

Evaristo García Piedrahíta 1845-1921

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Physician, public health expert, researcher, academic, social, and political leader

This brief review highlights the extraordinary personality and achievements of Evaristo García Piedrahíta, a distinguished physician from Valle del Cauca who lived in the 19th century but remains largely unknown to the general public and even to many healthcare professionals. It also seeks to emphasize that in 1942, the Departmental Assembly of Valle del Cauca ordered that the hospital under construction be named after him and that his effigy be placed at the entrance of what is now called the *Hospital Universitario del Valle Evaristo García*¹ (Figure 1).

A few years after the founding of the School of Medicine, the San Juan de Dios Hospital was insufficient for the ambitious medical education reform plans promoted by Gabriel Velásquez, Alfonso Ocampo, and other leaders of the nascent School of Medicine of the Universidad del Valle. That is why they set out to finish the hospital that had been under construction for many years. Its inauguration took place in 1956 in the so-called Carlos Manzano Auditorium in the presence of city and department authorities. Since then, Hospital Universitario del Valle "Evaristo García" has been the flagship hospital of the Universidad del Valle. Distinguished professors and students have passed through it, and research of significant national and international importance has been carried out there.

Biographical review

Dr. Evaristo García was born in Cali on November 17, 1845, the son of Juan Antonio García Guerrero and María Josefa Piedrahíta. He graduated from *Colegio Santa Librada* in his hometown and, in 1867, traveled to Bogotá to study at the recently created Faculty of Medicine at the *Universidad Nacional de Colombia*, where he obtained his *Médico Cirujano* (Surgeon) degree in 1872. He was part of the first cohort of medical graduates from this institution and became the first physician from Valle del Cauca to graduate from the *Universidad Nacional de Colombia*.

In 1879, he married María Josefa Vásquez Cobo, the sister of Alfredo Vásquez Cobo, who directed the construction of the railroad connecting Cali with the Pacific, played a significant role in the war against Peru, and was a candidate for the presidency of Colombia.

Later, he traveled to London to learn about public health and sanitary medicine advancements. By the late 19th century, these reforms had already demonstrated the benefits of modern public health policies. This exposure to European sanitary models significantly influenced his proposals for modernizing health conditions in Colombia.

His professional career was recognized in 1885 when he was included in the list of the twenty most outstanding Colombians in medicine and natural sciences, submitted by the *Academia Nacional de Medicina* to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington ².



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Figure 1. Bust of Evaristo García in front of the façade of the Hospital Universitario del Valle "Evaristo García"

Evaristo García was an extraordinary individual with diverse interests. Although this review organizes his contributions into separate chapters, it is important to remember that they are artificially divided, as they were all deeply interconnected within the same person.

Evaristo García, the Physician

In 1874, Evaristo García traveled to Europe to learn about medical advancements. Initially, he arrived in Paris and studied at the *Hôpital de la Salpêtrière*, where he worked with a colleague and friend, Jean-Martin Charcot. There, he disseminated his research on “mutilating leprosy,” a disease he had observed in Colombia, a significant concern in Europe at the time. He was admitted to the *Académie Nationale de Médecine de France*, led by Charcot, who was known for his studies on hypnosis and for being one of Sigmund Freud’s professors. However, Charcot’s pioneering work correlating mental illnesses with neuropathological findings is why he is now considered the father of neurology.

Later, Evaristo traveled to London, where he learned about sanitary medicine and public health advancements, which had already shown the benefits of modern public health systems by the late 19th century. His exposure to European sanitary models profoundly influenced his efforts to modernize Colombia’s health conditions.

In 1894, he wrote the article *La Elephantiasis Árabe (Arab Elephantiasis)*, highlighting the importance of public hygiene, purified water, improved housing, and better living conditions in reducing the causes of elephantiasis in hot climates. This was even though, at the time, there was no clear understanding of the role of insect vectors in parasitic diseases³.

After completing his postgraduate studies, he returned to his hometown of Cali, where he practiced medicine in his office near *Plaza Caycedo* and at *San Juan de Dios Hospital* for the rest of his career.

Evaristo García, the Academic Leader

Evaristo García became a professor of clinical medicine at the *Universidad Nacional de Colombia* in 1872. With Plinio Rengifo, he founded the chair of pathological anatomy at *Hospital San Juan de Dios* in Bogotá, Colombia ⁴.

On January 3, 1873, in association with Pío Rengifo Martínez and other colleagues, he founded the *Sociedad de Medicina de Bogotá*, a scientific society dedicated to advancing medical and natural sciences, fostering unity among physicians, and strengthening the medical profession in Colombia. This society later became the *Academia Nacional de Medicina*, where García was named an Honorary Member in 1893 ⁵.

Upon returning to Cali in 1877, he published the first *Boletín de Medicina del Cauca* volume, which compiled articles from international journals and presented original scientific research. This journal, which ran for 205 issues until 1910, played a crucial role in medical discourse ⁶.

He led the first gathering of physicians from the *Gran Cauca* region in Buga on July 20, 1888, which can be considered the first medical congress in the region.

On April 21, 1912, he founded the *Academia Vallecaucana de Historia y Antigüedades* (now *Academia de Historia del Valle*), serving as its first president.

