



“In God We Trust” was added to the Johnston County Courthouse in Smithfield recently. - Rick Hester

#### RELIGION

## Why ‘In God We Trust’ is now prominently displayed at the Johnston County courthouse

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SMITHFIELD — A new message went up in the Johnston County Courthouse this week, gleaming golden letters on a prominent interior transom proclaiming, “IN GOD WE TRUST.”

The phrase was installed Wednesday at the request of a private North Carolina-based group called the US Motto Action Committee, launched in 2002 to encourage city and county governments to add the national motto to public buildings.

The group says the display expresses confidence in American society. But some humanists say it's unnecessary in a modern courthouse and exclusionary to some non-Christians.

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Johnston County Manager Rick Hester said county officials got a letter a couple of months ago from Rick Lanier, co-founder and vice chairman of the US Motto Action Committee, urging the county's board of commissioners to take up the issue. Lanier was a member of the Davidson County Board of Commissioners from 1998 to 2002 who persuaded his county to install the motto on the outside of its government center to mark the first anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Hester said that after receiving the letter, Johnston County Board of Commissioners Chairman Jeff Carver asked him to see whether the phrase already appeared anywhere on the county's courthouse. It did not.

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So at a December meeting of the board, Carver proposed adding the motto. Hester said commission members approved the idea by unanimous vote.

### **Motto's history**

According to the U.S. Department of the Treasury, the phrase “In God We Trust” has appeared on U.S. coins since the 1860s as a result of “increased religious sentiment existing during the Civil War.” It became the official U.S. motto through an act of Congress in 1956, at the height of the Cold War and anti-Communist sentiment. It was added to paper currency in 1957 and has been in constant use on American money since.

Its placement has not been without controversy. President Theodore Roosevelt supported its inscription on “our great national monuments, in our temples of justice, in our legislative halls and in buildings such as those at West Point and Annapolis – in short, wherever it will tend to arouse and inspire a lofty emotion in those who look thereon.” But Roosevelt compared its use on money to putting it on a postage stamp or an advertisement and said that “is in effect irreverence, and comes dangerously close to sacrilege.”

Its use on currency and on public buildings has been challenged in court on the grounds that it violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. But courts have

ruled that the phrase doesn't amount to an endorsement of a religion.

In his letter to Johnston County, Lanier said, "In times of both war and peace, these words have been a profound source of strength and guidance to many generations of Americans."

Reached by phone Friday, Lanier said his group has persuaded 90 government entities in 52 of North Carolina's 100 counties to display the motto. The group started with the western half of the state and is now working on eastern counties, he said. It also has distributed more than 2,700 reflective decals bearing the motto to be placed on sheriff's and police cruisers and fire department vehicles, Lanier said.

For him, he said, the motto is deeply connected to the nation's founding and identity.

"If we lose our identity, then who are we?" he asked.

### **'Exclusionary'**

Randall Best of Durham, a member of the Ethical Humanist Society of the Triangle and leader of the Northern Virginia Ethical Society, said he was disappointed that anyone feels it necessary to emblazon a government building with a statement that he said "can be seen as exclusionary to people who don't share that belief. It's a kind of tyranny of the majority.

"For people who don't have that faith - or a God belief - that is kind of put there to poke them in the eye."

The US Motto Action Committee offers to bear the cost of the installations and raises donations to pay for them. According to an accounting that Lanier sent to Johnston County officials, the group has paid a total of \$98,500 for the installations so far.

The Johnston County job was the best bargain yet. According to Lanier's list, the least expensive project until now was one in Rockingham County in 2015 that cost \$605. The most expensive is a package of five installations for buildings in Richmond County, the first of which went up in September on the county's judicial center. There, the motto is displayed in eight-inch-tall letters of cast aluminum.

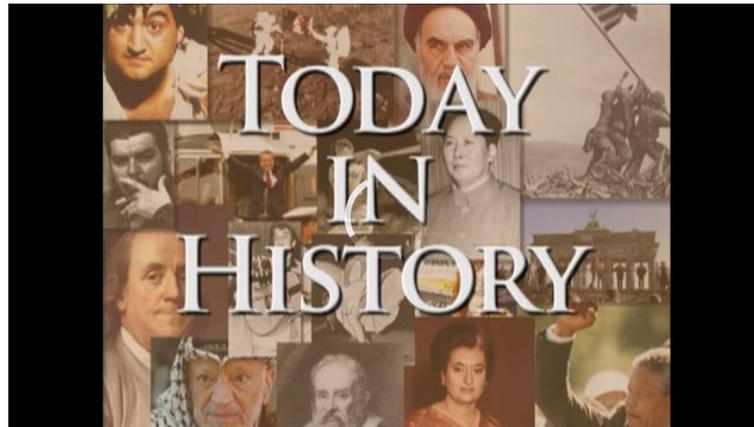
Hester said Johnston County has not yet invoiced Lanier's group for its motto, which was installed by staff. It was placed above a door that leads from the nearly century-old section of the Johnston County Courthouse into the atrium of the newer part of the building, past which the busiest courtrooms are located.

Johnston County's installation came in at a bargain \$175; apparently county officials place some trust in plastic.

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