

# Names linked to lost graves

*A historian says more bodies may have been at a Tampa African-American cemetery.*

Times Staff Writer, Paul Guzzo, atpguzzo@tampabay.com, June 25, 2019

TAMPA - The lost Zion Cemetery's burial population might have been nearly double the 382 that has been reported thus far.

Last fall, hobbyist cemetery historian Ray Reed told the *Tampa Bay Times* that he had come upon a few death certificates for an unknown Tampa burial ground called Zion. He asked for help in discovering its story.

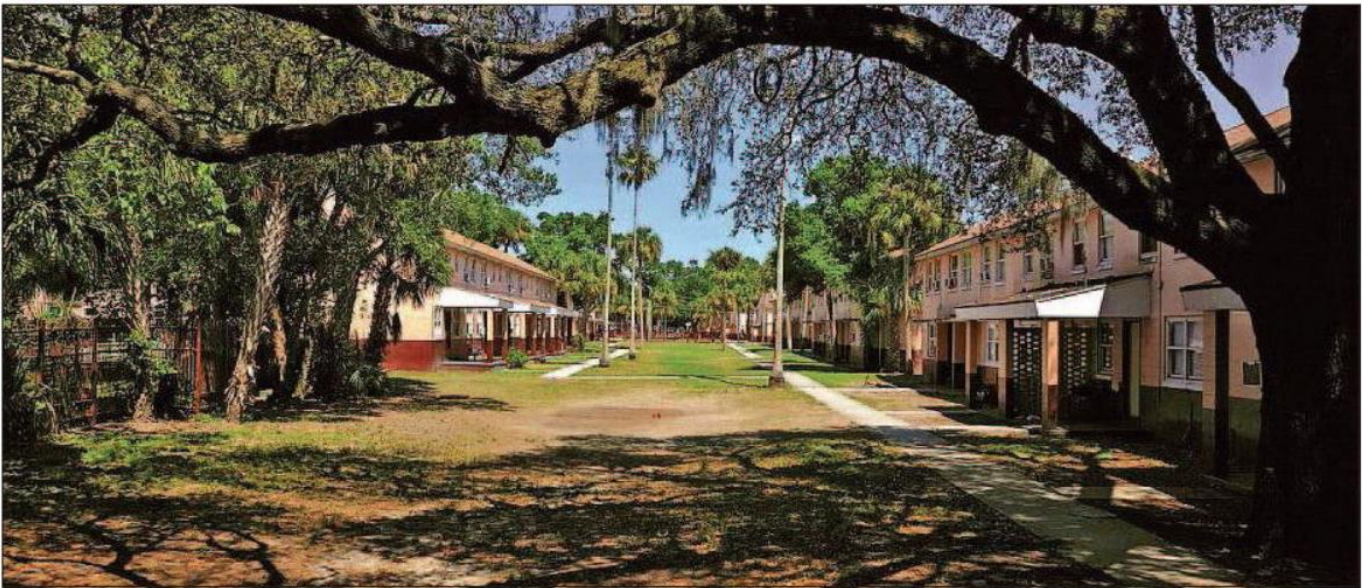
After nine months of research, the *Times* reported on Sunday that Zion was the first African-American cemetery recognized by the city of Tampa, existed from 1901 through the 1920s and was located on the corner of Florida and Virginia avenues.

The *Times* also discovered 382 death certificates for Zion.

The *Times* determined that 13 of the bodies were moved, leaving open the possibility that all or some of the other 369 remain on the property that today makes up part of Robles Park Apartments and land on which Richard Gonzmart of the Columbia Restaurant Group wants to develop a culinary school.

Reed says that in the past few weeks he dedicated nearly all his waking hours to searching for Zion records.

He claims to have found names for 747 buried in Zion.



LUIS SANTANA | Times

**In 1951 when Robles Park Village in Tampa was being built, workers dug up three bodies near where this photo was taken in April. Newspaper accounts from the time said the bodies were buried in Zion Cemetery and should have been moved in 1925.**

Regardless of the actual number, Tampa City Council member Orlando Gudes, who represents the Tampa Heights district where the former Zion land is located, said the city needs to discuss how it can help locate the remains of those once interred there.

'We need to make this right,' he said. 'You always want to start with a conversation. Let's see what can be done, and we can go from there.'

The *Times* has not independently verified Reed's findings, but he listed the 747 names on the findagrave.com website under Zion and attached scans of some of the death records for evidence.

He wants to add scans of all the records but said it is a time-consuming task.

'I hope some kind souls from somewhere will assist in attaching the image of the death certificate and/or the burial permit record' to the remaining names, Reed said in an email.



**Ray Reed**

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What's more, historians now wonder if records from that era listing another African-American cemetery are related to Zion.

There are death certificates and news archives that reference Robles Pond Cemetery.

But there is no listing for Robles Pond Cemetery in city directories or on maps from that time, and obituaries for that burial ground say it was located on Florida Avenue, which was where Zion was.

'My intuition tells me that there would not be two African-American cemeteries in the same area,' said Rodney Kite-Powell, curator of the Tampa Bay History Center.

The records, he said, might have cited the burial ground by its location at Robles Pond.

In the search for Zion death certificates, the *Times* found dozens for Robles Pond Cemetery.

'So now it is a question of space,' Kite-Powell said. 'Did the cemetery have that much room?' A map of the 2.5-acre Zion Cemetery filed with the Hillsborough County Clerk's Office in February 1901 has it split into 98 sections.

Rebecca O'Sullivan of the Florida Public Archaeology Network at the University of South Florida said each section could fit up to eight graves. Plus, half an acre of the cemetery was a potter's field - an area to bury unidentified and indigent people.

A 1912 article about Zion said it had not been 'used as a cemetery for some time.' A 1923 article later described Zion as one of the city's 'most prominent and greatly used burial places.' 'It could have been filled in the teens as the city grew,' curator Kite-Powell said.

In 1951 when the **Tampa Housing Authority** was constructing Robles Park Apartments on the former Zion property, three caskets were uncovered. The city told reporters at the time that the Zion graves had been moved in 1925 by someone who purchased the cemetery that year.

Neither the name of that owner nor where the remains were moved was reported.

There is no mention in Housing Authority minutes of a further investigation.

Leroy Moore, chief operating officer of the Housing Authority, previously told the *Times* that he would welcome one now.

Yvette Lewis, president of the NAACP in Hillsborough County, said that examination needs to include searching other cemetery records for a mass re-interment of the remains and using ground penetrating radar on the former Zion property to find out if graves are still there.

'Let's all have a candid conversation and talk about this,' she said. 'Let's figure out a way to right this.' Ashley Bauman, spokesman for Tampa Mayor Jane Castor said, 'We've reached out to USF to work with them on a process to determine if and where the bodies may be on the private property. We've also reached out to The Columbia Group, and the Housing Authority to ensure we're all on the same page and that if found, the remains are properly interred and given the proper burial and markings they deserve.' Regardless of whether the bodies are there or not, or if they are one day found, Luis Viera, the councilman representing the North Tampa area, says a memorial honoring Zion Cemetery and its history must be erected.

'Tampa should honor the stories and names of those forgotten souls, and work with proper local institutions like (the University of South Florida) to get all of the information necessary to respect and honor these names,' he said. 'These are the hands that built America - often against their will. Let's give them the respect that they are due.'