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Memorial space at Bryce Cemetery dedicated

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During a visit to Bryce Hospital in 2006, Dr. Tom Hobbs of Hueytown noticed peeling paint on the historic white building's iconic dome.

"It was beginning to look really, really shabby, and I thought what a shame, what a shame to think that icon, that symbol fell into disrepair," Hobbs said.



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Cody White, with Dogan Steel Inc., welds part of a fence around Bryce Cemetery #1A Friday, May 15, 2015. Michelle Lepianka Carter | Tuscaloosa News

The state of the hospital, a cutting edge facility at the time of its opening in 1861, stuck with Hobbs, who eventually helped present a Bryce Hospital preservation proposal to the Alabama Department of Mental Health and then-

Commissioner John Houston, who convened the Bryce Hospital Preservation Committee in April 2008. The 16-person committee, which includes Hobbs, has spent the last seven years working to ensure the hospital's preservation.

Sunday, a crowd of about 100 including Hobbs, other committee members, state officials and relatives of former patients gathered to celebrate the culmination of efforts to honor the memory of the thousands of patients buried across the grounds.

"Today, I think we have taken a real important step in that direction," Hobbs said.

The dedication celebrated the completion of a memorial space in Cemetery 1A, located on the Bryce property just south of Jack Warner Parkway.

The state sold the historic hospital grounds to the University of Alabama in 2010 but retained ownership of the hospital's four cemeteries.

Gov. Robert Bentley and Mental Health Commissioner Jim Reddoch said the dedication was part of an effort to honor the patients who lived, died and were buried at Bryce.

"It was through their lives that we really learned as much as we did about how to treat mental illness," Hobbs said. "We owe them."

There are more than 5,000 patients buried in the historic hospital's cemeteries, some in unmarked graves.

The hilltop memorial, designed by Tuscaloosa architect Evans Fitts, includes, a sculpture, column, benches, and commemorative bricks, which were sold to help fund the project.

"We want the people in the cemeteries to be remembered as people," Bryce historian Steve Davis said.

More than 2,000 are buried in cemetery 1A, an open field bordered by scrubby underbrush overlooking the Mary Starke Harper Geriatric Psychiatry Center.

“We wanted it to be a place that was peaceful, where people could reflect,” Hobbs said.

The entrance to the cemetery is now bordered by a wrought-iron fence and gate, which was patterned after the obelisks that used to mark the entrance to the hospital grounds.

The installation of the fence was completed this week. The monument in the cemetery was completed in 2013.

Previously, the state mental health department and the preservation committee honored the patients with a commemoration ceremony as historic markers at the cemeteries were unveiled.

The preservation committee raised roughly \$180,000 for the memorial project during a four-year fundraising effort, Davis said.

“It took people all across Alabama who gave money to have this magnificent monument erected,” committee member Nancy Callahan said.

The funds came from those who “had a heart for preserving,” she said.

Callahan, the niece of former Bryce superintendent Dr. James Tarwater, grew up with stories of Bryce’s struggles for adequate funding from the state to care for thousands of patients living there in the 1960s but also the real difference the care could make in the lives of the people treated there.

“I grew up loving the idea of Bryce Hospital, that it was a place where people could get some treatment in the state of Alabama for mental illness,” Callahan said.

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