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# Bryce Hospital rich with history

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Steve Davis remembers what Bryce Hospital was like years ago. As he walks down the halls of the Kirkbride building, Davis, the Bryce Hospital historian, recounts story after story of Bryce during the 1960s, and brings hallways that have been abandoned for more than 12 years to life.

Bryce's dome is a landmark of the Tuscaloosa skyline and might soon become a symbol of the University. How to preserve the hospital has stumped both the University and Bryce's chief staff members.

According to the Bryce Hospital Fact Sheet, Bryce's history dates back to the early 1800s with Dorothea Dix. Dix was a reformer who devoted her life to the welfare of the mentally ill and poor. In Dix's personal report "A Memorial" she said patients were treated as animals.

Many were locked in cages, chained and beaten with rods. As Dix worked with state governments to establish mental health facilities she connected with Alabama Gov. Henry Collier.

Collier, Dix and Sen. Robert Jemison hired the most influential architect of mental institutions in history, Thomas Kirkbride, to build a hospital in Alabama. Kirkbride said that his "Kirkbride Plan" had a curative effect on patients. His hospitals had long, rambling wings staggered so each connected but still received sunlight and fresh air.

Kirkbride saw the Alabama Insane Hospital, which opened in 1861, as his best building, and it soon became a center for mental illness research. According to the Encyclopedia of Alabama: Bryce Hospital, Dix requested 26-year-old Peter Bryce as the hospital's first superintendent. Bryce devoted the rest of his life to the hospital that now bears his name.

Bryce used a form of treatment that was later dubbed as "moral treatment," according to an article from the Alabama Department of Archives and History. This form treated patients with respect and courtesy. He strayed from the practices Dix had reported and treated his patients like people. Just as Kirkbride had intended, Bryce ran the hospital as a self-providing establishment equipped with a patient-run farm, newspaper and choir.

After Bryce died in 1892, the hospital began a slow decline that reached rock bottom in 1971. During this time, treatment began to slip back to it how it used to be.

Almost every year the state legislature cut funding for the hospital, making survival, at the time, nearly impossible, according to a report from the Alabama Department of Mental Health.

Also according to the Bryce fact sheet, the hospital was built to house 300 patients. According to 1971 reports, the Alabama Department of Mental Health estimated the population was 5,732 with only 10 full-time staff physicians and three psychiatrists.

This was the largest patient load of any state in the nation. Rooms no bigger than residence hall bedrooms on campus today were housing four to five patients.

According to the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, a journalist who suspected Bryce to be over-crowded, visited the hospital and



Bryce Hospital has been a significant Tuscaloosa landmark since 1861. CW | R.F. Rains

reported that many patients were strapped, soiled and lacking any semblance of treatment.

Ricky Wyatt, a former patient at Bryce who was healthy yet not allowed to leave, was interviewed at the University in 2007 and said he remembers how people were treated.

"[Orderlies] would take people who had head injuries and see how far they could walk down the halls," he said.

With the help of two attorneys, Jack Drake and George Dean, Wyatt was chosen to bring change to the now debauched hospital. Wyatt sued then-superintendent Stonewall Stickney, demanding that if he was not being treated he should be allowed to leave, according to the case summary of Wyatt v. Stickney at [psychlaws.org](http://psychlaws.org).

Carol Stickney, Stonewall Stickney's wife, was also interviewed in 2007.

"Stone knew there needed to be change and saw this lawsuit as a way to bring change," she said in the interview.

Judge Frank M. Johnson ruled that if a patient was not receiving regular treatment he or she should be allowed to leave. That ruling was the first of many mental health lawsuits that gave legal rights to those affected by mental illnesses.

The case also mandated minimum standards of care, established basic patient rights and reduced patient populations. The method of warehousing patients had now become illegal.

Through these rulings, the Alabama Department of Mental Health believe that Bryce is a symbol of civil rights much like the Edmund Pettus bridge or 16th street Baptist Church. Davis said the hospital has again fallen onto hard times.

Patients are now housed in outlying buildings rather than the original Kirkbride facility. Yet this facility is on the National Registry for historic buildings.

Davis said he knows something must be done to preserve this beautiful structure, but said he does not think Bryce nor the University has the funding needed. He has spent the past 10 years collecting recreation equipment, barber chairs, books and musical instruments that were used by Bryce patients.

"I don't know what I'm going to do with them, but I feel they need to be kept," Davis said.

Davis said he thinks a museum needs to be built. He said he has support but no funding, but he said he hopes the possible purchase of the hospital by the University will bring the funding he needs to set up a respectable museum.

Those interested in getting involved with preservation can contact the Bryce Hospital Historical Committee at the Office of Alabama Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation at (334) 242-3417 or email Steve Davis at [steve.davis@bryce.mh.alabama.gov](mailto:steve.davis@bryce.mh.alabama.gov).