

Wharton, Robert Leslie ^[1]

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Robert Leslie Wharton, foreign missionary and teacher, was born in McLeansville, the son of William P. and Jane N. Rankin Wharton, who were married in 1856. After graduation from [Davidson College](#) ^[2] in 1892, he enrolled at [Trinity College](#) ^[3], Durham, in September 1893 for postgraduate courses. He may also have taught in the [Durham](#) ^[4] school then as well as in the 1894–96 interval in his theological training. Wharton is recorded as attending Union Theological Seminary in Virginia during the periods 1893–94 and 1896–98. He was licensed and ordained by the Orange Presbytery on 25 May 1898 and served as an assistant pastor in Durham in 1898–99.

With the end of the [Spanish-American War](#) ^[5] Wharton became a foreign missionary in Cuba. For two years beginning in 1899, he taught school in Cárdenas, about 100 miles east of Havana on Cuba's northern shore, and from 1901 to 1903 he was an evangelist in Caibarien. Returning to Cárdenas he was an evangelist during the years 1903–12; again at Caibarien, he served as pastor to the Presbyterian congregation from 1912 to 1918. In 1919, however, he began the work for which he was best known—superintendent of mission schools in Cárdenas, where, in 1900, he had founded a boys' school, La Progresiva, with fourteen students. Both a high school and a junior college, [La Progresiva](#) ^[6] in time became coeducational, with an enrollment of two thousand students. Wharton also became editor of *El Heraldo Cristiano* and in 1922 was awarded an honorary doctor of divinity degree by Davidson College.

Wharton's school was recognized by the Cuban government as one of the strongest teaching centers in the country and soon had the largest number of students of any private school there. Its role in relief projects (a hurricane almost destroyed Cárdenas in 1931) and civic work was commended by the Red Cross and the Cuban government. To meet some urgent needs, Wharton created committees of a thousand people (called *Mil Hombres*) in each of forty towns who agreed to give a dollar every month to pave the nearly impassable streets of their town, provide pure water, control mosquitoes, or support some other community project. Wharton was given the highest honor Cuba could bestow on a private citizen—the Carlos Manuel de Céspedes medal. He was president of the school and superintendent of all Presbyterian educational work in Cuba for almost forty years. (There were thirteen schools in the system maintained by the Presbyterian church.) On his retirement from these positions in 1941, many national and local officials from across Cuba went to Cárdenas to honor him.

He next began to teach church history at the Interdenominational Seminary in Havana and to work among University of Havana students. For several years he also took a group of Cuban students to [Presbyterian Junior College](#) ^[7] in Maxton, N.C., for summer school. In 1947 Wharton joined the [Queens College](#) ^[8] faculty in Charlotte as professor of modern languages. In 1956 he moved to Arlington, Va., to live with a daughter, and it was there that he died. He was buried temporarily in Arlington until his body could be transferred to Cuba for burial in Cárdenas near that of his wife. Thousands of people lined the streets there as his body passed; stores, banks, and factories closed, and bells in churches of all denominations were rung in salute to him.

In 1902 Wharton married Anne Elizabeth Ramsey, of Durham, who died in 1953. They had three daughters, Elizabeth (Mrs. John P. McKnight), Anita (Mrs. Val John Guthery), and Josephine, and one son, Robert L., Jr.

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