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Bryce Hospital, Tuscaloosa Landmark

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WINTER / SPRING 2011

Bryce Hospital
Landmark of Tuscaloosa

By Margaret Clevenger

Photography by Porfirio Solorzano

For years, long before the days of super-sized football stadiums and multi-million dollar coaches, Tuscaloosa was perhaps best known as the home of Bryce Hospital.

Above: Main entrance to Bryce Hospital, the familiar view to most citizens.

Far left: Dr. Peter Bryce photo by Steve Davis

Left: Aerial view from 1945 annual report

Bryce's beautiful dome has been a landmark of the city since the building, then called the Alabama Insane Hospital, opened its doors in 1861 with the hope and promise of revolutionizing care for those with mental illness. The hospital, later named for its first superintendent Dr. Peter Bryce, was a shining star on the cutting edge of treatment and humane care in the mental health field. Ironically, a century later the same hospital would become known for overcrowding and questionable treatment of its patients. April, 2011, will mark the 150th anniversary of the opening of the hospital whose first patient, a Confederate soldier with a diagnosis of "Mania A" caused by "political excitement," was admitted four days before the start of the Civil War.

Dorothea Dix, a national advocate for those with mental illnesses, toured Alabama in the 1840s. She helped lead a movement for professional care for the mentally ill who were often caged or shackled and beaten. Dix, along with Alabama Governor Henry Collier and Senator Robert Jemison, pushed for the construction of a state psychiatric hospital. Alabama's legislature passed an act in 1852 appropriating $100,000 to build the new mental health facility on 326 acres in Tuscaloosa. The allotted money fell short of the needed construction and delays marred progress. It took nearly a decade for the building to open and even then some of the work was not completed until after the first patients were admitted.

Philadelphia architects Samuel Sloan and John Stewart designed the hospital based upon the specifications of Dr. Thomas Story Kirkbride, a leader in the mental health field. Kirkbride's Linear Plan called for the main building to be at the center with staggered rows of wards and private rooms shooting off from either side. The setup allowed each room to have a view of the grounds, sunlight and fresh air. "With the Kirkbride plan you have three wings and a crosshall," says Steve Davis, historian at the Alabama Department of Mental Health. "So you have either afternoon or morning sun." In Tuscaloosa women patients were in the east wing and the men in the west. The hospital became the model for other such institutions that would be built over the next several decades. The Alabama Insane Hospital was the first building in Tuscaloosa to have gas lighting and central heat. The original 1861 building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Kirkbride wanted the building's design to "impress favorably not only the patients, but their friends and others who may visit it." He was adamant about avoiding a "prison-like appearance" and insisted that wrought iron window guards "if properly made, and painted of a white color, will not prove unsightly."

The landmark dome that sits atop the main building is one of the earliest surviving examples of its type. The dome was made of wood and covered in tin that was originally painted red. In 1964 a new tin roof was added by the Welch Sheet Metal Company of Tuscaloosa at a cost of $12,163. The Renaissance style structure has a window-lined observatory that provides a view of the surrounding area. It is here where Mrs. Bryce and Mrs. Garland, the wife of the president of the university, watched as Union invaders began burning the University of Alabama during the Civil War. Mrs. Garland ran to the president's mansion on the university campus and saved it from being destroyed.

The front of the building originally had a cast iron balcony which was accessible from the parlors and the center hall. The balcony was demolished in 1884 to make way for the portico that was designed by Dr. Bryce who had wanted a more impres-

The main entrance to the Kirkbride building

sive entrance to the building. Bryce said that it "gives the front what it always needed, an imposing appearance, and makes the building in every way more comfortable and attractive."

Inside the central building a cast iron staircase was built in the hall near the front door to connect the main floor with the second floor. The staircase featured decorative spindles, weighed 13,000 pounds and cost $1300 in 1855. The staircase still stands but was moved farther back into the hallway in the 1970s. "The second floor has a beautiful parquet floor and when the staircase was moved we made three tables out of that and two of those tables are still here at Bryce," says Davis.

When the trustees began their search for a superintendent for the new hospital, Dix suggested Dr. Peter Bryce, a South Carolina native who had studied in Europe. Bryce was only 26 years old when he was hired for the job. He stayed until he died in 1892 and is buried on hospital grounds along with his wife who, to honor him after his death, took his full name as her own, Ellen Peter Bryce.

At a time when few insane asylum superintendents were actual physicians, Dr. Bryce brought innovative ideas for the treatment of his patients. He initiated the "moral treatment plan," a well-known system in Europe but rarely implemented in this country. Patients were to be afforded respect and courtesy by the hospital attendants. Individual treatment plans were devised and restraints were frowned upon. As a result of Bryce's leadership, the hospital was named one of the five best in the world in the 1880s.

"I think that the whole idea of moral treatment was that you started treating people like they were sick, not that they were a criminal," says Davis. "And that you would have the same opportunities at Bryce, then it was called the Alabama Insane Hospital, that you would anywhere else. And I think Peter Bryce was a man ahead of his time when he talked about you needed intervention in the community and that's what we talk about today. You need family support and we talk about that today. One of the first things he did was build a library and an amusement hall. He had outside gazebos, he called them pleasure gardens, that the women could walk through and meditate. It's a little bit outdated but a lot of his ideas have come full circle."

