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AVERY, OSWALD THEODORE
(1877-1955)
PAPERS
1867-1970

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INTRODUCTION

The papers of Oswald Theodore Avery, 1867-1970, research physician and bacteriologist with the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research, foremost researcher on pneumonia, one of the founders of the science of immunochemistry, and discoverer of the transforming nature of DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid), were given to the Tennessee State Library and Archives by Dr. Avery's brother and sister-in-law, Dr. and Mrs. Roy C. Avery, Nashville, Tennessee.

The collection occupies 1.68 linear feet of shelf space and numbers approximately 600 items and 2 volumes. There are no restrictions on the collection, and photocopies of materials in the collection may be made for individual or scholarly purposes.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The Oswald Theodore Avery Papers, consisting of about 600 items and two volumes covering the years 1867-1970, are composed of accounts, biographical sketches, citations (awards, diplomas, honorary degrees), citizenship papers, correspondence, documents, military papers, obituaries, a patent, photographs, speeches, a will, and scientific writings.

The earliest papers in the collection concern Avery's parents. His father, Joseph Francis Avery (1847-1892), was a Baptist minister. Born in England, he moved to Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1870, where he served in the Baptist ministry. In 1887 he was called to be the pastor of the Mariner's Temple in New York City. Newspaper clippings include several describing his work there and his successful missionary efforts in the city.

Mrs. Avery's papers (Elizabeth Crowdy Avery [1843-1910]) include her pension payments from the Baptist Western Widows and Orphans Society; interest on money she had loaned Acadia University, Wolfville, Nova Scotia; funeral bills; a patent (1879) for "Avery's Auraline," a preparation for the relief and cure of earache, noises in the head and deafness; papers concerning her partnership with Jane Caroline Irish for the sale of this preparation; and her will.

A scrapbook made by Mrs. Avery contains articles written by her husband Joseph Francis Avery. The Reverend Avery's articles appeared in newspapers and church papers in Halifax, Nova Scotia, from about 1873 to about 1882. Included is a booklet he wrote in 1876 titled, *The Voyage of Life*.

There is biographical data for Dr. O. T. Avery including a reprint from *Genetics*, Vol. 51, No. 1, January 1965. Written by Rollin D. Hotchkiss, the reprint contains a selected bibliography illustrative of Dr. Avery's work.

On August 1, 1918, Dr. Avery became a United States citizen. Included in the collection are his citizenship papers.

There is a clipping from the Nashville *Banner*, December 11, 1965, in regard to the memorial gate at Rockefeller Institute erected by "grateful friends" honoring Dr. Avery. Another clipping from the New York *Times*, Sunday, November 5, 1967, is about the Nobel Prize, explaining why Dr. Avery had not received the award even though he had made the historic discovery that hereditary information is coded for transmission to future generations in the structure of DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid).

Forty-seven letters, 1909-1944, written by Dr. Avery, mostly to his brother and sister-in-law Dr. and Mrs. Roy C. Avery, discuss family affairs, and reveal a kindly, thoughtful, and generous man.

On May 13, 1943, Avery wrote to his brother describing his research dealing with the transformation of pneumococcal types. This letter was written on the eve of his momentous discovery that DNA is a functionally active substance in determining the

biochemical activities and specific characteristics of cells, and that by means of a known chemical substance it is possible to induce predictable and hereditary changes in cells.

Correspondence also includes one letter, ca. 1892, written by Joseph Francis Avery to his wife from an infirmary where he had undergone surgery; a letter of December 13, 1897, to Mrs. Avery from Jane Caroline Irish in regard to her husband's unsuccessful attempts to interest a capitalist in marketing "Avery's Auraline" and their consequent inability to repay Mrs. Avery any part of the \$1,000 she had loaned them; and nine letters from Mrs. Avery's sisters-in-law in England, 1897-1910, that deal with family matters.

W. A. Cauldwell in New York City wrote to the Reverend Avery on February 3, 1890, about the desire of their mutual friend Mr. Rockefeller that the Averys might dine at Delmonico's to meet some of the Baptist people in a social setting. There is a note from Emily Vanderbilt Sloan, January 22, 1893, to Mrs. Avery expressing her friendship and interest in Mrs. Avery's work.

