

Work begins to identify relatives of those buried at Zion Cemetery

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TAMPA, Fla. (FOX 13) - It could be years, or even decades before we know exactly who was buried at Tampa's first Black cemetery, or we may never know at all. But the work starts now.

Archeologists determined there are more than 130 gravesites under part of the Robles Park apartment complex. Before the apartments were built in the '50s, the land was Zion Cemetery.

Hundreds of death certificates, possibly belonging to those buried at Zion, have already been found. Now researchers have to identify and track down every living family member of each person possibly buried at the site.

Only then can the next steps be determined.

Residents of Robles Park, meanwhile, held a vigil Friday night on Tampa's forgotten black cemetery, many praying the bodies interred at Zion Cemetery would remain so.

"It could have been my grandmother," said Clark Simmons, a member of the Robles Park Resident Council. "To respect them, you should leave them there, to make a memorial, a sanctuary, to where we can honor the dead."

State Sen. Janet Cruz filed a bill Wednesday that would allow the University of South Florida to identify next-of-kin of those buried. Once all living relatives have been located, Florida law requires each and every one of them to agree to the graves being unearthed, which is the only way the remains can be positively identified.

"My perfect world is that that family member would say, 'We want my great, great grandfather to stay exactly where he is,'" said Cruz.

In the short-term, her bill would provide \$50,000 for a memorial with the names of those who are believed to be in Robles Park and \$500,000 for the formation of a task force that would delve further into forgotten black cemeteries, which were often established as Jim Crow took a stranglehold on Florida.

"Who is where across the state? This happened in many, many cities across Florida," Cruz wondered.

Although her bill provides for re-interment and grave marker costs if the remains are moved, those we spoke to in Robles Park Friday were not particularly interested in disturbing the bodies.

Let them finally rest in peace, they said.

"Those were people. Black people. They were purposely forgotten. Purposely," said Simmons. "To have them forgotten the way they were forgotten, it was heinous. It was a heinous crime to me."

The **Tampa Housing Authority** is in the process of relocating residents who live above the burial site.