

## **Welcome to Cooksville! New signs back citizen's claim**

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A controversy is cooking in Speer. One man's claim that this north Choctaw County village "doesn't exist" is being put back on the front burner due to the installation of new highway signs.

Newton Cook, Jr., is the self-proclaimed mayor of "Cooksville," an outpost which Cook claims predates everything - including the Trail of Tears - ever established in Choctaw County.

Last week, the Oklahoma Department of Transportation installed signs on US 271 pointing the way to Cooksville at Cook's request. new highway sign - photo by Ron Henson

"Generally, we don't put up any destination panels unless you're on the state map." said ODOT's local traffic engineer, Brian Taylor. "He brought us the original county map that showed it all parceled out. He provided all the information necessary. He jumped through all our hoops."

Cook asked ODOT to remove Speer from the highway sign, but they refused.

Modern state and local maps show Speer, and a 1921 land allotment map in the Choctaw County Clerk's office also lists the area as Speer, with villages nearby named Hamden, Kent and Rooster. But a new map displayed at Choctaw Nation Community Center shows Cooksville Cemetery.

Cook was charged with malicious injury to property in 2003 for allegedly dismantling the Speer Cemetery sign and installing one renaming it "Cooksville Cemetery." A jury found him guilty in 2004, levying fines and fees of \$1,926. His appeal of the decision was thrown out by a higher court.

None of this has deterred Cook, who says the controversy is racially motivated. Cook claims to be of Indian and Irish descent, but court documents list him as black. Nevertheless, Cook says blacks in the north Choctaw County area wish to dismiss the non-black "Cooksville" name.

"There aint' no such things as Speer," Cook says. "Cooksville" is the first town in Oklahoma. Cooksville was created by God, and James Cook. He put the first store out here, way back in the late 1700s, 1800s. Cooksville has been here before the Trail of Tears."

Native Americans of assorted tribes called southeast Oklahoma home until the 1820s and 1830s, when Choctaws and other eastern tribes began to settle here during a U.S. government removal campaign. Villages sprang up in the tribal district, and a railroad was installed through the area around 1900. Oklahoma became a state in 1907, and Choctaw County was formed. Non-Indians arrived in ever-increasing numbers, eventually acquiring most of the private land in the area and relegating Choctaws to minority status in their own homeland.

Through it all, Cook claims, there was Cooksville. He claims to be a descendant of "Judge Hunter," and says his grandmother was daughter to a prominent 19th century Choctaw chief. He also plans to "file charges" to get his blue Cooksville signs back from Choctaw County Sheriff's office, who confiscate any signs Cook installs along county roads.



OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION recently installed new "destination panels" on US 271 between Hugo and Antlers, pointing to both Speer and Cooksville communities. The signs were installed after the self-proclaimed mayor of Cooksville showed ODOT officials some old maps showing the village of Cooksville.