

The curious history of rapidly decaying Searcy Hospital, Alabama's most historic site



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This is a timeline and introduction to a four-part history of the Mount Vernon/Searcy Hospital site near Mobile. As discussions continue about the future of the abandoned state-owned site, these photos and history give insight into what would be lost. **NOTE:** This site was visited with permission and under supervision of the State Department of Mental Health. It is continually guarded and visitors are not allowed without prior approval.

The curious history of rapidly decaying Searcy Hospital

In the small south Alabama town of Mount Vernon, one of the state's greatest historical treasures – and one of the least known to the general population – is slowly being consumed by kudzu, time and apathy. At the site of Mount Vernon Arsenal, founded in 1828, more than 30 historic buildings are rotting where they stand, including those that housed, at differing times, Geronimo, a Civil War militia, [Dr. Walter Reed](#) and African American mental patients when it was the Mount Vernon Asylum for the Colored Insane, later known as Searcy Hospital.

Today, timber rattlers, peacocks, vandals and security officers to stop vandals are the only living presences at the site, which is one of two of the nation's original 14 arsenals survive as intact complexes, according to Mobile historian Devereaux Bemis. The other is [Kennebec Arsenal in Maine](#), which also later became an asylum. The site, last used as the integrated mental health facility Searcy Hospital, was abandoned in 2012 after its closure.

The property is owned by the [Alabama Department of Mental Health](#) and historic groups hope to save at least some of the buildings, a project that would require massive infusions of time and money. And time is quickly running out. Two buildings have collapsed into rubble, a third was damaged by a tornado, some are being taken over by kudzu from the inside-out, most roofs have deteriorated, and the oldest building is falling to the ground, literally brick-by-brick.



[READ MORE: Mount Vernon/Searcy site was one of state's earliest arsenals](#)

In August, as [AL.com was writing a series of stories](#) investigating the influx of mentally ill people in the state's prisons following the closure of hospitals, state Department of Mental Health Commissioner Jim Perdue told attendees of a Spanish Fort town hall

A HISTORY OF THE MT. VERNON & SEARCY SITE

[Geronimo, Apache villagers held at Alabama's Mount Vernon were among first 'political prisoners'](#)

[Of arsenals built for nation's earliest defense, Alabama's Mount Vernon is rare example](#)

[The curious history of rapidly decaying Searcy Hospital, Alabama's most historic site](#)

[Vintage and current photos show history of abandoned Alabama mental asylum](#)

meeting he would like to see the Searcy site reopened and used to serve terminally ill and mentally ill inmates. Click [here](#) to read more of Perdue's comments.

Can the site be saved? As the debate continues, even as buildings collapse and history is lost, we'll look at three phases of its history: the arsenal (posted Tuesday, Sept. 5), the Apache prison (posting Wednesday) and the mental hospital (posting Thursday). The series will also include a then-and-now gallery that compares historical photos with those of the same buildings today.

Here is a timeline to help keep events in perspective:

Mount Vernon/Searcy Hospital Timeline

1811

Mount Vernon Cantonment, a military encampment, is established at a site 3 miles inland of Fort Stoddard, in hopes of avoiding mosquitoes.

War of 1812

Gen. Andrew Jackson, who had used the cantonment as a rendezvous point for the federal army during the Creek Wars, occupied the site during the War of 1812, according to a 1990s summary of the site's significance by Devereaux Bemis of the Mobile Historical Development Commission.

1828

Congress authorized construction of Mount Vernon Arsenal as one of 14 to be built nationwide. It was part of the nation's first effort to create a unified defense. The arsenals were to be used to manufacture and store arms and ammunition.

1830

Construction begins on a main building with a turret and several surrounding buildings in a horseshoe layout.

1836

Arsenal buildings completed, enclosed by a 12-foot-high brick wall.

1861-1865

Controlled by Confederates. In January 1861, just before the state seceded, Mount Vernon Arsenal was seized by the Alabama militia by order of Gov. Barry Moore and turned over to the Confederacy. At the time, the arsenal was outfitted with only 17 men and their commander, Gen. J.L. Reno. The Arsenal reverted to fed control at war's end.

1865-1894

A second building period begins at the site.

1873

The site was designated as barracks for the Second Regiment of the U.S. Infantry.

1887-1894

The arsenal was home to about 400 Chiricahua Apache natives, who were designated as prisoners of war but who were never charged with crimes. They used existing buildings and tents and camped.

1887-1890

Walter Reed, the U.S. Army physician who confirmed yellow fever was transmitted by mosquitoes, was post surgeon at the site and worked with the Apache.

1895

Mount Vernon is decommissioned as a military post and transferred to the State of Alabama.

1895-1900

The site was unused.

1900

Mount Vernon Hospital for the Colored Insane, referred to as Mount Vernon Hospital, is established to care for mentally ill African American patients, who were segregated from white patients. The hospital began with a state appropriation of \$25,000 and, for two years, the site was modified and new buildings were constructed.

1902

The first patients and staff arrive.

1906

Patients began to exhibit signs of a disease that caused blisters to extremities and suicidal thoughts known as Italian Pellagra. The first cases of pellagra were reported in the U.S. in 1902, although it likely existed earlier with no diagnosis, and were believed to be caused by eating "Indian corn," or dried corn, **according to Dr. Kumaravel Rajakumar** of West Virginia University. Mount Vernon Superintendent J.T. Searcy's son, Dr. George H. Searcy, conducted a study of patients and determined their cases were caused by ingesting moldy cornmeal, which wasn't fed to the nurses. This confirmed the initial hypotheses of other doctors. It was one of first intensive studies of the disease in U.S.

1919

The facility is renamed Searcy Hospital after Dr. J.T. Searcy, who worked with Peter Bryce in Tuscaloosa and was the first superintendent at Mount Vernon.

1963

In-house surgery established at Searcy so patients no longer had to be sent to other facilities for procedures.

1969

Searcy Hospital is desegregated. White patients are admitted at Searcy, and black patients are admitted to Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa.

1986

The Mount Vernon/Searcy Hospital site is **named to the National Register of Historic Places.**

2012

Searcy Hospital closes, as does Bryce in Tuscaloosa.

June 2016

Michael W. Panhorst, coordinator of Alabama's Places in Peril list, researched the site and presented recommendations on how to preserve the site to the state Department of Mental Health. Click [here](#) to read his Proposed Action Plan.

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