

## HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY

### Community demands answers on hundreds of missing graves in Tampa's first black cemetery

Hundreds of people found their final resting place at Zion Cemetery in the early 1900s. In the decades since, the cemetery was forgotten.

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TAMPA, Fla. — It's believed hundreds of bodies from Tampa's first African American cemetery could be buried underneath a part of a public housing complex in Tampa.

"The fact that Zion Cemetery could be so quickly covered up and its memory extinguished really goes to show what life was like in the 1920s for African Americans," said Rodney Kite-Powell of the Tampa Bay History Center.

"The lack of any kind of political strength, the kind of helplessness...that the community would have felt to prevent something like this from happening, just shows how truly powerless African Americans were not just in Tampa, but in this country during that time period."

In the early 1900s, hundreds of African American men and women found their final resting place at the Zion Cemetery along Florida Avenue in Tampa.

However, when the **Tampa Housing Authority** built Robles Park Village in 1951, some of those bodies were likely permanently encased underneath the development, and the memory of that cemetery was forgotten – until now.

"It is unconscionable, even based on 1951-era standards, that land was developed upon without having confirmed all bodies were properly removed," said Leroy Moore, chief operating officer of the Tampa Housing Authority in a statement. "From the reporting, there seems to be legitimate reason to believe that could have happened.

"We will find out as soon as we proceed with our archaeological assessment and will always seek to be responsible and respectful of what we discover."

Community leaders who learned about the lost cemetery said the discovery was a painful reminder of a dark chapter in Tampa's history.

"I couldn't do nothing but cry," said Yvette Lewis of the Hillsborough NAACP. "When someone is laying to rest, that's just it. They are laying to rest. "And for you to go back and to disturb them, they're not at rest."

Lewis said she wants to see the city be proactive in rectifying what she calls an injustice.

"We're going to ask that the city of Tampa put together a task force to help explain to the community, put up a placard, put up some information record this in the history of Tampa," she said.

"Let people know that we were a part of the history of Tampa."

Historian Fred Hearn's echoed that sentiment: "My gosh, we've got to make this as right as we can, right now. It's frustrating because as we look at this part of history...it makes me wonder how many other significant things in black history were kept from us.

"Tampa's part of the deep South, and we know that segregation, racism ran rampant and that black lives did not always matter."

The Tampa Housing Authority said the agency is "in the process of advancing its environmental, historical and archaeological assessment process of Robles Park Village" to further gather facts about the site.

"Let's right this wrong," Lewis said. "Let's fix it."

