

Bryce Hospital: Historical Significance

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The main building at Bryce Hospital located in Tuscaloosa, Alabama—consisting of a central, four-story section capped by a dome and flanked on either side by three, three-story wings en echelon—is unquestionably one of the most significant 19th century mental health facilities remaining in the United States. Its importance on the national, state, and local levels cannot be overestimated because of its impact on hospital architecture and design and Bryce's long and sometimes troubled history that led to the 1971 watershed Wyatt vs. Stickney lawsuit that completely transformed the treatment and care of the mentally ill in this country. Indeed, a "reading" of this imposing old building reveals historical high and low points of American mental health care over the past 150 years.

Alabamians can take pride in the fact that their 1852 legislature appropriated a large sum of money enabling the construction, in one building phase, of the most up to date mental health facility in the nation. It was based on the concepts of Philadelphia's Dr. Thomas Story Kirkbride, America's foremost 19th century authority on "moral treatment," a reform movement in psychiatry that utilized architectural design and pastoral settings as essential components in the treatment of mental illness. Plans for the building were drawn by prominent Philadelphia architect, Samuel Sloan, who became the most famous asylum architect of the last half of the century. So successful was this collaboration between physician and architect that Dr. Kirkbride used the drawings which he entitled "the Alabama plan" to illustrate his concept of an ideal moral treatment hospital in his seminal book, *On the Construction, Organization, and General Arrangements of Hospitals for the Insane* (1854) which went through many editions in the next forty years and influenced the design of several hundred mental health facilities in every state of the Union and Canada.

The distinctive design of Bryce with its imposing dome and set back wings is of great significance for the study of American architecture for it demonstrates an innovative approach to construction. According to moral treatment proponents, the design of the asylum played a key role in the healing process. Dr. Luther Bell, a northern asylum superintendent, summed up the importance of the architectural environment:

An Asylum or more properly a Hospital for the Insane, may justly be considered an architectural contrivance as peculiar and characteristic to carry out its designs as any edifice for manufacturing purposes to meet its specific end. It is emphatically an instrument of treatment.

The inference was clear: A rationally planned building surrounded by a serene and beautiful landscape enhanced the possibility that a mentally deranged patient might return to a calm and rational state. In other words, the building and the landscape that surrounded it played a significant role in the healing process.

In theory the linear Kirkbride plan hospital with its emphasis on moral treatment represented a noble attempt to come to grips with one of society's most distressing problems. In actual practice, however, moral therapy was not entirely successful. Proponents held as a primary premise the notion that many forms of insanity were curable, and it is probably true that many patients did improve in these carefully controlled environments, at least to the extent that their behavior was deemed socially acceptable enough to release them back to their families. Unfortunately, many of them probably returned to their aberrant ways and were recommitted, thus starting the process all over again. Such problems, coupled with the dilemma of how to deal with incurably insane patients in a hospital milieu which emphasized recovery, further eroded the idealistic and humanitarian aims of moral treatment. At Bryce Hospital, as nationally, these problems led to what is now often referred to as the "custodial era" in the last years of the 19th century. Dr. Kirkbride's ideal hospital was designed to house only 250 to 300 patients. In a desperate attempt to house the ever-increasing population—and to adapt to shifts in philosophy and theory of asylum management—Bryce hospital administrators added seemingly endless wards and extensions (removed in the 1990s) to the original building. These additions essentially destroyed the carefully thought out relationships between architecture and function. In effect the therapeutic value of the building was lost, and architecture ceased to play a part in the cure.

By the mid 20th century, Bryce Hospital was grossly overcrowded (5,000+ patients) and underfunded. Conditions were so bad that the hospital became involved in a lawsuit that caused a revolution in American psychiatry. Ironically Bryce, which began its existence as a model moral treatment institution, found itself in 1971 a respondent in a landmark federal lawsuit, Wyatt vs. Stickney for neglecting to provide adequate treatment for patients. The effects of this famous case, which transformed American psychiatry, have been far reaching at Bryce Hospital and all other mental health facilities around the country.

Today, the number of patients remaining at Bryce has been greatly reduced. The few patients who do remain are housed in new buildings and the historic old building is largely empty except for its center section which houses administrative offices. With the exception of its monumental Tuscan Doric portico (added in the 1880s that replaces cast iron porches), the south facade of this historic structure looks much as it did when build over one hundred and fifty years ago. It remains the earliest and finest expression of a fully realized and intact, mid nineteenth-century moral therapy mental hospital still in existence. Bryce Hospital also gives physical expression to the noblest ideas and good intentions of our forebears as well as revealing their weaknesses and shortcomings in attempting to alleviate the distress and suffering associated with mental illness.