

Forgotten cemetery may be under Miccosukee Greenway trail

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TALLAHASSEE — After trained dogs found unmarked graves, 72-year-old Gloria Jefferson Anderson went home and looked into the eyes of a photograph of her dad. Then she began to cry.

Her dad once had told her that their ancestors were buried at the now-forgotten New Hope Cemetery, but he passed away when she was a teen. Her mom had died earlier.

For more than 50 years, no one has been able to tell her just where New Hope Cemetery was located. (It's not to be confused with the "New Hope Church Cemetery," also in Leon County.)

What she knew was that her great-grandmother was a Creek Indian named Suwannee Cruel, married to Abram. Together they had 16 children, one named Maryanne, Anderson's grandmother.

She thinks they're buried under a section of what is now the Miccosukee Greenway.

The possible find comes at a time when there's interest in locating and memorializing abandoned cemeteries where former slaves and sharecroppers now lay. A 1998 Task Force on Abandoned and Neglected Cemeteries funded by the Legislature suggested there were at least 1,750 in the state.

That report came long before last December's announcement that archaeologists, using ground-penetrating radar, think they located 40 graves under the golf course at the Capital City Country Club, site of the former Houston Plantation.

Last August, the **Tampa Housing Authority** said it may have located the city's first African-American cemetery under an apartment complex. Zion Cemetery was established in 1901 but disappeared from city maps in 1929.

Archeologists used ground-penetrating radar and discovered what they believe to be 126 caskets beneath Housing Authority land.

And this past spring, lawmakers advanced a bill to establish a new task force to identify and memorialize the sites, the "covered-up graves that have been built upon, or destroyed, or obliterated from history," said state Sen. Darryl Rouson, D-St. Petersburg, one of the bill's co-sponsor. The bill cleared the Senate but the House did not take it up.

DOCUMENTING A LOST PAST

The affairs of slaves and sharecroppers were considered unimportant by historians. Events like their births and deaths went unrecorded and their contributions unrecognized.

When the findings of the country club graves were announced, Jonathan Lammers, the historian whose research convinced the club to allow further investigation of the site, said there are probably thousands of unmarked graves of slaves in the area, given the number of plantations in Leon County.

Guided by oral histories, Anderson searched through census, plantation and court records for some mention of her relatives. She traced her ancestors' journey from the slave markets of North Carolina, to a Jefferson County plantation, to a Leon County plantation along Centerville Road.

And she found after Emancipation, Abram signed a sharecropper's contract for a plot of land that eventually became part of the Welaunee hunting plantation. And he and his family joined the St. Peter Church.



In this Friday, June 5, 2020 photo, Gloria Jefferson Anderson points to the name of her grandfather, Abram Crowell (Cruel), on documents she has found during her search for the location of the New Hope Cemetery where Abram and others who lived on the Welaunee plantation are buried, near Tallahassee, Fla. (Tori Lynn Schneider/Tallahassee Democrat via AP)

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Page | 2

Some members of that congregation in the late 19th century were buried at a New Hope Cemetery, Anderson said. New Hope is behind a small white church on Miccosukee Road that borders the Miccosukee Greenway, two miles east of Fleischmann Road.

When her research led to the Testerina Primitive Baptist Church, she recruited an older brother in the quest.

In Orange County, his job was to survey for placement of water and sewer lines. He came to Leon County and inspected a wooded area atop a hill, along the greenway trail. He saw depressions that he said would require a developer to notify local archeological and cultural officials before they dug.

Then a friend's two cadaver dogs, independent of each other, signaled that there was something in the ground.

The dogs, Shiraz and Fletch, explored the width of the greenway Jan. 30 and about 125 feet on both sides in a loose grid pattern. Trainer Suzie Goodhope has assisted law enforcement in forensic work and the U.S. Park Service in efforts to identify historic sites and volunteered their time for the investigation.

The dogs gave two "responses" on the trail west of the church and six where the footpath turns south.

"I cried because I found his people, and that's my family," Anderson said. "Now that I know where they are, this won't be completed until we get the county and state to verify it."

Anderson said the New Hope Cemetery extends west from the church onto the county's greenway and possibly into city property marked for the Welaunee development.

