

Historian gives update on plans for Bryce Hospital

Artifacts will be preserved, housed in museum on grounds, now part of University of Alabama campus

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Plans for a museum to be located in the historic Bryce Hospital, bought by the University of Alabama in 2010, are still being developed, according to a historian with the Bryce Hospital Historic Committee.

While there are no specific plans in place yet, the museum planned for the main building could potentially include medical and surgical equipment used at the facility, photographs and furniture from prominent superintendents and other important figures in the hospital's history, according to hospital historian Steve Davis.

Davis, who is employed by the Alabama Department of Mental Health, made the comments during an hourlong presentation at the Jemison-Van de Graaff Mansion in Tuscaloosa on Thursday night during the Sundown Lecture Series, a monthly event sponsored by the Tuscaloosa County Preservation Society.

In addition to artifacts from Bryce, the museum could potentially include photographs and other materials from other historic state facilities closed in recent years, such as the nearby Partlow Developmental Center and Searcy Hospital in Mount Vernon.

Davis noted Searcy was also the site of an Army arsenal and barracks before and after the Civil War and at one point served as the location used to house Apache prisoners, including Geronimo. Davis said he had collected artifacts from Searcy's pre-hospital history and brought them to Tuscaloosa.

The audience Thursday asked questions ranging from which buildings on the hospital grounds would be preserved to how many patients the hospital housed at its peak — 5,299 in its heyday, according to Davis.

"Anytime we have a lecture about what is happening at Bryce Hospital, people come out," said Lucy Murphy, events coordinator for the society.

Davis gave a history of the hospital before moving to a discussion of plans for the museum and the ongoing discussion of what buildings will be saved on the grounds located on the east side of the UA campus.

"The bones of this building are good," Davis said, repeating a frequent assessment of the main hospital building.

Davis said the main building and dome will be preserved as part of the purchase agreement with the university, though there is still an ongoing discussion by UA of which other structures will be retained.

"We will wait to see what happens," Davis said.

Davis said he also hopes to see an agreement with the university for perpetual care of the hospital's cemeteries and preservation of its records.

UA purchased the Bryce property from the state in 2010, paying nearly \$77 million for the 168 acres on the northeast side of campus and agreeing to pay an additional \$10 million for environmental cleanup and historic preservation.

UA's campus master plan proposes using the grounds for new academic and residential buildings, roads and recreational facilities, while preserving the green space of the sprawling main lawn.

The University of Alabama System board of trustees approved the scope and preliminary budget for a 109,017-square-foot, \$60 million performing arts center in April. The new facility will connect to the historic main Bryce Hospital building via a new lobby and require the demolition of the north wing of the main hospital.

Some of the old buildings and outlying structures north of the historic hospital will be demolished to make way for a planned network of roads that will bisect the grounds, connecting the eastern part of campus to Jack Warner Parkway.

The university also plans to demolish the obelisks at the main gate on Campus Drive, though the gateway has been recreated at the new hospital. The Department of Mental Health seals and Bryce Hospital signs have already been removed from the gateway.

Davis noted the university will build a fence around the graves of Peter and Ellen Bryce on the main lawn.

The Department of Mental Health is hoping to complete the turnover of the facilities on the historic grounds by mid-June.

The department is making a phased move to the 268,000-square-foot new Bryce Hospital. The state will continue to lease the Mary Starke Harper Geriatric Psychiatry Center from the university.

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