

Historic Bryce Hospital Tuscaloosa, Alabama

FACT SHEET

Description of Historic Bryce Hospital

Bryce Hospital has been in continuous operation since 1861. Designed in the Italianate style, the four-story building features an imposing white dome that has been a landmark on the eastern skyline of Tuscaloosa for almost 150 years. Over the decades, the original six wings were extended to accommodate a patient population that grew from the initial 250 to over 5,000 individuals. Due to the federal lawsuit, *Wyatt v. Stickney*, the hospital became the focal point in the U.S. for the civil rights movement for people experiencing mental illness. The lawsuit, filed in 1971, kept Alabama's mental health system under federal court control for over 33 years and virtually changed the landscape of mental health care across the nation by establishing patient rights to minimum standards of care. This fact sheet provides an overview of the history of Bryce Hospital and its historical significance to the state and the nation.

History of Bryce Hospital + the Evolution of the Mental Health System in Alabama

- In the early decades of the 19th century, there was virtually no mental health care system in the U.S. In response, Dorothea Dix, a national advocate for appropriate mental health treatment, traveled across the country pleading for the care of people who experienced mental illness.
- Miss Dix, along with Alabama Governor Henry W. Collier and Senator Robert Jemison, Jr., lobbied for the establishment of a state psychiatric hospital in 1849-50. An act passed in 1852 appropriated \$100,000 for the construction of the "Alabama Insane Hospital" (which was later renamed for Dr. Peter Bryce, the first superintendent) on 326 acres in Tuscaloosa. The hospital admitted its first patient in 1861.
- The Sloan/Kirkbride plan had a central administrative building with three staggered patient wings segregated by gender on each side. Many institutions across the country followed this pattern, but Dr. Kirkbride considered the "Alabama Insane Hospital" to be the finest example of this concept. Later wings (not a part of the Kirkbride plan) have been removed, but the original 1861 building still stands and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places because of its national significance.
- Upon the recommendation of Miss Dix and Dr. Kirkbride, Dr. Peter Bryce was appointed the first superintendent of the hospital. He and his wife, Ellen Clarkson Bryce, became cornerstones of Tuscaloosa society and tenacious advocates for people who experience mental illness.
- Dr. Bryce put in place the latest methods of therapy fostered by the "moral treatment movement." Early intervention, treatment without the use of restraints, and social support were hallmarks of this methodology. After his death in 1892, the hospital was renamed for Dr. Bryce. He and Mrs. Bryce are buried on the hospital grounds near the grand approach to the institution they served with great devotion.
- Dr. James Thomas Searcy succeeded Dr. Bryce and served as superintendent from 1892 until 1919. He initiated reforms in treatment and medical records. He also established a second hospital in Mount Vernon, Alabama, which was named for him following his death. Searcy Hospital has its own rich history and is still in operation.
- Dr. W. D. Partlow served as superintendent from 1919 to 1950. During his tenure, a new residential facility was opened in 1923 for people with intellectual disabilities (ID). Shortly thereafter, the legislature passed an act naming the facility for Dr. Partlow. The W. D. Partlow Developmental Center is the only remaining residential facility in the state for persons with ID. More than 99 percent of individuals with ID are now served in the community.

- When Dr. J. S. Tarwater became superintendent of Bryce Hospital in 1950, the state mental health system was grossly under-funded. The hospital continued to augment deficient budget allocations from the legislature with the sale of its farm products. During Dr. Tarwater's tenure, psychological and social service departments were established to assist with the care and discharge of patients into a slowly evolving community care network.
- In 1965, the Alabama Legislature passed Act No. 881 creating the Alabama Department of Mental Health. A subsequent bill added the words "and Mental Retardation" to the department's name. Before Act No. 881, services were provided under the general umbrella of the Alabama Department of Public Health. Over the next six years, the state made steady improvements with the emergence of several community mental health programs. Progress, however, was woefully inadequate to meet the growing demand.
- The lack of minimal standards of care, in addition to the rising demand for services, reached a crisis point in 1971. At that time, the hospitals and residential facilities were overcrowded, short staffed, and under-funded. Bryce Hospital, for example, had over 5,000 patients with only three psychiatrists. The lawsuit, *Wyatt v. Stickney*, was filed in federal court and became the catalyst for change across the nation.
- Through rulings associated with the *Wyatt* case, Judge Frank Johnson, Jr. and later Judge Myron Thompson, Jr. mandated minimum standards of care, established basic patient rights, encouraged the development of the community mental health system as an alternative to institutionalization, and reduced the patient population in the facilities. The *Wyatt v. Stickney* case was terminated in December 2003. The community mental health system now serves more than 98 percent of individuals in the state who experience mental illness, and state hospital facilities have been downsized to serve a daily population of hundreds rather than thousands.

Summary

Bryce Hospital has a rich history that encapsulates the architectural evolution of mental health in the United States and the beginnings of the civil rights movement for people who experience mental illness. Because of its rich history, the exterior facade of the original Kirkbride building, along with the grand approach from Campus Drive, should be preserved. If the walls of Bryce Hospital could talk, one would hear of the difficulties of experiencing mental illness, the advantages of recovery, and the compassion of clinicians and staff. Additionally, one would hear the ongoing discussions by leaders who sought to offer the best care, given the resources at the time. Completed in 1861, having endured both the Civil War and the burning of the adjacent University of Alabama by federal troops in 1865, Bryce Hospital is a symbol of resilience and reform. As a contemporary of the Alabama State Capitol in Montgomery, Bryce is an irreplaceable historical treasure for future generations.

Get involved!

The Bryce Hospital Historical Committee is working with the Alabama Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation to preserve the historic Kirkbride building, along with the Bryce Hospital cemeteries, where thousands of former patients are buried. The committee is also exploring the possibility of establishing a national mental health museum in a portion of the historic building. For more information, contact the Public Information Office of the Alabama Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation at (334) 242-3417, or email the department Historian, Steve Davis, at steve.davis@bryce.mh.alabama.gov.