

PLACES IN PERIL

Alabama Heritage, Fall 2003 by Coumanis, Keri

ALABAMA'S ENDANGERED HISTORIC LANDMARKS FOR 2003

ONCE AGAIN, THE ALABAMA HISTORICAL COMMISSION AND THE ALABAMA PRESERVATION ALLIANCE HAVE TEAMED UP TO PROFILE HISTORIC SITES THROUGHOUT THE STATE THAT ARE IN DANGER OF BEING LOST TO ALABAMIANS FOREVER.

THIS YEAR MARKS THE TENTH YEAR THAT the Alabama Preservation Alliance and the Alabama Historical Commission have collaborated to designate some of Alabama's most imperiled historic sites and structures as "Places in Peril." The listing is meant to raise awareness about landmarks that often reflect little-known aspects of our heritage. Though under threat, these landmarks all share a similar potential: the potential to engage local support and foster grassroots activity that will keep them around for future generations to see and enjoy. It is this potential that Places in Peril highlights and encourages.

The sites on the following pages, while noteworthy in and of themselves, are symptomatic of a larger problem: the steady erosion of historic places throughout Alabama. Though threatened by many different factors, the problem is increasingly one of economics. On one hand, a shortage of funds often leads to neglect and deferred maintenance of our historic places. On the other hand, too much economic activity and development, such as sprawl and urban redevelopment, threaten the very existence of historic resources. No other site better illustrates the former than the nationally significant Bryce Hospital. Lack of public funding for the maintenance of this graceful building has led to its severe deterioration in recent years. However, in the historic town of Fairhope, burgeoning economic growth threatens to compromise its much-cherished historic landscape.

The tools are often there to protect and promote these endangered historic sites and structures. With the right combination of local interest, imaginative foresight, and preservation guidance, the threat to these resources can be alleviated. The Alabama Historical Commission and Alabama Preservation Alliance always stand ready to support and provide assistance to any grassroots efforts.

RURAL CEMETERIES

STATEWIDE

THREAT: Neglect

AS POPULATIONS IN OUR RURAL AREAS SHIFT and diminish, the typically small, rural cemeteries associated with a particular family or village are left behind. Oftentimes, the locations of rural cemeteries are not marked on maps; in addition, many historic burials were either never marked or were marked using materials that have since been torn down, moved, or deteriorated. Vandalism accounts for a great deal of the destruction of these cemeteries. Law enforcement agencies are often unaware of laws protecting cemeteries or do not have the resources to respond when a problem is reported. Another threat arises when well-intentioned citizens, in an effort to clean the historic marker, use substances too abrasive for the material.

The University of Alabama Geography Department has compiled an excellent database of Alabama's burial grounds. The Alabama Historical Commission, with assistance from local citizens, is compiling a registry of historic cemeteries, providing a historic context for each one. Technical assistance is offered to local groups who seek assistance in maintaining historic cemeteries. Furthermore, Alabama's rural cemeteries have an advocacy group effort underway. The Alabama Cemetery Preservation Alliance is in the process of forming a statewide, nonprofit membership organization. A statewide cemetery workshop will be held November 1, 2003, at the Archives and History Building in Montgomery. For more information, contact Joyce Nicoll at 334-272-0481.

BRYCE HOSPITAL

TUSCALOOSA

THREAT: Physical Deterioration, Lack of Funding

TUSCALOOSA'S BRYCE HOSPITAL, constructed between 1853 and 1861, was the first institutional building dedicated solely to the care of the mentally ill in the state of Alabama. A rather elongated, three-story, masonry structure with Italianate details and a Roman Revival portico, the hospital is characterized by three progressively setback wings flanking each side of the central pavilion. Its design, the then-unique linear plan, was the result of architect Samuel Sloan's collaboration with Dr. Thomas Kirkbride, a leading physician in mental health care. Kirkbride sought to express in concrete form the current philosophy of moral treatment. More so than other hospitals using Kirkbride's ideas, Bryce Hospital retained many features of the plan and, therefore, was the leader among the Kirkbride linear plan hospitals. Today, it is the oldest and most intact Kirkbride hospital in existence. In 1995, unable to meet federal regulations for patient care, the Department of Mental Health removed patients from Bryce Hospital. Meanwhile, budgetary constraints and revenue shortfalls forced the State of Alabama to defer maintenance on the building, leading to the failure of the roof system.

The Alabama Historical Commission has applied for federal grants to fund preservation efforts and is working on a nomination for National Historic Landmark status for the historic core of the Bryce campus. However, these endeavors take time; true rehabilitation of Bryce will necessitate a public-private partnership.