In 1916, he established the *Granja Modelo de Agricultura*, which later became the Faculty of Agronomy and Animal Science at the *Universidad Nacional de Colombia*, Palmira campus. This initiative revolutionized agriculture in Valle del Cauca, fostering the scientific study of key crops such as bananas and sugarcane ⁷.

He promoted the creation of scientific organizations such as the *Society of Medicine of Cauca*. He participated as a member, attendee, and presenter of scientific works at the *Academies of Medicine* in Bogotá, Medellín, and Cartagena. Additionally, he served as the rector of *Colegio Santa Librada* in Cali on two occasions: 1878 and 1905.

Evaristo García, as a Naturalist and Pioneer in Toxicology

Among his works as a naturalist, his research on malaria, syringomyelia, alcoholism prevention, and snakebite treatment stands out. In 1892, he presented his study on *Venomous Snakes of Cauca* before the *Society of Medicine of Cauca*, a fundamental work later published in Paris in 1896 (Figure 2). This study was notable for its scientific rigor in cataloging various species of venomous snakes in the Cauca region while providing practical and evidence-based treatments for snakebites ⁸. This effort advanced knowledge of local fauna and laid the foundations for modern toxicology in Colombia by addressing public health issues through a scientific approach.

In parasitology, he published a study titled *The Stinging Worms of Valle del Cauca* (1910), in which he described common species found in the fields of Valle del Cauca, analyzed their habits, and provided information to local inhabitants about the areas where these worms were most frequently encountered to help them avoid them. He also documented various treatment options and acknowledged the importance of considering the empirical methods used by traditional healers ^{9,10}.

His description of beriberi, identifying its relationship with diets based on processed rice, was pioneering and widely recognized. He also addressed the role of mosquitoes in malaria transmission, advocating for education on vector control measures and housing improvements.

His monograph *Bananas in Colombia* (1898) is also noteworthy, as it analyzed this essential crop's nutritional and economic impact. He calculated that one hectare of banana plantations

could produce up to 25 tons of food in two annual harvests, enough to feed more than 24 people yearly. His study provided practical strategies to enhance production, establishing bananas as a fundamental nutritional and economic resource for Valle del Cauca ¹¹.

Finally, his monograph, *Climates of Valle del Cauca* (1913), discussed diseases influenced by environmental and climatic conditions ¹².

Evaristo García, the Social and Political Leader

García was widely respected in social and political circles. An exceptional orator, he delivered a historic speech on January 1, 1915, during the inauguration of the *Cali Railway*, predicting its role in the country's development.

A staunch liberal, he participated in the 1907 *Asamblea Nacional Constituyente*, served as a deputy in the Departmental Assembly, and was a councilman and president of the *Cali City Council* in 1889.

As manager of the *Compañía Constructora de Obras Públicas*, he promoted significant projects such as the *Pacific Railroad*. Concerned about public health, he proposed sewer systems, constructing a public slaughterhouse with aseptic protocols (1895), and inaugurating a covered market in 1897 ¹³.

In his later years, he contributed numerous articles to the *El Relator* newspaper in Cali, discussing the city's history and customs ¹⁰.

Evaristo García's Legacy

His legacy was immortalized in 1942 when the *Hospital Universitario del Valle* was officially named *Evaristo García*. His statue at the hospital entrance symbolizes his dedication and service to the Valle del Cauca community ¹.

Many streets, schools, and libraries in Valle del Cauca also bear his name, ensuring that his influence as a professional, humanist, and visionary leader endures. His contributions inspire new generations of physicians, scientists, and leaders committed to collective well-being.

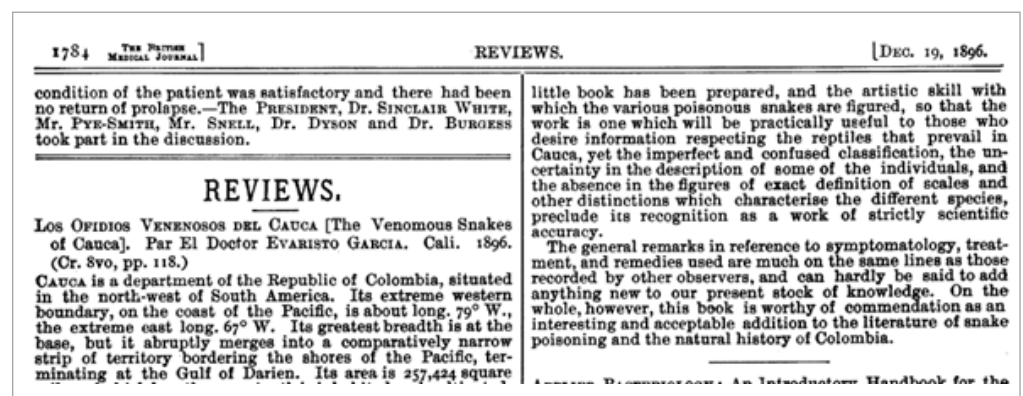


Figure 2. The image is a fragment of a review published in *The Practitioner Medical Journal* on December 19, 1896, about the book *Venomous Snakes of Cauca* by Dr. Evaristo García.

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