

Historic Bryce eyed by UA, preservationists

By JAY REEVES Associated Press Writer
Published: Tuesday, July 29, 2008 at 7:43 a.m.

State officials and preservationists are developing a plan to save the old Bryce Hospital, a cradle of civil rights for American mental patients.

Built on the eve of the Civil War, Bryce is located on a 209-acre tract long coveted by the University of Alabama, whose campus borders Bryce and needs room to expand as it dramatically increases enrollment.

But state mental health officials and supporters fear such a deal could lead to the demolition of Bryce, which was considered a national model of humane care when it opened in 1861 but fell into disrepute by the 1970s, when horrid conditions led to a landmark court ruling on patient rights.

"It has made such a contribution to our national heritage that we need to preserve it," said Tom Hobbs, a mental health professional in metro Birmingham.

Hobbs chairs the Bryce Historical and Preservation Committee, which is working on a blueprint for saving the old hospital, painted white and ringed with magnolias and acres of lawns where patients once strolled and farmed as part of their therapy.

Patients haven't lived in the building in more than a decade, but its central portion still houses offices. Most of the old building appears structurally sound, but falling ceiling plaster and peeling paint litter dark, abandoned wards.

Graffiti dating back as far as 1900 decorates the roughhewn boards inside the hospital's dome, where observers watched Union troops set fire to the neighboring university in 1865.

John Ziegler, a spokesman for the state mental health agency, said officials have discussed transforming Bryce into a national museum of mental health treatment. It is one of the oldest remaining buildings based on the ideas of Thomas Kirkbride, a pioneer of hospital design.

"We've got a 150-year history here that we do not want to go by the wayside," he said.

The cost of saving Bryce is uncertain, but it could easily reach into the millions. Some patient advocates are more interested in spending money on people than plaster.

"I'd rather see money for appropriate care for patients than for redoing a building," said Toni Welbourne, executive director of the Mental Health Association in Tuscaloosa County.

Bryce was designed for fewer than 300 patients, and its first residents lived in conditions reminiscent of a grand hotel.

"It was one of the first places in Tuscaloosa to have water closets, or restrooms. It had gas lights when no one else did. The patients ate off china. It was sort of a Taj Mahal," said Steve Davis, historian for the Alabama Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation.

The hospital was expanded dramatically and held about 5,300 patients by 1970 in what amounted to a human warehouse. Maintenance was spotty and open wards overflowed with patients, yet the hospital employed only three psychiatrists.

Presiding in a suit over conditions at Bryce, U.S. District Judge Frank M. Johnson Jr. ruled in 1972 that mental patients had a constitutional right to individual care aimed at a cure, a precedent-setting ruling that led to similar decisions in other states.

Since the order, most state treatment programs have been moved to local mental health centers and programs.

The current Bryce Hospital building, located near the old one, houses only 330 patients; officials are considering options for their treatment as part of a major system overhaul or sale. Meanwhile, more than 105,000 people annually are served in community-based programs.

"The civil rights movement for people with mental disabilities started right here," said Ziegler. "It had a profound effect on millions of people all over this country."