

Lost African American cemetery with over 120 coffins found under apartment complex in Florida

FACE 2 FACE AFRICA, THEODORA AIDOO | Contributor | September 05, 2019 at 10:29 am | [HISTORY, NEWS](#)



A 3D laser scan of Robles Park Village showing grave-shaped objects beneath the ground in relation to buildings at the public housing complex. Pic credit: Tampa Bay Times

Authorities in Florida, U.S., have discovered a long-lost cemetery with over 120 coffins beneath a public housing complex along North Florida Avenue in Tampa's black community.

The cemetery, known as 'Zion Cemetery', was established in 1901 and believed to be the city's first cemetery for African Americans. Reports say a portion of Robles Park Village, which is owned by the [Tampa Bay Housing Authority](#), was built on top of the cemetery in the 1950s.

For many years, there were little details about the burial ground and the people buried there until *Tampa Bay Times'* special report published in June indicated that five Robles Park village apartment complexes were built on rows of caskets.

In June, *Tampa Bay Times*, upon seeing death certificates of 382 people, published names of people believed to be buried at the 2½-acre cemetery that disappeared a century ago.

Following the report, a survey commissioned by the Housing Authority using ground-penetrating radar identified 126 caskets with more properties yet to be studied.

Reacting to the discovery, Archaeologist Eric Prendergast, who was hired by the Housing Authority to investigate whether occupied graves remain on its land, described finding reflections of rectangular objects that are the size and shape of coffins between four and six feet in depth.

"The reflections are oriented east-west within boundaries of a former cemetery and arranged in rows", Prendergast told reporters.

This discovery came as a shock to many people whose families have lived for generations in Tampa but knew nothing about the graves.

A local historian, who led a downtown walking tour, said: "Their story needs to be told". "African-American history is American history."

Even though there are likely more, the archaeologists have discovered what they believe to be 126 caskets. This is because they only had access to the cemetery property portion owned by the Housing Authority.

The rest is reportedly owned by restaurateur Richard Gonzmart who had plans to build a culinary school on the property.

However, regional director for the Florida Public Archaeology Network, Jeff Moates, said Gonzmart will have to determine whether there are bodies there before he can build the culinary school.

According to the Housing Authority, the park will honor the pioneering African-Americans buried there and relocation will begin soon for the people living the five Robles Park Village buildings that occupy the burial ground.

There are 67 buildings with 1,118 people living in Robles Park village.



A 1901 map of the forgotten Zion Cemetery. Photo Credit: Tampa Bay Times