

Bryce Hospital should be preserved

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Nearly 15 years after the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., the site of his death was in danger of being leveled to the ground.

For many, the image of King's body crumpled lifeless on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel is unforgettable. It is the ultimate "I remember when" moment.

The motel was an afterthought relatively soon after one of the most tragic events of our country's history. It took the diligence of a group of prominent Memphis citizens to preserve the structure, which has since evolved into the National Civil Rights Museum.

Thinking about civil rights often conjures images of white vs. black. It means defeating landownership as a means to oppress.

The dream of equality, however, is a blanket ideal, meant to protect every person who lives and contributes to our society.

People who cannot help their mental state are included underneath that blanket.

Bryce Hospital provided the stage for groundbreaking reform in the treatment in mental patients across the country.

Now replaced by a newer facility that bears the same name, the Tuscaloosa hospital began as a standard for patient care in 1861. It featured gas lights, flushing toilets, china for patients' dining and central steam heat. Patients were also treated with courtesy and held to minimal restrictions.

It deteriorated to worse than prison-like conditions by the 1970s after a cut in funding led to the layoff of more than 100 workers and the neglect of patients.

Building his case on an article by physician and attorney-turned-author Morton Birnbaum, George Dean argued that any mental patient deserved a "realistic opportunity to be cured or improve his mental condition."

A class-action legal battle that drug on for more than 30 years and that named patient Ricky Wyatt as plaintiff eventually led to the deinstitutionalization of mental hospitals in every corner of America.

Naturally, the more than 300 acres the hospital sits on is attractive for several reasons.

But the sheer reminder that mental patients deserve human treatment is alone enough to restore and celebrate the hospital.

It should be hailed now and forever as a monument to medical and civil rights breakthroughs.