Dr. Avery's brother, Roy Crowdy Avery, served in the United States Army Sanitary Corps during World War I. Included are 35 letters that describe his activities in France in 1918.

A letter of October 21, 1947, by colleagues William S. Tillett and Colin M. McLeod, and Dr. Avery's cousin Minnie Wandell, whom he and Roy had supported and educated after the death of her mother, expresses appreciation to and gratitude for knowing "Fess."

Included is a copy of President Harry Truman's letter, October 1, 1947, to Dr. Harry S. Mustard congratulating the winners of the Second Annual Lasker Awards for Medical Research and Public Health Administration.

There is a rough draft of a letter written by Dr. Roy C. Avery on February 16, 1965, to the Director of the National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, Maryland, in regard to the possibility of publishing an American edition of a German text that credits Dr. O. T. Avery for his work with DNA.

The most recent letter in the collection is from A. R. Massar, Luanshya, Zambia, dated July 28, 1970, thanking Dr. Roy Avery for permitting Massar to read O. T. Avery's 1943 letter describing his work. The 1943 letter was written on the eve of Avery's discovery of the transforming properties of DNA.

Other correspondence includes many letters of congratulation to Dr. Avery when he received various prizes, awards, and honorary degrees.

Included is an oral history memoir of Tom Rivers, titled "Reflections on a Life in Medicine and Science," in which Rivers speaks of Dr. Avery's manner of working and writing, his shy and retiring nature, and his generosity in sharing his knowledge.

Dr. Avery's military papers include his appointment as Captain in the Medical Corps, U. S. Army, September 26, 1918, and his honorable discharge, January 30, 1919.

There are two photographs of a young Dr. Avery in his laboratory; a snapshot of him taken many years later; a snapshot of the Avery Memorial Gate at the Rockefeller Institute; a group picture of members at the annual meeting of the Army Epidemiological Board, Washington, April 1945 and April 1946; and a group picture of members of the Board for the Investigation and Control of Influenza and Other Epidemic Diseases in the Army. Dr. Avery served on both boards.

Speeches include one given by Dr. Avery on his acceptance of the Kober Medal Award, reprinted from the *Transactions of the Association of American Physicians*, Vol. LIX, p. 43, 1946; and another upon his acceptance of the Passano Award in 1949. Included also is the speech that Colin M. McLeod gave at the dedication of the Avery Memorial Gate, Rockefeller Institute, September 29, 1965.

Writings include Dr. Avery's annual report, April 1947, "Studies on the Transformation of Pneumococcus." A reprint from *Arch Environ Health*, Vol. 21, September 1970, titled "The 'Undiscovered' Discovery," by Wendell M. Stanley, deals with Dr. Avery's discovery of the transforming principle of DNA.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Oswald Theodore Avery

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| 1877 | Born October 21, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, son of Joseph Francis Avery and Elizabeth Crowdy Avery. |
| 1887 | Moved to New York City with his family. |
| 1893 | Diploma from New York City Male Grammar School. |
| 1900 | Awarded B. A. degree from Colgate University. |
| 1904 | Awarded M. D. degree from Columbia University College of Surgeons. |
| 1904-1907 | Practiced general surgery. |
| 1907 | Bacteriologist with Hoagland Laboratories in Brooklyn, N.Y.; became associate director. |
| 1913 | Joined the staff of the Rockefeller Institute. |
| 1923 | Joined the faculty of the Rockefeller Institute. |

- 1943 Retired as emeritus member of the Rockefeller Institute.
- 1943-1948 Continued bacteriological research as emeritus member.
- 1949 Retired to Nashville, Tennessee.
- 1955 Died in Nashville; buried in Mt. Olivet Cemetery.

