

What happened to nearly 400 people buried in Tampa?

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TAMPA — Byron Pressley parked along the side of the road and sat for a few minutes looking out the window of his car. He got out, walked slowly toward a chain link fence, and asked himself: “Will people watching think I’m crazy?” Pressley, a church pastor, knelt in front of the fence and prayed. Then he stood, took a breath and sang Jesus Keep Me Near, a hymn popular among African-Americans in the decades after slavery was abolished. Minutes before on this January afternoon, Pressley had learned from a reporter that Tampa’s black community buried its dead

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Photographer James Borchuck contributed to this report.

for two decades along this stretch of North Florida Avenue — now home to a couple of Columbia restaurant warehouses and the back of the Robles Park public housing complex.

There’s no sign today that a cemetery once occupied 2 1/2 acres here, no hint of the squares plotted out on an old map showing nearly 800 graves. Zion Cemetery, the first African-American cemetery recognized by the city, has been forgotten. Acting on a tip last fall, the Tampa Bay Times began examining what became of it. After reviewing thousands of historic records, and conducting dozens of interviews, reporters identified death certificates for 382 people who were buried at Zion from 1913 to 1920. There were likely many more.

The cemetery was established in 1901 but deaths were not always recorded in an era when no regulations protected graves and when African-Americans were treated as second-class citizens. The Times determined that 13 of the bodies were moved, most of them to two Tampa cemeteries. No one knows what became of the others. Were they moved, too? Or do they still lie beneath the ground where restaurant trucks and the residents of a half-dozen apartments come and go?

As the Times sought answers, ripples of shock and disbelief spread. They reached Pressley, pastor of First Mt. Carmel AME Church at 4406 N 26th St. Pressley had never given a thought to the property at Florida and Virginia avenues. He didn’t know that his church had historical ties to a place called Zion Cemetery. But as he prayed there that January afternoon, a connection formed.

“I don’t know how to explain it to people, but there’s a feeling you get,” Pressley said. “As if there were people there. Their spirit was kind of still there because I could feel it. I stood there in awe. There used to be a cemetery there, and it just gave me chills.” The search for the bodies in Zion Cemetery began with an even bigger mystery.

Since 2015, Ray Reed has pored over genealogy websites seeking death certificates for the thousands of people buried three miles to the northeast at Cemetery for All People — known through the years as the Poor Farm Cemetery or the county’s potter’s field. County records listed only 839 burials at the site, 5901 N 22nd

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St., and finding more has become Reed's quest in his retirement from a job with Hillsborough County's indigent health-care system.

Reed came upon death certificates for African-Americans who had been buried in a place he never heard of, Zion Cemetery. He reached out to the Times. Neither local historians nor churches linked to Zion Cemetery had ever heard of it, either. A handful of people whose families have lived for generations in Tampa recalled the name, but nothing more.

Maybe the bodies were moved somewhere else. Shelby Bender, author of Tampa's Historic Cemeteries, suggested a city cemetery, perhaps, or the Italian Club Cemetery, or the private Memorial Park — Tampa's second African-American cemetery. The Italian Club has no knowledge of a mass reburial. So the Times reviewed genealogy websites and found 382 death certificates with Zion as the burial site, then compared them with the lists of people buried in Memorial Park and in city-owned cemeteries — Jackson Heights, Marti/Colon, Oaklawn and Woodlawn.

Seven people turned up at Memorial Park, 2225 E Dr. Martin Luther King Blvd., and three at Woodlawn, 3412 N Ola Ave. Three other bodies had been identified in November 1951 when crews building the Robles Park housing project unearthed their caskets. That might have served as a red flag that a larger cemetery had been discovered. But the city told reporters at the time that the Zion graves had been moved in 1925, by someone who purchased the cemetery that year.

There is no indication, in the documents or news archives, that any but those 13 bodies were ever moved. And there likely would be some mention, somewhere, given the time and effort such a sensitive undertaking would require, historians say. Presented with this research, African-American leaders are demanding to know what became of the people buried in the city's first black cemetery. "Sadly, I'll be more surprised if they were moved," said Pastor Dwayne Gaddis of New St. Paul AME, another church that learned it had ties to the cemetery. "If not, hopefully there is something that can be done to bring proper closure."