From the time it opened in 1861 until 1977, the hospital maintained an extensive farming operation. Patients worked in the fields every day, in part to provide food for themselves and the staff, but also as occupational therapy. Kirkbride wrote in his definitive book "Hospitals for the Insane," published in 1854, that physical labor "is one of the best anodynes for the nervous, it composes the restless and excited, promotes a good appetite and a comfortable digestion, and gives sound and refreshing sleep to many who would without it pass wakeful nights."

The hospital staff and its patients raised cattle and hogs. Fields of corn, sweet potatoes, and peas were cultivated. In 1864, sixty acres of Chinese sugar cane were planted and Dr. Bryce planned to make tax-free whiskey out of it to raise needed funds for the hospital. He had several stills built on the hospital grounds but the plans

The front of the old Bryce Admission building originally named the Ladies Receiving Building.

fell through when he could not get the government's go ahead for the project. While no whiskey was ever sold, the hospital did profit when sugar cane fetched extremely high prices that year.

The hospital also operated its own coal mine with the shaft running from the rear of the dome toward the Black Warrior River. "The coal mine was worked by patients and staff," says Davis. "They supplied the gas to Bryce and probably the university." In February, 1901, an accident in the mine trapped 13 miners underground for 63 hours. Three of the miners died.

Beginning in 1872 and continuing for several years thereafter, the patients wrote and published their own newspaper, "The Meteor." The quarterly was designed for the enjoyment of the patients but also served to inform those outside the walls of confinement of what life was like inside the hospital. In the first issue, a patient stated that "The inmates of the University come to acquire ideas. We to get rid of them."

Through the years numerous changes were made to the Kirkbride design as the population of the hospital swelled from the anticipated 250 to an overwhelming 5299 patients. More wings were attached and additional buildings constructed. The overcrowded hospital suffered from too many patients and too few psychiatrists to help them. A federal lawsuit, Wyatt versus Stickney, was filed in 1971 resulting in Alabama's mental health system remaining under federal control until December, 2003. Ramifications from the lawsuit were felt not only in Alabama but across the country. Rulings in the case reduced patient populations, set minimum standards of care, and established basic patient rights.

The original 326 -acre parcel of land that once belonged to Bryce Hospital was gradually whittled down over time as the neighboring University of Alabama acquired the land to expand its own campus. Where patients once strolled through gardens or coaxed ripe vegetables from tilled fields, college students now study in the modern classrooms of brick and mortar multilevel buildings. The University purchased approximately 20 acres near its softball complex in 2007 and turned the once tree-filled spot into a parking lot for students and

Cemeteries

There are more than five thousand grave sites in the cemeteries on the Bryce Hospital grounds. When River Road (now Jack Warner Parkway) was constructed forty years ago, it cut through the main cemetery and forced the relocation of most of the graves. Many of the markers have been vandalized or stolen. The Bryce Hospital Historic Preservation Committee is raising money to establish a memorial garden on the south side of Jack Warner Parkway. "We are trying to atone for 150 years of neglect," says Camille Elebash a member of the committee. Corporate donors are being sought and individuals can purchase inscribed bricks that will be placed in the garden. The bricks available are: 4x8 inches red brick with 3 inscribed lines for $100; 8x8 inches gray granite brick with 6 inscribed lines for $200; 12x12 inches black granite brick with 8 inscribed lines for $300. If you would like to donate, make checks payable to the Community Foundation of West Alabama, P.O. Box 3033, Tuscaloosa, AL 35403. Put Bryce Cemetery Memorial Fund in the memo line. For more information contact Dr. Tom Hobbs at 205-788-7770.

a home for recreational vehicles and tailgaters on football game days.

On May 28, 2010, the University of Alabama signed a deal with the State Department of Mental Health to buy the remaining 168.29 acres at a cost of $77.75 million. According to an e-mail from UA spokesperson Deborah Lane, included in that figure is a state bond issue of $22 million that "will be used for economic development projects on our campus, specifically the third Science and Engineering building. We will also have to spend $10 million to remediate the environmental issues on the property."

There are approximately 300 patients still at Bryce Hospital. Some of those will probably go into community treatment while the rest will most likely be transferred to a new adult psychiatric treatment facility that will be built on the grounds of the Partlow Developmental Center on University Boulevard. The new facility will be located only a couple of miles from where the Alabama Insane Hospital was constructed one hundred and fifty years ago.

The original Kirkbride building with its beautiful dome will remain where it has always stood. The add-ons have been torn down, returning the historic structure to its beginnings. "What's left is the original footprint of the Kirkbride other than a few additions on the front," says Davis. "That's what the building was originally meant to be--to hold 250 patients and it shouldn't have gotten any larger." Plans are in the works for a museum which will detail the history of the hospital and its patients and will be housed on the second floor.

Bryce Hospital Champion Trees

The Champion Tree Program honors the largest tree of each species in the state. Bryce Hospital has had two Champion trees on the property: a China fir tree and a pistachio tree that Mrs. Peter Bryce planted. Both trees still stand but the fir tree is no longer designated as a Champion tree. Some accounts assert that Mrs. Bryce planted the pistachio in honor of her husband in the year that he died.