

Severance Hospital: Bringing Modern Medicine to Korea

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“Severance Hospital shines among the pages of history as the birthplace of Western medicine in Korea. Throughout the course of medical development in Korea, Severance Hospital has always been there to ease the struggles of and suffer alongside a burgeoning nation” (Kim Doo-jong, History of Korean Medicine, p.486).

CHEJUNGWON AND AN INTRODUCTION TO WESTERN MEDICINE

Korea was first introduced to Western medicine in the 17th century via Chinese books on medical practices in the West. Among the few with access to these early manuscripts, Silhak scholars throughout Korea were some of the first to become aware of Western medical practices.¹ Taking their new-found knowledge, they began to write to their peers on the promises of Western medicine. Nevertheless, acceptance of these new medical practices was not garnered among society until the opening of the Joseon kingdom in 1876. Still, a need for Western medicine would not be realized among the general public and ruling powers until December 1884, during the Gapsin Coup: in the aftermath of the coup, Dr. Horace Newton Allen, an American missionary doctor, was able to successfully treat the serious injuries sustained by royal relative Min Young Ik after being stabbed with a sword. His recovery demonstrated the benefits of Western medicine to the masses.

Motivated by the incident, Dr. Allen (Fig. 1) would go on to propose the establishment of a Western hospital in Korea. In the following months, the Korean government received proposals from charities in the United States stating that they would help support the founding the hospital and salary of missionary doctors if the Korean government agreed to cover all operating expenses of the hospital. By April 10, 1885, Korea would open the doors to its first Western medical hospital to the citizens of Seoul near Jaedong (present day location of the Constitutional Court of Korea). First named Gwanghyewon, meaning “House of Extended Grace,” on April 12, the hospital would two weeks later on April 26 come to be called Chejungwon, meaning “House of Universal Helpfulness” (Fig. 2).

Within months, the hospital became host to anyone seeking treatment for their illnesses, both commoner and royal family alike. Eventually, the building would come to serve as not only a place of physical healing but also a gateway to introduce Christianity to Korea. In its beginnings, the Chejungwon remained as an official government institute of medical practice, as its operating expenses were being financed by the Korean government. Meanwhile, all administrative and medical

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undertakings were entrusted with the North American Presbyterian Mission.² The Chejungwon would continue to be operated in this manner until its reorganization as a mission hospital under the direction of Dr. Oliver R. Avison (Fig. 3)

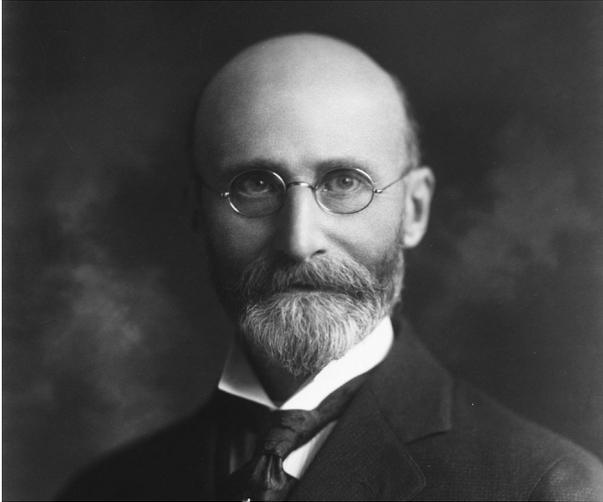


Fig. 1. H. N. Allen (1858–1932).



Fig. 2. Chejungwon.



Fig. 3. O. R. Avison (1860–1956).

in 1894.

In his initial proposal, Dr. Allen specifically addressed the importance of medical education within the hospital. He stated that establishing a hospital must serve to not only treat diseases among Korean people but also to educate its youth on the sanitary and hygienic practices upheld by Western medicine. Despite Allen's efforts, full-fledged medical training within the Chejungwon would not begin in earnest until the appointment of Dr. Avison as its director. In the meantime, nonetheless, on March 29, 1886, a student-oriented medical education institute was established within the Chejungwon, a pioneer of Western medical education in Korea. Here, taught by Dr. Allen, Dr. John William Heron, and Dr. Horace Grant Underwood, students were immersed in English language studies, followed by courses on basic mathematics, physics, and chemistry. Those that completed these prerequisite courses were then lectured in English on anatomy, physiology, and other medically-related sciences.

TRANSFER OF OPERATING RIGHTS TO THE NORTH AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN MISSION

As the Chejungwon grew in popularity among the Korean people, the lone Dr. Allen was soon facing more patients than he could treat. In an effort to lighten his workload, the North American Presbyterian Mission would dispatch Dr. Heron to join him. Additionally, in 1887, the narrow corridors of the Chejungwon were to be extended and moved from Jaedong to Gurigae. In August of the same year, Dr. Allen would resign as missionary and director of the Chejungwon after being appointed to join the first Korean legation to Washington, D.C., leaving his post under the care of Dr. Heron. Unfortunately, however, Dr. Heron would suffer for three weeks from severe dysentery in the summer of 1890, eventually dying on July 26; after consultation with the Korean government, his remains were placed in the Yanghwajin Foreign Missionary Cemetery, where they can still be found today.

