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## Bryce honors patients buried in neglected cemeteries

By Wayne Grayson Staff Writer

Published: Friday, April 16, 2010 at 3:30 a.m.

TUSCALOOSA | In its nearly 150-year history Bryce Hospital has buried an estimated 5,000 patients in the four cemeteries bordering its campus.

All four cemeteries sit just inside the treeline along Jack Warner Parkway and inside, many of those patients lie beneath ever-

shrinking soil, nameless, out of sight and mind.

On Sunday, the Bryce Hospital Historic

Preservation Committee along with the Alabama Department of Mental Health will hold an event to honor the lives and memories of those patients whose final resting place has fallen victim to years of neglect and vandalism.

On a tour of the cemeteries Thursday, Department of Mental Health historian Steve Davis paused to consider how the cemeteries came to their current state of disrepair.

"You know a former director of this hospital once told me an analogy for the situation that I'll never forget. He said, 'If you were forced to spend your money putting flowers on your grandmother's grave or feeding your children, what would you do? Well, that's what I'm going to do is feed these people under my care,' " Davis said. "Also a lot of it has to do with the fact that the cemeteries are out of sight and they're not a part of the main campus. You know, if they were in sight, they may have kept them up a little better."

During the event, the committee will unveil four markers to be placed at the entrance of each cemetery. The markers will indicate that each cemetery is registered with the Alabama Historical Commission and will detail the years each site was used as a burial ground.

A larger memorial marker will also be unveiled that will sit between two of the cemeteries. The memorial will be carved in the shape of a triangle and will feature a transcription written by a Bryce patient carved on the side of the marker that will face Jack Warner Parkway.

"We want to appropriately honor the lives of those patients whose final resting place has not received the respect they deserve," commissioner of the Department of Mental Health John Houston said in a prepared statement.

The event will be held at the Bryant-Jemison Chapel directly across from the hospital's main building and will begin at 2 p.m. Sunday.

Davis, who also serves on the hospital's preservation committee, said the project was first conceived in 2001, but fell to the wayside.

He said the project was given new life recently and he credited Tom Hobbs, a fellow committee member and the executive director of Western Mental Health Center Inc.



Staff photos | Michelle Lepianka Carter

Steve Davis, historian for the Alabama Department of Mental Health, talks about the history of the Bryce cemeteries and property on Thursday.

"We're just trying to make the public aware... that the people that lived here and are buried here are the same as those who lived and were buried elsewhere," Davis said.

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Bryce's first cemetery, used between 1861 and 1969, sits atop a hill looking down over Jack Warner Parkway. An iron sign bears its name, The Old Bryce Cemetery.

Davis said that the hospital ceased burying white patients at the old cemetery, known as Cemetery 1 to Bryce staff, in 1922 but continued burying black patients there until 1969.

In 1967, the construction of Jack Warner Parkway cut through the middle of Cemetery 1, forcing the hospital to clear out farm land bordering the cemetery and move thousands of graves, Davis said. Since the construction cut the cemetery in two, the land the graves were moved to is considered a separate site known as Cemetery 1-A.

Davis estimates that Cemetery 1 contains about 1,700 patient graves while Cemetery 1-A has between 1,200 and 1,300.

Since Cemetery 1 saw little use after 1922 and Cemetery 1-A was only used for the transfer of graves, both cemeteries became overgrown in areas and were vandalized quite a bit.

"Right now, we're walking on top of graves," Davis said while walking through Cemetery 1-A which looks much like a vacant grass lot with a handful of grave markers. "But when I came to work here in 1975, there were many more iron crosses to mark them."

The iron crosses were clover-shaped and marked with the letters A.I.H. for Alabama Insane Hospital, Bryce's original name. Davis said most of the crosses have been knocked over and stolen from the cemetery and a few have even turned up on eBay.

Many of the grave markers were damaged when a disgruntled employee entered the cemetery and ran over the graves with a vehicle.

In 1922, the hospital cleared out a new site for a cemetery known as Cemetery 2 which was full by 1954. Cemetery 2 was bordered by a creek that workers simply went around and continued clearing land to create Cemetery 3, which is still in use today.

Cemeteries 2 and 3 are estimated to contain more than 2,000 patient graves. Like Cemeteries 1 and 1-A, many graves are completely unmarked or contain markers with only a burial number. Many of those markers have been displaced by weathering and some of them can faintly be seen beneath a layer of grass and leaves.

Today, the hospital only buries three or four patients a year, Davis said. Typically, they are people who have outlived their siblings, have no children and have no one to claim their body, he said. Their graves are marked with headstones provided by the state, marked with their name and the years they lived.

However, like the three cemeteries before it, Cemetery 3 is nearing its capacity and in the next 10 years, Davis said the hospital will have to decide whether to build a new cemetery or explore other options.

On Sunday, Davis said he hopes that the people laid to rest in these cemeteries will be honored in some way.

"That's what we're trying to do here is make people understand that these graves are valuable," he said.