CONTAINER LIST

Microfilm Reel #1

Box 1

1. Accounts--Avery, Elizabeth (Crowdy) and Joseph Francis Avery
2. Accounts--Avery, Dr. Oswald Theodore
3. Biographical sketches
4. Citations
5. Citizenship papers
6. Clippings.
7. Correspondence--A-Avery, Mary
8. Correspondence--Avery, Dr. Oswald Theodore
9. Correspondence--Avery, Dr. Oswald Theodore

Box 2

1. Correspondence--Avery, Roy Crowdy
2. Correspondence--B
3. Correspondence--C
4. Correspondence--D-F
5. Correspondence--G-J
6. Correspondence--K-L
7. Correspondence--M-O
8. Correspondence--P-Q
9. Correspondence--R
10. Correspondence--S
11. Correspondence--T-V
12. Correspondence--W-Z
13. Diaries, memoirs, etc.--Rivers, Tom
14. Documents
15. Estate Papers

Box 3

1. Military papers
2. Miscellaneous
3. Obituaries
4. Patent--1879
5. Photographs
6. Programs

Microfilm Reel #2

7. Scrapbook
8. Speeches
9. Wandell, Minnie Belle--papers
10. Writings

Box 4

Awards--Diplomas--Honorary degrees

NAME INDEX

This is a name index of correspondence in the Oswald Theodore Avery Papers together with the dates of the letters and information regarding their contents. The figures in parentheses immediately following the name denotes the number of letters if more than one. The last numbers refer to the box and folders number in which the letter is to be found.

- Aggie, 1936, re: visit to Halifax (NS), 1-7
Alan, 1953, re: general news, 1-7
Anderson, Harold A., 1950, re: convocation exercises, University of Chicago, 1-7
Armstrong, George E., 1954, re: appreciation for Dr. Avery's service on Commission on Streptococcal Diseases, 1-7
Aunt Sade, n. d., re: family news, 1-7
Avery, A. (2), 1902, re: family news from England, 1-7
Avery, Ernest (4), 1891, re: his stay in the country, 1-7
Avery, Lena (5), 1892-1909, re: family news from England, 1-7
Avery, Mary E. (Mrs. Ernest Avery) (2), n. d., re: family news from England, 1-7
Avery, Oswald Theodore (47), 1909-1944, re: family affairs, 1-8
Avery, Oswald Theodore, 1943, re: his research with DNA, 1-9
Avery, Roy Crowdy (35), 1918-1965, re: his World War I service in France, 2-1
Avery, W. I. (2), 1887-1892, re: Mr. Spurgeon, an "accuser of brethren" in the church; Joseph F. Avery's death, 1-7
Baldwin, Edward R., 1932, re: congratulations for Phillips prize, 2-2
Bible Class, 1870, re: wedding of Joseph F. Avery, 2-2
Brigham, F. Gorham, 1932, re: congratulations for Phillips prize, 2-2
Bradley, Ernest B., 1932, re: congratulations for Phillips prize, 2-2
Butterworth, W. Walton, 1950, re: gold Pasteur medal sent to Dr. Avery, 2-2
Cole, Rufus, 1932, re: general news, 2-3
Cambridge University (4), 1949, re: honorary degree of Doctor of Science to be awarded to Dr. Avery, 2-3
Carrel, Alexis, 1932, re: congratulations for Dr. Avery's award, 2-3
Cauldwell, W. A. (2), 1890-1891, re: invitation to the Reverend Mr. Avery from Mr. Rockefeller, 2-3
Chipman, X. Z. (10), 1891-1892, re: business matters with the Reverend Mr. Avery, 2-3
Churchman, John W., 1932, re: congratulations for Phillips Prize, 2-3
Clark, Robert d., 1954, re: a thank-you for information on Dr. Fosdick, 2-3
Coburn, Al (2), 1943-1949, re: work with Dr. Avery, 2-3
Coburn, Anne, 1949, re: personal matters, 2-3
DeMuth, J. Smith, 1897, re: certifying that William Gravenhaus died September 19, 1897, 2-4
Dible, J. H., 1948, re: honorary membership in the Pentecostal Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 2-4

du Nouy, P. Lecomte, 1933, re: congratulations on gold medal award from Ehrlich Foundation, 2-4

Edsall, Geoffrey, 1950, re: appreciation to Dr. Avery for work on *Journal of Immunology*, 2-4

Ehrlich, Paul, n. d., re: congratulatory cablegram in German, 2-4

Finance Department, Ottawa, Canada (2), 1893, 1903, re: business matters, 2-4

Flexner, Abraham (2), 1933, re: congratulations, 2-4

Flexner, Simon (3), 1927-1933, re: congratulations, 2-4

Gasser, Herbert S., 1942, re: Dr. Avery's imminent retirement from Rockefeller Institute, 2-5

