

Their ancestors were forgotten as Zion Cemetery faded from view. Now, they want answers.

Some of Tampa's most prominent African-American families buried their dead at Zion. Still, apartments and businesses were built on top of them.

Tampa Bay Times, By Paul Guzzo, Published September 13, 2019

TAMPA — Samuel Oscar Sheehy was a fixer for Tampa's black community in the early 1900s.

His fluent Spanish helped connect him with the region's growing Cuban population and his father owned a successful West Tampa butcher shop that also "hooked him into the political establishment," nephew Ronald Sheehy said.

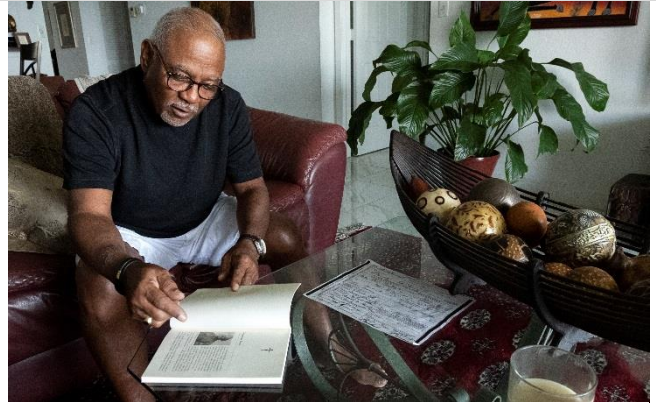
"When people lost jobs or had a problem, they went to him."

Still, Samuel Sheehy couldn't fix it when the tragedy of his baby son's death from pneumonia was compounded by the disappearance of the cemetery where the 18-month-old boy was buried.

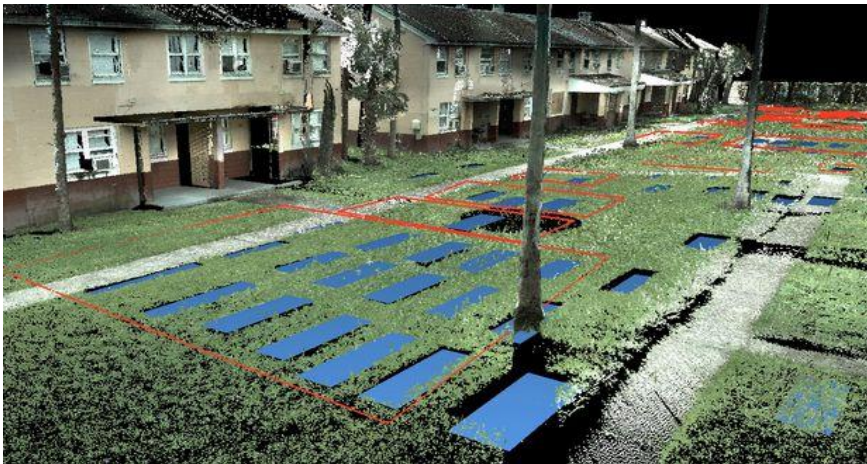
"If it was in his power, he would have done something," said Ronald Sheehy, 74, of St. Petersburg.

The sentiment is shared by descendants of two other people buried at Zion Cemetery. They're convinced that racism played a role in the disappearance of what is believed to be Tampa's first African-American burial ground.

Now, they wonder whether the bodies of their loved ones will turn up among the caskets detected during an ongoing survey of the property that once was Zion Cemetery. Nearly 130 have been found so far, beneath land on North Florida Avenue where a public housing project, warehouses and an old storefront were later built.



Ronald Sheehy of St. Petersburg knew about his uncle, Samuel Oscar Sheehy, a well known "fixer" in Tampa's minority communities of the early 1900s. But he didn't know his uncle had a son who died at 18 months and was buried in the long-forgotten Zion Cemetery. [JAMES BORCHUCK | Times]



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]

Even Richard Doby, the prominent African-American developer who founded Zion in 1901, buried his son at the cemetery, in 1923.

