

# FIRST COAST FREETHOUGHT SOCIETY, INC.

*An organization of freethinkers and secular humanists supporting free inquiry, education, and community in the Northeast Florida area*

**Our Motto: “To Question is the Answer.”**

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First Coast

# FreeThinker



The Newsletter of the First Coast Freethought Society

October 2010

Volume 8, Issue 10

## Inside this issue: **President's Message - October 2010**

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*All religions are founded on the fear of the many and the cleverness of the few.*  
—Marie-Henri Beyle

### Earl Coggins

*“Freedom arises from the multiplicity of sects, which pervades America and which is the best and only security for religious liberty in any society. For where there is such a variety of sects, there cannot be a majority of any one sect to oppress and persecute the rest.”* These words were spoken by James

Madison at the Virginia convention on ratification of the Constitution, June 12, 1788.

**J**ames Madison was fearful of tyranny, especially coming

***“Americans are by all measures a deeply religious people, but they are also deeply ignorant about religion.”***

from a majority. I feel strongly that a portion of his fears stemmed from his reasoning that

some people have not thoroughly familiarized themselves with a given subject or

situation that shapes the basis for some of their beliefs.

Recently released research in the form of a religious survey conducted by the independent Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life

*(Continued on page 3)*



## October 2010 Meeting

### L. Barry Albright, Ph.D.

paleontologist, author, and a professor of Earth Science  
Department of Physics, University of North Florida

## “Cretaceous Park: Paleontology Adventures in Southern Utah”

Monday, October 18, 2010, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.

In the Sanctuary, upper parking lot level • Doors open at 6:00  
Unitarian Universalist Church • 7405 Arlington Expressway • Jacksonville, FL

## Humanist Book Discussion Group



**When:** 2:00 p.m., the first Sunday of each month

**Where:** The November 7, 2010, meeting will be held at a private home

**What:** Books planned for discussion:

- November 7, 2010 - *The Diaries of Adam & Eve* by Mark Twain
- December 5, 2010 - *Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes* by Daniel Everett

Books may be found in the library, may be purchased from local book stores, or purchased online. The First Coast Freethought Society will receive a small remuneration from your purchase (at no additional cost to you) if you first go to <http://www.firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org/> and then click the link to Amazon.com for your purchase.

**M**arianna Smith, an FCFS member and a representative of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, will lead a discussion of Mark Twain's *Diaries of Adam and Eve*, described in the Oneworld Classics (publisher) 2009 edition as a "gloriously funny dialogue between the first man and woman, presented along with a number of other Twain pieces on Adam and Eve—including excerpts from his letters and diaries—as well as extracts from Eve's autobiography."

A light lunch will be served at 1:00 p.m. Please R.S.V.P. directly to [marianna.smith@comcast.net](mailto:marianna.smith@comcast.net) for the address, directions, and front gate access info if you plan to attend.

More info, contact Jewell Kross at [JKross@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org](mailto:JKross@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org) or call 904-996-1553.

## First Coast FreeThinker

The *First Coast FreeThinker* is published for all freethinkers and potential freethinkers. Nonmembers may receive the e-mail version indefinitely. Nonmembers may receive three hard-copy issues free of charge, after which they must join the FCFS to continue to receive hard copy.

Readers are invited and encouraged to reprint our original materials provided they give credit to this publication. The officials of the FCFS are not responsible for opinions or other statements expressed in this newsletter. The *FreeThinker* is intended to convey ideas that stimulate thought and promote discussion on a variety of subjects.

We welcome submissions. The deadline is the **FOURTH SATURDAY** of each month for the following month's issue. Submit contributions by e-mail or by U.S. mail to Fred Hill, 1817 Egner St.,

Jacksonville, FL 32206.

**ADVERTISING RATES:** Eighth-page (business card size) \$25.00, quarter-page \$50.00, half-page \$75.00, and whole page \$100.