PROGRESS MAY CONFLICT WITH HIDDEN HISTORY

The site is just two miles up the trail from the Hickory Hill sharecropper cemetery near Dempsey Mayo Road. It may foreshadow the discovery of other forgotten slave cemeteries as the city of Tallahassee's boundaries edge northward into the county's former cotton belt.

The Welaunee development, which may become the city's biggest subdivision and an eventual home to 50,000 people, is on land where once were four antebellum plantations. Two of the plantations were owned by the county's biggest slaveholders.

"When black people were on the plantation and they died, they were buried right there on the plantation," Anderson said about the rolling red-clay hills of northeast Leon County.

According to an 1860s county agriculture survey, some 620 enslaved workers were on the four plantations bordered by today's Fleischmann, Centerville and Miccosukee roads, north to the state line with Georgia. J.J. Williams' La Grange Plantation held 232 enslaved people, while another 180 worked the James Kirksey Plantation.

Workers on the four plantations produced 1,989 bales of cotton (worth \$145 a bale in today's dollars) and at least 17,500 bushels of corn (\$8 a bushel) the year before the Civil War broke out.

Anderson's family story is that her ancestors were sold in North Carolina to a Jefferson County plantation in 1828. When Emancipation came, her great-grandparents were working the House Place Plantation, owned by R.A. Whitfield and along Centerfield Road.

Other than that, all Anderson knew was that her great-grandparents and their children lived in the St. Peter community along Pablo Avenue, off Olson Road near the Fleischmann and Centerville intersection. They too were buried at New Hope.

In the 1870 census records, she found a Suwannee and Abram and 16 children. One was named Maryanne.

Then, about this time last year, she found an 1869 sharecropper contract between Cruel and Whitfield in a file of the Florida Plantation Records.

CONNECTING THE HISTORICAL DOTS

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Page | 3

“You have to know how to connect the dots,” said Lonnie Mann, a retired state employee and armchair historian who is helping Anderson research her family’s history. “Not much was written down because African-Americans were not allowed to read and write.

“But these contracts list a few place names, and New Hope is written in there, and the oldest record we found places it in the area between Miccosukee and Centerville.”

Many former slaves clustered in small enclaves, like Frenchtown. These enclaves had evolved from “brush arbors,” campsites where people worshiped away from their overseers.

Many of the brush arbors had aspirational names, like “New Hope.” According to the U.S. Geographical Census, there are at least 60 such places in Florida, including one along the Florida-Georgia border.

That complicated Anderson and Mann’s search for her ancestors’ resting place.

“What a morass that I just wallowed in, let me tell you,” Mann said. “There were all sort of blind alleys I went down. But it’s a theological concept, like the Second Coming. There are more than 600 New Hope churches and cemeteries in the U.S.”

Attending services at St. Peter Church last fall, Anderson struck up a conversation with a church elder, a man in his mid-90s. He told her he remembered congregants talking about New Hope when he was a child. He told her he believed it was near Testerina.

The site inspection, cadaver dogs, government documents and oral history gives her confidence she has located the lost cemetery.

LOST BODIES, REMEMBERED SOULS

Anderson thinks up to 12 Tallahassee families have relatives buried there. In addition to the Cruels, she suspects there are also members of the Austin, James, Dennis and Porter families. And she’s trying to identify others.

Mann is preparing to register the site with the Secretary of State’s Division of Historical Resources Master Site file. The submission will document the area as a cultural and historic resource. State verification will provide access to more research tools to further examine the findings.

“Leon County has been supportive of the citizen-led effort to survey the New Hope location and learn more about the area’s history,” county spokesman Matheiu Cavell said. “We also know that local history has deep roots for generations of nearby residents, so we hope future research keeps everyone engaged.”

Anderson fears the race is on to get the site verified, marked and protected from development. Its western edge could possibly extend close to the proposed route for the Welaunee Boulevard extension, being built partly with Blueprint 2000 tax dollars.

She wants the state to commission a ground-penetrating radar survey of the area: “It’s abandoned and forgotten. Nobody thought about it until I started to inquire where are my people buried.”

A spokeswoman for Blueprint said it doesn’t appear that the Welaunee extension will affect the area Anderson has identified.

Blueprint is developing an archaeological and cultural resource survey to identify any cemeteries or other historically significant parcels in the route’s path. That survey should be completed in September.