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Hyman Wallace Witcover was born in Darlington, S.C. on July 16, 1871. At a young age - in 1888 - Witcover began a lengthy tenure as a draftsman for Savannah architect A.S. Eichberg. In 1900 became himself an architect. Some of his more notable works in Savannah include the Savannah City Hall, the Public Library, Sacred Heart Church, the National Bank Building and the Scottish Rite Temple at Bull and Charlton Streets. As an architect, he was a member of the Savannah Society of Architects and the American Institute of Architects.

Witcover's distinguished career as an architect is excelled only by his long affiliation with the Scottish Rite Masonry and his extensive involvement in the educational and cultural betterment of Savannah. As a Freemason, he became the Sovereign Grand Inspector General for Georgia in 1911. Once eligible for Grand Commander of the Southern Jurisdiction in 1914, he did in 1923 enjoy the privilege to serve on the Supreme Council as Secretary General. With the death of his Savannah wife, Agnes Dillon Witcover, in 1932 and ill health, Witcover resigned his high post in 1934 and returned to Darlington. He died there after a long illness on the evening of October 2, 1936.

Hyman Wallace Witcover
An Inconclusive Biography

To uncover the past events of the life of a man and to recreate that same life is not the same revelation. Recorded history reveals; that is true. Yet when dealing with a distant past there is always that same penumbra; there is always that separation between then and now. Such is the case of Hyman Wallace Witcover. He lived and died and all that remains for the historian is record and his own imagination.

On the afternoon of August 11, 1904, Mr. Witcover was present for the cornerstone ceremony of what is currently Savannah's city hall.¹ The day for him surely represented a personal triumph; at thirty-three years of age he was just beginning a distinguished career as "the city's most famous builder"² and the new structure would be a fine example of his architectural skill. As an up and coming member in Georgia Freemasonry, he took part in the "impressive" ceremonies (Senator A.S. Clay delivered the keynote speech) as Acting Grand Architect.³

Little is known of Witcover's early life in Darlington, S.C. He was born there on July 16, 1871 and received some form of education.⁴ Savannah became his home around 1888 and Savannah architect A.S. Eichberg became his employer.⁵ As a young draftsman, he entered the business at a time when Eichberg was the busiest architect in Savannah.⁶ Witcover boarded at the Morrison House at 102 Droughton St. for the first two years of his Savannah residency,⁷ and 1889 becomes the year that his name begins a long tenure in the Savannah newspapers.

The October 15, 1889 Savannah Morning News reported the "opening hop" of the Young Men's Hebrew Association as "a most enjoyable affair".⁸ The paper includes H. Witcover as a member of the organization's "committee of arrangements" and noted that the Association's membership was rapidly growing.⁹ At the second annual meeting of the Association on January 15, 1890, Witcover was elected to serve as an officer in the capacity of director and it is also interesting to note that a Jacob Gazan was elected to serve as corresponding secretary.¹⁰ Perhaps Jacob was the son of Nathan Gazan of 55 $\frac{1}{2}$ Abercorn Street; the same Nathan Gazan that Witcover boarded with from 1890 until sometime before 1894.¹¹ Witcover can also be found at the Association's Second Annual Purim Ball that took place on the evening of March 5, 1890.¹² Participating in the "bewildering scene" that the costume ball became, Witcover and others (Jacob Gazan included) in the "Gilmore band" were awarded a "handsome silver pitcher" for having been the prize group among some hundred or so maskers.¹³

Five years later and twenty-three (almost twenty-four) years old, Witcover was a private in the Georgia Hussars.¹⁴ He spent part of July 1895 at Camp Atkinson and it is likely that he was excused from work during this time; Architect and now summer soldier Quartermaster Sergeant A.S. Richberg was there also.¹⁵ The Hussars left Savannah for Camp Atkinson on July . . . and "had a rough experience" (heavy rainstorm) getting there; Witcover and four others of the detachment for some reason or another were unable to leave the 5th and missed this particular misfortune - his employer, Mr. Richberg, did not happen to be one of the other four.¹⁶

Between the years of 1895 and 1900, Witcover boarded at no less than three different addresses: 44 Hull St. (Mrs. J. Tolson), 220 Hull St. (Julius Berlinicki - who operated a dry goods business at 209 Congress), and the old Julaski House at the northwest corner of Hull and Bryan Streets.¹⁷ During this time he probably

began his ascension within the Scottish Rite Fraternity - perhaps influenced by Scottish Rite Mason and employer A. B. Richberg¹⁸ - in blue lodge Ancient Landmark, No. 231, Savannah.¹⁹ The 1900 Census for Chatham County - besides revealing that his father was German born and his mother a native of North Carolina - confirms what the Savannah city directory of 1900 denotes: that after twelve years of craftsmanship, W. Witcover was now an Architect.