To advertise, contact Patrice Bennett, 904-352-7005, or [PBennett@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org](mailto:PBennett@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org)

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*(President's Message - October 2010  
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revealed exactly that: Many Christians, the religious majority in America, know less about their religion than atheists, agnostics, and Jews. In a recent *New York Times* article summarizing the survey data, author Laurie Goodstein put it succinctly in her opening statement: *"Americans are by all measures a deeply religious people, but they are also deeply ignorant about religion."*

An "elephant on the table" (also elephant in the room, elephant in the kitchen) is an English expression and old cliché used to alert or reveal an obvious contradiction being ignored by one or more people, or in other words, a blatantly obvious truth going unaddressed or completely disregarded. The cliché is probably based on the idea that an elephant is impossible to overlook, whether it's in the kitchen or on the table. When employed, its user is generally advocating that an unaddressed issue should be talked about openly and honestly.

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life uncovered a huge elephant in the room with their research data on religious knowledge. It revealed many people claiming to be religious—especially Christians—know very little about their chosen faith or the faiths of others, while people with no religious affiliation or beliefs actually are

very knowledgeable about Christianity and other religions.

Interestingly absent from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life research data was another fact: Nonreligious people have known for a very long time that a lot of religious individuals have a very narrow understanding of their faith, and many adhere to it with a cavalier approach similar to that of Blaise Pascal, a famous French mathematician. His approach has come to be known as Pascal's Wager.



***"Oh, I really don't know much about the Bible except that it's all true and if you don't believe it, you will go straight to Hell when you die. That's good enough for me."***

Richard Dawkins, in his book *The God Delusion*, describes Pascal's Wager: *"...However long the odds against God's existence might be, there is an even larger asymmetry in the penalty for guessing wrong. You'd better believe in God, because if you are*

*right you stand to gain eternal bliss and if you are wrong it won't make any difference anyway. On the other hand, if you don't believe in God and you turn out to be wrong you get eternal damnation, whereas if you are right it makes no difference."*

Put succinctly, it's better to believe in a god and be wrong than to "not" believe in a god and be wrong. The consequences differ by orders of magnitude.

Could that be it? People are religious or, as the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life data seem to suggest, blindly religious—simply out of a fear of death? Could it be that simple?

In his book *The Demon-Haunted World*, Carl Sagan urges us to follow Ockham's Razor when sorting out reasons for why things operate as they do. Sagan explains Ockham's Razor, named for the 14<sup>th</sup> century English Franciscan, Friar William of Ockham, who postulated, *"This convenient rule-of-thumb urges us when faced with two hypotheses that explain the data equally well to choose the simpler."*

It has been my personal experience that many people I encounter who claim to be Christian know very little about their religion, so the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life survey on religious knowledge did not come as a complete surprise to me. It begs the question: If you don't know much about religion, why be religious at all?



## Finding Dinosaurs in Unexpected Places

Fred W. Hill

**E**arth was a very different place 92 million years ago. For one thing, there were no arrogant, nearly hairless apes walking around, insisting that the entire universe was only about 6,000 years old and had been created by a deity that looked a lot like them, specifically for them to plunder prior to ascending to joining said deity in Heaven. For another, North America, as we now know it, did not exist. Oh, the parts that would eventually make up the continent were mostly all there, but the modern contiguous landmass was then divided into three subcontinents by immense bodies of water, including the Western Interior Seaway which ran from the Arctic Ocean to what is now the Gulf of Mexico. The Seaway covered most of the region between the modern Rocky and Appalachian mountain ranges with waters

nearly a half mile deep during the late Cretaceous era of 100 to 70 million years ago.

Other parts of Mexico, Canada, and the United States, including much of

*“... our knowledge is never exactly 100 percent certain and is always subject to change as new information comes to light.”*

Utah, were thus deluged, and for far longer than a mere forty days. As expected, strata from the inundated region contains fossils of a great

variety of ancient sea life, including several species of humongous sharks and

many large aquatic reptiles, such as mosasaurs, ichthyosaurs and plesiosaurs, that all swam in that long gone sea. Remnants of their contemporaries, the land-lubbing dinosaurs, are much less common. This explains why paleontologist Dr. L. Barry Albright (our October speaker) and his colleagues were surprised to find the nearly complete skeleton of a dinosaur in an area that had been about 60 miles from the nearest shore when the creature died approximately 92.5 million years ago.

