

THE FORGOTTEN

» ZION continued from 12A

Gonzmart knew nothing about Zion Cemetery when he purchased the land in 2016, he said in an email to the *Times*. Informed of the property's history, he began his own research. He would not say whether he'd allow radar on his property.

Said Gonzmart, "We recognize the significance of that land in the history of Tampa Heights and in the lives of African-American pioneers."



Richard Gonzmart

Zion Cemetery was founded in 1901 by Richard Doby, a wealthy black businessman who helped establish an African-American community known as Dobyville in today's west Hyde Park.

In 1894, Doby purchased the land to the north that would later become Zion Cemetery from Isaac W. Warner for \$100, the *Times* discovered in a deed search.

The Zion land was part of another African-American settlement, Robles Pond. Doby likely saw a need for a school and a church at Robles Pond, plus a cemetery for African-Americans from throughout the county, historians said.

Pressley, of First Mount Carmel AME, said that in its early years, the church was allowed to use the Robles Pond School on Sundays.

Doby was a member of another church, St. Paul AME — downtown at the time but now New St. Paul AME at 4603 N 42nd St.

The city's Oaklawn Cemetery allowed black and white burials but was filling up, said Rodney Kite-Powell, curator with the Tampa Bay History Center. Woodlawn had added a section for African-American burials by 1900, but it couldn't handle the city's growing population, either.

The first map of Zion Cemetery filed with the county clerk at the turn of the 20th century had a corner cut out for the schoolhouse and church.

Doby sold Zion in 1907 for \$300 to Florida Industrial and Commercial Co. — a black-owned company that made caskets, furniture and musical instruments, according to clerk's office archives, city directories and a February 1909 article in the *Tampa Tribune*.

In 1912, newspapers reported that James J. Head, a former Confederate commander and county



LUIS SANTANA | Times

FORMER ZION SITE: This field and warehouse off Florida Avenue is the former site of Zion Cemetery and is now owned by restaurateur Richard Gonzmart.

treasurer, tried and failed to take control of the cemetery by claiming he owned the tax deed.

Florida Industrial and Commercial eventually did lose Zion Cemetery, in 1915, during a sheriff's sale to pay a debt, according to a legal notice published in the *Tampa Daily Times*.

In 1916, a county map shows "Mt. Carmel" scribbled in the corner of the Zion property, perhaps indicating that the church was overseeing the cemetery for the new owner, Kite-Powell said.

Genealogy websites show no Zion Cemetery death certificates after 1921 — perhaps, he said, because Memorial Park opened in 1919 and took all the business.

In December 1923, the *Tampa Daily Times* called Zion one of the city's "most prominent and greatly used burial places."

Soon, though, developers were eyeing the neighborhood for future white suburbs.

Robles Pond had a population of 315 in 1927, according to *A Study of Negro Life in Tampa* from the city of Tampa. "The Negroes lived in this area first, but it has been surrounded by Whites," the study says.

By this time, Zion Cemetery had disappeared from maps and city directories.

In 1929, a five-shop storefront was built on the Florida Avenue site of the Zion property, home to Acme Furniture and Tampa Health Bakery. The building, now vacant, is still there on Gonzmart's property.

The developer of the storefront was H.P. Kennedy who, according to clerk's office records, purchased

the Zion property in 1926 for \$1 from Alice W. Fuller of Los Angeles County. It's unclear how Fuller came to own the land.

When Doby sold the property to Florida Industrial and Commercial, the deed noted that it contained cemetery plots. No such mention appears in the Fuller-to-Kennedy sale.

Decades later, in November 1951, the discovery of the three child-sized caskets made news during construction of the Robles Park apartments, a complex of three dozen long, two-story buildings where initially only whites were allowed.

Newspaper articles make no mention of who might have moved the other Zion graves or how in 1925. It is not clear from the *Times* research who owned the property then.

Minutes from Housing Authority meetings at the time include discussion of the caskets and the need to reinter them, but there's no mention of any search for more graves.

Unlike today, no laws required developers to do so in 1951.

"In a best-case scenario, when human remains are moved from one cemetery to another, there is a paper trail," Kite-Powell said.

But considering the second-class status of African-Americans in the 1920s, he said, "I can certainly picture a scenario where a private or a church-based black cemetery ceased to exist and they move the remains to someplace else, but they don't document that."

Still, a large-scale relocation would have rated coverage in local newspapers, said Joe Joseph of Georgia-based archaeological society New South Associates, which specializes in lost African-American cemeteries.

The only mention the *Times* found of relocating remains from Zion was a handwritten letter sent in 1989 from the late Leland Hawes of the *Tampa Tribune* to Cantor Brown, who has written books on the city's African-American history. Hawes said the mother of the late civil rights activist Robert Saunders once told him African-American bodies from a "burial ground in an area north of downtown called Robles Pond" were moved to "parts unknown."

Brown said he cannot imagine where they might have gone.

The men buried in Zion would have been laborers, primarily, and the women domestic workers — people whose "tears and blood" helped build Tampa in its pioneering years, said Lewis with the NAACP.

