

Neighbors express dismay after learning about forgotten cemetery under property

Zion Cemetery was the first cemetery for African Americans in Tampa.

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TAMPA, Fla. — When Tony Polite found out his building at Robles Park Village sits on top of the old Zion Cemetery, he said he was deeply troubled.

“That feels like there's no respect to the ones that was buried,” he said. “Now we live [on] them so, it's disrespectful. But what can you do?”

Historian Rodney Kite-Powell believes the Zion Cemetery was the first cemetery for African Americans in Tampa. It existed for the first couple of decades of the 20th century, but after the Tampa Housing Authority

built Robles Park Village in 1951, its memory faded.

“Just the mere fact that a cemetery did exist here, should have resulted in a revision of the plan,” said Leroy Moore, chief operating officer of the Tampa Housing Authority.

The cemetery was recently rediscovered through a tip first given to the Tampa Bay Times.

Historians independently confirmed the cemetery did exist along Florida Avenue where the Robles Park public housing development sits today.

“In 1951, [housing authority minutes] report that the construction crew did unearth three caskets, and then it was silent going forward from that point, which is very concerning and disturbing that something like that would be reported in one board meeting and never heard from again in future board meetings,” Moore said. “It certainly gives me a reason to question whether there was an interest back in those days of determining if indeed there were more caskets before completing the building of this site.”

Moore said the housing authority is currently conducting an environmental site assessment and hopes to soon learn if there are still bodies underground.

“Right now, we're going through the next 60 to 90 days of actually completing this phase two environmental site assessment, which would actually look for evidence of what's underground here through the ground-penetrating radar, possibly through some excavation,” Moore said. He added there will also be biological assessments if indications of remaining graves are found.

“All the parties today are working to right that wrong. But why should it matter? Because it's history. It's Tampa's history. It's black history. it's just the dignified, appropriate thing to do at any period of time.”