

DR. JOHN W. HERON AND HARRIET GIBSON HERON, MEDICAL MISSIONARIES

In a far field in South Korea, a former Jonesborough doctor and his wife are buried, Dr. John Heron and Harriet Gibson Heron. We came across their story indirectly through the young doctor's naturalization papers filed in 1883 in the Washington County Circuit Court. It is an interesting story of two impactful lives.

John William Heron was born in Derbyshire, England, in 1858, the son of a minister. By the early 1880s he was living in Jonesborough, where he practiced medicine in conjunction with Dr. David J. Gibson. Dr. Heron came into open court before Judge Newton Hacker on April 28th, 1883, applied to become a citizen of the United States of America, and took the oath of allegiance. On April 23rd, 1885, Heron married Gibson's daughter Harriet.

The Herons were active in the Jonesborough Presbyterian Church. Feeling a call to service, the Herons were appointed in 1885 as the first medical missionaries to serve overseas by the Presbyterian Church USA. They were sent to South Korea. Here they cared for the Korean people in often difficult conditions. Dr. Heron also began the training of native Korean doctors and established a school that eventually became Yonsei University College of Medicine, the first medical school in Korea. Thousands of physicians have graduated from this school in the years since its founding, and the Herons' work had a tremendous impact of the health care and betterment of the Korean people. Dr. Heron died in the summer of 1890 while treating the sick during a dysentery epidemic in which he himself became infected. Harriet Gibson Heron died in 1908. The Herons are buried in the Yanghwajin Foreign Missionary Cemetery in Seoul, South Korea.

In an interesting side note to this story, in April 2017, three physicians, who graduated from Heron's medical school, were the first in-person researchers to use the archives reading room after it opened. They were researching the life of Dr. Heron for a biography in honor of their school's founder.

Dr. Heron's
Naturalization
document

State of Tennessee } In the Circuit Court at Jonesboro
Washington County } April Term 1883

I John W. Heron do solemnly swear that
I will support the Constitution of the
United States and that I do absolutely
and entirely renounce and abjure all
allegiance and fidelity to all and any
foreign prince potentate state and
sovereignty whatever and particularly
to Victoria Queen of the United Kingdom
of Great Britain and Ireland

John W. Heron, M.D.

Sworn & Subscribed to in }
Open Court on this the }
28th day of April 1883 }
Newton Hacker
Judge & Justice
Circuit of Tenn