

Published: 10.24.2006

1800s-era cemetery to be dug up Downtown

By Erica Meltzer

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Excavation will begin early next month at a Downtown cemetery that was once a final resting place for as many as 1,800 early Tucsonans.

Displaced by the railroad in 1880, dug up during the construction of the Tucson Newspapers building in 1953, uncovered nearly every time a utility company puts a hole in the ground Downtown, those early residents — native, Mexican and Anglo — have hardly rested in peace.

Now the remains that remain must make way for a \$76 million joint Justice Court/Municipal Court complex.

County officials — who aren't sure how many people were ever buried there, or how many still remain — say they are making every effort to treat those early Tucsonans with respect, and are working with groups of descendants to ensure reburial in more peaceful places.

Any remains found will either be turned over to the appropriate tribe or buried at All Faiths Cemetery on the East Side.

Excavation of the 4.2-acre site will start Nov. 6. It is expected to take a year and cost at least \$1 million. It could cost much more than that depending on the number of bodies found, and the county has set aside \$9 million to cover the potential expense.

Known alternately as the National Cemetery or the Government Cemetery, the burial grounds once lay between Stone Avenue and Sixth Avenue, between Alameda Street and Seventh Street.

Roughly where the Chicanos por la Causa building sits now, there was a military cemetery, while the rest of the site held civilians.

The cemetery opened in the early 1860s and closed in 1875, though some burials may have continued after that.

But it didn't take long for city planners to think of better uses for the land.

The railroad bisected the cemetery in 1880. In 1889, the city took out newspaper ads calling on residents to move their loved ones to a new cemetery at what is now Stone Avenue and Speedway. Soon the land was subdivided and sold for houses.

The Coconuts nightclub sat square in the middle of the cemetery site.

Roger Anyon, cultural resources program manager for Pima County, said the county used census and diocese records to determine that 1,800 people died in Tucson during the time the cemetery was open.

But it doesn't know if they all were buried there, and it has no records at all of how many bodies were moved.

However, when the basement of the former Tucson Newspapers building was excavated in 1953, between 80 and

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120 bodies were found. According to an Arizona Daily Star article on the excavation, workers were digging just a few minutes when the first bodies — two women and a newborn baby — surfaced.

"That's a fairly large number of bodies in a relatively small space," Anyon said.

Anyon said the county has spent the last year studying historical documents and consulting with descendant groups, including representatives of Arizona's Indian tribes and the group Los Descendientes del Presidio de Tucson.

"We're going into a historical cemetery that's seen a lot of disturbance," Anyon said. "We want to do this as respectfully as possible."

Anyon said the tribes shared information about typical burial items and practices to help identify any native remains in the cemetery.

The military cemetery is not part of the excavation, and most if not all of those remains were relocated to Fort Lowell in the late 1800s.

The majority of the remains are likely to be Mexican or Anglo. Anyon said Tucson's population was about 40 percent Anglo when the cemetery was open.

Fred McAninch, a historian and archivist with Los Descendientes, said the county has shown sensitivity with its plans, and the group is prepared to take responsibility for any remains that can't be identified.

"It would be better if the people who died didn't have to be disturbed," McAninch said. "But it's important if they have to be disturbed, their descendants can rest assured the remains will be handled with care and dignity."

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