

## Zion is now registered as a historical cemetery site. What does that mean for future development?

Tampa Bay Times, Paul Guzzo, pguzzo@tampabay.com, Published July 1, 2019

TAMPA — Restaurateur Richard Gonzmart has big plans for the 1.3 acres along the 3700 block of N. Florida Ave. that he purchased in 2016.

He wants to build a culinary school to train people in the low-income area for careers that can set them on a path to a better life.

There is no timetable, but moving forward now will prove more difficult than he expected.

In the early 20th century, the property constituted about half of the Zion Cemetery — an African American burial with room for some 800 interments.

But no one knows where the bodies are today, whether they were moved before development began there or whether they might still lie beneath the land.

Since the history of the property was revealed June 24 in a special report by the *Tampa Bay Times*, the University of South Florida has moved to ensure that any future owners of the land will not be blindsided like Gonzmart was.

Last week, Rebecca O'Sullivan of USF's Florida Public Archaeology Network registered the land as a historic cemetery site with the state.

"It doesn't block development," O'Sullivan said. "It puts a dot on the map so the story is not again forgotten."

Gonzmart has told the *Times* his company researched the property as far back as 50 years. "Nothing in any of those searches indicated any of this tragic part of Tampa's history," he said.

He did not return requests for comment on the USF action.

Work is under way by those with a stake in the Zion Cemetery to determine whether there are still bodies there. Those taking part include USF, the city of Tampa, Gonzmart and the **Tampa Housing Authority**. The Housing Authority owns the other half of the property, the back portion of the sprawling Robles Park Apartments.

The City Council wants to know by August how to proceed.

The next steps could include a survey using ground penetrating radar, but O'Sullivan warned that the results won't provide all the answers.

Even if the work reveals bodies there, it might not find all of them — especially considering that structures have been built through the decades on land identified as cemetery plots in an original 1901 map.

The recollections of a woman who once lived next-door, 96-year-old Eunive Masse, also raise questions about what a survey might find. Masse told the *Times* she remembers as a girl around 1933 seeing men digging up the area and bones left lying in the sand, describing what appears to be a disorganized attempt at exhuming and relocating bodies.

To O'Sullivan, Masse's memories could "mean that bones might be found outside of coffins or burial features. So, it is very important that any work that disturbs the ground is done in a very careful way."

Potential property owners will now learn about this thanks to its listing as a historic cemetery site.

Marc Maseman didn't know.

His family owned the 3700 block of Florida Ave. for nearly 20 years, making condiments and drink bases in a warehouse there through their International Foodsource company.

They considered redeveloping the site before selling it to Gonzmart for \$690,000.

Maseman considered the land's greatest historical value to be Lister's Furniture, operated there for half a century.

"I am shocked," Maseman said. "I can't believe we owned that property for all those years and never learned its history."

By contrast, developers were aware they had to deal with another historic cemetery that has made headlines in Tampa recently.



A field and warehouse off North Florida Avenue now occupy part of the former Zion Cemetery. [LUIS SANTANA | Times]

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Strategic Property Partners knew that a burial grounds dating to the 1830s once was located on a portion of the downtown property that makes up their \$3 billion Water Street redevelopment project. The company was formed by Tampa Bay Lightning owner Jeff Vinik and billionaire Bill Gates' Cascade Investment.

So, before ground was broken on the section north of modern day Channelside Drive, archaeologists excavated the land. They discovered grave shafts.

The Tampa City Council wants a report on what they've found July 18.

In fact, an archeological assessment is required before any building permit is issued in the downtown area, birthplace of what became the city of Tampa, because there is always the potential of finding human remains there.

The Zion Cemetery property has no such protection.

Still, state law forbids developers from knowingly disturbing or destroying human remains, O'Sullivan said. Now that Zion is "back on the map" following the *Times* report, she said, any construction there will face increased scrutiny.

That's especially true for the Housing Authority property, where more construction is planned in the coming years.

"If that gets developed using any federal money, it would be subject to review under the National Historic Preservation Act," O'Sullivan said. "They would probably have to do some investigation before any construction in the area."

Whether or not human remains are found there, the Housing Authority plans to erect a monument engraved with the names of those once buried in Zion.

The *Times* found 382 death certificates with the burial place listed as Zion Cemetery. Ray Reed, a cemetery historian, claims to have found 747.

"History is important," said Leroy Moore, chief operating officer with the Housing Authority. "We've always endeavored to preserve and present history for future generations as we revitalize communities."



Ground penetrating radar won't provide all the answers on whether bodies still are buried at Zion Cemetery, said Rebecca O'Sullivan, a public archaeology coordinator with the Florida Public Archaeology Network at the University of South Florida. [JAMES BORCHUCK | Times]