Around 20 percent of those whose death certificates the *Times* located were born before the end of the Civil War in 1865, either in Florida or another Southern state.

Some of them rated stories in the newspapers when they died, like Caroline Hicks, a servant for the sheriff, and L.G. Caro, a minister who helped found Bethel Baptist Church and was considered a key political endorsement for white politicians.

Still, their community would have wielded little of the power needed to protect the cemetery during the years it faded from sight.

"The mid 20s are the high-water mark of the Ku Klux Klan in the 20th century," said Andy Huse, a librarian with the University of South Florida Special Collections Department. "They would parade

around quite openly."

African-Americans, Huse said, "had no voice at all."

Many might have chosen to head North, away from Tampa, cutting off their connections here, said Joseph with New South Associates.

"With them went the memory of where their burial grounds were," he said.

Communities across the country often forget their African-American cemeteries, Joseph said. He provided a dozen examples where headstones but not bodies were removed from cemeteries in the years before the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

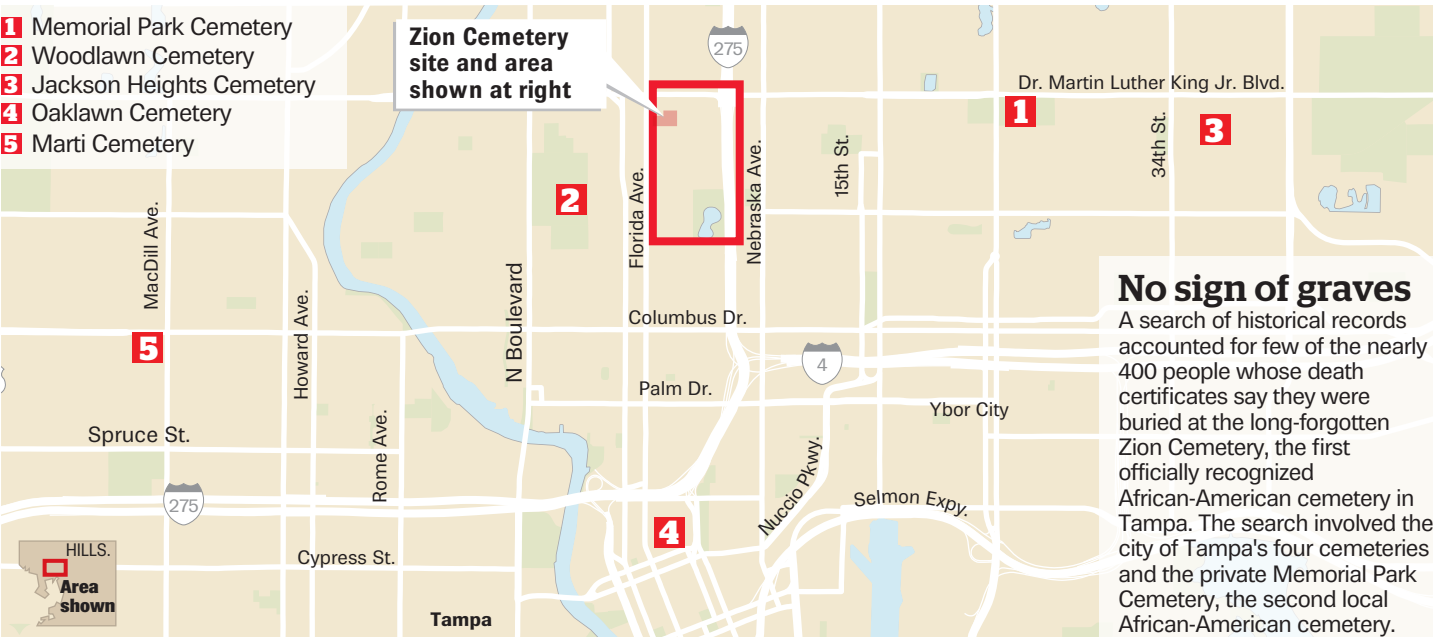
Last year, the skeletal remains of 95 African-Americans were discovered at a school construction site in Fort Bend County, Texas, and 13 years ago, the remains of nearly 400 African-Americans were uncovered during construction at Hunter Army Airfield outside Savannah, Ga.

U.S. Rep. Alma S. Adams, a North Carolina Democrat, has introduced the African-American Burial Grounds Network Act to create a government-funded database of known and potential grave sites.

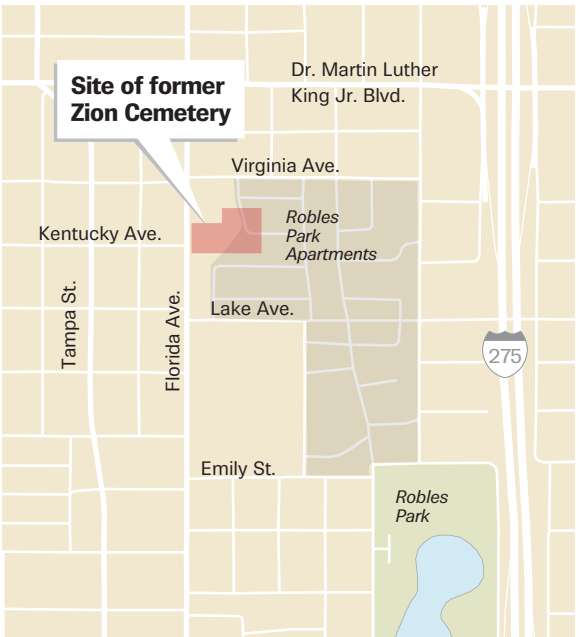
One afternoon in May, a handful of people with a stake in the rediscovery of Zion Cemetery toured areas of the property that they could reach.

