

Pennsylvania County Under Attack by Atheist Group

The Lehigh County, Pa., official seal features images of prominent structures and sights within the county, but in the background, it also features a Latin cross.

Now a group of “freethinkers” says that just goes too far. The Freedom From Religion Foundation has launched a lawsuit to have the cross removed. The organization made the following statement after launching the suit:

FFRF is a plaintiff, as are members residing in the county who have encountered the religious symbol on governmental property and documents, such as on letterhead, numerous official county forms and reports, the county’s website, a display in the Board of Commissioners meeting room and even on flags prominently displayed at the entrance of county buildings. Joining FFRF in the suit are four county residents, Stephen Meholic, David Simpson, John Berry and Candace Winkler.

The board first adopted the imagery that appears on the seal in 1944. Allentown, the third-largest city in Pennsylvania, is located in Lehigh County, which has a population of about 350,000. Local institutions include the Catholic DeSales University.

FFRF complained to the county in November 2014 and again in January of last year, creating a minor firestorm. Following several meetings about the controversy, the Board of Commissioners sent a reply on March 25, 2015, noting: “The cross, one of more than a dozen elements, was included to honor the original settlers of Lehigh County, who were Christian.”

Members of the public clearly view the Latin cross as having

religious significance. Among representative responses to FFRF's complaint from members of the public was this message from a local citizen: "It's do or die time. Stand up and live our national motto, 'In God We Trust.' And Jesus' words 'fear not' should give you strength to win one for the cross. The people of the state's prayers are with you. Go with God in your effort to prevail over this clear and present evil."

FFRF's local members find the presence of the cross on a seal representing the entire county to be exclusionary and offensive, as the cross endorses Christianity and does not reflect the diversity of the population.

By adopting and displaying a seal and flag with a Latin cross, the county is violating the First and 14th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution. The purpose is religious, not secular, and "has the primary effect of both advancing religion and expressing defendant's preference for Christianity above all other religions and nonreligion," the plaintiffs contend.

FFRF and its co-plaintiffs are seeking a declaration that the religious symbols on the county seal and flag are unconstitutional, a permanent injunction against displaying them, nominal damages, costs and attorney fees.

"Lehigh County is not a Christian county, it should be equally welcoming to all its citizens regardless of their religion or their reject of religion. A redesign to comply with the Constitution is imperative," says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.

County commissioners have received more than 100 emails and about a dozen letters from county residents and people outside the county demanding that the seal not be changed.