

With death of owner, future uncertain for Tampa's troubled Memorial Park Cemetery

Some 6,000 people were laid to rest at the African-American cemetery, but no one wants to take care of it anymore.

Tampa Bay Times, Paul Guzzo, Senior news researcher Caryn Baird | Published Sept. 17, 2019



The owner of Tampa's last operating segregation-era African-American cemetery has died and his family no longer wants to run it. Memorial Park Cemetery is a segregation era all-black cemetery. [JAMES BORCHUCK | Times]

interest in taking over the cemetery. At this point,

TAMPA — Largely on his own, John Robinson did the maintenance work at Memorial Park Cemetery, an African-American burial ground that his family has owned since 1929.

It is no small task.

The 20-acre cemetery at 2225 E Dr Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. is the final resting place for some 6,000 people and home to a memorial erected to honor black soldiers killed during World War I.

The job got away from Robinson. Paper records kept through years don't indicate how many plots are still available there. There isn't even an inventory of the burials.

Robinson died July 15 at 66. No one in his family has an interest in taking over the cemetery. At this point, neither does anyone else.

"No one wants it? I'm shocked," said Andre Arenas, whose grandfather — Negro League Baseball star Humberto Arenas — is interred in a mausoleum at Memorial Park. "I hope something can be worked out. It can't just be left alone."

Memorial Park Cemetery was established in 1919 as Tampa's second African-American burial ground — around the time that the first one, **Zion Cemetery** on North Florida Avenue, was accepting its last burials.

Soon afterward, Zion Cemetery began fading from public view; grave markers vanished and businesses and apartments were later built on top of it. Zion was rediscovered with a special *Tampa Bay Times* report in June. A survey has so far revealed 126 caskets under the ground there.

For the much larger Memorial Park Cemetery, there is a disagreement between Robinson's estate and the city of Tampa over whether the estate has the money to continue operating the cemetery.

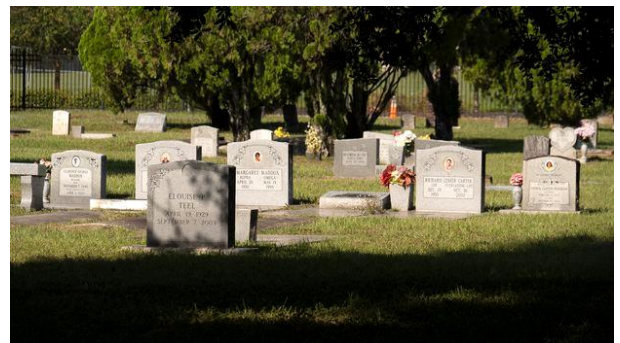
"Right now, there is no one to maintain it and there is no money," said Roland Waller, attorney for the estate.

The city of Tampa disagrees. "The estate has assets to provide for the maintenance of the cemetery," according to city spokeswoman Ashley Bauman.

State law allows the city to maintain and secure an abandoned cemetery or one that has not been maintained for more than six months. A city or county may sue to recover maintenance costs, according to the law.

The city of Tampa already spends around \$100,000 a year maintaining the cemeteries it owns — Jackson Heights, Marti/Colon, Woodlawn and Oaklawn.

The city recently cut the grass at Memorial Park and has done some maintenance there "in order to protect the welfare of the adjacent owners and neighborhood," Bauman said.



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But that's as far as it goes, she said.

Tampa does not "have the resources to assume ownership or operation and ongoing maintenance of the Memorial cemetery."

The record-keeping problems have complicated any notion of putting the cemetery on the market. A value can't be assessed until there's a count of how many plots still are available for sale. Meantime, attorney Waller said, the estate is reviewing 100 years of records, handwritten and in notebooks, "to identify who owns what lot" and "where everyone is."

How long will it take? The estate is "going as fast as they can."

As for why the records weren't better kept, Waller said he doesn't know "why Mr. Robinson didn't do that."

Robinson's last will and testament, filed with the Pasco County clerk, says he has no children so his estate falls to niece Wendy Scolaro and nephew William Robinson III.

The *Times* left a voicemail for Scolaro but the attorney called back instead.

Nancy Heusted, who identified herself as Robinson's longtime partner, did not want to comment publicly.



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Nor does the list include some pioneering African-Americans whose death certificates say they were buried in Memorial Park. Their headstones are missing. They include early 20th century developer Richard Doby, who established Zion Cemetery.

"I am truly concerned about what happens to it," said Yvette Lewis, Hillsborough County NAACP president. "Hopefully someone wants it. But, if not, the city needs to take on the initiative."



The owner of Tampa's last operating segregation-era all-black cemetery has died and his family no longer wants to run it. Humberto Arenas was a former Negro League Baseball star who has family members still in the area. [JAMES BORCHUCK | Times]

Soon after Memorial Park opened in 1919, the bodies of African-Americans killed during World War I were buried there on a regular basis. In 1923, the Red Cross purchased a section near the front entrance and erected a brick marker honoring them.

At some point members of the Florida Genealogical Society walked the cemetery and documented nearly 6,000 headstones there. The latest grave on their list is dated 2005.

The Genealogical Society's list does not include recent burials, such as Willie Robinson Jr., former owner of the Jackson House, who died in June. Top African-American entertainers stayed at the historic downtown rooming house in the mid-1900s.