Responsibility for a search lies with the city of Tampa and with the **Tampa Housing Authority**, owners of the Robles Park housing project, said Yvette Lewis, president of the NAACP in Hillsborough County. "They need to apologize and make this right," Lewis said. "Bodies don't mysteriously disappear." Whatever the research might turn up, those pushing for it want to see a memorial erected on the property, featuring the names already revealed and space for more.

"Their story needs to be told," said Fred Hearn, a local historian who leads a downtown walking tour. "African-American history is American history." The first step may be to spread the word to see if anyone knows what became of the bodies. If no answers emerge, remote-sensing experts with ground-penetrating radar might help. But that process could cost tens of thousands of dollars.

It's the kind of work done through the Florida Public Archaeology Network, part of the University of South Florida's Anthropology Department. USF might be able to coordinate with the state's Bureau of Archaeological Research, said the network's Rebecca O'Sullivan. "If that worked out, it would obviously be at a much-reduced cost to the city," O'Sullivan said.

The Housing Authority, which purchased the property decades after the cemetery disappeared, would welcome an investigation, said Leroy Moore, chief operating officer. One reason: There are plans to develop more housing there in the coming years. Under Florida law, once a lost cemetery is found, construction must stop until the bodies are disinterred and reinterred somewhere else. "If there are organizations that are interested in partnering with us now to start looking for it, we are open to doing that," Moore said. "We can cooperate, but we don't have ability to fund it today."

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The rest of the cemetery property is owned by Richard Gonzmart of the Columbia Restaurant Group, who one day aims to develop a culinary school there to provide opportunities for neighborhood youth. Gonzmart knew nothing about Zion Cemetery when he purchased the land in 2016, he said in an email to the Times. Informed of the property's history, he began his own research. He would not say whether he'd allow radar there. Said Gonzmart, "We recognize the significance of that land in the history of Tampa Heights and in the lives of African-American pioneers."

Zion Cemetery was founded in 1901 by Richard Doby, a wealthy black businessman who helped establish an African American community known as Dobyville in today's west Hyde Park. In 1894, Doby purchased the land to the north that would later become Zion Cemetery from Isaac W. Warner for \$100, the Times discovered in a deed search.

The Zion land was part of another African-American settlement, Robles Pond. Doby likely saw a need for a school and a church at Robles Pond, plus a cemetery for African-Americans from throughout the county, historians said. Pressley, of First Mount Carmel AME, said that in its early years, the church was allowed to use the Robles Pond School on Sundays.

Doby was a member of another church, St. Paul AME — downtown at the time but now New St. Paul AME at 4603 N 42nd St. The city's Oaklawn Cemetery allowed black and white burials but was filling up, said Rodney Kite-Powell, curator with the Tampa Bay History Center. Woodlawn had added a section for African-American burials by 1900 but it couldn't handle the city's growing population, either.

The first map of Zion Cemetery filed with the county clerk at the turn of the 20th century had a corner cut out for the schoolhouse and church. Doby sold Zion in 1907 for \$300 to Florida Industrial and Commercial Co. — a black-owned company that made caskets, furniture and musical instruments, according to clerk's office archives, city directories and a February 1909 article in the Tampa Tribune.

In 1912, newspapers reported that James J. Head, a former Confederate commander and county treasurer, tried and failed to take control of the cemetery by claiming he owned the tax deed. Florida Industrial and Commercial eventually did lose Zion Cemetery, in 1915, during a sheriff's sale to pay a debt, according to a legal notice published in the Tampa Times.

In 1916, a county map shows "Mt. Carmel" scribbled in the corner of the Zion property, perhaps indicating that the church was overseeing the cemetery for the new owner, Kite-Powell said. Genealogy websites show no Zion Cemetery death certificates after 1921 — perhaps, he said, because Memorial Cemetery opened in 1919 and took all the business.

