

# Spooky, dilapidated Searcy Hospital complex was state's first asylum for black patients



By **Kelly Kazek** | [kkazek@al.com](mailto:kkazek@al.com)

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This is the third part of a four-part history of the abandoned Mount Vernon/Searcy Hospital site near Mobile. An introduction and timeline, then-and-now photos, the history of Mount Vernon Arsenal and Apache history are linked at right.

The decaying buildings of the abandoned Searcy Hospital complex hold the history not only of the site's original function as one of the country's earliest arsenals but also the little-known story of the care of Alabama's mentally ill black patients.

In 1902, mental health officials in Alabama were concerned about the "increasing insanity among the negroes," according to J.T. Searcy, superintendent of Alabama's mental health facilities in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The doctor reported that the number of state patients had increased from 33 in 1870 to 71 in 1881, then to 241 in 1890 and 451 in 1900, he reported.

Soon, the growing numbers led to overcrowding at the state's only asylum, the Alabama Hospital for the Insane, later renamed Bryce Hospital. At Bryce, black patients were treated alongside white patients, although they were housed in separate wards.



**Inside the spooky skeleton of Bryce, Alabama's historic insane hospital, as it undergoes restoration**

The history of mental health care for Alabama's black residents followed patterns seen across the South of the varying influence of freedman in America. In Reconstruction-era South, numerous African American men were elected to public office, for the first time finding a political voice. But the growing sense of equality, such as it was, was short-lived. In the 1890s, many southern communities began practicing the separate-but-equal doctrine, which was upheld by the Supreme Court in 1896 with Plessy V. Ferguson.

It was in this climate that Alabama's "separate-but-equal" mental institution – the Mount Vernon Hospital for the Colored Insane, later named Searcy Hospital – was founded in 1900 on a former arsenal site near Mobile. For the next 67 years, black and white patients would be treated at separate hospitals. Although Dr. Searcy followed the ideology of his mentor, Alabama's first superintendent Peter Bryce, and believed mental patients should be treated in bucolic surroundings and assigned farming and maintenance duties to give them a sense of purpose, overcrowding and lack of funding would eventually raise concerns about

## A HISTORY OF THE MT. VERNON & SEARCY SITE

[See what's inside Alabama's creepy abandoned asylum](#)

[Spooky, dilapidated Searcy Hospital complex was state's first asylum for black patients](#)

[These 1830s structures survive at the Mount Vernon/Searcy Hospital site](#)

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standards of care at both Bryce and Searcy hospitals.

In its early years, however, Mount Vernon/Searcy was described as a beautiful place where patients received expert care, although black people were invariably still considered inferior and the Searcy facility's needs were routinely placed second to those of Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa.

### **Was mental illness increasing among black Alabamians?**

Before the hospital was opened at Mount Vernon, black patients were housed at Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa in separate quarters from white patients. Bryce opened in 1860 as the Alabama Hospital for the Insane and, in 1863, the annual report showed an all-white patient population. According to [asylumprojects.org](http://asylumprojects.org): "By 1868, annual reports indicate a payment of \$1,900 by the Freedman's Bureau to care for the 26 African American patients at the facility. By the end of 1902, 400 African American patients were at the Mount Vernon facility."

A [biennial report of the Alabama Insane Hospital issued in 1902](#) recounts Dr. Searcy's startling theory of the reason for increasing numbers of black patients in asylums. He claims African Americans were healthier mentally when they were enslaved.



Searcy Hospital: Then and Now

He wrote: "In this part of the United States, we are very much interested in the increasing insanity among the negroes. When they were first imported from Africa, as a rule, they were young and healthy adults, selected specimens of their tribes. During the two or three hundred years of their servitude, they were subjected to an environment of European civilization, much more sanitary and salutary than they had ever occupied before ... the selfish interests of their masters enforced sanitary, regular and moral habits and the practice of higher methods of thought, as well as regular muscle exercise, more than and better than the negroes had ever practiced before ... while they were slaves there was very little deterioration among them, and, consequently, little insanity. Since then, their rapidly increasing insanity is a result and an indication that many among them are mentally degenerating. It is very evident the care of the negro insane in the South will rapidly become more and more a public care and expense."