The new specimen, ultimately recognized as a new species and named *Nothronychus graffami* after Merle Graffam, an amateur paleontologist who made the initial discovery when he came across a toe bone of the dinosaur, held more surprises. *N. graffami* was a



*North America 90,000,000 years ago*

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type of sickle-clawed, bipedal theropod, related to Velociraptors and Tyrannosaurs. Further, based on its teeth and physiology, the thirteen foot tall *N. graffami* was recognized as a member of the genus *Therizinosaurus*, slow-moving herbivores, unlike most of their more nimble, carnivorous cousins, and previously found only in Asia. As reported by Josh Salman for the *Florida Times-Union*, (“UNF professor involved in new dinosaur discovery in Utah,” 7/20/09), Albright theorizes that the species’ unique diet evolved as a “survival tactic” and that the remains of the individual they found “floated offshore, then sank in a nearly complete state.”

How the body managed to escape being torn apart by multitudes of aquatic carnivores before settling into the muddy sea bottom, where fossilization preserved about 80 percent of its skeleton, is not clear. Even as geologic and climatic forces caused the sea to give way to land, and vast numbers of other dinosaurs and animals evolved to traipse over the land and die out in their own turn, and the

region eventually became the desert of the modern era, the fossil remained within the rocky layer where it would eventually be found in the year 2000.

There was nothing inevitable about any of these events. Fossilization, after all, occurs relatively rarely,



**Dr. Barry Albright, David Rankin at *Therizinosaurus* Dig in Utah**

usually requiring that remains be covered in sediment before the organic parts are eaten away or otherwise erode. Even when fossilized, discovery depends upon the ground where the remains are embedded being exposed, either through natural forces such as erosion or by human excavations, including inadvertent discoveries made while digging a hole for a swimming pool, as related in

a recent AOL News story, “Prehistoric Fossils Found in Tennessee Backyard” (by Michelle Ruiz, 7/4/10), relating how pool contractors unearthed the remains of a trilophodon, a type of mastodon that lived approximately 30,000 to a million years ago. More typically, discovery depends on exploration of areas known to hold fossils. David Rankin, as a 14 year old nature and hiking enthusiast in the Lake Powell area of southern Utah in 2000, routinely found fossils of fish bones, shark teeth and ammonite shells. His excursions into the desert led to the discovery of a previously unknown species of pliosaur, named *Eopolycotylus rankini* for his feat, but also helped find the new *Therizinosaurus* where no one expected such a discovery.

Earth is full of many such surprises which often confound our expectations. Some are perplexed because scientific discoveries contradict the “truth” related in their holy books. Others recognize them as part of the means of better understand-

Earth is full of many such surprises which often confound our expectations. Some are perplexed because scientific discoveries contradict the “truth” related in their holy books. Others recognize them as part of the means of better understand-

(Continued from page 5)  
ing our ever-changing world, realizing that our knowledge is never exactly 100 percent certain and is always subject to change as new information comes to light. Despite all we have learned within just the last two centuries as the scientific method has replaced unquestioned acceptance of ancient writ, there are still far more discoveries to be made about



*Nothronychus graffami*

our planet and the many forms of life that have inhabited it for billions of years.

Admittedly, however, I feel a bit more than 99.99 percent certain that contrary to the claims of some biblical literalists I know, fossils were not created by any god or devil to test our faith or tempt us into doubting the veracity of a holy book. I could be

wrong, but I'll take my chances.



## Ongoing FCFS Activities

### Dinners for Doubters

Sign up to attend or to host a dinner yourself. If a dinner is scheduled, sign-up sheets will be found at the back table at the monthly meetings. For details on how this works, see page 7 of the July 2008 *FreeThinker*, available on the website, or ask a greeter at the back table.

### Secular Sunday Morning in the Park (or Atheist Sunday Morning)

Freethinkers... let's get acquainted and enjoy intelligent conversation every 4th Sunday of the month (unless inclement weather prevails) at 10 a.m. until ? at the pavilion at Losco Park, 10851 Hood Rd., S., Jacksonville 32257, between Shad and Losco Roads. Need directions? Call Beth Perry at 904-733-5489 or Google the address to get a map and directions. We generally provide coffee. Bring a breakfast snack and a chair or two. Note, if it's too hot under the pavilion, we take our chairs to some trees with a nice breeze. Mark your calendar. We hope to see you there!

### Caring Tree

If a telephone call to a member is in order, or if a sympathy card, flowers, or some form of support is needed, please contact **Judy Hankins** at 904-724-8188, or e-mail her at [JHankins@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org](mailto:JHankins@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org), or leave a notation on a meeting sign-in sheet.

