

Robertson, Reuben Buck ^[1]

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by Elaine Kaye Lanning, 1994

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Reuben Buck Robertson, industrialist, was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, the son of Charles Dunbreck and Cynthia Buck Robertson. A Scottish immigrant, his father served as an Ohio jurist. After graduating from Cincinnati public schools, Robertson attended [Yale University](#) ^[2], receiving an A.B. degree in 1900. He then spent three years in the [University of Cincinnati Law School](#) ^[3], passed the Ohio bar, and joined his father's firm of Robertson and Buchwalter. Entrance into the paper industry in 1907 cut short his legal career. At the request of his father-in-law, Peter G. Thomson, owner of Champion Coated Paper Company of Hamilton, Ohio, Robertson journeyed to [Canton](#) ^[4], N.C., to supervise construction of the Champion Fibre pulp mills. His planned fifty-day stay turned into sixty-five years of service to the company and to western North Carolina.

After directing Champion's lumber and pulpwood operations at the Sunburst Logging Camp near Canton, he became the mill's general manager in 1912. Six years later the company promoted him to vice-president and in 1925 to president. Following the Canton mill's merger with the Hamilton plant in 1936, Robertson became executive vice-president of Champion Paper and Fibre Company. Eleven years after that, as he "climbed the industrial ladder of success," he moved into the president's office and soon graduated to chairman of the board. In 1961 he went into semiretirement as honorary chairman of the board. For sixty-five years, the lawyer-turned-papermaker developed his company into a major industry of multinational scope. The company, with the Canton branch still operating, became the Champion International Corporation.

Under Robertson's leadership, Champion perfected two technical processes of major importance to the paper industry. In 1912 plant chemists had devised a method of extracting tanning acid from chestnut logs and making bleached pulp from the spent wood. Champion was the first pulp mill in the world to make high-quality white paper from spent wood. The company built and operated the world's largest tanning extract plant at Canton. A second "Champion first" involved developing a satisfactory bleached pulp from southern pines. During the 1920s chemists in Champion's laboratories solved numerous technical problems to produce fine white paper from the plentiful pine trees. Champion used the new procedure at Canton and at its new mill in Pasadena, Tex., where the entire wood supply came from pine. Other pulp mills began to use the process and by the 1950s, one-third of all long-fiber pulp made in the United States came from yellow pine.

In addition to technical and mechanical guidance, Robertson worked to improve management-labor relations. His own brand of paternalism included concern for the welfare of workers on and off the job. He established a safety committee, a credit union, old-age bonuses, wage incentive plans, and profit-sharing programs. Champion led the pulp industry in all five areas. Robertson also demonstrated this interest in speeches to civic, business, and governmental groups and in founding and directing the Southern Industrial Relations Conference. Attended by hundreds of area and regional leaders, those yearly meetings held at Blue Ridge aimed to promote human relations in industry and business.

A third major interest lay in forest preservation. He encouraged people to consider trees as a resource that could and should be replenished. At a time when others stripped land of its timber without regard to future growth, Robertson advocated selective cutting, reforestation with nursery seedlings, and flood and fire prevention. A realization that the pulp and paper industry was a young giant whose expansion required a perpetual and dependable wood supply motivated his conservation efforts. Financial value to the company and aesthetic and environmental worth to the people of western North Carolina became apparent with the passage of time. For his pioneering role, the [American Forestry Association](#) ^[5] gave Robertson its Distinguished Service Award in 1952 and its conservation award in 1954.

As a manufacturing leader, Robertson served on several government commissions and joined several business associations. He was chairman of the Wood Utilization Committee of the U.S. Department of Commerce in 1926, was one of twelve industrialists invited to Franklin Roosevelt's 1941 Labor-Industry Conference, and sat on the National War Labor Board (1942–44). He also was director of the [National Association of Manufacturers](#) ^[6] and a member of its war and industrial relations committee, a graduate member of the Business Advisory Council, and president of the American Paper and Pulp Association. On the state and local levels, he presided over the [North Carolina Forestry Association](#) ^[7], held membership in the Appalachian Forestry Research Council, and served as long-term director of the Wachovia Bank and Trust Company. As a supporter of higher education, he was a trustee of [Western Carolina Teachers College](#) ^[8] (chairman) and of [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[9].

During his long life, Robertson received much recognition for public service. In 1932 [North Carolina State College](#) ^[10] awarded him an honorary doctorate of science for "achievements in science, in industry, and in promoting social welfare." Two decades later, the *Dixie Business* magazine named the Ohioan its Man of the South for 1950. Also in the 1950s he

received the Distinguished Citizens Award from the North Carolina Citizens Association. Acknowledgement of his leadership in the pulp and paper industry came when twelve companies endowed the R. B. Robertson Chair of Forestry at North Carolina State College and when Champion employees honored their boss by establishing a scholarship fund in his name for needy area youths.

Known as a "quiet philanthropist," Robertson contributed to the Champion and RobertsonYMCA^[11]s, to the Canton Public Library, to several area churches, to organized charities, and to colleges. People throughout the South benefited from his generosity.

In 1905 Robertson married Hope Thomson. They had four children, the late Laura Thomson, Reuben, Jr., Hope Robertson Norborn, and Dr. Logan Thomson. Reuben, Jr., served for three years as deputy defense secretary in the U.S. Department of Defense; he died in an automobile crash in 1960, while president of the Champion Paper Company.

Robertson was a lifelong Democrat^[12] and Presbyterian. Fraternal membership included the Masons (he reached the thirty-second degree) and Zeta Psi at Yale. Though he spent his last sixty-five years in western North Carolina, Reuben Robertson was buried at the Spring Grove Cemetery in Cincinnati, Ohio.

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