

Woman, 96, recalls placing flowers on graves before Zion Cemetery disappeared from memory

As many as 800 people might have been buried at the cemetery based on records from the early 1900s, but what became of the bodies remains a mystery.

Tampa Bay Times, Paul Guzzo, pguzzo@tampabay.com, 6/26/19

TAMPA — Eunive Massey said she was there when the men came for the bodies at Zion Cemetery. It was around 1933. The neighborhood kids watched as cranes and shovels dug up the plots.

In the evenings and on weekends, boys climbed into the holes to rummage through exposed remains for valuables. Bones discarded by workers were in the sand near graves. Massey estimates the workers were at the site for weeks.

Established in 1901, Zion was the first African American cemetery recognized by the city of Tampa. As many as 800 people might have been buried there based on death certificates from the era, but what became of the bodies remains a mystery.

Massey came forward after reading a special report Sunday in the Tampa Bay Times called The Forgotten — chronicling the disappearance of Zion Cemetery in the 3700 block of North Florida Avenue and asking for information from anyone who might remember it.

Her recollections from the time she was a young girl, living adjacent to the cemetery property, shed light on the mystery. She describes what appears to be an attempt at exhuming and relocating some bodies, but a disorganized one. “Where did the bodies get moved?” said Rebecca O’Sullivan, with the Florida Public Archaeology Network at the University of South Florida. Massey does not know.

Shelby Bender, who authored the book Tampa’s Historic Cemeteries, added, “We have not found evidence of a methodical approach for graves being removed from Zion and re-interred. We need ground penetrating radar there.”

Massey's memory of her old neighborhood, then known as Robles Pond, remains sharp. She recalled the names of neighbors and businesses, all verified by the Times through old city directories and maps. Massey says she was one of nine siblings raised at 214 E Nordica Ave. in the early 1930s.



Fig. 1: Eunive Massey, 96, remembers visiting Zion Cemetery behind her house. And she remembers men digging up some of the graves, but she was too little to know what became of them.

[JAMES BORCHUCK | Times]

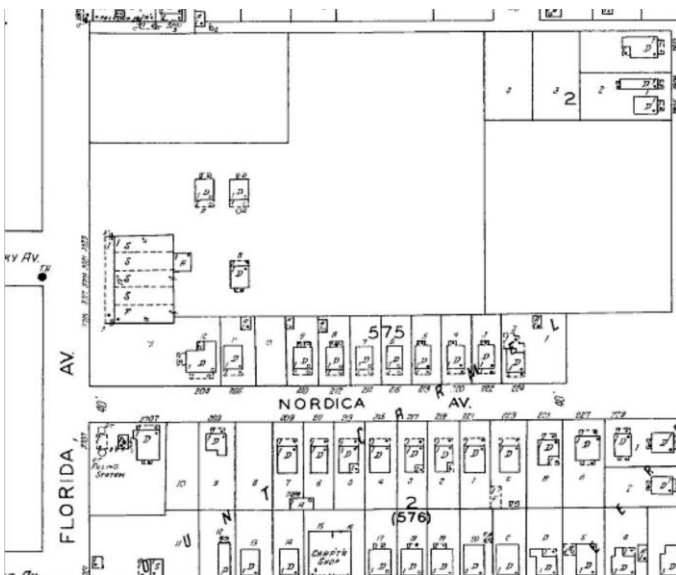


Fig. 2: A 1931 insurance company map shows the area around the long-forgotten Zion Cemetery, including a storefront along North Florida Avenue and three houses behind it that are no longer there. [Sanborn Fire Insurance]

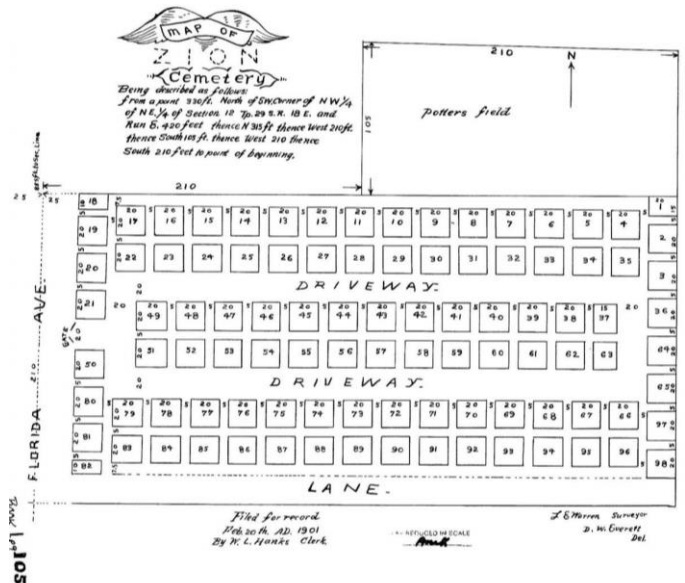


Fig. 3: A map filed with the Hillsborough County Clerk in February 1901 shows the entrance to Zion Cemetery along North Florida Avenue. A woman who lived next door 30 years later said the entrance at that time was along Ruth Avenue. [Hillsborough County Clerk]

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"Zion was right in the back of my house," she said. "I could walk the length of a car and be right in it. There was no fence." The cemetery sign was on the southern end of the property along Ruth Avenue, she said. Painted on wood, it showed two white crosses flanking the words "Zion Cemetery" in black.

