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hopeful descendants; Groups weigh how to respond after ancestors' remains found

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The longtime archivist of the Archdiocese of San Antonio has said he can find no documentation of a mass exhumation of grave sites and removal of remains in the 1920s from the cemetery grounds that now lie underneath the Children's Hospital of San Antonio.

Other researchers haven't found any documentation either, and newspapers of the time have yielded no mentions of any such event.

So far, the remains of 70 early San Antonians have been uncovered during renovations at the downtown hospital. Initially, the discovery in September was thought to be the remains of only three people, and archdiocesan officials had said they may have been inadvertently left behind when the cemetery, often referred to as campo santo (sacred ground), was moved to make room for the hospital and Milam Park, across the street.

As the number has grown, however, historians, genealogists and descendants of the nearly 3,000 originally interred under the hospital have been on a slow simmer.

In the past week, they've vented with one another, sharing emails, calls and cups of coffee to discuss what they can do and how to respond as their ancestors' remains are excavated, placed in boxes, analyzed and packed up again for ultimate reinterment across town in a perpetual care cemetery.

They've pointed to a 1975 manuscript written by the late Bexar County archivist John Ogden Leal, himself a descendant, who studied Spanish documents and recorded more than 2,800 burials from 1808 to 1860 at the campo santo that now lies under the hospital.

Descendants have long doubted the oft-repeated explanation that all the graves were exhumed in one 24-hour period and moved in the 1920s and that remains found in the 1990s and recently were inadvertently left behind.

In an interview last week, Brother Edward Loch, the archdiocese archivist, confirmed that he could find no documentation of such a move.

If no remains were ever exhumed or moved, then Santa Rosa Hospital's development and expansion, its construction and demolition of buildings over many decades, happened atop those almost-forgotten graves.

Archdiocesan officials have issued a statement saying no disrespect is intended and suggesting that records of the exhumation and move may have been lost to flood or fire.

Among descendants, there are many hopes. They hope they'll be consulted about what happens to the remains of the 70 people that have been found so far and where they will be reinterred. That includes people such as **Ramon Vasquez**, executive director of the American Indians in Texas at the Spanish Colonial Missions, who suggests remains be reinterred in the old Protestant cemetery underneath what is now Milam Park.

Descendants say that given upcoming tricentennial celebrations and World Heritage Site attention, how such campo santos - filled with historical and cultural assets - are handled should be a wider discussion that guarantees them a seat at the table.

Many echo Anthony Delgado, a descendant of several early families: "The first feeling I had was disappointment, disappointment in our government officials and private entities like the hospital, that they

totally disregarded something as sacred as a cemetery."

"It's not a surprise," he added.

He and others say plans by the Catholic hospital that have been approved by a state district court reflect a historical pattern by governmental, private and religious entities toward ancient burial grounds and cemeteries.

Descendants - among them Native Americans, Tejano soldier-settlers, Canary Islanders, Mexicans and others - use words like "heartbreaking" and "sickening" to describe their feelings about how their ancestors are being treated.

The critics represent the city's largest descendants' groups, including the American Indians in Texas, the Canary Islands Descendants Association and Los Bexareños Genealogical and Historical Society.

A member of the Bexar County Historical Commission, which could have intervened in the hospital's plans but didn't, is critical of the hospital intentions. Commissioner Mickey Killian is a descendant, too.

Other critics include Rudi Rodriguez, a Tejano historian behind an instructional website TexasTejano.com, and Professor Alston Thoms, a recognized Texas A&M University anthropologist in College Station who's an expert on the city's missions and ancient burial sites.

Descendants' groups say none were contacted by the hospital to discuss the remains and say they're especially upset by the court ruling that the hospital had "no reasonable manner" to identify remains or descendants. They also criticize the avenue the hospital took to inform the public: legal notices in the classified section of the San Antonio Express-News.

Several descendants acknowledged, however, that the hospital followed the letter of the law.

Ed Mata, president of Los Bexareños, the state's largest Hispanic genealogy group, called it "a little disturbing" that "no greater effort" was made by the hospital to reach out directly to descendants' groups.

He and others like Mari Tamez of the Canary Islanders think that the oversight is especially glaring, given that so many direct descendants live in the Alamo City and are active in groups with active websites and Facebook pages that offer email addresses and in some cases phone numbers.

Mata and Tamez are disappointed that the hospital won't attempt to identify the remains. Mata said they should be treated like those recovered from World War II, Korea and Vietnam. "Fragments come back and are given honorable burial," he said, and all attempts are made to identify both remains and descendants.

The hospital and the head of the University of Texas at San Antonio archaeology team hired to conduct the dig and analyze remains, primarily visually, have said no DNA testing is planned.

Like Mata, Tamez and **Vasquez** of the American Indians in Texas, Thoms views it laughable that the hospital chose to inform the public by way of a classified legal notice. "That's the oldest trick in the book," he said. "What are the chances of anybody reading that and saying, 'Yeah, my ancestors are there?' Maybe zero."

The hospital responded to the criticism with a statement Thursday from Melissa Krause, director of marketing and strategic communications of the Christus Santa Rosa Health System.

"The Children's Hospital of San Antonio is taking great care to honor those whose remains were uncovered during the creation of our prayer garden," she said in the statement. "Although as a Catholic ministry we would prefer to rebury the remains in a Catholic cemetery, Texas law dictates that the remains must be buried in a 'perpetual care' cemetery, and there are only a few in the city, including Sunset Memorial."

"Our actions are a result of careful consideration as we faithfully execute the court-ordered actions, and we mean no disrespect to any family's legacy. We are in discussions with the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate

Word on how to best honor the site in the future, as it is transformed into a prayer garden. At The Children's Hospital of San Antonio, we acknowledge our 'sacred ground,' and continue to honor those who came before us by helping their descendants - their children - live healthier lives."

The archdiocese released a statement Friday in a response to questions, including doubts by descendants and researchers that graves at the campo santo and a nearby larger Catholic cemetery, which may have contained upward of 3,000 souls, were exhumed and reinterred at San Fernando Cemetery No. 1 in the 1920s.

Its statement said some campo santo records were kept at San Fernando Cathedral, where they may have been lost, including in an 1869 fire and a 1921 flood.

The archdiocese said remains from the campo santo, the larger Catholic cemetery and in Milam Park, which served as the city's Protestant cemetery and is not a part of the Catholic sites now at issue for descendants, "were reinterred at San Fernando Cemetery No. 1 at 1100 South Colorado in what was most likely a common grave, as was the customary practice during that time.

"There is currently no marker or headstone denoting the unknown site of the reburials at the cemetery; however, the archdiocese is considering some type of memorial or plaque to be placed there."

The statement also noted the hospital system "believes their process has been open, deliberate and very careful to follow all legal requirements in a respectful manner that is consistent with their Catholic identity."

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More: Examine the manuscript that recorded the cemetery's burials.
