

His church has ties to Zion Cemetery. He forgives those who ignored the bodies and developed it.

To Pastor Pressley, those who are long forgotten remain his parishioners. "They are probably still watching over us."

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Pastor Byron Pressley of First Mt. Carmel AME Church says prayers Friday afternoon for the people buried and forgotten at Zion Cemetery, now the site of Tampa's Robles Park Village apartment complex. A ground-penetrating radar survey has revealed 126 caskets there with more of the cemetery property still to be studied. [JAMES BORCHUCK | TIMES | Tampa Bay Times]

To him, they remain parishioners. "They are probably still watching over us," he said.

The cemetery was forgotten over time until a special report published June 23 in the the Tampa Bay Times revealed the names of nearly 400 people buried at Zion Cemetery. Were they moved or did their bodies remain buried there?

The answer came Friday. A survey commissioned in response to the Times' story by the Housing Authority found images of 126 caskets with more property still to be studied. The survey used ground-penetrating radar to identify the caskets.

The discovery turns attention to another question: How was Zion Cemetery forgotten?

Founded by Richard Doby, a wealthy black businessman, Zion has links to two modern-day churches — New St. Paul AME and First Mount Carmel AME.

In 1907, Doby sold the cemetery to a black-owned casket company and records indicate the cemetery came to be overseen by Mount Carmel Church.

But by the 1920s, the cemetery was owned by white businessmen who parceled it out for development.

Some people among Tampa's African-American community, and those who lived nearby, retained memories of Zion Cemetery.

It didn't surface again until 1951, when construction crews working on Robles Park Village unearthed three caskets. Still, the discovery appears to have raised no red flags. The Housing Authority never searched for more.

Nearly 70 years later, the *Times* report finally triggered action.

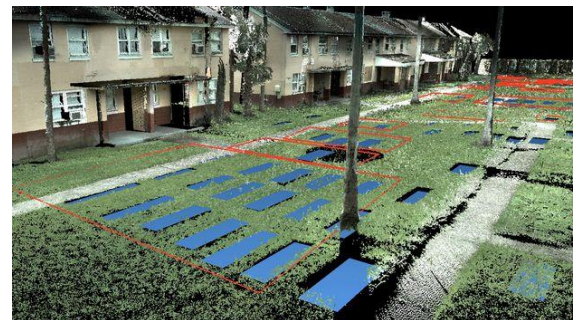
TAMPA — The **Tampa Housing Authority** learned around noon Friday that five of the 67 buildings at its Robles Park Village apartment complex were built atop rows of caskets.

Four hours later, Byron Pressley, pastor at First Mount Carmel AME Church, stood in a courtyard there.

He prayed.

"I ask God that he bless the families who have lost loved ones over here, who are buried right here today," Pressley said, "and that he whispers words of encouragement to them."

The caskets are part of Zion Cemetery, believed to be the first burial ground for African-Americans in Tampa when it was established in 1901. Members of the parish Pressley now leads were likely buried there.



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]

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After the discovery of the caskets was announced to the Housing Authority on Friday, Clark Simmons, vice president of the Robles Park Village Tenants Council, asked why the families of those buried there allowed such an injustice.

Simmons asked, too, how the city could have let it happen.

And he questioned what type of people would remove headstones and build over graves.

All are questions now under investigation as part of the survey by Cardno, a private archaeological assessment company hired by the Housing Authority.

Still, Cardno's Paul Jones told Simmons, finding definitive answers will be difficult.

On Friday afternoon, Pastor Pressley looked out over land now known to contain caskets, four to six feet underground. They appear in a pattern of blue shapes on Cardno's radar images.

"Standing right here, now, I get the chills," Pressley said. "It's not a scary feeling. It's a feeling that they are here. They were saved."

He welcomes plans by the Housing Authority to reassemble Zion Cemetery as a memorial park.

"It is very important," Pressley said. "It's history and should not be forgotten."

He does have forgiveness in him, though, Pressley said — for those who knowingly built on a cemetery in the 1920s and for those who ignored it in the 1950s.

God "forgave us all for our sins," he said. "If he can do that for me, then I know I can do it."