Along intersecting North Florida Avenue was a storefront that included a bakery and furniture shop. Behind that, there were three homes and then the cemetery. "We would walk through it, collect little wild daisies and put them on the graves," Massey said.

A 1931 map shows the stores and homes. But the space behind it, described as a part of the cemetery on maps from a decade earlier, is not labelled. The *Times* found 382 death certificates from the early 1900s and other records that identify Zion Cemetery as a burial ground for Tampa's African American community.

But Massey said she and her friends thought it was an abandoned white cemetery. "If it was for blacks, people we knew who died would have been buried there," she said. The last of the 382 death certificates was in 1920, three years before Massey was born.

The *Times* did account for 13 of the bodies — seven relocated to the African American Memorial Park Cemetery and three to Woodlawn Cemetery. Both burial grounds are in Tampa. Another three were uncovered inadvertently as workers started building the Robles Park complex in 1951. "I wouldn't remember something that happened when I was 2," Massey said. "I saw the bodies moved in the 30s. I was around 10."

The city of Tampa told reporters in 1951 that Zion's other graves had been relocated in 1925. But no records confirm that. In fact, no reference to a cemetery there appears in documents after 1923, the *Times* reported Sunday. But based on information from Massey, a new search this week revealed a reference in March 1929. That's when City Council minutes show that H.P. Kennedy, who purchased the land in 1926, petitioned to have the taxes he owed on the property suspended because — as a cemetery — it was exempt.

Also in 1929, according to news archives, Kennedy built the storefront Massey remembers along the North Florida Avenue side of the property. A 1901 map of Zion Cemetery shows burial plots across the entire 2 1/2-acre property and a cemetery entrance along the North Florida Avenue sign.

The property was subdivided for development in 1912, splitting off what would later become the storefront area, according to news archives. Perhaps no one was ever buried in what became the storefront area, said O'Sullivan of USF, or the bodies were moved. Or perhaps bodies remain there, underneath the long-abandoned row of stores.

Maybe all the bodies spread across that piece of the property were moved in 1925, as the city — three decades later — would claim they were. But if so, said Rodney Kite-Powell, curator of the Tampa History Center, "Where are the records?"

Kite-Powell also questioned where the records are for the work Massey witnessed in 1933. She doesn't recall seeing any caskets loaded onto trucks. "We might need to start thinking in terms of a mass grave somewhere," Kite-Powell said.

Following publication of the *Times* story Sunday, four institutions with a stake in the cemetery began discussing how to coordinate a search there. They are USF, the city of Tampa, and the two property owners — the **Tampa Housing Authority** and the Columbia Restaurant Group. "Who knows what was left behind," USF's O'Sullivan said. "I like to go with the premise that once something is a cemetery, it is always a cemetery."

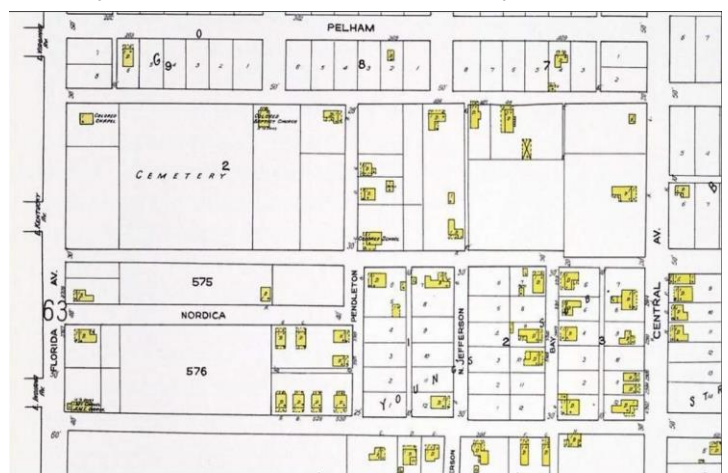


Fig. 4: A 1922 insurance company map shows that the original Zion Cemetery property was later subdivided for development along North Florida Avenue. [Sanborn Fire Insurance]