"He's still there somewhere," said descendant Booker Doby, 87, of Tampa. "Terrible."

Delores Brooks of Riverview said her great-great grandmother Tawsie Lacoïn-Mobley was a well-known midwife who delivered babies in the Robles Pond community where Zion was established. Yet, no final resting place has been preserved for her brother-in-law Charley Mobley, who died of pulmonary tuberculosis and was buried at Zion in 1913.

"Who could have done anything?" said Brooks, 49. "Who would have helped them in that era when Jim Crow laws were written to keep white people in power?"

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The survey now underway was prompted by a special report June 23 in the *Tampa Bay Times*, revealing that the property once was a cemetery where at least 370 people were buried and that no records indicate they had ever been moved.

Using ground penetrating radar, archaeologists found caskets last month beneath the Robles Park Village public housing complex. Zion had room for more than 800 graves, so the archaeologists say they may find more.

The *Times* informed Doby and Sheehy that they had ancestors buried at Zion. Neither had heard of these particular relatives until they were shown the death certificates.

They wonder if their families were ashamed that they had no power to preserve the cemetery and kept the story of the dead to themselves.

Brooks reached out to the *Times* after the June 23 report to share her connection.

As a child, she was told of an Uncle Charley Mobley who, in the early 1900s, moved to Robles Pond from Hernando County.

But she had never heard of Zion Cemetery before. The *Times* report included a list of death certificates with Zion as the burial place and her uncle's name was on it.

African-Americans from that era, Brooks said, "have less of a tendency to talk about certain things they couldn't stop."

Like many, she wonders who is responsible for leaving the caskets behind and allowing development on the Zion property.

State Board of Health of Florida
BUREAU OF VITAL STATISTICS
CERTIFICATE OF DEATH

PLACE OF DEATH: Hillsborough
COUNTY: Hillsborough
REGISTRATION DISTRICT NO.: 1912
FILE NO.: 3006
REGISTERED NO.: 32

Patient: (Write name, not number)
City: Tampa
No. 737 Green St.
Ward: (If death occurred in a hospital or institution, give its NAME instead of street and number.)

FULL NAME: Samuel O Sheehy

PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS
SEX: Male
COLOR OR RACE: Col
MARRIAGE STATUS: Single
DATE OF BIRTH: Sept 25, 1916
AGE: 71 yrs, 6 mos, 7 ds
OCCUPATION: none
BIRTHPLACE: Tampa Fla
FATHER: Daniel O Sheehy
MOTHER: Juanita McSheehy

MEDICAL CERTIFICATE OF DEATH
DATE OF DEATH: April 4, 1988
I HEREBY CERTIFY that I attended deceased from April 4, 1988 to April 4, 1988 and that I last saw him alive on April 4, 1988 and that death occurred on the date stated above, at 6:00 a.m.
CAUSE OF DEATH: Bronchitis - presumed

17. PLACE OF RESIDENCE (For hospitals, institutions, transient, or other places)
18. PLACE OF BIRTH OR REMOVAL
19. SIGNATURE OF REGISTRAR

The Zion Cemetery death certificate for Samuel Oscar Sheehy Jr. [FAMILYSEARCH.ORG]

"What was done in the dark will come to light," Brooks said. "You cannot hide secrets, you cannot hide lies. At some point, all is revealed."

The survey team hopes its research will turn up the answers.

Zion's last owners of record were Henry P. Kennedy and partner Hewitt Walker. In 1929, Kennedy sought a property tax break for Zion on the grounds it was a cemetery, then later that year, he built a storefront along a portion of the land, according to records uncovered by the Times.

The **Tampa Housing Authority** is relocating residents of the five buildings erected on the cemetery and plans to demolish the buildings soon then turn the property into a memorial park. The authority hopes that the owner of the rest of the land, restaurateur Richard Gonzmart, will contribute his property to a memorial park, as well.

State Sen. Janet Cruz has introduced a bill that would create a task force to search for descendants of those buried in Zion so they can decide whether caskets should be moved to other cemeteries.

