



Old Searcy Hospital cemetery holds hundreds of graves from decades past; records no longer exist, officials say

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MOBILE, Alabama -- Colléte King thumbed through the yellowing documents, just like she did many years ago, searching for connections to the patients buried at Searcy Hospital.

She had stumbled upon this trove of records --some dating as far back as the 18th century -- in the attic of the old Mobile courthouse building decades earlier. That was when she discovered one of the few known links to the hundreds of people -- unidentified by name -- buried in a cemetery that few knew existed.

Stuffed in little wooden boxes, she found bundles of the hospital's death certificates. And then it clicked: "When I started seeing 'hospital cemetery,' or 'Searcy cemetery' -- that's when I started putting one-and-one together," she said.

A former record keeper at the Mobile County Probate Court, King, who is now retired, said people have often come in search of a paper trail to dead relatives who spent their final days at the now-shuttered hospital in Mount Vernon, a small town in north Mobile County. "All I can say is 'go to Searcy,'" she said.

Access guaranteed

Access to cemeteries in Alabama is guaranteed by state law. But a visit to the grounds at Searcy would be more onerous than visiting most graveyards. Abandoned by the state, a security guard now patrols the gated complex, sitting on nearly 150 acres. The state mental health department owns about 1,800 acres surrounding the vacant hospital.

Headstones assigned to the Mount Vernon gravesite, in a remote section of the campus, were not etched with names, only numbers. And local historic preservationists and archaeologists agree there's little record of the burial grounds to speak of in recorded history of the property.

The studied narrative of the Mount Vernon Arsenal and Barracks is uncomplicated in its telling. It's the place where Civil War soldiers battled in the early 1860s and where the Apache Indian Geronimo was brought in 1888 and kept for a time as a prisoner.

Until around October two years ago, it was the place where the state housed the mentally ill, which was the facility's main purpose going back to the early 1900s. The facility first opened as mental institution for black Americans in and wasn't formally integrated until 1969.

"Due to security and liability issues," the Alabama Department of Mental Health has said access to the property is generally not granted unless "we receive legitimate requests" from family members.

"We do not have records," Tamara Pharrams, the department's lands manager, wrote in an email exchange, "because records were not being maintained during that time."

A second state mental hospital, Bryce, in Tuscaloosa, has four individual cemeteries; the oldest dating back to 1861. A historic preservation committee was formed in 2008 in an attempt to salvage the history of Bryce Hospital. According to its website, the committee plans to erect historical markers for all four graveyards.

Information gap is critical

One day recently, in the dimly lit second floor of the courthouse building where King now works as a volunteer, she set the death certificates out again -- each one now catalogued in an archive -- to see if she could match them up to insanity cases. A Mobile County judge would have presided over a hearing for some of the patients before they were deemed insane. A correct pairing would help answer a question many have longed to know: Just how many people are buried on the site?

A map of the site suggests there could be at least 740 graves, laid out in tight formations that form a peculiar shape. Headstones made of either concrete, wood or metal are assigned to places on the ground, marking the spot where the hospital once buried its dead. Death records and interviews with former hospital workers suggest a burial hasn't taken place at Searcy since the 1940s, and possibly earlier.

King punched a few keys, commanding the computer to search for a Chaney Abston, a former patient. Committed to Searcy in 1924, Abston's life was documented with scant detail, a colored woman who died of a stroke 28 days after her arrival, according to her death certificate. The caretakers didn't know her age or her place of birth. She was buried somewhere in the hospital's cemetery.

The gap in information, King says, is the critical problem.

"The thing is with Searcy and with Bryce [in] the majority of the death records that you read or the lunacy cases -- most of these people were indigent; didn't know where they came from; and didn't know who their parents were," King said. "They might have a simple name like Mary Allen. And how are you going to know that's your Mary Allen?"

The mental health department's Pharrams said state staff members normally "work with them to determine whether their family member's grave can be located."

Still, the mystery of the graves is not where the growing concern begins. The **Press-Register/AL.com** has reported before about the site's physical decline. Plans to convert some of the hospital's buildings into a **training center for paroled prisoners** was seen as a positive development for an area that lost as many as 300 local jobs when the hospital closed, but the potential fruits of that idea have not yet materialized.

Left out of history

When workers left Searcy Hospital for the last time a little more than two years ago, it ended close to a century of continuous use of the facility since the first buildings were erected prior to the Civil War.

The 34 structures that cover about 150 acres were placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1986. The cemetery, to the surprise of some, was not included.

"I didn't even include it in my survey when I did the nomination back in the 1980s, because frankly they didn't tell me about it," said Devereaux Bemis, director of the Mobile Historic Development Commission.





Bemis also submitted the application for the Mount Vernon Arsenal and Barracks to be recognized. In the years since, Bemis said he has visited the cemetery. "I'm wondering now why they didn't because I didn't even realize that it was there."

Not many people do. Mount Vernon Town Councilman James May didn't know much about it, either. And he was employed by the hospital, starting in 1972. He worked as a ward assistant, first in the criminal wing, changing, clothing and feeding patients. He retired in 2005, about six years before Searcy closed.

"In all my years I never went back there," May said. He knew there had been a graveyard "years and years ago." But many of the patients, he recalled, had burial policies back in their hometowns. "I would have guessed about 300 [were buried there] at the most."

Reason for a survey

Local archaeologist Gregory Waselkov has seen the cemetery, too. He, in fact, began surveying the area a few years ago. Many of the graves, he said, were in "nice neat rows" and it seemed like there were well over 1,000 of them. "There may be more; we didn't really explore very far."

He and maybe 20 of his students from the University of South Alabama recorded numbers for about 200 markers before they left around early spring of 2012.

"I really haven't pursued it since then, but I would really like to go back and do more. But of course the concrete markers have numbers on them," Waselkov said. "It looked like mostly patient numbers and it would be a few other employees buried here and there throughout the cemetery."

The endeavor, Waselkov said, "certainly seemed worthwhile" at the time. "We were able to get numbers for most of the graves that we found out there," he said. "And they are deteriorating; it's not something that you can just let go forever. You would have to do it fairly soon or you would begin to start losing information."

If you have a relative buried at Searcy Hospital cemetery or have any other information, please contact me by email at mfinch@al.com, or post it in the comments section below.

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