One of Witcover's first major works as an architect was the Sacred Heart Church at the corner of Bull and 33rd streets in Savannah - "an imposing and attractive addition to the architectural beauty of that section of the city."²¹ He also had a hand in the construction of the Germania Bank building; Architects Bruce and Morgan of Atlanta designed the building with Witcover acting as "supervising architect".²² After completion, Witcover made his offices in the same building in 1905.²³ The "young Savannah architect" was also responsible for the "exceptionally beautiful and appropriate" design for the basin and approaches to Jasper Springs - a Daughters of the American Revolution memorial to Sergeant William Jasper.²⁴ His work in the residential area around 1903 is quite extensive; a Morning News article entitled "Many New Homes" reveals that nearly all the new homes listed were designed by Witcover and his brand of "attractive architecture."²⁵

The City Hall cornerstone is a minor reflection on Witcover's ingenuity. To keep moisture from permeating the traditional cornerstone box, Witcover directed that the "unique" cornerstone would have a hole for the box in the bottom of the stone so the the stone would be placed atop the box and another flat surface.²⁶ Mayor Herman Meyers noted that the new City Hall would, "typify the 20th century Savannah, the Savannah of indomitable energy, of pushing progressiveness..."²⁷ Shortly after the cornerstone ceremonies, Witcover completed

the plans for the National Bank Building at Full and Proughton streets,²⁸ which once erected became the location of his offices in Savannah from 1906 until at least 1917.²⁹

Examination of assorted records of the Mickva Israel Congregation deposited at the Georgia Historical Society reveal more than once the name of W. W. Mitcover. Miscellaneous records up until 1902 establish very little except the existence of Simon Hexter, who served for awhile preceding his death in 1900 as secretary of the Congregation.³⁰ Mr. Hexter was the husband of the widow Bertha Hexter that Mitcover resided with on 22 E. Jones Street from 1903 to 1906.³¹ In the months of August and October 1902 Mitcover acted as a consultant in various matters concerning the Building Committee of the Congregation and on January 10, 1904 he was elected to the membership by the Board of Trustees.³²

Mitcover himself was elected to serve on the Congregation's Board of Trustees on January 9, 1909.³³ In a letter dated the same from the Rabbi George Solomon, Mitcover is among a few members recognized for 'valuable assistance rendered' during the Rabbi's absence from the city.³⁴ On a lesser note, Mitcover was appointed to the Congregation's standing committee on Public Worship on January 12, 1911³⁵ and it appears as though he still served on the Board of Trustees until at least the end of that year. Lacking further investigatory time, the last record of his name coincides with a gap in these particular records that appears between 1911 and 1921.³⁶ Of course, there was a more significant meaning of the year 1911 that existed to W. W. Mitcover....

June 30, 1910 found Mitcover in New York where his mother was ill.³⁷ Back in Savannah the community was mourning the death of Dr. Richard Joseph Dunn³⁸ - the "much beloved" Sovereign Grand Inspector General for Scottish Rite Masons in Georgia.³⁹ A "pupil" and "intimate, devoted" friend of Dr.

Munn, Witcover shared in the loss and sent a telegram regretting his inability to be present and participate in the special midnight *kadosh* services.⁴⁰

At the next biennial session of the Supreme Council of Scottish Rite Masons in Washington, D.C. on October 21, 1911 - H. W. Witcover was elected to replace the late Dr. Munn as Active Sovereign Grand Inspector General for Georgia.⁴¹

At forty years of age, he was one of the youngest men ever elected to that office; the executive head of the Scottish Rite Masons in Georgia.⁴²

Masonry served to complement Witcover's professional life, not to hinder it. Going into the year 1911, he had accomplished two other things in his life: He had taken a wife and maintained the same residence at 205 E. Charlton for eight years⁴³ - the latter only interesting because of his tendency to move about Savannah and the former puzzling because no record can be found in Chatham County of his marriage to Agnes Dillon other than the first mention of a wife in the 1911 Savannah City Directory, her will, and other ambiguous references. Speculation aside, 1911 proved to be a busy year for Mr. Witcover. Mainly it was the year of the new Carnegie Library.

