

The Atlantic

A Newspaper Written Entirely by Mental-Health Patients

The Meteor, staffed by residents of Alabama's first psychiatric hospital, was part of an experiment in the way the U.S. cared for the mentally ill.



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On a 17-acre plot adjacent to the University of Alabama were a farm, a corn crib, a stable, and a building to house the people who kept all of those things running. The building was a sprawling white structure with a library and a dance hall and rooms for the people who plowed the fields, shucked the corn, and raised the

pigs. It was the first building in Tuscaloosa to have steam heating or gas lighting.

It was also a hospital for the mentally ill, the first of its kind in Alabama. And from 1872 to 1881, it was the headquarters of the *Meteor*, a newspaper written, edited, and published entirely by patients and circulated beyond the hospital walls.

The paper was named after the patients' own expectations for it: "Meteors are always a surprise," the first issue explained, and "so doubtless will be our little sheet. They appear at regular intervals. So will it." Whenever it appeared, though—quarterly at first, more sporadically in its later years—the paper offered its readers a clear-eyed look at life inside the hospital—and, by extension, a window into a grand new experiment in mental-health treatment.

Over the first few decades of the 19th century, ideas around mental illness began to shift in the U.S., and what had once been considered a moral failing was now viewed as a medical condition, one that could be treated with more humane care. In the 1840s, the social reformer Dorothea Dix spearheaded the movement for "moral treatment," lobbying for the construction of asylums around the country to house the mentally ill, who had previously been held largely in jails and almshouses.

The Alabama Insane Hospital was born directly out of Dix's efforts. In 1852, the state legislature authorized funding to build the hospital. The first patient was admitted in April 1861, a soldier sent from nearby Fort Morgan and diagnosed upon arrival with mania caused by "political excitement." (For all its progressivism, the hospital loosely and liberally diagnosed, at times admitting patients for something as minor as a smoking habit.)

The building itself was a key part of the treatment that Dix and her allies envisioned—the hospital was designed according to the Kirkbride plan, an architectural style developed by the psychiatrist Thomas Kirkbride with patients' well-being in mind. In Kirkbride's view, the building itself, set on grounds that were "tastefully ornamented," could itself be therapeutic for patients, "a special

apparatus for the care of lunacy.” It would forego the use of straitjackets and shackles, which had been standard practice at the time, and busy its patients with farm work and recreation.

And then there was the newspaper, written and printed entirely by patients—something for them to do, but also an assurance to the outside world that all was well inside the hospital’s walls.

“The economic climate of the south at the time, it was a big investment for the state, and a really big risk,” said Ryan Phillips, a journalist based in Birmingham, Alabama, who is writing a book about the hospital. “The paper was a way to bridge the gap with the community, but more importantly, it let the folks at the state level who were funding it know, ‘This is what we’re doing, your money isn’t wasted on this place.’”

There were columns on Darwinism, essays on literature, and updates about goings on at the hospital, including an editorial complaining that the female patients were too loud (a letter in a [subsequent issue](#) upbraided the editor for his sexism). There were concert reviews, marriage and death notices, and a recurring section of one-off musings called *Meteoric Dust*.

“It is pleasantly written,” reads an 1876 column in the *American Journal of Insanity* (now the *American Journal of Psychiatry*), “and no doubt affords [*sic*] amusement as well as substantial advantages to the patients.”

“It bears the motto *Imagus a non Locendo*,” the column continues, “which may be freely translated, ‘light out of darkness.’” This is wrong, though. The Latin phrase that appeared on the top of each front page was actually *Lucus a non Lucendo*, roughly translated to “a dark grove because it is not light,” used to indicate something nonsensical—the mark of a dry wit that permeated much of what the paper printed.

On the hospital’s collegiate neighbors: “The inmates of the University come to acquire ideas. We come to get rid of them.”

On an ongoing project by one of the hospital's residents: "We learn from an undoubted source that one of our most popular and talented lady-patients is engaged in writing for publication a novel to be called *Uncle Eddie*. We risk nothing in promising that its readers will be *edified*."

On the spread for the Alabama Press Association's visit to the hospital: "The cold-water folks—Sons of Temperance, Good Templars, &c.—mistook the punch for lemonade colored by the strawberries floating in it, and declared it altogether superior to the uncolored."

And, poignantly, on the value of the newspaper itself: "I am a patient. I have not lost interest in the affairs of the world. It is my ambition to return and take part in them."

The paper's editor remained anonymous until the end. But Phillips, whose grandmother was a member of the hospital police force, believes his research has led him to the right name: a patient named Joseph Goree, who died at the hospital in December 1896.

Others thought Peter Bryce, the hospital's superintendent, was the editor (the hospital, now owned by the university, has since been renamed in his honor). In an issue [published](#) on March 30, 1873, the newspaper addressed one of the proponents of this theory: "He manifestly thinks the *Meteor* wires are worked by some one who is not insane. With this we find no fault," it reads. "It is our own conviction. But unfortunately we can't get the Superintendent to see it."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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