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City, Historical Society partner to identify, sign Milton's local waterways

By HAYDEN SUMLIN

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Members of the Milton Historical Society and Public Works Department are all smiles after putting up one of the first signs, labeling Chicken Creek as it crosses the Dinsmore Road bridge, last month. With four signs up on each side of two city bridges, the grassroots initiative is underway.

CITY OF MILTON/PROVIDED

MILTON, Ga. — Signs labeling two Milton waterways, Chicken and Cooper Sandy creeks, are scheduled to go up on both sides of 19 bridges across the city.

Through a partnership between the city and the Milton Historical Society, four of the 38 wayfinding signs were installed in mid-September.

City/Milton Communications Coordinator Oksana Solovei wrote that the aim of the joint initiative is to make motorists more aware of their natural surroundings, specifically the creeks that have been vital to human and animal life in the region for centuries.

Milton Historical Society Board member Jim Farris, who brought the idea for creek wayfinding at bridges to the city in the spring, said he's excited that the first batch of signs are installed.

"Historically, the creeks were important to this area," Farris said. "Not only did they provide water, but they also served as landmarks, describing locations and identifying boundaries."

Farris said he's been driving around the city for 27 years. Every time he passes over a bridge, he calls out the name of the creek below.

"One day, I realized, 'Hey we should be putting signs up,'" he said. "There was a lot of controversy about whether Cooper Sandy is the right name of the creek."

Farris said historical maps labeled the creek Copper or Cooper Sandy, and it required extensive research to determine what the city's signs would say.

The ratio of "Cooper" to "Copper" on maps is about 5-to-1, he said.

"The maps that we've got go all the way back to about the 1840s, and its 'Cooper,'" Farris said. "We resolved that issue, and that allowed this to go forward."

Farris said he thinks the "Copper" name was a misnomer, but it took research to convince every member of the Historical Society.

The first two signs are at the Dinsmore Road bridge where the roadway crosses Chicken Creek next to the Milton City Park and Preserve.



James Neal Farris, member of the Milton Historical Society, holds up Cooper Sandy and Chicken Creek signage for future installation at 19 bridges that the waterways cross throughout the city. Farris originally brought the initiative to the Milton Public Work Department's attention.

MILTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY/PROVIDED

Chicken Creek, which takes its name from a local tribe leader of the Cherokee Nation, begins in northeast Milton and zigzags across the city to Little River after crossing Birmingham Highway (Ga. 372) north of Providence Road.

Farris has collected details about the Chicken family, prominent in the local Cherokee tribe before the Trail of Tears and their expulsion from the Southeast.

The other two installations are near the Bethany Road bridge and the Cooper Sandy Greenspace, identifying part of the creek's path from the Cambridge High School campus to just west of Mill Springs Academy.

Cooper Sandy Creek begins south of Providence Road just west of Alpharetta Highway (Ga. 9) and feeds into Little River behind the McConnell-Chadwick House off Arnold Mill Road (Ga. 140).

"[The creeks] are generally about the same size and length overall, running east to west," Farris said. "One of the motivating forces was connecting people with their natural environment ... I think Chicken Creek will make an impression on people."

The Georgia Department of Transportation put up a sign labeling Little River at the Arnold Mill Road (Ga. 140) bridge at the Fulton-Cherokee County line in 2018, which may have inspired the grassroots initiative.

Milton Environmental Program Manager Emily Groth, working under Public Works Director Sara Leaders, said the sign project helps foster a sense of place for community members.

"Awareness of our natural surroundings, including our waterways, helps to personalize our environmental impacts," she said. "It also promotes our ongoing efforts to maintain stormwater and preserve the health of our lakes, ponds, rivers and streams."

There are about 68 miles of waterways in Milton, according to the city's GIS Department. Cooper Sandy and Chicken creeks feed into Little River, the city's main tributary to the Etowah River, which runs from outside Dahlonega to the Coosa River in Rome.

Eventually, water from the Little River hits the Gulf of Mexico in Mobile Bay.

Groth, who credits Farris and the Milton Historical Society with bringing the initiative to city's attention, said the Public Works team and city staff bought in, especially with the new signage sporting Milton's new logo.

The City Council approved a revamped "branding toolkit" in March, creating a slightly altered logo with a bolder font and forward-facing horse.

Groth said she worked with the city's on-call manufacturer to produce the signage, and then Tri Scapes contractors put them up.

The cost of each sign is \$30, and the first phase of the project, totaling 16 signs, is just under \$500.

"All things considered, it's an affordable project that continues a great partnership with the Historical Society," Groth said.

Like anything, the Milton Historical Society is wondering when the remaining signs will go up.

"My goal by the end of the year is to install 10-12 more signs, so 5-6 additional crossings," Groth said. "We're prioritizing more popular routes, which would include Freemanville, Hopewell and Hamby roads."

An historic campaign
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