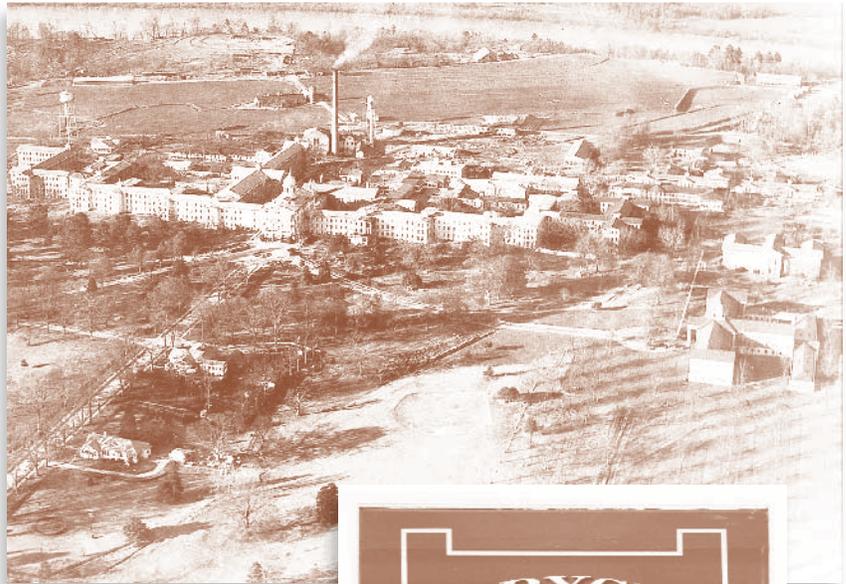


Brief History of
Bryce Hospital



By Steve Davis

The history of Bryce Hospital is certainly diverse, ahead of its time, antiquated, noble, and uncaring—just take a specific time frame and put your perspective on it. Alabama Insane Hospital (AIH) certainly started out with lofty expectations. It was situated on an almost perfect location and was of course, a Kirkbride-Sloan Hospital. The buildings designed by Thomas Kirkbride and Samuel Sloan have their own website with hundreds of viewers each day. Both Kirkbride, one of the most influential Psychiatrists, and Sloan, one of the most famous architects of the period, have reported that AIH was the most perfect example of their design. With a magnificent dome, gas lights, water

closets and three wings set echelon on each side of the center building, Alabama Insane Hospital was an impressive and imposing sight. Originally built to help in the delivery system for the care of the persons with mental illness, the building eventually lost its purpose as it received additional wings piece meal. By 1970 the building was reported by *Ripley's Believe It or Not* to have the longest roof line in the world. Although not documented by primary sources, it was believed to be the third largest building in the world. Demolition has reduced the building to the original Kirkbride-Sloan footprint with a few significant additions by

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BRYCE HOSPITAL STAFF, ca> 1890



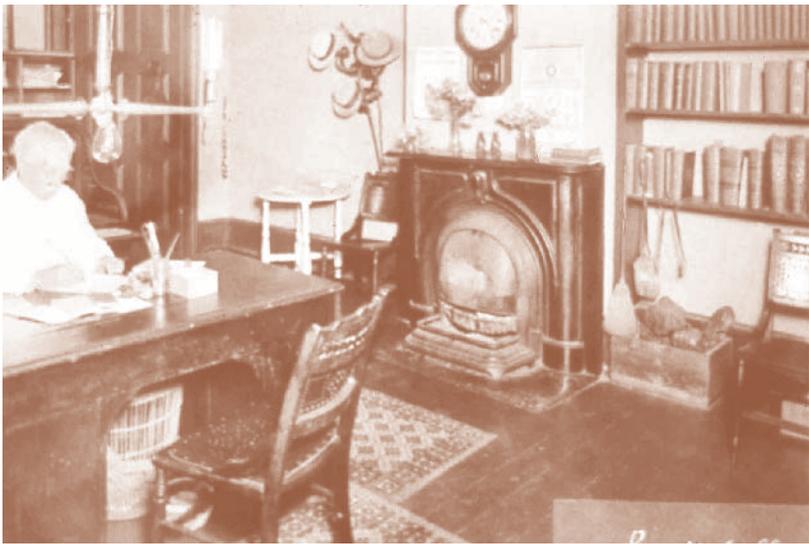
Doctor Peter Bryce

Dr. Peter Bryce, the first superintendent of AIH. Like the building Dr. Bryce was a man ahead of his time. He was only 26 years old at the time of his appointment but had studied in Europe and New York, and had experience as an assistant physician at the South Carolina state hospital. He believed in moral treatment, non-restraint, individual treatment plans and early intervention. The Civil War and Reconstruction resulted in the majority of his efforts being focused on the survival of the hospital. Even with these hurdles the hospital was named one of the five best in the world in the 1880's. Dr. Bryce served until his death in 1892. The hospital was soon named after him. He is buried on the hospital grounds alongside his wife, Ellen Clarkson Bryce. She survived him for approximately 37 years and was one of the most influential women in Tuscaloosa for the remainder of her life. She officially changed her name to Ellen Peter-Bryce to honor

her late husband and continued to support the hospital until her death. Overcrowding was a major concern of Dr. Bryce and it continued to be a problem with each succeeding superintendent. They also had to deal with their particular problems. Dr. J.T. Searcy was the facility's second superintendent. His family includes many famous physicians and bankers as well as one notable artist. The painter Peter Bryce Searcy is particularly known for his landscapes of the American West. Dr. Searcy served from 1892 until 1919 with unfortunate social changes and World War I having adverse effects on the hospital. The second state hospital located at Mt. Vernon is named for him. Dr. W.D. Partlow served from 1919 until

1950. He established an institution for the intellectually disadvantaged which was renamed in his honor after his retirement. World War II reduced the resources for the hospital. Dr. Partlow and Dr. George Denny forged a strong alliance between the University of Alabama and the hospital that was beneficial to both institutions. The families of Dr. Partlow and his brother Dr. R.C. Partlow continue to remain active in the mental health movement through financial support, volunteerism, and influence in the medical and political arenas. Dr. J.S. Tarwater was superintendent from 1950 until 1970. He oversaw the creation of the Alabama Department of Mental Health, the birth of community-based programs, and the beginnings of the sweeping social changes that were so long overdue. What of the original campus? The dome is still a Tuscaloosa landmark. The farm lands are now soccer fields, golf courses and dwellings. The majority of the original consumer records -- including the admissions records -- still exist, in sharp contrast to other Kirkbride hospitals. One exception is the original cemetery book which has been missing since 1976. It covers the period from 1861 until 1922 and is Bryce's most important missing artifact. Why should anyone care about this old campus? We need a base point, a starting place to chart our journey. We may not know what the future holds but we must not forget the past so we can avoid repeating the same mistakes.





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