

Herald News Media Services

News You Can Use in the East Birmingham Tri-County Area

HERALD NEWS MEDIA SE



Skip to content

- Home
- About
- Advertising
- [Ad Guidelines](#)[Classifieds](#)[Current Promotion – Spirit Lines](#)[Community Forums](#)
- Event Calendar
- Submission Guidelines
- Subscribe – FREE
- Weekday Talk Radio

150th Anniversary of Bryce Hospital Commemorated

Posted on [10/07/2011](#) by [Herald Staff](#)

MONTGOMERY – Governor Robert Bentley recently proclaimed October 2, 2011, as Bryce Hospital Day in Alabama. Because of the hospital's significant contributions to the treatment of mental illness in the state, it is appropriate the 150th anniversary of Bryce Hospital is recognized during National Mental Illness Awareness Week, observed October 2-8.

Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, has been in continuous operation since 1861. In its early years, it exemplified the clinical philosophy of the moral treatment movement, and influenced the design and construction of psychiatric hospitals across the nation. Eventually the original white-domed central pavilion and its six wings were extended to accommodate a patient population that grew from the initial 250 to more than 5,000. The overcrowded conditions were the antithesis of Dr. Peter Bryce's philosophy. At its peak population, the hospital became the focal point in

America for the civil rights movement for people with mental illnesses through the federal lawsuit Wyatt v. Stickney in 1970. By the time the lawsuit ended in 2003, it had transformed mental health treatment in the U.S. The hospital is on the National Register for Historic Places as a site with national significance. The following is a synopsis of the 150-year history of this great institution.

History of Bryce Hospital and its Influence on the Mental Health System in the United States

- In the mid-nineteenth century there was virtually no mental health care system in the U.S., and Dorothy Dix traveled across the country pleading for the cause of people with mental illnesses.
- Throughout 1849 and 1850, Ms. Dix, along with former Alabama Governor Henry W. Collier, lobbied for the establishment of a state psychiatric hospital. An act was passed in 1852, and \$100,000 was appropriated for the construction of The Alabama Insane Hospital in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, on 326 acres. The hospital admitted its first patient in 1861.
- The architectural plan was drawn by Sloan and Stewart of Philadelphia under the direction of Dr. Thomas S. Kirkbride, a physician at the Pennsylvania Hospital for the Insane. Kirkbride and Sloan developed plans that functionally followed the latest treatment philosophy of their day. The so-called moral treatment philosophy prescribed that patients had rooms with windows, appropriate climate and dignified dining quarters. Spacious grounds for tranquility and outside activities emulated, to some extent, the resort hotels and retreats popular in the nineteenth century.
- The Sloan/Kirkbride plan had a central administrative building with three staggered wings on each side. Although many institutions followed this pattern, the Tuscaloosa hospital was said to have been the finest example of their work. The original footprint remains and is on the National Register for Historical Places as a site with national significance.
- Upon the recommendation of Dorothea Dix and Dr. Kirkbride, Dr. Peter Bryce was nominated to be the first superintendent of the hospital. Dr. and Mrs. Bryce lived in an upstairs apartment in the central building. Mrs. Bryce

became a cornerstone of Tuscaloosa society and a tenacious advocate for people with mental illnesses.

- Dr. Bryce put in place methods of treatment that were in many respects ahead of his time. He was one of the first doctors to use medication in treatment. Early intervention, treatment without the use of restraints and the need for social support were hallmarks of his methodology. After his death in 1892, the hospital was renamed for Dr. Bryce. He was succeeded by Dr. T. J. Searcy.
- Dr. Searcy served as superintendent from 1892 until 1919. He initiated reforms in treatment and medical records, and established a second hospital in Mt. Vernon, Alabama, that was renamed for Dr. Searcy after his death.
- Dr. W. D. Partlow served as superintendent from 1919 to 1950. In 1923 a new residential facility was opened for people with intellectual disabilities. The first dormitory for the facility housed nearly 160 persons and was located next to the expanded Bryce agricultural properties in Tuscaloosa. In 1927 the institution was named for Dr. Partlow.
- When Dr. J. T. Tarwater became superintendent of Bryce Hospital in 1950, the system was grossly underfunded. It struggled to remain self-sufficient, as it had from its inception, through the sale of farm products.
- During Dr. Tarwater's tenure, psychological and social service departments were established to assist with the care and discharge of patients transitioning to a slowly evolving community care network.
- In 1965, Act 881 formed the Alabama Department of Mental Health with a commissioner appointed by the governor. Until that time services were provided under the umbrella of the Alabama Department of Public Health and were managed by the hospital superintendents. Over the next five years the state made steady improvements with the emergence of several more community mental health programs. The progress, however, was woefully inadequate to meet growing demand.
- The lack of minimal standards of care and rising demand for services reached a crisis point in 1970. At that time the hospitals and residential facilities were overcrowded, short staffed and underfunded. Bryce Hospital, for example, had more than 5,000 patients with only three psychiatrists. A lawsuit, known as Wyatt v. Stickney, was filed in federal court and became the catalyst for change across the nation.

- Through rulings associated with the Wyatt case, U.S. District Judge Frank Johnson, Jr. and succeeding judges mandated minimum standards of care. These essentially reduced census in facilities, established basic patient rights and encouraged the development of the community mental health system as an alternative to institutionalization.
- In December 2003 U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson, Jr. terminated the Wyatt case. More than 98 percent of individuals with mental illnesses who receive services through Alabama's public mental health system are now served in community-based care, and institutions have been downsized to serve a census of hundreds rather than thousands.
- In 2008, the Bryce Hospital Historical Preservation Committee was established. Descendants of the Bryce, Searcy, Tarwater and Partlow families serve with others who have expertise and interest in historical preservation. Current Alabama Department of Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh has supported the continuing work and contributions of the committee.
- The University of Alabama purchased the Bryce Hospital campus in May 2010. The department continues to operate the hospital while a new facility is being built on the front acreage of the nearby Partlow campus. The new hospital is scheduled for completion in 2013.

Summary

With a rich history that strongly influenced the architecture of psychiatric hospitals, the clinical evolution of mental health treatment in the United States and the beginnings of the civil rights movement for people with mental illnesses, Bryce is unique. Enduring the Civil War and the burning of the University of Alabama, Bryce is a symbol of resiliency and reform. As a contemporary of the state Capitol, the 150-year-old structure is an irreplaceable Alabama treasure for future generations.