

7 On Your Side: Cemetery Investigation

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The investigation into a human bone found in a pile of fill dirt is wrapping up.

Homicide detectives with the Austin police department are not expected to file any criminal charges. A FOX 7 crew discovered the bone last Wednesday along the north edge of Evergreen Cemetery. That area has been selected to be filled in as part of a controversial expansion project. Medical examiners confirmed the bone was human remains. It's believed the bone came from a forgotten burial site, and was unearthed by work crews who were digging a new grave.

The expansion at Evergreen Cemetery is currently on hold, but not because of the bone. There is concern old graves have already been covered up with fill dirt, and trash that has been thrown down the hill side. Dale Flatt, with Save Austins Cemeteries, is among those fighting the city plan.

"So to treat it like a dump site, and then just propose to cover it up with new fill and create a new cemetery on top of that is just ludicrous, said Flatt.

Evergreen cemetery is running out of space for new burial plots. To create new acreage to sell the city is dumping fill dirt down the slopes which lead to a creek called Tannehill Branch. Near the creek headstones have been found. Flatt is certain bodies are nearby.

"Human remains were flushing out downstream in 1995, said Flatt.

A stone retaining wall was built to keep the bodies out of the creek. In 1995, a survey by a group called Hicks and Company, concluded the bones, and headstones are most likely from what was once known as Highland Park Cemetery.

Historic graveyard researcher DeVonn Wood says Highland Park dates back to the late 1890's. Hand written documents indicate the city took control of the site sometime after 1893.

They did bury Indians, from the Indian skirmishes in this area, and many paupers and other individuals, said Wood.

The same company that re-discovered the Highland Park Cemetery in 1995 was hire again. This time the focus was not back in the woods, but on the area selected for excavation. More headstones were found. Among them, one with MOTHER carved on top. Another for a Navy veteran. The largest found was for a woman who died in 1955. Its not known if the stones ended up there after being replaced and discarded or if there are bodies under them. The \$15-thousand study provided more questions than answers. As a result city leaders to hit the brakes.

"We will not expand Evergreen in any area where there may be a question of previous burials that may exist there, said Assistant Parks Director Cora Wright

Wright manages public cemeteries in Austin. While she hasnt been to the old burial grounds, she says dumping dirt near them is not violating watershed protection rules. To help find out what is under all the dirt a new survey has been ordered. While the city waits for its third report to be completed, Dale Flatt says the first survey should be enough to settle the fight. The reason why it didnt, according to Flatt, is that no one remembered it.

"Staff changes every couple of years. I've tried to encourage them to put that history in a book on the shelf, so when the new guy comes in, new staff members comes in, and somebody says hey lets create 3 more acres of burial property, by bringing in fill, he could have pulled out the book and said, wait a minute, there was a report in 1995, and this report indicates there are burials out here, and maybe that is not a good idea."

The new survey is not expected to be completed until after the first of the year.