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# Unmarked Bryce Hospital graves could complicate

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TUSCALOOSA, Ala. (WIAT) -- - Unmarked graves along US-82 in Tuscaloosa could hold up lane expansions slated for 2019 if the Alabama Department of Transportation would have to move the grave sites for the project.

The grave yard is visible along McFarland Boulevard near the Woolsey Finnel Bridge, where ALDOT plans to add lanes. The graves belong to patients of Bryce Hospital, which opened in 1861, and utilized land that was then far away from the hospital campus and much of the Tuscaloosa metro area.

"These are people just like me and you, and that's one of the first things I said. I just want every grave treated like it's your mama," Steve Davis, Historian for the Alabama Department of Mental Health, said.

The possibility of having to move the graves was first mentioned at a Tuscaloosa County Road Improvement Commission meeting on Monday. A project manager told the commission that the graves wouldn't inhibit the plan to add lanes and improve traffic flow along the heavily traveled road.

"Our current design as it is may or may not even have to call for those graves to be moved," said John McWilliams with the Alabama Department of Transportation.

The graves were discovered, using ground penetrating radar, by the University of Alabama's Office of Archeological Research, which will assist in any movement of the graves that is needed.

Before the early 1920s, there are no records of patients kept by name who were buried after dying while at Bryce Hospital. Davis says stigmas associated with mental health in that era meant that many were buried with generic headstones bearing only a patient number.

"Once, when they came to Bryce, they were here forever, and so that record and that grave is the only history we have with them and that's the only connection their family has with them," Davis added.

ALDOT says the graves will be moved with respect and care for those buried, if they must be moved at all. The road expansion project is slated to begin in late 2019.