

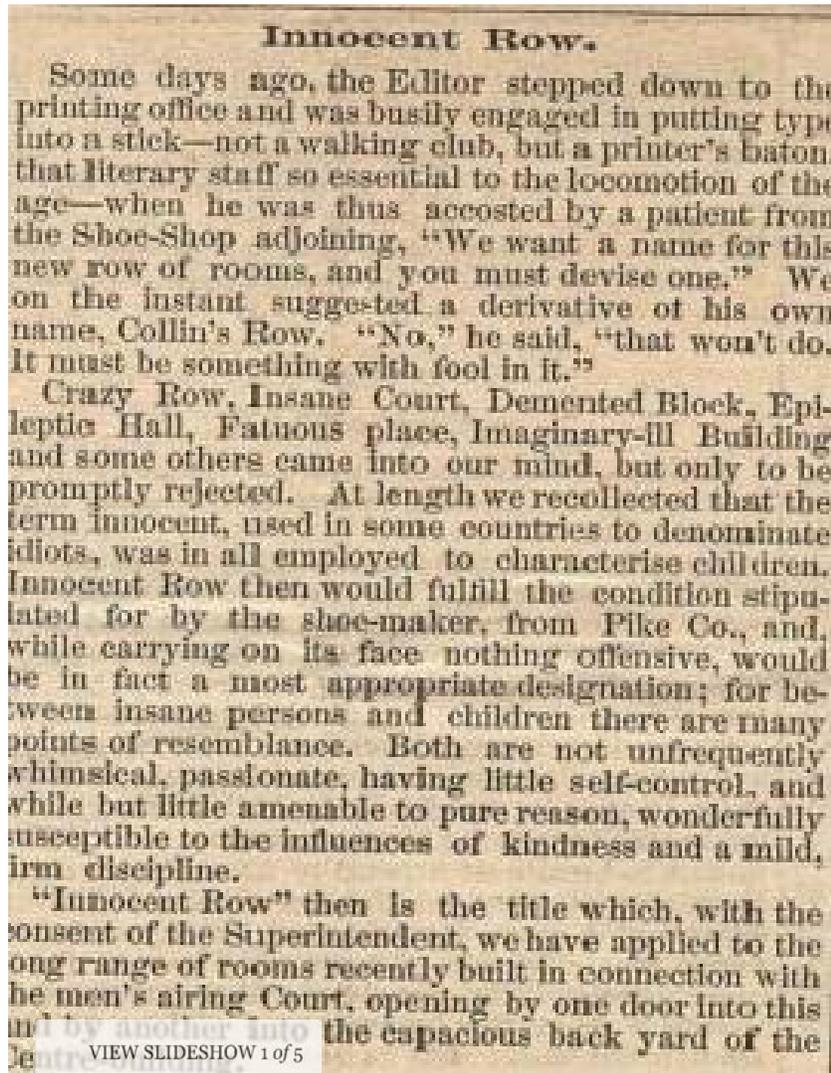
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The Meteor And Innocent Row

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The Meteor and "Innocent Row"

By [STAN INGOLD \(/PEOPLE/STAN-INGOLD\)](#)



http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/wual/files/styles/x_large/public/201506/meteor.jpg

The naming of "Innocent Row"

Alabama Department of Archives and History



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4:45

APR feature on *The Meteor*, the newspaper from the Alabama Insane Hospital in the late

The University of Alabama is renovating a building that helped to modernize the treatment of mental illness in the U.S. following the Civil War. Old Bryce Hospital sits on the Tuscaloosa campus. It was the first asylum to unshackle its patients and ban the use of straitjackets. There's another innovation that's less known. Old Bryce Hospital used to print its own newspapers and historians believe many of the stories were written by the patients. APR's Stan Ingold brings us the story of the Meteor...

