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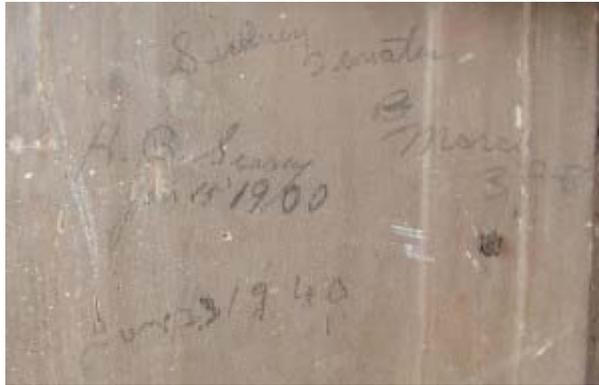
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[LOOKING BACK: The Bryce Hospital Dome](#)

Sunday, [October 19, 2014](#) at 3:19 by [betty.slowe](#)

When the dome at Bryce Hospital was created by the architect, it was because most mental hospitals had

them. However, a decision was made by Judge William Miller, superintendent of construction at Bryce, to make the dome useful. He had water tanks placed in the dome for use as a water system.



The hospital was built on a spring that could provide enough water for the hospital's needs. Water from the spring that was under the hospital was pumped into the tanks in the dome and gravity fed the water through pipes to all parts of the hospital. The main building was completed in 1861, but the water system may not have been completed at that time.

Two Englishmen from Philadelphia were hired as pipefitters for the system, but with the adven



t of the Civil War, they feared if they stayed too long, they would not be able to get back to their homes. So other men had to finish the work and the system was used for many years until water was piped in from the city.

The dome was built in three tiers and is accessible even today by three sets of creaky stairs.

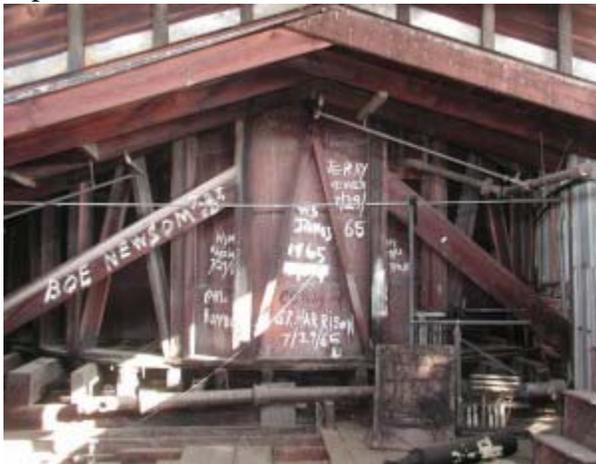
Part of the dome was blown away in 1870 and it had to be replaced, but very little repair work had been required since that time. In 1960, lightning struck the dome, knocking off the steeple and causing several leaks. S.D. Allen, hospital engineer, decided it was time for a new tin roof. He said, "This is the first time we have had to do any major work on it since I can remember. It has been very well kept, painted almost every year. We are going to put a new tin covering on it, since it is leaking, and give it another paint job."

An article in The Tuscaloosa News on October 26, 1964, by Paul Davis quoted Alabama Gov. Winston in



1856 as having said that the hospital would never be fully occupied except for the bats and owls. His prediction was true for the dome, but certainly not the rest of the hospital.

Two names can be found inside the dome. One is H.B. Searcy, dated 1900; the other was J.S. Tarwater, dated 1948. Harvey B. Searcy was a prominent Tuscaloosa physician. Dr. Searcy's father, Dr. J.T. Searcy, was the superintendent of the hospital in the early 1900s and J.S. Tarwater, who also served as hospital superintendent, had a son who was then in dental school who added his name.



Rumors floated around that Tuscaloosa residents had hidden their valuables in the dome during the Civil War, but Edna Corley Winters, an authoritative hospital historian, told Davis it was more likely that they were hidden in the basement.

Paul Davis concluded, "So the dome still stands as a thing of beauty and as a symbol of Bryce Hospital, expensive to repair, and yet too expensive to take down."

In 2010, the dome received another badly needed renovation when its windows were leaking excessively, according to Bryce historian Steve Davis. Modern windows were installed, a pool liner was applied to prevent leakage and it was repainted along with the rest of the central building.

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