In December 1923, the Tampa Times called Zion one of the city's "most prominent and greatly used burial places." Soon, though, developers were eyeing the neighborhood for future white suburbs. Robles Pond had a population of 315 in 1927, according to A Study of Negro Life in Tampa from the city of Tampa. "The Negroes lived in this area first, but it has been surrounded by Whites," the study says.

By this time, Zion Cemetery had disappeared from maps and city directories. In 1929, a five-shop storefront was built on the Florida Avenue side of the Zion property, home to Acme Furniture and Tampa Health Bakery. The building, now vacant, still is there on Gonzmart's property.

The developer of the storefront was H.P. Kennedy who, according to clerk's office records, purchased the Zion property in 1926 for \$1 from Alice W. Fuller of Los Angeles County. It's unclear how Fuller came to own the land. When Doby sold the property to Florida Industrial and Commercial, the deed noted that it contained cemetery plots. No such mention appears in the Fuller-to-Kennedy sale.

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Decades later, in November 1951, the discovery of the three caskets made news during construction of the Robles Park apartments, a complex of three dozen long, two-story buildings where initially only whites were allowed. Newspaper articles make no mention of who might have moved the other Zion graves or how in 1925. It is not clear from the Times research who owned the property then.

Minutes from Housing Authority meetings at the time include discussion of the caskets and the need to reinter them, but there's no mention of any search for more graves. Unlike today, no laws required developers to do so in 1951.

"In a best-case scenario, when human remains are moved from one cemetery to another, there is a paper trail," Kite-Powell said. But considering the second-class status of African-Americans in the 1920s, he said, "I can certainly picture a scenario where a private or a church-based black cemetery ceased to exist and they move the remains to someplace else, but they don't document that."

Still, a large-scale relocation would have rated coverage in local newspapers, said Joe Joseph of Georgia-based archaeological society New South Associates, which specializes in lost African-American cemeteries.

The only mention the Times found of relocating remains from Zion was a handwritten letter sent in 1989 from the late Leland Hawes of the Tampa Tribune to Cantor Brown, who has written books on the city's African-American history. Hawes said the mother of the late civil rights activist Robert Saunders once told him African-American bodies from a "burial ground in an area north of downtown called Robles Pond" were moved to "parts unknown." Brown said he cannot imagine where they might have gone.

The men buried in Zion would have been laborers, primarily, and the women domestic workers — people whose "tears and blood" helped build Tampa in its pioneering years, said Lewis with the NAACP. Around 20 percent of those whose death certificates the Times located were born before the end of the Civil War in 1865, either in Florida or another southern state. Some of them rated stories in the newspapers when they died, like Caroline Hicks, a servant for the sheriff, and L.G. Caro, a minister who helped found Bethel Baptist Church and was considered a key political endorsement for white politicians. Still, their community would have wielded little of the power needed to protect the cemetery during the years it faded from sight.

"The mid-20s are the high-water mark of the Klu Klux Klan in the 20th century," said Andy Huse, a librarian with the University of South Florida Special Collections Department. "They would parade around quite openly." African-Americans, Huse said, "had no voice at all." Many might have chosen to head north, away from Tampa, cutting off their connections here, said Joseph with New South Associates. "With them went the memory of where their burial grounds were," he said.

Communities across the country often forget their African-American cemeteries, Joseph said. He provided a dozen examples where headstones but not bodies were removed from cemeteries in the years before the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Last year, the skeletal remains of 95 African-Americans were discovered at a school construction site in Fort Bend County, Texas, and 13 years ago, the remains of nearly 400 African-Americans were uncovered during construction at Hunter Army Airfield outside Savannah, Ga.

U.S. Rep. Alma S. Adams, a North Carolina Democrat, has introduced the African-American Burial Grounds Network Act to create a government-funded database of known and potential grave sites.

One afternoon in May, a handful of people with a stake in the rediscovery of Zion Cemetery toured areas of the property that they could reach. One recalled hearing church elders speak of the cemetery when he was a little boy. Another remembered hearing a story from a fellow parishioner. All wondered whether the bodies still remain.