Locks turn and shelves roll as we go deep into the vault in the basement of the State Department of Archives and History. This is where we find the remaining copies of "The Meteor." The newspaper was started in 1872, just seven years after the Civil War. It was written, edited and printed at The Alabama Insane Hospital, which was later renamed Bryce Hospital...

"It originally started as a mode of therapy..."

Ryan Phillips grew up hearing stories about Bryce Hospital. His grandmother worked as Captain of the hospital's police force. Phillips went on to study the Meteor in graduate school at the University of Alabama to separate the fact from tales he heard from his family...

"The hospital prided itself on the therapy it did for patients you know a lot of it was work based. The paper was formed to give more of a perspective from the hospital's point of view to the state. It was edited, produced, printed, everything by the patients."

The very first issue opens with a paragraph explaining the paper...

"We call our paper "The Meteor." Meteors are always a surprise. So doubtless will be our little sheet. They appear at irregular intervals, so will it. Their careers, though short, is brilliant..."

The paper covered a wide variety of issues.

"You have to realize this is in the middle of Victorian Times where people put skirts around piano legs and things like that."

Steve Davis is a historian with the Alabama Department of Mental Health. He says while the Meteor let people know what was going on, the articles got into some into some deep topics. Davis says they had some fun while they were at it...

"Well the very first issue I believe, they had a poem, 'Lads are made for lasses, lasses made for lads, those who doubt it are asses and never will be dads'"

The patients working on the paper even went so far as to have a little fun at the expense of the staff working at the hospital at the time, posting a personals ad to find a wife for an official...

"The gentleman is neither a youth nor an old man, but combines in a rare degree, the bloom of early manhood with the sedate carriage and unfailing propriety of conduct that belong to middle age."

The Meteor Volume 1 Number 2, 1872."

The official identity of the editor remains a mystery.

"You can have suspects to a crime but if you don't have evidence to prove it then your point is moot."

However, Ryan Phillips believes he has found the identity of the editor, a man named Joseph Alexander Goree.

"What I found at the Tuscaloosa Public Library going through

death records and found where he was listed in the death records for that year, that he was buried at Bryce and the cause of his death and my heart about stopped.”

Goree was from Marion Alabama and attended Brown University in Providence Rhode Island. The hospital had a close relationship with The University of Alabama and the paper references it numerous times...

“The grounds of the two institutions join and their buildings loom over the landscape as if rising to take a side view of each other. Let us glance at some of the differences that distinguish them. The inmates of the University come to acquire ideas, we to get rid of them.”

Steve Davis says people study “The Meteor” but not always for the reason you would expect...

“It’s an amazing, just amazing, amazing paper, would be an amazing paper today. There are a lot of people who go to the archives to study it for good journalism, not good journalism from a patient standpoint or a mental illness standpoint; I mean this is an amazing piece of journalism for the 1800’s.”

And it’s the archives where the remaining copies of The Meteor are held. Dorothy Fouche is the head of Government Records Collections at the state archives. She says the original copies of The Meteor are restricted to the public due to their condition...

“They are fairly brittle and they were bound into a volume at one point so the edges or where that binding was, those are where that brittleness and tears are, otherwise they’re pretty good for the type of paper they are and for their age.”

Ryan Phillips plans to share the story of the Meteor by writing a book about it. He even has a title picked out. Phillips wants to call it “The Meteor or the Story of Innocent Row at the Alabama Insane Asylum.” The Innocent Row part takes a little explaining...

“Innocent Row was the name of the print shop, they actually talk about that in the Meteor, and it was like “We’re going to need a name if we’re going to work here.” They threw around a couple names that used various plays on the word crazy but then they came up with ‘Innocent Row’ because after all they’re incarcerated but we’re all innocent.”

And by renewing interest in the Meteor, Phillips may help these writers find a new audience over one hundred and thirty years since the last issue came out.

Editor's note: Digital copies of The Meteor can be found at the following website from the Alabama Department of Archives and History...

<http://digital.archives.alabama.gov/cdm/ref/collection/voices/id/7029>

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