

Forgotten? More like ignored, say people who remember stories of bodies at Zion Cemetery

Researchers are trying to learn what happened to the cemetery where as many as 800 African-Americans were buried in the early 1900s.

Tampa Bay Times, **Paul Guzzo**, Published Aug. 23, 2019

TAMPA — The summer of 1953 started out slow for young Barbara Feliciano. Her family was among the first to move into the new Robles Park Village, a public housing project, so most apartments were empty. There were few other children, says Feliciano, now 75.

Then word spread, she recalls, that sets of human remains had been found near an adjacent storefront along the 3700 block of North Florida Avenue. "That broke an otherwise uneventful life," Feliciano said. But the grownups never told her any more about the bones.

Today, Feliciano believes the remains had emerged from Zion Cemetery, an early 20th century African-American burial ground that once occupied 2 ½ acres now split between that storefront land and a section of Robles Park Village.

It appeared the cemetery had been lost or forgotten until it was revealed again with the publication of a special report June 23 in the *Tampa Bay Times*.

But now, with stories surfacing from Feliciano and others, historians and activists are using a different word to describe what happened to Zion Cemetery — ignored.

"People have said for years that we were built on a cemetery," said Clark Simmons, vice president of the Robles Park Village Tenant Council. "I first heard about it around 1978 from my grandmother. But no one has ever done anything."

The discovery Feliciano describes came on the heels of another find in 1951. That's when the **Tampa Housing Authority** was building a whites-only Robles Park complex and workers came upon three caskets. They were identified as the remains of people who had been buried in Zion Cemetery.

But no sign has emerged that in either 1951 or 1953, any effort was made to see whether more bodies remained beneath the ground. An old map the Times found showed there was room for as many as 800 graves at Zion Cemetery when it was founded in 1901.

In its research, the Times also found 382 death certificates listing Zion as the burial place and reached out to churches that are linked to the cemetery through historical records.

Two parishioners from First Mt. Carmel AME Church recalled older friends telling them years ago that Robles Park Village was built on a cemetery. The parishioners dismissed it as an urban legend.

As Tampa grew, as segregation was outlawed, and as housing patterns changed, Robles Park Village changed from an all-white community to one inhabited largely by people of color.

Over the decades, said Simmons with the tenants' council, the Housing Authority must have heard the stories. "Why didn't they check into it?" Simmons said. Today, they are.

The Housing Authority hired archaeologists to investigate its portion of the former Zion Cemetery. And the agency will relocate the people living in the five buildings located atop the former Zion Cemetery land, even if no human remains are found. The land will be turned into a memorial park honoring the African-American pioneers buried there.



Barbara Feliciano, 75, remembers the discovery of human remains in 1953 on the site of the former Zion Cemetery. Feliciano was 8 at the time and lived nearby in the Robles Park Village public housing complex. ["JAMES BORCHUCK | TIMES" | Tampa Bay Times]

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As Feliciano recalls, the remains found in 1953 were behind the former Lister's Furniture in the now-empty storefront. The property is owned by restaurateur Richard Gonzmart.

Informed by the Times about Zion Cemetery, he said he hadn't known about it when he purchased the property and is now researching the history of the land.

Feliciano's recollections don't give the Tampa Police Department enough detail to search whether a report was filed about the bodies at the time, said police spokesman Steve Hegarty. "We wandered over and asked what was going on," Feliciano said. "An authoritative figure said we needed to go away because they found skulls and bones." She never did get a glimpse of the remains.

News coverage of the three caskets found in 1951 received widespread news coverage. But the Times found no coverage of remains being found in 1953.

Rodney Kite-Powell with the Tampa Bay History Center said it "is very reasonable to assume" that back in the 1950s, the Housing Authority or the city "would want to cover up the fact" that bodies remained.

"Any burials would be a problem," Kite-Powell said, "so it would have been important to them to keep news of the discoveries out of the public view."

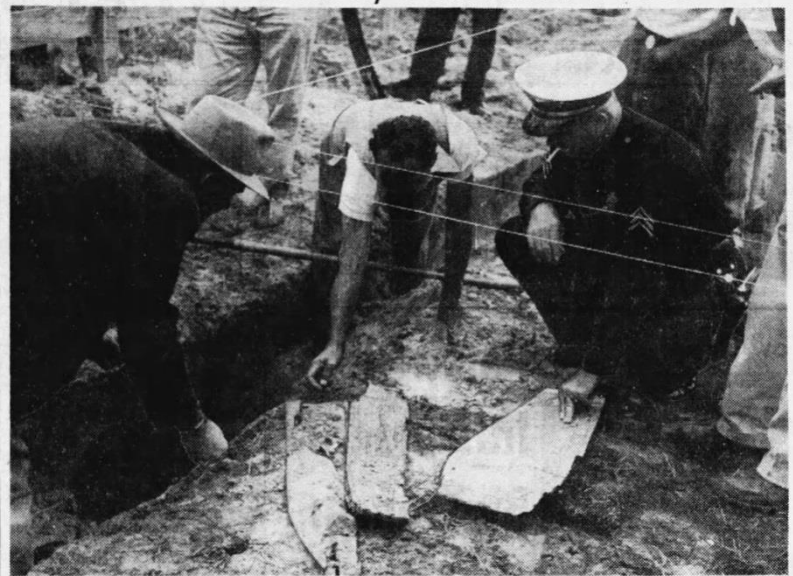
It's clear that concerns raised through the years about bodies on the property went unheeded, said Rebecca O'Sullivan with the Florida Public Archaeology Network at the University of South Florida, part of the archaeological team looking for Zion Cemetery.

"At key points in the past it was ignored by the people who had the evidence to say that there was a cemetery there, but also the power to do something about it," O'Sullivan said.

Zion later "turned into this sort of ghost story that people passed along as a way of remembrance." O'Sullivan heard another story that shows someone in authority knew about Zion through the years, from a woman in her 40s who still lives in Robles Park Village.

The woman remembers finding a small headstone when she was out playing. "She said the city was contacted and that someone came and took the headstone away," O'Sullivan said. "She and her friends tried not to play over there again."

Unmarked Graves Found by Construction Workers



Mystery surrounded the finding today of several unmarked graves on the site of the new 436-unit Robles Park Village housing project which has just been started by Paul Smith Construction Co. Workmen discovered the unidentified graves while digging for foundations on the project at the southeast corner of Ruth and Morgan Sts. Tampa police and detectives were called in to investigate. Shown here are Detective W. R. Bland (left) and Sgt. W. H. Locke (right) as they studied the first of three children's caskets removed by workmen. The most puzzling aspects in the finding of the skeletal remains were: How old is the cemetery? Who knows the identity of those buried there, and what should be done with the remains unearthed by the workmen? —Times Photo.

Newspapers.com This is a clipping from the Tampa Daily Times dated Nov. 16, 1951 which stated that several unmarked graves were mistakingly dug up during the construction of Robles Park Village in Tampa. The article accompanying this photograph states that the bodies were part of Zion Cemetery and that they were supposed to be moved in 1925. [TAMPA DAILY TIMES | [Newspapers.com/Tampa Daily Times](https://www.newspapers.com/Tampa-Daily-Times/)]