

EDITORIALS

Save this reminder: Don't destroy Bryce Hospital

In our opinion
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No one would think of tearing down the 16th Street Baptist Church, or Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, or replacing Selma's Edmund Pettus bridge with a more modern structure. But there are those who feel the time has come to tear down another civil rights monument — Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa.

Even without its association with civil rights, Bryce would be a historic structure. Opened in 1861, it was built according to the ideas of Dr. Thomas Kirkbride, the most influential designer of mental hospitals before and possibly since. At a time when mental patients were hidden away, Kirkbride called for facilities that would be campuses, self-contained communities with a beautiful, imposing building at the center that would look like a fine hotel. "The building," according to a historian of such asylums, "became part of the treatment."

Located on a 200-plus acre tract, with a central structure just as Kirkbride planned, the hospital opened with approximately 300 patients who lived in facilities better than most residents of Tuscaloosa. But over the years more people were sent there and budgets did not match the need.

Few state officials paid more than lip-service to the growing problems at Bryce until 1967 when Gov. Lurleen Wallace, concerned at reports in the press, visited the hospital. She was horrified at what she found. With only a year yet to live, she was not able to improve conditions — though she tried.

By 1970 there were more than 5,300 patients there; only three psychiatrists were on staff. That was when a suit was filed against the state, and Bryce Hospital became part of civil rights history.

In 1972, U.S. District Judge Frank M. Johnson Jr. handed down yet another decision reaffirming the rights of citizens, no matter their color or condition. Johnson ruled that mental patients had a right to treatment

aimed at a cure and that simply putting them away in a human warehouse was not only wrong, it was unconstitutional.

In the years to come, other courts handed down similar decisions and the treatment of the patients changed radically.

Although some people feel Bryce should be torn down, the land sold to the University of Alabama, and the money used to treat more people, others in the Bryce Historical and Preservation Committee are working to save the building as a monument and a museum to the civil rights movement for mental patients.

This page wishes the preservationists well.

Bryce Hospital is a needed reminder of what once was and what it took to make things better.