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\$180,000 raised for memorial garden at former Bryce Hospital's cemetery

By Sara Milledge

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TUSCALOOSA | You won't find most of the graves at Bryce Hospital unless you go looking for them. A handful of stones rise from the ground below a wrought iron sign that reads "Old Cemetery," but the markers that fill the three other Bryce cemeteries are all but invisible. And almost all are engraved with a number.

Steve Davis, historian for the Alabama Department of Mental Health, surveys the grounds. He points to a small plot in the right corner of Cemetery No. 2, where nine stillborn babies, one from Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility and eight from Bryce Hospital, were originally remembered with a pair of praying hands. The statue was stolen several years ago.



Staff file photo | Michelle Lepianka Carter
Steve Davis, historian for the Alabama Department of Mental Health, talks about the history of the Bryce cemeteries and property in 2010.

"It kind of broke my heart," he said.

One grave in Cemetery No. 2 is decorated by family members once a month and has been throughout Davis' 38-year tenure at Bryce. The grave is at least 60 years old, making its decoration a tradition spanning two generations.

Davis estimates that 5,500 graves fill Bryce's four cemeteries, the oldest of which is dated 1862. Many of the markers are covered with soil and weeds. Some are not there at all. The majority of the markers that remain are simple concrete blocks the size of bricks stamped with a number. Very few are identified with a name.

"I think it's really important that people have their name on their grave. It just personalizes the grave," Davis said. "I've had tremendous experiences where people have come and located their great-grandmother, their grandmother's grave."

Family members are allowed to purchase personalized markers for their loved ones. That policy may change, however, because of new restrictions concerning privacy.

Last year, Davis was able to show a woman from Texas the marker she had purchased for a relative.

"After I started counting she thanked me 11 times for being able to show her the grave," he said.

Three thousand of the original markers have not survived and an unknown number of graves were moved in 1967 for the construction of River Road, now Jack Warner Parkway, making it difficult to know the exact location of each grave. Some of the unmarked graves have been identified using equipment from Moundville Archaeological Park. The park, a 20-minute drive south of Tuscaloosa, is dedicated to the excavation of artifacts and study of the Mississippian Indian culture along the Black Warrior River.

Most of Bryce's visible burials lie under markers with no name and no words. Only a number distinguishes them.

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"Peter Bryce was a man way ahead of his time," Davis said. "(The use of numbers) wasn't to make people less of a person, but he thought people would be stigmatized by family members being here. He put patient numbers on the graves."

Bryce, the hospital's first superintendent and its namesake psychiatrist, was a pioneer in the field of mental health when the Alabama Insane Hospital, now Bryce Hospital, first opened in 1861.

"Dr. Bryce was a leading psychiatrist in the country," said Camille Elebash, a member of the Bryce Historic Preservation Committee and a lifelong Tuscaloosan. "Once upon a time, mental patients were not treated any better than animals."

She added, "(Bryce) was one of the early ones for humane treatment; he followed Dr. Kirkbride. Dr. Kirkbride was the first person who really did something about building good hospitals. They called it the Kirkbride imprint out here. This hospital was one of the first ones in the whole country that Dr. Kirkbride designed. The building was literally part of the treatment."

Dr. Thomas Story Kirkbride, a Philadelphia psychiatrist, founded the Association of Medical Superintendents of American Institutions for the Insane in 1844. The association evolved into the American Psychiatric Association. His Kirkbride model for designing mental health institutions was revolutionary at the time of Bryce's construction. The building's design was intended to provide comfort and privacy for patients, and the architecture was meant to help cure mental illness.

Today, a group of Tuscaloosa volunteers aims to memorialize the thousands of nameless patients buried on the Bryce campus.

While the use of numbers as burial identification remained constant for 120 years, the markers themselves changed, Davis said. Originally, the numbers were carved into wooden blocks, which were replaced by iron crosses. The crosses are now a rare find in any of the cemeteries.

"Those have been stolen, vandalized and are simply not there," Davis said. "When I started work, both the cemetery right at the back of the grounds and the one on the north side of Jack Warner Parkway still were covered with crosses, so it's been during my employment lifetime that they've been stolen. We see them on eBay. University Police brought a pickup truck with a bed full of iron crosses they'd found in a fraternity house. That's been about seven or eight years ago."

Today, only the concrete markers designate graves. The use of patient numbers ceased in 1922, and burial numbers were used for the next 60 years. In 1982, Bryce began engraving the markers with patients' names.

