

The Enduring Impact of Black Hospitals

They were a major source of pride for Black Americans.

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In the center of Mound Bayou, the historically Black Mississippi city once deemed “the jewel of the Delta” by President Theodore Roosevelt, dreams of revitalizing 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 and doesn’t know what’s to become of the deteriorating building.

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 United States were casualties 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.”

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