

NEWS/POLITICS

State lawmakers move to identify, preserve forgotten African-American burial sites

Two state senators introduced legislation to seek out forgotten cemeteries, citing a Tampa Bay Times investigation. Tampa Bay Times, Aaron Holmes, Times Staff Writer, aholmes@tampabay.com or 706-347-1880 | July 1, 2019



This is an aerial view of Robles Park Village in Tampa taken by drone on April 24, 2019. In 1951 when these projects were being built, workers dug up three bodies near the top left building. Newspaper accounts from the time said the bodies were buried in Zion Cemetery and should have been moved in 1925. [LUIS SANTANA | Times]

Nobody knows how many African-American cemeteries are scattered across the state, christened during segregation then forgotten by history.

Two state lawmakers aim to fix that.

Florida state Sen. Janet Cruz, D-Tampa, and Audrey Gibson, D-Jacksonville, the Senate's minority leader, announced Friday that they were drafting legislation that would form a task force to identify unmarked African-American cemeteries. It would ensure the burial sites are recognized and preserved.

Their announcement follows a Tampa Bay Times investigation this week that revealed that Tampa's first African-American burial ground, Zion Cemetery, had mysteriously disappeared. The *Times* located death certificates for nearly 400 people who were buried in the 3700 block of N Florida Ave. from 1913 to 1920.

There is no sign that there was ever a cemetery there. The land has since repeatedly changed hands and is now home to the Robles Park Village public housing complex.

What became of the bodies once buried at Zion Cemetery is unknown. A woman who grew up in the area, Eunive Massey, 96, told the *Times* last week that she recalls workers digging up the grounds and removing bodies in the 1930s.

"Every person's story deserves to be told," Cruz said in a statement. "They need to be memorialized and as a state we must come together to identify these historical burial sites so we can remember all those who were an integral part of Florida's history."

Lawmakers say the task force would prioritize cataloguing the cemeteries, disseminating information about them to local governments and erecting historical markers to identify burial grounds.

African-American leaders in Tampa have already begun to call for a historical marker at Zion Cemetery, and for the city to account for what happened to the bodies buried there. The **Tampa Housing Authority**, which owns much of the land, has said it would welcome an investigation.