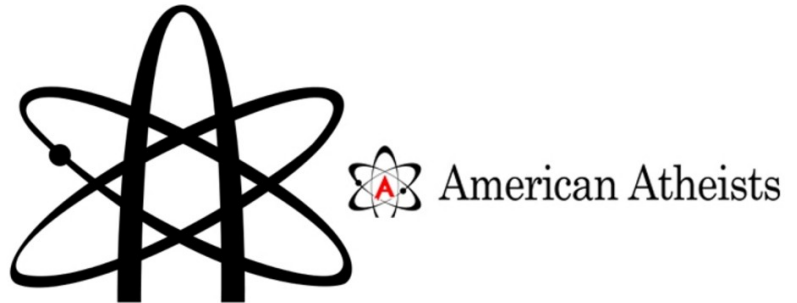




Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on June 13, 2013

Florida County to Host Nation's First Official Atheist Monument

A Florida county has agreed to allow an atheist organization to erect a monument to its godless religion. In a major concession to a Ten Commandments monument that graces the courthouse lawn at Bradford County, Florida's, county seat in the community of Starke, county officials will allow the group [American Atheists](#) to erect a 1,500-pound granite bench engraved with quotations from the group's founder, Madalyn Murray O'Hair, along with pithy secular-flavored sayings from Founding Fathers Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. The bench, which is scheduled to be dropped at the courthouse June 29, will share prominence with the Judeo-Christian monument, which was placed at the courthouse in May 2012 through the efforts of the local [Community Men's Fellowship](#).



After the \$22,000 Ten Commandments display, paid for by a local businessman, was erected on the courthouse property, the atheist group promptly sued to have it removed. But when the men's Christian group decided, after "prayerful" consideration, not to move the monument and filed its own suit to prevent the display from being forcibly displaced, the county decided, rather than press the issue, to simply allow the atheists to put up their own display.

The American Atheists grudgingly agreed to the compromise, with the group's president, David Silverman, commenting: "We have maintained from the beginning that the Ten Commandments doesn't belong on government property. There is no secular purpose for the monument whatsoever and it makes atheists feel like second-class citizens. But if keeping it there means we have the right to install our own monument, then installing our own is exactly what we'll do."

Will Sexton, an attorney for the county, explained that neither the religious monument nor the atheist display implies that the county is either establishing a religion or denying one. In fact, he noted, the atheists had the opportunity all along to erect their own display. "In October 2011, the county adopted a set of monument placement guidelines that created what we saw as a free speech forum in the courtyard," he recalled. "What the atheists agreed to is something they could have originally been approved for without a year of money and litigation."

Among the quotes etched on the odd-shaped atheist bench (which roughly resembles a backwards, lower-case letter "h"), are the following:

An atheist believes that a hospital should be built instead of a church. An atheist believes that a deed must be done instead of a prayer said. An atheist strives for involvement in life and not escape



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into death. He wants disease conquered, poverty banished, war eliminated. — Madalyn Murray O’Hair

Question with boldness even the existence of a god; because, if there be one, he must more approve the homage of reason than that of blindfolded fear. — Thomas Jefferson

It will never be pretended that any person employed in that service [writing the Constitution], had interviews with the gods, or were in any degree under the inspiration of Heaven. — John Adams

Where a religion is good, I conceive it will support itself; and when it does not support itself, and God does not take care to support it so that its professors are obliged to call for help of the civil power, ’tis a sign, I apprehend, of its being a bad one. — Benjamin Franklin

Silverman insisted that his godless group’s copycat display “is not an attack on religion, but rather religion’s monopoly. The words on our monument do not deride or mock, but rather they clarify and correct assertions that Christianity has some kind of special place in America over other religious positions.”

[Religion News Service](#) (RNS) reported that the opposing monuments in Bradford County “illustrate an ongoing battle over public displays of religion across the country that have gone beyond the annual December dust-ups over creche displays on civic property. Just this year, there have been legal wranglings over Ten Commandment displays in Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and in another Florida county.”

First Amendment scholar Charles Haynes noted that the atheist display represents a strategy that is likely to pop up in other communities that have allowed religious displays on public property. “This is a tactic that is becoming more common,” Haynes told RNS. “If we can’t get religious symbols out of public spaces, then we will put ours up to counter them. If the government allows one group to put up a display, then it must allow others.”

The American Atheists’ Silverman confirmed the strategy, promising that “everywhere a religious monument is displayed, we will attempt to place an equalizer.” He added, “I would like to encourage all religious groups, sects, or cults to follow suit. Everyone has the same rights in America, and those rights are lost if not defended.”

For its part, the Bradford County Community Men’s Fellowship said it had no beef with the atheist monument that will soon take its place near the Ten Commandments display. The group explained on its Facebook page that “this issue was won on the basis of this being a free speech issue, so don’t be alarmed when the American Atheists want to erect their own sign or monument. It’s their right. As for us, we will continue to honor the Lord, and that’s what matters.”



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