

## Who's accountable for the tragedy of Zion Cemetery? Chasing a century-old mystery.

*The discovery of caskets under a public housing project raises questions about how it happened: 'They did something wrong and need be charged publicly.'*

Tampa Bay Times, By Paul Guzzo | Published: Thursday, September 05, 2019



The Kennedy family plot is among the most elaborate at historic Oaklawn Cemetery in downtown Tampa. Henry P. Kennedy, who is buried at the site, was the last recorded owner of Zion Cemetery, a segregation-era burial ground for African-Americans that disappeared from view. [OCTAVIO JONES | TIMES | Times]

The revelation has saddened and angered many people with a stake in Tampa's African-American history. They want to know who allowed Zion Cemetery to vanish through time, leaving the 2½ acres along North Florida Avenue open to development.

"It's important," said Reva Iman, tenant representative at the housing project, **Robles Park Village**. "They did something wrong and need to be charged publicly."

Jeff Moates, who as regional director for the Florida Public Archaeology Network is part of the team that found the caskets, said there isn't enough evidence yet to "point a finger at anybody in particular."

Still, Moates added, "It's incumbent on us to define how it occurred and litigate the case."

Kennedy may be a starting point.

Descended from a pioneer Tampa family and a member of the City Council for eight years, Kennedy purchased the Zion Cemetery land in 1926 and got busy with it three years later. First, he sought property tax relief from the city of Tampa on the grounds that cemeteries are exempt, and later, he built a storefront along part of the property.

After 1929, Zion Cemetery — established in 1901 with room for more than 800 graves — disappeared from the public record.

A map from 1931 shows the storefront but not the cemetery. A year later, according to news archives, the Blue Moon Poultry Shop opened in a second storefront on the same block. In 1937, the owners of the poultry shop, Herman and Mary Jane Pleus, purchased the shop property from Kennedy.

Sharon Shepherdson, 75, the couple's granddaughter, told the *Times* that she lived with them for a while, in a house behind the store. But she knew nothing about a cemetery there.

TAMPA — Henry P. Kennedy was laid to rest in the family plot at historic Oaklawn Cemetery, a burial ground renowned as the rare place where blacks and whites were interred together during an era of segregation.

But Kennedy figures into a darker chapter from that era, too.

He and partner Hewitt Walker are the last people on record to own Zion Cemetery, just two miles to the north, where hundreds of African-Americans buried their dead during the early 1900s.

Last month, archaeologists acting on reporting by the *Tampa Bay Times* announced they had found more than 120 caskets buried on the property — even after storefronts, warehouses and a public housing project were built there through the years.

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Descendants of Kennedy still live in the Tampa area but did not return calls. The *Times* could not locate descendants of Walker.

Zion Cemetery re-emerged in 1951, when construction crews building Robles Park Village unearthed caskets holding the remains of three children.

Officials from the city assured reporters at the time that other bodies buried at Zion had been relocated. But there are no records indicating this actually occurred, or that anyone looked into these claims.

The *Times* located death certificates for 382 people buried at Zion. A cemetery historian who conducted followup research said he found 747.

Research by the archaeological team continues. They're surveying whether there are more bodies on the property and who is responsible for the cemetery's disappearance.

Racism might provide an answer, said Fred Hearn, who chronicles Tampa's African-American history.

African-Americans in the 1920s and 1930s were considered second class citizens, Hearn said. He wouldn't be surprised to learn that people interested in developing the land simply had the grave markers removed.

"Who would have stopped them?" he said. "African-Americans had no political power and it would have taken an unusually brave white person to stand up and say something."

Even those with loved ones buried at Zion would have been hesitant to protest, archaeologist Moates said.

"Racism was prevalent in Florida," he said.

Maybe they did speak up at some point, he added, and no one in a position of power cared.

It's also possible that Kennedy and partner Walker meant to do the right thing, but people they hired to move the graves failed to do their job, said Rodney Kite-Powell with the Tampa Bay History Center.

Or perhaps some graves were moved, but only those with grave markers of some kind, Kite-Powell said.

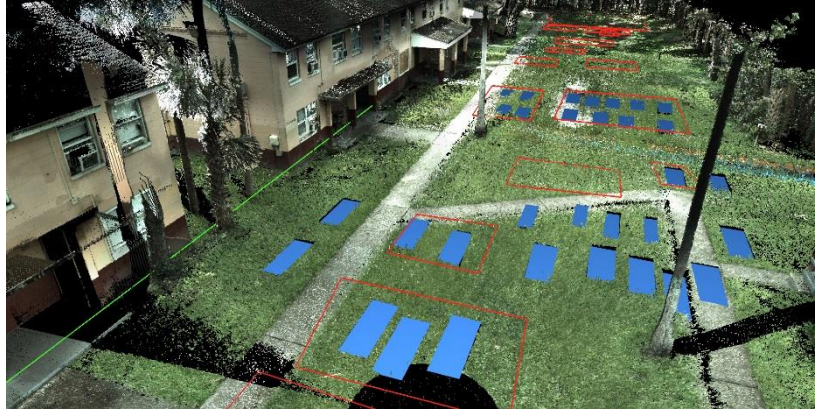
Eunive Massey, 96, used to live near the cemetery and recalled to the *Times* that she saw a few bodies removed around 1933.

"It's possible she saw people moving only those with headstones," Kite-Powell said. "Other headstones could have been lost or maybe not every grave had one. Without the markers, maybe the owners didn't know where the others were."

Archaeologist Moates is especially upset that nothing was done after the three caskets were found in November 1951.

He sees it as part of a decades-long "institutional effort" that erased Zion.

The city, led at the time by Mayor Curtis Hixon, told reporters the graves had been moved in 1925, even though City Council minutes from 1929 had recorded Kennedy's claim for a cemetery tax exemption.



This image is a 3D laser scan of Robles Park Village showing grave-shaped objects beneath the ground in relation to buildings at the public housing complex. The single image is made from two data sources and aligns with historical maps of the former Zion Cemetery. [CARDNO | Cardno]

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“The city should have done something,” said Iman of Robles Park Village. “They are just as guilty for not doing their job to protect that cemetery when it was there and when it was found in the '50s.”

Kennedy was still alive in 1951 and might have corrected the record. And at the time, his former partner Walker was working as chief deputy tax assessor for Hillsborough County.

A search of news archives and meeting minutes shows no sign that anyone checked on the relocation claim.

In fact, another false claim surfaced during an authority meeting that was held right after the discovery of the caskets — that Zion's graves had been moved way back in 1909.

It would be nearly 70 years after that meeting before Zion Cemetery was discovered again, with the publication of the *Times* report June 23.

Now, the Housing Authority has hired the archaeological team, moved to relocate residents of Robles Park Village, and pledged to establish a memorial park.

Hearns wants to see more research conducted to determine who let Zion Cemetery disappear: “We don't know who knew what.”

But one thing is clear, said archaeologist Moates.

“Our job moving forward is to make sure that Zion is never again erased and lives on in perpetuity.”