

Zion Cemetery just one of many in need of protections legislation would offer, researcher says

State Sens. Janet Cruz and Audrey Gibson announced last week they are drafting legislation to form a task force to identify and preserve Florida's African-American cemeteries.

Tampa Bay Times, Paul Guzzo, pguzzo@tampabay.com | July 3, 2019

TAMPA — A state measure that would help identify and preserve African-American cemeteries promises to see wide application across the Tampa Bay area.

Historical researcher Ray Reed, whose tip led to a special report in the *Tampa Bay Times* about the forgotten Zion Cemetery, said he believes there are a number of other lost burial grounds in the area, too.

"I can state without hesitation," Reed said, "that Zion was not the only case here of a non-white cemetery being re-purposed as residential and/or commercial property."

It was Reed who came across death records pointing to a place he had never heard of called Zion Cemetery.

Following a nine-month examination, the *Times* determined that Zion was the first African-American cemetery recognized by the city of Tampa and had room for some 800 burials. It was established in 1901 along the 3700 block of Florida Ave. in the Robles Pond neighborhood.

But no one knows where the bodies are today — whether they were moved before development began or whether they might still lie beneath the land that is home to warehouses and Robles Park Apartments.

Reacting to the *Times'* report, state Sens. Janet Cruz, D-Tampa, and Audrey Gibson, D-Jacksonville, the Senate's minority leader, announced last week they are drafting legislation to form a task force to identify and preserve African-American cemeteries throughout the state.

Reed, a retired director of Hillsborough County's Division of Health and Financial Services, welcomed the news and pointed to evidence he has found about other cemeteries.

It includes death certificates indicating people were interred at an African-American burial grounds called St. Joseph's Aid Cemetery. The death certificates span a period from 1910-1939. Reed hopes one day to compile a complete list of names.

Reed has not found a location yet but said it might have been in the back portion of a white Catholic Cemetery once located on North Florida Avenue just a few blocks from Zion, "because Catholic Cemetery was so large, and Robles Pond was a place in town a black person could own property,".

In May 1926, the *Tampa Tribune* reported that 400 people buried in Catholic Cemetery were later moved to Myrtle Hill Cemetery — a whites-only burial ground during that era.

"Perhaps they took the whites but left the other section for a while longer," Reed said

Reed would also like to learn more about a place identified on death certificates as Robles Pond Cemetery. Historians believe it's the same place as Zion, using the name of the neighborhood rather than the burial ground, but Reed wants proof of that before he gives up on the idea that there may be another forgotten cemetery.

The task force might help.



Figure 1 This field and warehouse off North Florida Avenue are where Tampa's black community once buried its dead. Zion Cemetery was lost to history after hundreds of bodies were buried there. [LUIS SANTANA | Times]



Figure 2 Robles Park Village in Tampa. In 1951 when these projects were being built, workers dug up three bodies near the spot where this photo was taken. [LUIS SANTANA | Times]

Zion Cemetery just one of many in need of protections legislation would offer, researcher says

State Sens. Janet Cruz and Audrey Gibson announced last week they are drafting legislation to form a task force to identify and preserve Florida's African-American cemeteries.

Tampa Bay Times, Paul Guzzo, pguzzo@tampabay.com | July 3, 2019

"Responsible treatment of burial sites, as state law mandates, includes investigating where they are located," Sen. Cruz said in a news release.

The task force would disseminate information about the cemeteries to local governments, work with Florida's Department of State to find a proper place for re-interment if needed, and place a memorial marker on the original site.

Still, Cruz said, the legislation is a work in progress.

Lou Claudio hopes the task force protects an endangered African American cemetery he looks after.

Since 1996, Claudio has been part of a team of volunteers who clean the Whispering Souls African American Cemetery at 2698 South Drive in Clearwater. It has 20 visible headstones but at least 130 people are buried there, Claudio said, with the first interment in 1896 and the last one in 1973.

In 1953, Claudio said, the St. Paul Home Helping Hand Society of Safety Harbor sold the cemetery for \$1 to the vaguely identified "Safety Harbor Colored Community." The non-profit Whispering Souls African American Cemetery Inc. is trying to obtain the deed.

The cemetery is three-fourths of an acre in the suburban Ehle Subdivision. Claudio points out that laws today prevent simply paving over cemeteries, but he is concerned Whispering Souls will one day be moved to make way for development in a community where available land is disappearing.

"The site has escaped the fate of so many other African-American cemeteries here and across the country," Claudio said. "Those interred there rest in peace and we want to keep it that way."

Claudio also hopes the task force can help the nonprofit put up a historic marker.

Meanwhile, the city and the University of South Florida are working with the two current owners of the 2 1/2 acres that were the Zion Cemetery — the **Tampa Housing Authority** and restaurateur Richard Gonzmart.

"Zion Cemetery is the starting point to honor those who are an integral part of Florida's history," Sen. Cruz said.

Claudio would not be shocked to learn there are more African-American cemeteries under local developments.

"It is always a possibility," Claudio said. "As we see in cases like Zion, records disappear. That could happen anywhere. There may be one under a parking lot someplace."

As for Reed, who also documents the forgotten buried in Hillsborough County's Cemetery for All People, he becomes emotional when contemplating how his hunch about Zion might help bring dignity to people whose lives have been forgotten.

"Maybe, just maybe, my life maybe has meant something," he said. "I can't stop crying hard."



Figure 3 Ray Reed stands among headstones dating back to the 20th century at the Cemetery for All People in Tampa. Reed's passion in retirement is researching old cemeteries. [Times (2018)]