

Most Black Hospitals Across the South Closed Long Ago. Their Impact Endures.

The end of legal racial segregation precipitated the demise of many Black hospitals, which were a major source of employment and a center of pride for Black Americans.

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In the center of Mound Bayou, the historically Black city once deemed “the jewel of the Delta” by President Theodore Roosevelt, dreams to revitalize an abandoned hospital building have all but dried up.

An art deco sign still marks the main entrance, but the front doors are locked, and the parking lot is empty. These days, a convenience store across North Edwards Avenue is far busier than the old Taborian Hospital, which first shut down more than 40 years ago.

Myrna Smith-Thompson, who serves as executive director of the civic group that owns the property, lives 100 miles away in Memphis, Tennessee, and doesn’t know what’s to become of the deteriorating building.

“I am open to suggestions,” said Smith-Thompson, whose grandfather led a Black fraternal organization now called the Knights and Daughters of Tabor. In 1942, that group established Taborian Hospital, a place staffed by Black doctors and nurses that exclusively admitted Black patients, during a time when Jim Crow laws barred them from accessing the same health care facilities as white patients.

“This is a very painful conversation,” said Smith-Thompson, who was born at Taborian Hospital in 1949. “It’s a part of my being.”

A similar scenario has played out in hundreds of other rural communities across the United States, where [hospitals have faced closure](#) over the past 40 years. In that regard, the story of Mound Bayou’s hospital isn’t unique.

But there’s more to this hospital closure than the loss of inpatient beds, historians say. It’s also a tale of how hundreds of Black hospitals across the U.S. fell casualty to social progress.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the enactment of Medicare and Medicaid in 1965 benefited

millions of people. The federal campaign to desegregate hospitals, culminating in a [1969 court case](#) out of Charleston, South Carolina, guaranteed Black patients across the South access to the same health care facilities as white patients. No longer were Black doctors and nurses prohibited from training or practicing medicine in white hospitals. But the end of legal racial segregation precipitated the demise of many Black hospitals, which were a major source of employment and a center of pride for Black Americans.

“And not just for physicians,” said Vanessa Northington Gamble, a medical doctor and historian at George Washington University. “They were social institutions, financial institutions, and also medical institutions.”

In Charleston, staff members at a historically Black hospital on Cannon Street started publishing a monthly journal in 1899 called *The Hospital Herald*, which focused on hospital work and public hygiene, among other topics. When Kansas City, Missouri, opened a hospital for Black patients in 1918, people held a parade. Taborian Hospital in Mound Bayou included two operating rooms and state-of-the-art equipment. It’s also where famed civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer died in 1977.

“There were Swedish hospitals. There were Jewish hospitals. There were Catholic hospitals. That’s also part of the story,” said Gamble, author of *“Making a Place for Ourselves: The Black Hospital Movement, 1920-1945.”*

“But racism in medicine was the main reason why there was an establishment of Black hospitals,” she said.

By the early 1990s, Gamble estimated, there were only eight left.

“It has ripple effects in a way that affect the fabric of the community,” said Bizu Gelaye, an epidemiologist and program director of Harvard University’s Mississippi Delta Partnership in Public Health.

Researchers have largely concluded that hospital desegregation improved the health of Black patients over the long term.

One 2009 study focusing on motor vehicle accidents in Mississippi in the ’60s and ’70s found that Black people were less likely to die after hospital desegregation. They could access hospitals closer to the scene of a crash, reducing the distance they would have otherwise traveled by approximately 50 miles.

An [analysis of infant mortality](#), published in 2006 by economists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, found that hospital desegregation in the South substantially helped close the mortality gap between Black and white infants. That’s partly because Black infants suffering from illnesses such as diarrhea and pneumonia got better access to hospitals, the researchers found.

A new analysis, recently accepted for publication in the *Review of Economics and Statistics*,

suggests that racism continued to harm the health of Black patients in the years after hospital integration. White hospitals were compelled to integrate starting in the mid-1960s if they wanted to receive Medicare funding. But they didn't necessarily provide the same quality of care to Black and white patients, said Mark Anderson, an economics professor at Montana State University and co-author of the paper. His [analysis found](#) that hospital desegregation had "little, if any, effect on Black postneonatal mortality" in the South between 1959 and 1973.

Nearly 3,000 babies were born at Taborian Hospital before it closed its doors in 1983. The building remained vacant for decades until 10 years ago, when a \$3 million federal grant helped renovate the facility into a short-lived urgent care center. It closed again only one year later amid a legal battle over its ownership, Smith-Thompson said, and has since deteriorated.

"We would need at least millions, probably," she said, estimating the cost of reopening the building. "Now, we're back where we were prior to the renovation."

In 2000, the hospital was listed as one of the most endangered historic places in Mississippi by the Mississippi Heritage Trust. That's why some people would like to see it reopened in any capacity that ensures its survival as an important historical site.

Hermon Johnson Jr., director of the Mound Bayou Museum, who was born at Taborian Hospital in 1956, suggested the building could be used as a meeting space or museum. "It would be a huge boost to the community," he said.

Meanwhile, most of the hospital's former patients have died or left Mound Bayou. The city's population has dropped by roughly half since 1980, U.S. Census Bureau records show. Bolivar County ranks among the poorest in the nation and life expectancy is a decade shorter than the national average.

A community health center is still open in Mound Bayou, but the closest hospital is in Cleveland, Mississippi, a 15-minute drive.

Mound Bayou Mayor Leighton Aldridge, also a board member of the Knights and Daughters of Tabor, said he wants Taborian Hospital to remain a health care facility, suggesting it might be considered for a new children's hospital or a rehabilitation center.

"We need to get something back in there as soon as possible," he said.

Smith-Thompson agreed and feels the situation is urgent. "The health care services that are available to folks in the Mississippi Delta are deplorable," she said. "People are really, really sick."

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