

NATION-WORLD

Housing authority believes it found nearly 130 coffins from Tampa's first Black cemetery

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TAMPA, Fla. — The **Tampa Housing Authority** believes it has close to 130 coffins from Zion Cemetery, which was the first black cemetery for the city.

A large portion of the cemetery was paved over in the 1950s when the housing authority built the Robles Park public housing complex along North Florida Avenue.

Construction crews unearthed three caskets, but work continued anyway.

Leroy Moore, chief operating officer for the housing authority, said about 130 anomalies were reported from archaeologists who conducted a ground-penetrating radar search of the section of Robles Park that overlaps with historical maps of Zion Cemetery.

He said the GPR only covered about 30 percent of the Zion site, so it's still possible there are other graves that exist off-site from Robles Park.

The housing authority recently announced its plans to move 96 residents from five buildings at Robles Park that sit on top of the old cemetery grounds. The story came to THA's attention initially through an investigation by the Tampa Bay Times.

"Certainly, no one today can justify the activities that occurred back in the late 40s and 50s, but the people around today are the people that can right that wrong," Moore said in June.

"Black lives mattered back in 1941, just like they matter today," said Moore. "And if a cemetery is not respected and the process back then, we would never redevelop a cemetery today. And with all the EPA and environmental processes that are in place today, for good reason, this could never happen."

"But this did happen 60 and 70 years ago. We can't account for the decisions they made. We can look back at it and say they were wrong decisions, and we can right that wrong today. And I think all the parties today are working to right that wrong. But why should it matter? Because it's history. It's Tampa's history. It's black history. it's just the dignified, appropriate thing to do at any period of time."