Soon after Dr. Heron's passing, the Chejungwon came under crisis. Thankfully, Dr. Avison, a medical professor with the University of Toronto, volunteered to take his place, arriving in July 1893. His arrival would bring new life and influence to the Chejungwon. In April 1894, while on a house call to a provincial area, Dr. Avison discovered that civil servants dispatched from the Korean government had,

on their own accord, leased to Japanese doctors a room within the Chejungwon set aside by Dr. Avison for use as an operating room. A few weeks later, on May 10, 1894, Dr. Avison submitted his resignation in writing, stating that continued abuse of the powers provided the civil servants within the hospital would make its operation difficult. Additionally, he proposed that the North American Presbyterian Mission would be willing to take over the financing and operation of the Chejungwon, if the Korean government would concede its ownership thereof.³

Pushing ahead with the Gabo Reform, the Korean government found its finances waning. Thus, on September 27, 1894, as an effort to reduce spending, it was agreed that ownership of the Chejungwon would be handed over to the North American Presbyterian Mission under the direction of Dr. Avison. From then on, the Chejungwon would be run as a mission hospital for the healing and evangelization of the people of Korea.

CONSTRUCTION OF SEVERANCE HOSPITAL AND ITS FIRST GRADUATES

Free from the financial constraints of the Korean government, Dr. Avison eagerly sought to expand the Chejungwon's capacities to treat patients and educate students in Western medical practices, just as Dr. Allen had envisioned. To do so, however, the hospital's existing facilities would need updating. In 1899, Dr. Avison would go on sabbatical leave to Canada and the United States in order to raise funds for expansion of the hospital and medical school. Tellings of his efforts in Korea would move Louis Henry Severance (Fig. 4), a philanthropist and partner with John D. Rockefeller in the Standard Oil Company, to donate 10000 US dollars for the funding of a new hospital: his son, John L. Severance, would also later choose to continue his father's support of the hospital financially.

Upon his return, Dr. Avison would immediately get back to work at carrying out his plans for expanding the hospital, and would break ground in 1902 on the construction of a new hospital building outside the South Gate of Seoul, Namdaemun. Equal to those in the West, the hospital was to be the first proper medical facility in Korea. During its dedication on September 23, 1904, it was announced that the Chejungwon would be called Severance Memorial Hospital (Fig. 5) to commemorate the giving of the Severance family.⁴

With construction ongoing, Dr. Avison would now seek to

develop the hospital's ability to offer medical education. To start, Dr. Avison ordered textbooks on physics, chemistry, and medicine to be translated into Korean, laying a stronger foundation for the learning of Western medicine. With these new books, Dr. Avison would oversee the graduation of the nation's first seven medical students within 10 years, 22 years after Dr. Allen first started offering education on Western medical science. On the day following their graduation, these seven students would also receive Korea's first licenses to practice medicine, numbers one through seven.⁵ Building upon their education, these first graduates would continue to help expand the Korean literature on Western medicine, and some would be sent abroad to be trained as future professors with the medical school.

SEVERANCE UNDER COLONIAL RULE

With the graduation of its first class and recognition from the government as a medical school for training profession-

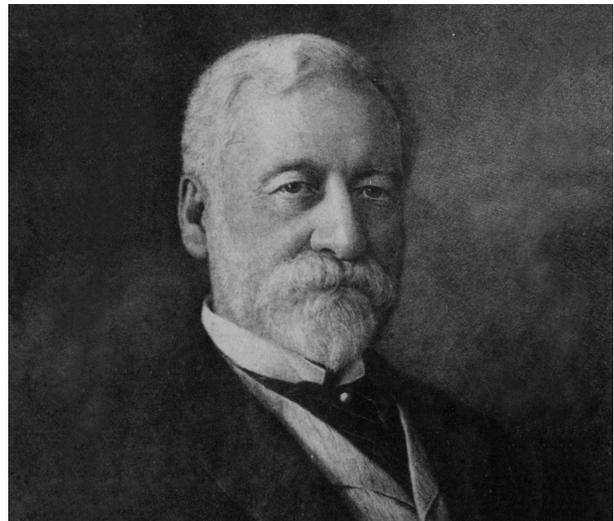


Fig. 4. L. H. Severance (1838–1913).