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Doby, Brooks and Sheehy prefer the Housing Authority's plan.

"I don't see any reason to dig up bones," Sheehy said, "and put them somewhere else."

Doby hopes the park mentions that his great grandfather founded the cemetery.

In 1951, three caskets containing the remains of children were discovered during construction of Robles Park Village.

But there's no indication that a broader search was considered, judging from a review of Housing Authority records.

By then, Samuel Sheehy was an instructor at Blake High School and his wife Juanita Sheehy was an English teacher at Middleton High School.

Another of Ronald Sheehy's uncles, Paul Sheehy Sr., was one of Tampa's first African-American physicians and an elementary school is named for him today.

"They were all well-thought of," Ronald Sheehy said.

Perhaps when the caskets were unearthed in 1951, the family did speak up, he said. Or perhaps they said nothing.

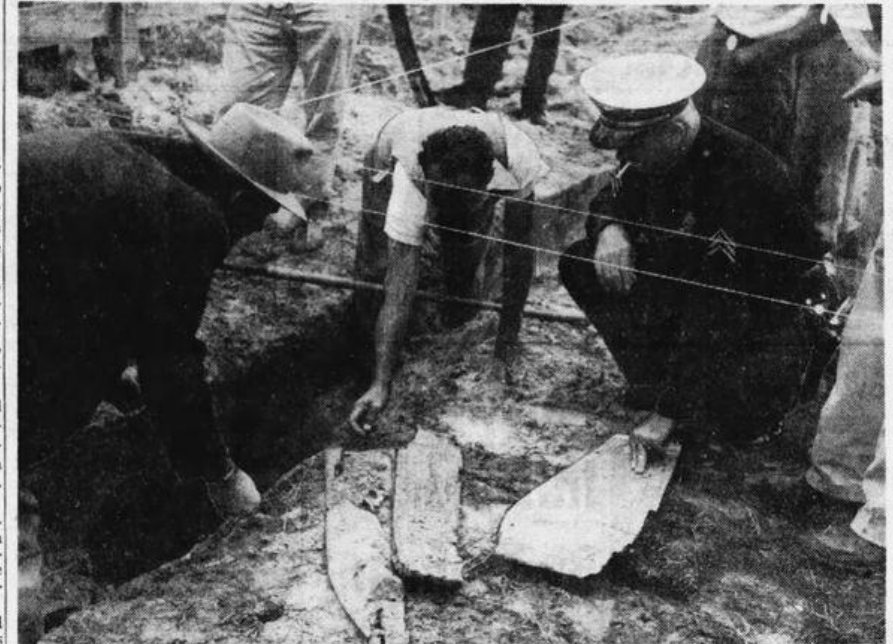
"If they didn't, I don't think I'll ever have the answer why."

Housing Authority minutes say the "child-sized" remains were reburied somewhere else but not where.

Perhaps one was the 18-month-old son of Ronald Sheehy's uncle.

"This is a revelation," Sheehy said. "This is sad."

Unmarked Graves Found by Construction Workers



Mystery surrounded the finding today of several unmarked graves on the site of the new 436-unit Robles Park Village housing project which has just been started by Paul Smith Construction Co. Workmen discovered the unidentified graves while digging for foundations on the project at the southeast corner of Ruth and Morgan Sts. Tampa police and detectives were called in to investigate. Shown here are Detective W. R. Bland (left) and Sgt. W. H. Locke (right) as they studied the first of three children's caskets removed by workmen. The most puzzling aspects in the finding of the skeletal remains were: How old is the cemetery? Who knows the identity of those buried there, and what should be done with the remains unearthed by the workmen?
—Times Photo.

Newspapers.com This report in the Tampa Daily Times on Nov. 16, 1951, said that several unmarked graves were mistakenly dug up during the construction of Robles Park Village along North Florida Avenue. [TAMPA DAILY TIMES | Newspapers.com/Tampa Daily Time