



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on July 31, 2012

Atheist Group Intimidates Ohio City Into Dropping Historic Christian Landmark From Logo

The city of Steubenville in eastern Ohio — best known for being Dean Martin’s hometown and the home of Franciscan University — has become one of the most recent victims of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) after the Wisconsin-based atheist organization demanded that the community remove a religious symbol from its official logo. The godless group intruded in the city’s business when a local resident supposedly complained about the logo, which had been unveiled by the city in 2011. The logo, which was designed by local businessman Mark Nelson, depicts a silhouette of the city’s downtown, highlighting such landmarks as historic Fort Steuben, the Veterans’ Memorial Bridge, and Franciscan University’s Christ the King Chapel.



It was the chapel, topped by its recognizable cross, that caught the immediate attention of FFRF, prompting the group to threaten the city with a lawsuit if its officials didn’t knuckle under and remove the chapel and cross from the logo. FFRF’s chief spokesman, Annie Laurie Gaylor, insisted that the cross in the logo is a symbol that “Steubenville is a theocracy and is a Christian city where non-Christians or nonbelievers are not favored citizens.” Gaylor said that “the city may not depict the university chapel and cross because to do so places the city’s imprimatur behind Christianity.”

In May FFRF attorney Patrick Elliott sent a [letter to Steubenville Mayor Domenick Mucci](#) claiming that the cross and chapel on the logo somehow made it unconstitutional, and warning him and the city council that they must change the logo immediately.

It didn’t take the city long to be intimidated into compliance. According to the Steubenville [Herald-Star](#) newspaper, the city’s law director, Gary Repella “announced the decision following a 15-minute closed-door meeting with City Council members.” Said Repella: “We will be approaching Mark Nelson of Nelson Fine Art and Gifts and asking him to redesign the city logo to remove the cross and silhouette of the Christ the King Chapel on the Franciscan University of Steubenville campus.”

For his part, Nelson told the *Herald-Star* that he found it “very frustrating that one person or a small group can complain and ultimately change the city’s logo.” He noted that Los Angeles County found itself in a similar predicament in 2004 after the ACLU demanded that a cross be removed from its official seal. Strangely, unlike its demands to Steubenville, the FFRF didn’t demand that the California county remove a Christian chapel from its seal, but only the cross. “We already prepared a new logo without the cross,” Nelson said, “but I don’t know why the Wisconsin organization objected to the



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silhouette of the Christ the King chapel. The Los Angeles county board of supervisors retained the Mission San Gabriel in its seal. The chapel is part of the Franciscan University of Steubenville campus.”

He added that “what bothers me is this organization has used its interpretation of separation of church and state, that is not included in the Constitution, to bully the city into changing its logo. My family and I are proud to be here in Steubenville and to be part of the community. We are also proud to have a business in Steubenville.”

Officials with Franciscan University responded in a similar manner to the FFRF’s intrusion. “We find it particularly troubling that an out-of-town and out-of-touch group targeted the university for removal from the logo solely because of our religious identity,” said Michael Herson, the university’s vice president of advancement. “For more than 65 years, Franciscan University of Steubenville has proudly served as an integral part of this community, and we were honored to have our chapel included in the new city of Steubenville logo.”

Herson said that as it was used in the city’s logo, “the chapel image is not an endorsement of any one religion, or religion at all. It merely signifies one of the many treasures of Steubenville — along with Historic Fort Steuben, the Veterans Memorial Bridge and the downtown cityscape — that are well-known community landmarks.”

He explained that the city included the chapel in the city’s seal because it is the most recognizable representation of Franciscan University, which he said is a “world-renowned center of higher learning and one of the largest employers in the region.” While the city offered to have the university represented on the redesigned logo with another building on campus, the university declined, said Herson, because the chapel and its cross are the “centerpiece” of the university and are “at the heart of our Catholic educational mission.” He pointed out that the chapel “is included in the university logo because it represents who we are. We are a faith-based organization and we are not ashamed of who we are.”

Addressing the attack by the atheist organization, Herson said that the U.S. Constitution guarantees “freedom of religion, not freedom from religion, as this Wisconsin group would like everyone to believe. They are the same group that wants to prohibit Nativity scenes from public squares. They certainly don’t understand the values of our community.”

Nonetheless, said the city’s legal expert Gary Repella, redesigning the logo minus any reference to religious faith was easier and cheaper than going head-to-head in court with the FFRF. He said the city council decided that “the potential cost to our city taxpayers may be very expensive to try to win the case,” and decided it wasn’t worth the cost.

Photo: The Franciscan University of Steubenville chapel



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