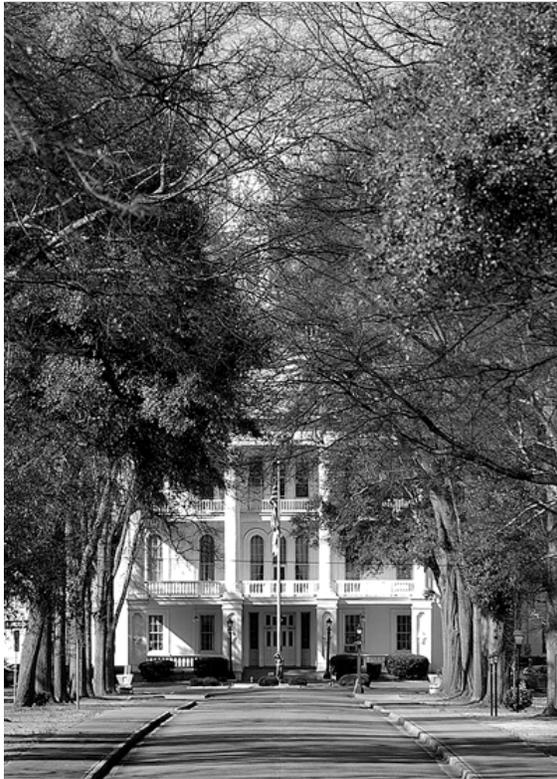


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AP File Photo

**The front entrance to Bryce Hospital in 2003. Much of the hospital sits unused on 209 acres of land adjacent to the University of Alabama, which is landlocked and has run out of room to grow.**

## UA could take over mental hospital land

TUSCALOOSA (AP) — The University of Alabama and the state are discussing the possibility of the school acquiring part of Bryce Hospital, a sprawling mental health center that dates back to before the Civil War.

Relatively new buildings at Bryce still treat some 340 people, but much of the old hospital sits unused on 209 acres adjacent to the university, which is landlocked and has run out of room to grow.

John Houston, commissioner of the state Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation, said he has met several times with Robert Witt, the president of the university, to discuss the school's interest in the Bryce property plus other partnerships between Alabama and the agency.

"Plans for the best use of Bryce Hospital should not be considered apart from the needs of the entire mental health care system in the state," Houston said in a statement.

University spokeswoman Janet Griffith said the talks about Bryce have been "very general" and preliminary.

Witt has aggressively tried to expand the Alabama campus since his arrival in 2003 as part of his goal to increase

enrollment.

The school and Bryce have been neighbors since 1852, when the Legislature established the Alabama Insane Hospital.

The university has developed its campus all the way to the fenced-in edge of the Bryce campus, which is mostly covered by trees, broad lawns and roads.

The Bryce property includes the original mental hospital that opened in 1861 and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Much of the cavernous building, which once housed thousands of people, is unused today.

Because of the hospital's historic status, the university could be handed the expensive responsibility of restoring the main building should it acquire the property, although Mental Health spokesman John Ziegler said there is no estimate on the cost of the work.

Gene Ford, an architectural historian at Alabama, said buildings on the historic registry can be torn down, but the process is slow.