Gay, Frederick P., 1932, re: congratulations, 2-5

Gill, Robert S., 1949, re: Passano Foundation award, 2-5

Heidelberger, Michael, 1926, re: his summer vacation, 2-5

Irish, Jane Carolina, 1897, re: inability to repay loan, 2-5

Jim, n. d., re: congratulations, 2-5

Johnston, J. A., 1887, re: advice to the Reverend Avery about the Mariner's Temple, NYC, 2-5

Jones, Lewis Webster, 1954, re: honorary degree from Rutgers University, 2-5

Katz, Ernst Fritz, 1933, re: a request to Dr. Avery written in German, 2-6

Lechtrecer, Henry M., 1932, re: congratulations, 2-6

Littell, Emlen T., 1949, re: hotel reservations, 2-6

Longcope, Norfield T., 1944, re: congratulations, 2-6

Loveland, E. R., 1935, re: Phillips Prize, 2-6

Lundquist, John, 1950, re: awarding of the Pasteur Medal from the Swedish Medical Society, 2-6

Maggie, 1909, re: news from Halifax, 2-7

Massar, A. R., 1970, re: thanks for permission to read Dr. Avery's letter of May 13, 1943; request for a photograph of him, 2-7

Mathers, Isaac H., 1909, re: bank business, Halifax, 2-7

Morgan, Hugh J. (2), 1932, re: congratulations, 2-7

Northrup, Jack, 1932, re: congratulations, 2-7

Ormston, Katherine, 1947, re: enclosing clippings from Mrs. Albert D. Lasker, 2-7

Parke, William M. (10), 1906-1910, re: mortgages, etc., 2-8

Parr, Leland W., 1948, re: Society of American Bacteriologists, 2-8

Phil, n. d., re: invitation for dinner, 2-8

Power & Foley, solicitors, 1906, re: a mortgage, 2-8

Renaux, E., 1950, re: the jubilee for Jules Bordet, 2-9

Resnik, William H., 1932, re: congratulations, 2-9

Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research (8), 1925-1938, re: salary, retirement policy, etc., 2-9

Sawyer, A. W., 1887, re: his report at the Reverend Avery leaving Halifax, 2-10

Sherman, J. M., 1948, re: honor conferred by the Society of American Bacteriologists, 2-10

Sherring, W., 1892, re: widow's claim, 2-10
Sloan, Emily Vanderbilt, 1893, re: church work, 2-10
Smith, Fred S., 1890, re: life in Vincent, LA, 2-10
Sproffkin, Bertrum E., 1949, re: his coming to work with Dr. Avery, 2-10
Spurgeon, C. H. (2), 1886-1887, re: thanks for donation to his orphanage and advice on the Reverend Avery's moving to New York, 2-10
Stacy, John H. (4), 1867-1870, re: Joseph F. Avery's progress in his studies, and his brother Phillip, 2-10
Streeter, Edward (2), 1936, 1950, re: securities, 2-10
Tabernacle Baptist Church, Halifax, 1887, re: resignation of the Reverend Avery, 2-11
Thompson, Thomas D., 1887, re: selling property, 2-11
Tillett, William S., and others, 1947, re: esteem and friendship for Dr. Avery, 2-11
Trask, Lillia M. D., n. d., re: congratulations, 2-11
Trask, Thomas, (?) D., 1932, re: congratulations, 2-11
Truman, Harry S., 1947, re: congratulations to the winners of the Lasker Awards, 2-11
Vanderbilt, F. P., 1936, re: dividends, 2-11
Vanderbilt, William H. (Mrs.), n. d., re: Christmas greetings and donation, 2-11
Wallace, J. R., 1891, re: bank business in Halifax, 2-12
Weinberg, Arthur von (2), 1932-1933, re: Ehrlich Prize (in German), 2-12
White, Benjamin, n. d., re: congratulations, 2-12
White, William Charles, 1932, re: congratulations, 2-12
Willstatter, Richard, 1932, re: congratulations (in German), 2-12