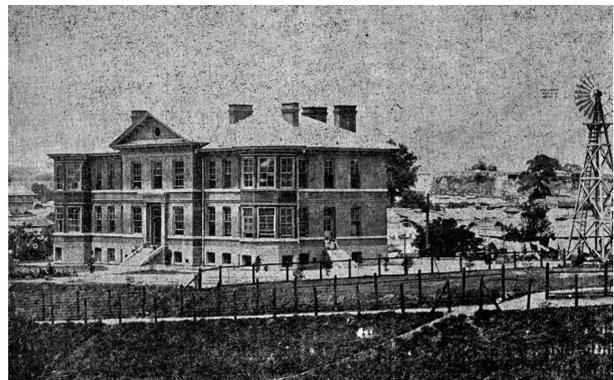


Fig. 5. Severance Hospital.

al doctors, the medical school at Severance was deemed to be in need of a more stable foundation on which to continue producing medical graduates. Thus, in 1908, under the newly-formed Korea Medical Missionary Association, several Christian denominations agreed to send missionary doctors from their respective denominations to lecture at the school each year for a given period of time. In 1913, lecturers from the North and Southern Presbyterian Churches of America, the Methodist and Southern Methodist Churches of America, and the Presbyterian Church of Australia were hired full-time. To reflect the united nature of these churches' efforts, on May 14, 1917, the school was renamed to Severance Union Medical College.⁶ In 1933, the school would print the first edition of the *Journal of Severance Union Medical College* in English, forerunner of the *Yonsei Medical Journal*.

Throughout these early years, along with its role as a medical and educational institution, Severance remained committed to helping Korea achieve its independence from Japanese colonial rule. Among its first and second graduate classes, Pil Soon Kim, Hyeon Chuk Joo, Chang Hui Shin, Seo Yang Park, and Tae Joon Lee contributed significantly to the building of bases for independence fighters in Manchuria and Mongolia. The Severance campus also played host to student and faculty led struggles against colonial powers during the March 1st Movement in 1919. Faculty members Dr. Frank William Schofield, Gap Seong Lee, and Tae Young Ham, along with students Yong Seol Lee and Moon Jin Kim, were particularly important in leading campus-wide demonstrations. In addition to treating many of the injured, the hospital was also utilized as a safe location for which to compose and store the nation's Declaration of Independence from Japan. For a number of years, Severance would remain more than just a hospital for the physically sick; it would stand as a shelter for nursing the heartache's of a nation.

YEONHUI UNIVERSITY AND SEVERANCE UNION MEDICAL COLLEGE

Soon after Korea gained its independence on August 15, 1945, Korea fell into the grips of a civil war. While a travesty, the war did provide Severance the opportunity to grow. The rebuilding of the hospital, nearly all of which was destroyed, was lead by Dean Myeong Sun Kim who was especially influential in mobilizing and gathering support among

alumni. With the help of the United States 8th Army and funding from the China Medical Board, set up by the Rockefeller Foundation, a larger Severance Hospital would be rebuilt in Sinchon.

On January 5, 1957, Yeonhui University and Severance Union Medical College were joined equally in Sinchon to form Yonsei University.⁷ The two had maintained a close relationship for many years and discussions on joining the two campuses were entertained long before starting construction on the new Severance Hospital. In addition to both being founded by Christian missionaries, Dr. Avison served as Dean of Yeonhui University's for nearly 18 years, and faculty from the two had competed in friendly athletic events. More concrete discussions for joining the two together were held during the 1920s and 1930s, although threats from the Japanese would derail the realization thereof. Nevertheless, while the outbreak of Korean War would further delay discussions, its conclusion would provide an opportunity. At the end of the Korean War, Maxwell D. Taylor, Commander of the US 8th Army, sought to commemorate the deaths of his troops in Korea with the building of a thoracic care hospital on the campus of Yeonhui University. On April 23, 1955, a ground breaking ceremony for the hospital would usher in the joining together of the two schools under the unified name of Yonsei University, formed by taking the first Korean letters of the names of both schools. Both the hospital and College of Medicine would be completed by 1962, followed by Colleges of Dentistry and Nursing.

Since the 1960s, the Yonsei University Medical Center has emerged as a standard model of healthcare in South Korea. The hospital has continued to grow and develop to meet demands of a growing nation. In 1978, the College of Medicine expanded its campus to Wonju in Gangwon Province and began to admit pre-medical students from the area, which lacked a representative medical school: the school's hospital remains dedicated to improving the health of its local residents. In 1983, Yeongdong Severance Hospital was opened to improve health conditions in a southern metropolitan area of Seoul seeing rapid expansion. Meanwhile, Severance Hospital in Sinchon continued to expand its services by establishing specialized hospitals in rehabilitation, cardiovascular medicine, cancer, and eye-otolaryngology. In the 90s, however, the hospital began to outgrow itself. By 2005, Severance Hospital would move into a long desired new building. The year 2014 would welcome the completion of the Yonsei Cancer Hospital, opening a new chapter in the long history of the hospital.

This year marks the 130 year anniversary of the opening of the Chejungwon and the beginning of Severance Hospital. Over these many years, Korea has seen remarkable advancements in medicine and medical education, owing in large part to the sacrifices of individuals who continued to believe in the safety and welfare of its people. May their spirit and vision continue in the next 130 years.

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