But was it true that the number of insanity cases increasing among the African American population? There are no records to determine the incidence of mental illness in enslaved people, or if there were fewer cases before the Civil War, because people were considered property and their illnesses, mental and physical, were rarely reported and may or may not have been treated.

Vanessa Jackson cites an early case in her history, ["In Our Own Voices: African American Stories of Oppression, Survival and Recovery in the Mental Health System."](#)

"One of the earliest records dealing with the issue of insanity among African-Americans was in 1745 when the South Carolina Colonial assembly took up the case of Kate, a slave woman, who had been accused of killing a child. After being placed in the local jail, it was determined that Kate was 'out of her Senses' and she was not brought to trial," Jackson wrote. "However, the problem of how to care for Kate was an issue since her owner was too poor to pay for her confinement and South Carolina had made no provision for the public maintenance of slaves. Ultimately, the colonial assembly passed an act that made each parish in the colony responsible for the public maintenance of lunatic slaves whose owners were unable to care for. Not surprisingly, there is no further record of what happened to Kate or what circumstances led to the murder of the child."

### **An inventory of historic structures at Searcy Hospital**



## Treating Alabama's black population

In 1895, the 1,500-acre Mount Vernon site was deeded to the State of Alabama by the federal government. It sat unused until 1900 when the state appropriated \$25,000 for the new hospital. Two years were spent renovating and repurposing the old arsenal buildings constructed in the 1830s and the barracks facilities built in the 1880s. In 1902, the staff and first patients arrived.

Like Bryce, Mount Vernon's facilities included a farm and other maintenance shops to run the hospital. Patients were given duties, such as caring for livestock or harvesting crops.

Although some critics saw this as enforced manual labor, it was meant to provide a sense of purpose and, according to staff accounts, the work was mentally beneficial. Food grown on the farm was prepared and served at the hospital to staff and patients.

It wasn't until a ruling in the [Wyatt v. Stickney](#) case in 1970 that farm operations ceased at both campuses and courts ordered "a minimum standard of care." By this point, both hospitals were severely overcrowded and underfunded.

However, there was evidence in early years that patients did not always receive the best in food or care.

In 1906, according to Mobile historian Devereaux Bemis, Searcy patients began to exhibit signs of a disease known as Italian Pellagra. Searcy's son, Dr. George Searcy, reported the disease was "generally associated with diets deficient in niacin and protein, the disease caused disorders of the gastrointestinal or central nervous systems, or caused dermatitis."



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

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](#). George 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.

## Desegregation

In 1969, Alabama's mental hospitals were desegregated as mandated in the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It would be a few years before true integration occurred, but eventually, the hospitals were treating patients based on region and not race, with Searcy treated patients in south Alabama and Bryce treating those in the upper two-thirds of the state.

As with facilities at Bryce, funding from the state dwindled over the years, which led to decreased staff, resulting in substandard care and very little maintenance of the historic buildings at Searcy.

The state funded construction of several modern wards at Searcy in the 1980s and it would eventually have 400 extended-care and 124 intermediate-care beds. However, by the 2000s, many buildings at the site were once again in derelict condition.

In 2012, the same year a smaller facility was built at Bryce and the old campus abandoned, Searcy Hospital closed. The state was planning to direct mentally ill patients to community-based programs although a recent AL.com investigation showed that many patients end up in Alabama jails. Click [here](#) to read more.

## The site today

The Mount Vernon/Searcy site, steeped in more than 200 years of history, is on the verge of being lost. Although as many as 13 structures remain from the 1830s, they are rapidly decaying and several appear to be beyond repair. (NOTE: The site is

surrounded by a 12-foot-high brick fence and guarded by security officers. No one is allowed on the property without approval of the Alabama Department of Mental Health. It is also overgrown and home to numerous rattlesnakes.)

In addition, patients were buried on the grounds and those sites, many unmarked, must be protected, Michael Panhorst said in a paper written for the [Alabama Trust for Historic Preservation](#) on the site's significance. "Two large cemeteries for African American patients are protected by the Alabama Burial Law (Code of Alabama 1975)," he wrote.

Can the site be saved, at least in part? Click [here](#) to read Panhorst's recommendations.

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