## Frankenstein's Creator

Fred W. Hill

On April 10, 1815, an Indonesian volcano, Mount Tombora, exploded, ejecting an estimated 38 cubic miles of pulverized rock and glass into the atmosphere. At least 10,000 people were killed outright by pyroclastic flows while more than 60,000 died of starvation due to the destruction of crops, making the Mount Tombura eruption the deadliest in recorded history. The massive amount of sulfur released into the stratosphere caused such severe climatic aberrations in the northern hemisphere during the next year that 1816 became known as the "Year Without a Summer." And during one cold and dreary June night in a Swiss villa near Lake Geneva, a small group of well-read young friends amused themselves by reading ghost stories and challenging themselves to conjure up a few of their own. Thus, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, soon to be better known as Mary Shelley, began writing what would become perhaps the most famous of all horror novels, *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, first published in 1818 with a preface by her husband, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley.

Nearly 200 years later, the Frankenstein Monster remains an icon of popular culture, although more for the various film incarnations than Shelley's original version. Yet, her "ghost story" was far more than a simple tale of a monster fashioned

from dead body parts brought to life by an aristocratic mad scientist. *Frankenstein* was a critique of antiquated social norms and prejudices; scientific ambitions that neglected social responsibilities; and other forms of inhumanity people all too routinely



*Mary Shelley*

inflict on one another. In her narrative, Victor Frankenstein, obsessed with bringing life to dead matter, is so repulsed by the results that he abandons his creation. The creature, left to its own devices, routinely is met with fear and hatred, and responds ever more violently, seeking revenge against his "god." During the story, an innocent woman is wrongly accused of murder and coerced to confess by threat of excommunication and then executed. Injus-

tice begets injustice as Frankenstein and his creation attempt to destroy one another, both becoming monsters in pursuit of their ends.

Only 18 when she began writing her gothic masterpiece, Mary Shelley was raised in an environment of unorthodox intellectual thought. Her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, who died shortly after giving birth to the author in 1797, was a renowned writer herself, best known for *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). Her father, William Godwin, was a journalist, novelist and proponent of anarchism. Then there was her husband, Percy Shelley, famed as one of the greatest English Romantic poets and notorious in his time for advocating atheism, free love, non-violence, ethical treatment of animals and vegetarianism, among other then radical ideas.

Such ideas horrified many people during his brief life (1792 - 1822), just as Mary's fictional monster horrified nearly everyone he encountered in her tale. Some people are still terrified of atheists as well as of anyone else they perceive as "different." Fortunately, while there is still far too much ignorance and hatred, there is also much more reason and tolerance. At least enough in most civilized parts of the world that we need not fear being chased by angry mobs with torches and pitchforks for our opinions!





First Coast Freethought Society, Inc.  
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(904) 288-6291  
<http://firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org>

### Statement of Purpose

The First Coast Freethought Society, Inc. is an educational, nonprofit, 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization dedicated to supporting nonreligious persons in the Northeast Florida area and promoting a nontheistic approach to everyday life.

### Meetings

The FCFS meets the THIRD Monday of each month at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Jacksonville, upstairs in the sanctuary, 7405 Arlington Expressway, Jacksonville, Florida 32211, (904) 725-8133. Meeting time: 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. Meetings are free and open to the public. Doors open at 6:00 p.m.

For other activities besides monthly meetings, please see the website, brochure, or newsletter!

### Committees and Chairs

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## October Social

**Where:** OLIVE GARDEN on Philips Highway, near the Avenues Mall.  
**When:** Tuesday October 26, 2010 at 6:00 p.m. Proceed directly to our room. Drinks at 6:00. Dinner at 7:00. (Order from the menu.)  
**RSVP:** [CarrieRen@att.net](mailto:CarrieRen@att.net) (or 268-8826) by **Tues. a.m.**, if you plan to go!

First Coast Freethought Society, Inc.

