

NEWS/TAMPA

More than 120 coffins found buried at forgotten Zion Cemetery, now an apartment complex

Ground-penetrating radar detected the objects at Tampa's Robles Park Village. Could they be something else? "That would be too big of a coincidence."

Tampa Bay Times, Paul Guzzo, Published August 30, 2019

Page | 1

Ground-penetrating radar has detected what appear to be more than 120 coffins under an apartment complex in Tampa, the remains of the lost cemetery revealed by the *Tampa Bay Times*.

The 2½-acre, segregation-era burial ground, believed to be the city's first for African-Americans, was built in 1901 along the 3700 block of Florida Ave. and extended back around 400 feet.

It disappeared nearly a century ago when the land was parceled off for white developments.

No one could find it until now.

It has been confirmed that Zion is still there, parts of it at least, under ground that today is home to the back of the Robles Park Village public housing complex owned by the **Tampa Housing Authority**.

Archaeologist Eric Prendergast described the find: "Reflections of rectangular objects that are the size and shape of coffins between four and six feet in depth."

Prendergast is principal project investigator for private archaeological assessment company Cardno, hired by the Housing Authority to investigate whether occupied graves remain on its land.

"The reflections are arranged in rows and oriented east-west within boundaries of a former cemetery," Prendergast added.

Asked if the shapes could show something other than caskets, Paul Jones, project manager for Cardno, replied, "That would be too big of a coincidence."

The *Times* published a special report about the forgotten cemetery in June, prompting the Housing Authority to hire the archaeologists.

During a nine-month search, the *Times* pieced together the cemetery's lost history but found no evidence of a mass reburial.

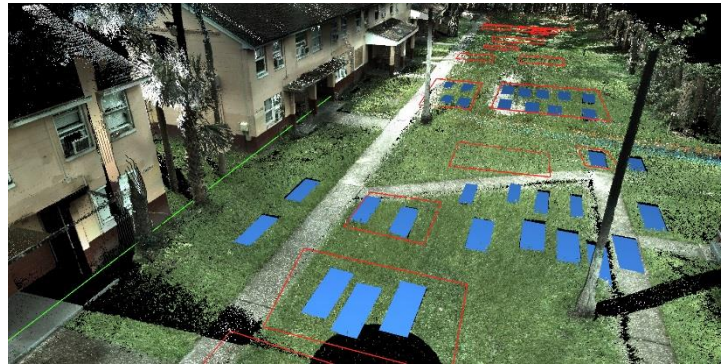
In response to the report, the Housing Authority set up the Zion Cemetery Archaeological Consultation Committee. The committee has members from the authority, the city of Tampa, the NAACP, Florida Public Archaeology Network at the University of South Florida, Robles Park Apartments Residents Council and Cardno.

Cardno informed the committee at its meeting Friday that the caskets had been found. Reva Iman, president of the Robles Park Village Tenants Council, walked out of the meeting room in tears.

Overall, the archaeologists have discovered what they believe to be 126 caskets. There are likely more to be found, they said.

The radar likely missed some. It also cannot detect century-old human remains if they weren't buried in a coffin. It was typical in the early 1900s for poor African-Americans to be buried in fabric shrouds. Old bones would be too deteriorated for the radar to find.

In addition, the portion of Robles Park Village that was once Zion Cemetery has five apartment buildings. Radar cannot scan through their floors.



This image is a 3D laser scan of Robles Park Village showing grave-shaped objects beneath the ground in relation to buildings at the public housing complex. The single image is made from two data sources and aligns with historical maps of the former Zion Cemetery. [CARDNO| Cardno]

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Page | 2

What's more, Cardno had access to less than 40 percent of the Zion property — the portion owned by the Housing Authority. The rest is owned by restaurateur Richard Gonzmart, who has said he is conducting his own research into the history of the property.

"Everywhere we have tested that one would assume has a burial ... has proven to have burials," Prendergast said. "Therefore, we can predict the rest of the cemetery has burials, unless they were removed."

Cardno cannot be certain, though, without surveying the rest of the site.

Gonzmart plans to build a culinary school on his property. He aims to train low-income people there for careers that can set them on a path to a better life.

But now that the property is known to be a "previously marked cemetery," Gonzmart will have to have a study done to determine if bodies are there before he can build, said Jeff Moates, regional director for the Florida Public Archaeology Network.

If human remains are found there, too, Gonzmart could still build but not before moving the bodies to a cemetery.

The Housing Authority has said it will not remove any of the bodies.

When the agency redevelops the 67-building Robles Park site in the coming years, the Zion Cemetery land will be turned into a memorial park operated by the city. The park will honor the pioneering African-Americans buried there.

The Housing Authority hopes Gonzmart will add his Zion Cemetery property to the park.

Relocation soon will begin for the people living the five Robles Park Village buildings that occupy the burial ground, all in the 200 block of East Stratford and East Kentucky avenues.

The *Times* discovered death certificates for 382 people who were buried in Zion. A cemetery historian who conducted followup research said he found 747.

Zion had room for some 800 graves plus a potter's field for the indigent and unknown. The potter's field contained 27 of the caskets found by the archaeologists.

In 1951, the Housing Authority unearthed three caskets during construction of Robles Park Village but did not search for more. At the time, the apartment complex was open to whites only.

It is possible, the archaeologists said, that some bodies have been moved through the years and others were left behind.

"It's possible that there are coffins without bodies," Cardno project manager Jones said. "It is possible there are remains of coffins. It is possible that there are completely undisturbed coffins. We won't be able to answer anything definitively until the next step of the process."

The next step would be to dig into the ground in a way that they leave the bodies undisturbed.

The Housing Authority has not yet decided whether that will be done.



The Tampa Housing Authority held a meeting to discuss findings from the archaeological firm Cardno on the location of Zion Cemetery Thursday in Tampa. JAMES BORCHUCK | Times [JAMES BORCHUCK | Times]