



MY VIEW: Preserve architecturally significant Bryce Hospital

By Bob Blalock

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The sale of Bryce Hospital to the University of Alabama is neither imminent nor certain, according to Kathy Sawyer, a consultant appointed by Gov. Bob Riley to identify critical issues and recommend solutions. Care of the patients at Bryce is the top priority, and much media attention has been focused on this complex problem. Further discussions have included uses the university intends for the property should the sale be consummated.

A very important facet of this ongoing discussion, and one that must not be overlooked, is the preservation of the original Bryce building. Opened in 1861 as the Alabama Insane Hospital, it was and is one of the best examples of the Kirkbride/Sloan design.

Dr. Thomas Kirkbride, an influential psychiatrist, and Samuel Sloan, a famous architect of the period, created a building that was part of the treatment -- comfortable private rooms, pleasant dining and beautiful surroundings for outside activities. With a magnificent dome, gas lights, water closets and three wings offset on each side of the center building to allow cool breezes through its wide hallways, Alabama Insane Hospital was an imposing sight. The design expressed in concrete form the philosophy of moral treatment.

Dr. Peter Bryce was brought to Tuscaloosa as the first superintendent, and the facility was later named for him. Under his guidance, the hospital became the center of mental health care in Alabama and set a pattern nationally as well for humane and compassionate treatment of the mentally ill. Bryce believed in early intervention and no restraints, and he was one of the first to use medication.

However, by the middle of the 20th century, funds from the state had dwindled, and Bryce Hospital projected a different image. It became simply a warehouse, with large numbers of patients getting little or no treatment. By 1971, there were more than 5,000 patients with only three psychiatrists.

It was this situation which brought about the Wyatt v. Stickney case filed in federal court, a case that became the catalyst for change across the nation. Federal Judge Frank Johnson mandated minimum standards, which encouraged the development of community-based care. Other judges across the country followed, handing down similar decisions, and the treatment of patients changed radically.

Bryce Hospital today is architecturally significant from a national perspective because it exemplifies the purest form of the Kirkbride plan and the best in early treatment for the mentally ill. It also represents the center of a civil rights movement for mental patients.

What a travesty to stand by and let this magnificent old building deteriorate even more when it could be preserved not only as a reminder of what has been but a valuable lesson in what can be. With the wealth of material and artifacts currently being gathered, a portion of a preserved Bryce would be the perfect location for a museum of mental health, for both tourism and research.

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