One recalled hearing church elders speak of the cemetery when he was a little boy. Another remembered hearing a story from a fellow parishioner. All wondered whether the bodies still remain.

Times photographer James Borchuck contributed to this report. Contact Paul Guzzo at pguzzo@tampabay.com.



Sources: Maps4News/HERE; Google Maps; Times research



Times

ABOUT THE REPORTING

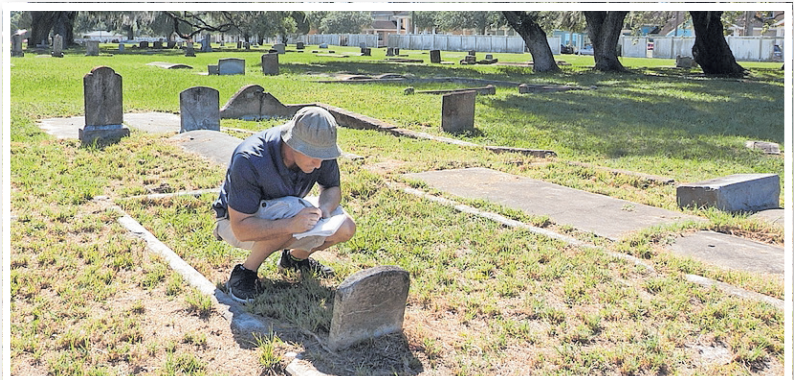
Examining what became of long-forgotten Zion Cemetery required poring over data from as far back as the late 1800s.

It started with the hardbound city directories published annually by R.L. Polk Co. and now available in digital form from the city of Tampa.

Zion Cemetery first appeared in the city directory in 1914, the first year the city limits extended as far north as the cemetery property but years after Zion was established in 1901.

With help from the Tampa Bay History Center, the *Tampa Bay Times* turned up three maps of Zion — a 1901 document filed with the Hillsborough County Clerk's Office, a 1916 atlas published by Hillsborough County, and a 1922 Sanborn fire insurance map from the History Center's collection.

At the request of the *Times*, the old maps were laid over modern street grids by Rebecca O'Sullivan of the Florida Public Archaeology Network, pinpointing the location of Zion Cemetery — the 3700 block



JAMES BORCHUCK | Times

SEARCHING HISTORY: Come along with the *Tampa Bay Times* on a journey in search of the lost Zion Cemetery: bit.ly/tbt-zionvideo. Above, *Times* reporter Paul Guzzo inspects gravestones in Memorial Park Cemetery, looking for the names of those who may have been originally buried in Zion Cemetery.

of N Florida Avenue.

The next step was to find who might have been buried there. A 1929 article about Zion, found at the digital collection Newspapers.com, provided a window of time. The genealogy website FamilySearch.org served as a source of local death certificates.

A search of the website turned up death certificates for thousands of African-Americans in Tampa between 1901 and 1929. Reading each one pro-

duced a list of 382 certificates with Zion Cemetery as the burial place.

From there, the *Times* set out to find whether these 382 bodies had been relocated.

The search included old editions of the former *Tampa Tribune* and *Tampa Daily Times*, and the *St. Petersburg Times*, now the *Tampa Bay Times*.

Public records also were reviewed, including a list of death certificates from city-owned cemeteries in the 1920s, a database of all 30,000 people interred in city-owned cemeteries, and digitized copies of City Council minutes from the 1920s.

The search revealed that three bodies from Zion were moved to the city's Woodlawn Cemetery. In addition, the relocation of two cemeteries but not Zion was reported in news articles, both in 1926. Another article decades later revealed that three bodies were unearthed during construction on the property.

Privately owned Memorial Park Cemetery, the city's second African-American cemetery, opened while

Zion was still in use. Seven names from the Zion list also appear on Memorial Park records at the genealogy website fl-genweb.org. To double check, the *Times* walked Memorial Park searching for graves from the early 20th century. Only the seven names matched the Zion list.

Having accounted for just 13 of the 382 names, the *Times* sought answers from anyone with ties to owners and managers of the property through the years. The search led to newspaper archives, to microfilm records at the Hillsborough County Clerk's Office, to churches and to the current owners of the property.

On two occasions, the *Times* gathered members of African-American churches with long histories in Tampa to present a slide show of its findings. Video recordings were conducted of interviews with those with a possible stake in Zion Cemetery.

The search for what became of the bodies continues.

Paul Guzzo, *Times* staff writer