



Groups work to preserve Bryce campus

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Now that the University of Alabama owns Bryce Hospital and the property surrounding it, the question of how to best preserve, honor and use it is currently under discussion.

In his State of the University address, UA President Robert Witt said work was being done in conjunction with the campus master plan committee in terms of utilizing the land around the mental institution.

Some organizations, including Preserve Alabama, have worked to help maintain the hospital.

John Ziegler, public information officer Alabama Department of Mental Health, said there is currently a historical preservation committee, appointed about 18 months ago by the ADMH commissioner, working on various issues concerning the property, such as preserving the main building at the hospital.

“Because of the building’s historical significance, the committee has been charged with gathering records, art, artifacts, furniture and equipment to hopefully be used, one day, in a National Mental Health Museum,” Ziegler said. “It is the committee’s dream to open a self-guided historical museum within the walls of Bryce itself.”

Bryce Hospital, Alabama’s oldest psychiatric facility, first opened its doors in 1861. It has survived both the Civil War and the burning of the University of Alabama campus by Union troops in 1865.

The architectural plan in Bryce’s main building was used as a model worldwide and helped change the way mental health facilities were designed in the 19th century. It featured rooms with privacy, incorporated natural sunlight and were furnished in part with items from patients’ homes.

In its winter 2009 newsletter, ADMH said the committee would also make recommendations about how Bryce Hospital might best be preserved as a memorial to all those who have worked, lived and died at Bryce since its opening.

Even the surrounding land has historical significance. The Honors College’s Fran Oneal, along with David Shankman and Justin Hart from the geography department and approximately 20 students conducted a survey of the diversity and age of the trees at Bryce in September.

Michael Dewar, a junior majoring in biology, was one of the students who participated in the survey. He has since been organizing and compiling the information they gathered.

“Our objective is to map, identify and measure every tree on the southern portion of the property to demonstrate the land’s value and encourage its preservation,” Dewar said. “The park-like environment adjacent to the UA campus and the grand, tree-lined avenue leading up to the original 1861 building are as important to the preservation of Bryce as the main building itself.

“The front lawn includes a beautiful variety of native and cultivated exotic species, including two state champion trees. One of them, a large pistachio tree, was planted by none other than Mrs. Bryce. Our overall goal with regards to the University’s future expansion is to develop accountability and support environmentally minded development through the efficient use of space.”

Dewar said the group is currently working to finish the project and anticipate it’ll be completed by the end of this month.

“We believe that the Bryce landscape has unique historical, environmental, and cultural value to the citizens of Tuscaloosa and to the history and character of Alabama and the nation as a whole,” Dewar said.