



# On the historic Mount Vernon grounds, an already weathered piece of history nears ruin

The old Mount Vernon Arsenal and abandoned grounds of Searcy Hospital have been left in ruins. The site was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1988, but it seems to have been abandoned since the state shuttered the mental hospital in September 2012. Photo taken Thursday, Oct. 17, 2013, in Mount Vernon, Ala. (Mike Kittrell/mkittrell@al.com)

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**MOUNT VERNON, Alabama** --The grounds of what was Searcy Hospital have been many things. The buildings were in almost constant use since 1830: as an arsenal, barracks, prison camp, mental hospital for African Americans, psychiatric facility for all. Now, since the hospital was emptied more than a year ago, it's on a course towards ruin.

A high brick wall surrounds the campus for about one mile, until you reach the east side where it opens up to a driveway of overgrown grass, buildings crumbling with chipped paint and collapsing roofs. Beyond the padlocked gates the former arsenal that preservationists thought enough of to have listed as a National Historic Landmark isn't taking the neglect any better.

The big changes here were years in the making, as lawmakers pushed away from institutional care for the mentally ill. Searcy, which was the state's second-largest facility, closed with little fanfare except for the faint protest by residents here in Mount Vernon. The almost 300 jobs are gone. At this point, some residents just want the grass mowed.

It's a unique piece of real estate, described as "a complex of some 34 buildings, structures and objects" when it was made a historic landmark in 1988. When the federal government deeded the property to the Alabama Department of Mental Health in December 2010, it placed a restriction on its sale: all the money must go back to mental health.

"All told there's about 1,800 acres," David Jackson, chief operating officer for the mental health department, said. "It's not terribly valuable land." Searcy stretches across 150 of those acres.

The ideal arrangement, he said, would be to find somebody who can "gainfully use the space." The land has been surveyed, but never appraised. Sitting out on the northeastern edge of Mobile County, Jackson said, no one is knocking on their door to buy it either.

**A vibrant past**

Heading west on Coy Smith Road, you see the historic marker before much of anything comes into view: “Established 1828 by Congress to store arms and munitions...,” it reads. And then follows a list of facts most residents here can rattle off without hesitation.

Where the hill crests, the great red brick wall stands, older than it looks. Confederate soldiers scaled the barrier’s 10-foot stature to take the arsenal in 1861. Near the stately McCafferty building, a white colonial with Greek Revival columns, the forsaken cottages wait on the sideline.

“It’s like it is being swept under the rug,” said Alice Rutland, a resident who worked at the hospital. “I don’t know what it’s going to take for people to be aware of what’s at stake.”

What it will take is money; the one thing public agency budgets have been short on, especially in mental health. Such is the narrative of many places, like this one, full of the wrong kind of value.

It’s a fortress of America’s past — the Civil War, the Confederacy, medicine, Native Americans and African-Americans — who have all strangely passed through. Few places are rooted in as much history. Even fewer places like it are saved.

### **An uncertain future**

Only the Kennebec Arsenal in Augusta, Maine, can compare to Mount Vernon in terms of age and construction. Built around the mid-1800s, it was once a hospital for psychiatric patients, too. The state sold it to a developer on the promise of development. Then the economy tanked. Plans never materialized. There were incidents of arson, theft and vandalism and now the state of Maine has filed suit to get it back.

Aging buildings, especially the historic kind, are high-priced assets to maintain, which may explain why there has been little investment in the facility, said Mobile County Commissioner Merceria Ludgood, whose district includes the town. “My concern is anyone who is looking for a safe place to be up to no good,” Ludgood said. Security guards watch over the property around the clock.

The expense is a factor, said Jackson, whose job is to monitor major issues facing the department. “We have not been able to maintain the capital investments like we want to,” he said. They have removed notable items, namely artwork and the door that was said to cover Apache Indian Geronimo’s quarters when he was a prisoner there from 1887 to 1894. “It’s not certain what the future will hold for Searcy.”

Budget money followed the patients into the community care facilities. There is a capital budget, but nothing tied to the upkeep of Searcy. About \$650 will get the grass cut. They’re looking for a lower price.

Many of the buildings are not connected to the town’s wastewater treatment facility, Jackson said.

“There are going to be issues for whoever wants to take it over that have to be addressed.”

### **Residents worry**

The site is a concern for the town’s mayor, James Adams. He said that, after some grumbling, the department started cutting the grass. “We have complained to the state (mental health) department because it’s an eyesore for the town,” he said. “A lot of the buildings are lost because of the conditions that they’ve kept it in.”

Not long ago, James said, a storm came. “They thought it was a tornado, but it might have been a straight-line wind.” Some of the buildings were damaged and it seemed every hard blowing wind or heavy rain since has taken a toll.

In spite of the structures’ condition, the town has an interest in them. There has been talk of turning at least one of them into a museum. The Mount Vernon Historical Preservation Society wants to make the McCafferty building its headquarters. There are high hopes for everything else.

“We haven’t taken that next step because we don’t have any agreement with the state,” said Terry Williams, the preservation group’s chairman. What should become of it all? The plans vary, if you ask Williams. It could become a museum, storing artifacts from the institution’s rich past. It could become a historic destination, hosting Civil War reenactments complete with 19th century garb. It could be used for many things, Williams said, “we just wanted the site to be something.”