P.O. Box 550591, Jacksonville, FL 32255-0591 • (904) 288-6291

2010 Membership Application



Name		Date	
Home address	City	State	Zip Code
E-mail address	Home phone	Business phone	
Occupation	Areas of interest and/or expertise		
How did you hear about us? Comments? _____			

Membership level (please select one):

- |  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Regular (\$30/yr.)      | <input type="checkbox"/> Carl Sagan (\$50/yr.)       | <input type="checkbox"/> Charles Darwin (\$200/yr.)   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student (\$15/yr.)      | <input type="checkbox"/> Bertrand Russell (\$75/yr.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Robert Ingersoll (\$500/yr.) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Senior - 65+ (\$15/yr.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Thomas Paine (\$100/yr.)    | <input type="checkbox"/> Lifetime (\$1,000)           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family (\$45/yr.)       |  |   |

Do you object to your name appearing on our membership list, distributed to other members?  Yes  No

I'm interesting in getting involved in the FCFS as a(n):

- General member     Committee member     Officer     Financial supporter

- Annual dues cover the period of January 1 through December 31.
- The initial dues for new members joining in July through September are half the regular rates. Membership extends to the end of the current calendar year.
- The initial dues for new members joining in October through December are the full, regular rates. Membership extends to the end of the following calendar year.

***You can make a lasting impact on the future of  
freethought and secular humanism in this community  
...if you provide for the First Coast Freethought Society in your Will.***

Your bequest will ensure that the FCFS continues to be a beacon for freethinkers on the First Coast and to remain a vital Voice of Reason in the Northeast Florida area. Several options are available for establishing a bequest (specific, percentage, residual, or contingent). We will be happy to provide the appropriate wording to you and your attorney, depending upon your wishes.

For further information, contact  
Carrie Renwick, P.O. Box 550591, Jacksonville, FL 32255-0591 or  
904-288-6291 • [CarrieRen@att.net](mailto:CarrieRen@att.net) • <http://www.firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org/>  
All inquiries are held in the strictest confidence.

## 2010 Freethought Events of Interest on the First Coast

Monday	Oct. 11	JAM Meetup at European St. Café, Jacksonville - 6:30 p.m.
Tuesday	Oct. 12	ACFH Social at Gypsy Cab Co., St. Augustine Beach - 7:00 p.m.
Monday	Oct. 18	FCFS Monthly Meeting - L. Barry Albright, Ph.D. - 6:30 p.m.
Saturday	Oct. 23	FCFS Deadline to submit articles for August 2010 <i>FreeThinker</i>
Sunday	Oct. 24	FCFS Secular Sunday in the Park, Jacksonville - 10:00 a.m.
Tuesday	Oct. 26	FCFS Monthly Social at Olive Garden, Jacksonville - 6:00 p.m.
Sunday	Nov. 7	FCFS Humanist Book Discussion Group, Jacksonville - 2:00 p.m.
Monday	Nov. 15	FCFS Monthly Meeting - 6:30 p.m.

Ancient City Freethinkers and Humanists (ACFH) • <http://www.meetup.com/A-C-F-H/>

First Coast Freethought Society (FCFS) • <http://www.firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org/>

Jacksonville Atheist, Agnostic, Secular Meetup Group (JAM) • <http://www.jaxatheists.com/>

Northeast Florida Coalition of Reason (NeFCoR) • <http://NorthEastFloridaCoR.org/>

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**The FCFS is a proud member of the Humanists of Florida Association  
and the Northeast Florida Coalition of Reason**

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## Elections in Next Month!

**T**he Nominating Committee is hard at work preparing the slate of officers for 2011. While it appears likely at this time that the current officers are willing to run for another term, we are ALWAYS seeking new folks to serve on the Board. If you think a position on the Board would interest you, please contact Nominating Committee Chair, Bobbie Nord at [bobbienord@gmail.com](mailto:bobbienord@gmail.com) or give her a call at call 904-396-9553. Ballots will be sent out Nov. 1, voting deadline will be Dec. 1.

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## Meet Our October Speaker

**D**r. Barry Albright is currently a professor of Earth Science in the Department of Physics at the University of North Florida. He received his BS in oceanography from Florida Institute of Technology, a Masters in geology/paleontology from Louisiana State University, and his Ph.D. in geology/paleontology from the University of California, Riverside. Prior to his employment at UNF, Dr. Albright was Curator of Geology and Paleontology at the Museum of Northern Arizona in Flagstaff. It was over those years that he began research in southern Utah where he returns each summer to continue his field work and studies on large marine reptiles, dinosaurs, and other aspects of paleontology and geology.