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Bryce Hospital commemorates patients in lost burial sites

By Jason Morton Staff writer

Published: Monday, April 19, 2010 at 3:30 a.m.

TUSCALOOSA | Somewhere on the campus of Bryce Hospital is the final resting place of Sara Elizabeth Foster.

Foster died about seven years after being committed to Alabama's largest mental health facility on Sept. 28, 1910, at the age of 45.

Exactly where Foster is buried remains a mystery, despite the best efforts of her great-granddaughters, Nancy Hicks and Diane Lovelady of New Hope, and Steve Davis, an historian for the Alabama Department of Mental Health.



Jason Morton / Tuscaloosa News

Nancy Hicks of New Hope holds a hand-made sign honoring her great-grandmother, Sarah Elizabeth Foster, whose gravesite at Bryce Hospital has been lost. Hicks and her sister, Diane Lovelady, attended a ceremony to unveil markers commemorating the missing dead at Bryce Hospital on Sunday.

But her lost burial site does not mean she is forgotten. In fact, Foster was one of the thousands buried in unmarked graves on Bryce's campus honored Sunday by the Bryce Hospital Preservation Committee and the Alabama Department of Mental Health.

"It brings some closure," said Hicks, 58, of the ceremony. "And, to me, it just honors her and her memory.

"I wish that I could only do more."

Hicks and Lovelady, 62, were among the close to 250 people who attended the ceremony to unveil historic markers for each of Bryce's four cemeteries of unmarked graves. The four markers will go at the entrance of each cemetery and detail the years each site was used as a burial ground. The markers will also show that each cemetery is registered with the Alabama Historical Commission.

Also unveiled at the Bryant-Jemison Chapel on the Bryce campus were plans for a memorial garden to further honor the dead.

"We will not forget what the past has given to the present," said Tom Hobbs, chairman of the Bryce Hospital Historic Preservation Committee. "And while we do not know the names of those forgotten, we know that they did exist.

"And we are all the better for it."

Plans for the memorial garden include a large, stone marker to explain the garden's purpose.

Hobbs also said the committee hopes to sell as a fund-raising tool individual bricks that can be etched with the names of dead or living Bryce patients, now called "consumers."

The 90-minute ceremony also featured a performance by songwriter Ben Mitchell Arthur, a former consumer of the Alabama Department of Mental Health's services,



whose song "Heavy Burden" is a dark, melancholy account of his battle with mental illness.

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Alabama's poet laureate, Sue B. Walker, penned an original poem at the request of the hospital's Historic Preservation Committee.

The poem, titled "In Remembered Lives We Live Anew," is filled with references to Southern life, but also honors the efforts of Peter Bryce, who came to Tuscaloosa as a 27-year-old psychiatrist personally recommended by mental health pioneer Dorothea Dix and revolutionized the way patients were treated.

It also sums up the reason behind Sunday's ceremony and the efforts of the Bryce Hospital historic committee.

"[T]he grace of long remembering redeems lost lives," the poem said, "commemorates the detritus of unmarked graves, gives silenced tongues a chance to say that time past is never past, but is ever always new"