Davis said stricter privacy laws, like the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act might force the hospital to revert back to the use of numbers. Laws like HIPPA regulate the disclosure of personal health care information, which can make accessing patients' medical records difficult.

"A lot of what we've tried to do with the historical efforts of this hospital is fight stigma. So I hate to see that, but I also understand from a legal standpoint," Davis said.

In 1902, 86 percent of those who died at Bryce were buried there. By 1922, that number had dwindled to less than 50 percent.

Davis said that after patients died their families were notified but that many did not have the transportation or the means to bury their loved ones elsewhere.

The hospital keeps records of corresponding patient/burial numbers and names, which until recently were open to patients' next of kin. With the implementation of more restrictive privacy policies, however, only a court-appointed executive of estate is allowed to handle patient records.

The cemetery ledger recording the burials between 1862 and 1922 has been missing since at least 1967.

Although many of the graves are shrouded in anonymity, they have not been forgotten. Members of the Tuscaloosa community are working with the Alabama Department of Mental Health to memorialize the people who, for more than a century, have been known only by a number.

"We decided that the best way was to do a memorial garden and to have it for everybody," Elebash said.

The Bryce Historic Preservation Committee has been working since 2008 toward the establishment of a memorial garden on the Bryce campus. Its members are diverse. Representatives from the Alabama Department of Mental Health, preservation advocates, architectural historians, descendants of former Bryce superintendents and past Bryce Hospital residents are on the committee.

The garden will honor those buried on hospital grounds, especially those in the unmarked graves.

"(We're) trying to pay tribute to the people that lived and died the Bryce Hospital experience," said Dr. Tom Hobbs, chairman of the committee.

Part of that tribute was a memorial service held in April 2010 at Bryant-Jordan Chapel on the Bryce campus, the first ceremony of its kind at the facility. Hosted by the committee, it was an effort to honor those who had died at the hospital. About 300 family members of former Bryce residents attended the service.

"It was more like a funeral — closure for families," Davis said. "One of the best things we've ever done."

Davis also said he was surprised at the community's generosity during a time of economic hardship.

To date, the committee has raised more than \$180,000 in private donations for the memorial. Businesses and individuals gave a considerable amount to the project, and members of the community purchased memorial bricks to be included in the garden in honor of loved ones. Tuscaloosa architect Evans Fitts designed the memorial, donating his service and time.

Originally, memorials were proposed for all four cemeteries. However, the committee has decided to build a single, larger garden that will be located on the hill in front of Cemetery 1A at the back of the Bryce campus. Each of the cemeteries now has a historic marker and is listed in the Alabama Historic Cemetery Register.

"There are thousands of people buried in these cemeteries, and a lot of them are unknown," said Rosemarie Childress, the Tuscaloosa County Preservation Society's representative to the committee. "We decided that one memorial, for all of these thousands of people, would be in order."

Fitts said a contract has been signed for construction of the memorial. He added that the committee plans to break ground on the memorial in spring.

Davis, Elebash and Childress agree that the community has been receptive to the idea of a memorial honoring those buried at Bryce.

"I think we've gotten great support from everybody," Childress said. "How could you object to that?"

The committee also hopes that the memorial will work to clear the stigma that surrounds Bryce and mental illness as a whole.

"There has always been stigma associated with Bryce Hospital," Hobbs said. "The stigma is endorsed, I think, most vigorously by those who least understand the role of Bryce Hospital. It has been the quintessential symbol of Alabama's dedication to its citizenry who have suffered from mental illness. Its checkered history certainly has to be noted. It has been the site of some really good things; it has been the site of some things that could have been better."

Bryce, once the frontrunner for mental health care and patients' rights, was criticized heavily for inhumane treatment of patients during the landmark Wyatt v. Stickney case filed in 1970. The case lasted 33 years and led to a nationwide revolution of standards in the medical care of mental illness.

Childress agreed. "Of course there's always been — for years and years and years — a stigma as far as mental health is concerned," she said. "But this project, I think, is a welcome project. I think people are glad that we're doing it to kind of help bring the mental health problem to the forefront and let people see that folks with mental illness aren't any different from the rest of us," she said.

"I would like to think that these kinds of efforts, in some way, reduce the kind of stigma associated with Bryce Hospital," Hobbs said. "Hopefully it will. But I think one of the main things that will help do that is the University of Alabama's current interest in including some of the hospital's most historical structures in their current master plan."

The University of Alabama purchased the Bryce campus, and has agreed to preserve the hospital's main Kirkbride building. An effort to save the building's wings is under way. The cemeteries, however, remain the property of the Alabama Department of Mental Health.