With Carnegie money, the city of Savannah and the library Commission elected Witcover to design the library on June 2, 1911.⁴⁴ With the celebration of New York architect and library specialist, Mr. Beverly S. King,⁴⁵ Witcover presented the tentative floor plans to the Commission on June 30th after the Savannah City Council had authorized Mayor and chairman of the Library Commission *to enter into a contract with Witcover.*⁴⁶ It was only fitting that a man actively affiliated with the library work in Savannah since the inauguration of the Public Library - Witcover had been one of the original members of the Public Library's Board of Managers and became chairman

in 1922-⁴⁸ should take part in this educational cultural contribution to the city of Savannah. The final plans were approved by the Commission on August 19, 1914.⁴⁹

In the same year, 1914, Witcover completed plans for a Masonic Temple for Pooler, Georgia; a two story structure "based with red brick and marble trimmings in symbolic design."⁵⁰ He also busied himself with the plans for the ^{Temples of} Confederacy; ^{Lodge House} basically it was an extensive external reconstruction of an already existing structure designated as "No. 808 Drayton Street."⁵¹ All details of his work seemed important to him; the eagle that adorns the Chatham Armory at Bull and Park Streets (which now houses the American Legion) was designed by him to be sculpted by a prominent sculptor of the time, Mr. Lawrie of the Yale Art School.⁵² The Armory itself was designed by Witcover.⁵³ Other buildings in Savannah attributed to him (built prior to 1923 and named here as they were then) include the Knights of Pythias Castle Hall, Hick's Hotel, Calvary Baptist Church, Jewish Educational Alliance, St. Joseph's Hospital annex, American Can Co. factory, Bryson garage and "hundreds of other buildings of all types."⁵⁴

Under H. W. Witcover's direction and leadership as Sovereign Grand Inspector General of Georgia, the Rite in Georgia prospered "not only in numbers, but in the true principles of Masonry" as well.⁵⁵ The Scottish Rite Temple (1916-1920) in Savannah, at Bull and Charlton Streets, was the work of Witcover,⁵⁶ who felt that once completed it should "reflect the dignity and importance of the Masonic Institution."⁵⁶ A favourable evaluation in more modern times states that the finished product

reflects his great knowledge of symbolism, with which it abounds, and at the same time the building reveals the fact that he was capable of "thinking ahead of his time" for it had an air-conditioning system in 1923 and embodied on the third floor a meeting hall with a cooling system based on the idea of a Thermos bottle, this room being a room with-

in a room, there being a space of a foot between two walls of the room. The practical features of the building were embellished by the fine symbolism...

With the death of the Sovereign Grand Commander of the Scottish Rite Masons for the Southern jurisdiction, Major James B. Richardson - the "highest of Masons in the world" - on July 24, 1911, Mitcover became one of few men (28) eligible to replace him.⁵⁸ George H. Moore, Lieutenant grand commander, was elected instead on October 8, 1911.⁵⁹

H. B. Mitcover had three children: Dorothy, Bryan Wallace Jr., and David Carl. From ages given in his wife's will (1932-1934), their years of birth can be established as 1913, 1917, and 1926 respectively.⁶⁰ If the year of birth for his daughter, Dorothy, is correct, then marriage to Agnes (if not prior to 1913) probably came early in the year. Without concrete data, however, these questions are better left alone for further research. Bryan and his wife Agnes left their residence at 205 W. Charlton to live at 1128 Farnard Street in 1914.⁶¹ The city directory for the next year, 1916, indicates another move to 317 E. Bolton Street,⁶² and in 1917 they moved to 612 W. Henry Street, which remained their residence in Savannah until 1923.⁶³⁻⁷¹ In October of 1923, at the biennial session of the Scottish Rite Supreme Council in Washington, D.C., Mitcover was elected Secretary-General of the Supreme Council;⁷² the celebration of years that made him "one of the most brilliant men the fraternity ever produced in the South."⁷³

At the time of his election in 1923, Mitcover confined his architectural work mainly to the planning of Masonic Temples throughout the United States either as architect or consultant.⁷⁴ He designed the Temples of Jackson, Mississippi, Montgomery, Alabama, Jacksonville, Florida and other Southern cities.⁷⁵ In his last two years of residency in Savannah, he maintained a small office at 8 West President Street.^{76,77} Leaving Savannah and Georgia to serve in his high post, he left with the following distinctions: A mem-

ber of the Georgia State Board for the Examination and Registration of Architects, first president of the Savannah Society of Architects (he was also a member of the American Institute of Architects), member and chairman of the Savannah Public Library Board of Managers, first president of the Waters Avenue Free Kindergarten Association (his wife was a member of the Savannah Kindergarten Club),⁷⁸ past master of Ancient Landmark Lodge, F. & A. M., past chancellor of Chivalry Lodge, Knights of Pythias, past priest of Georgia Chapter, F. A. M. and "a member of many social and educational organizations."⁷⁹

Very little is known of Witcover's tenure in Washington. The primary source for this period is the will of his wife - dated July 15, 1926 - and the correspondences between the Chatham County Court of Ordinary, Judge Adkins of Washington, Witcover and the Savannah law firm of McLaws, McLaws and Brennan dated from 1930 to 1934.⁸⁰ Based on this and speculation, it is likely that his wife died in 1932; that and ill health caused him to retire in 1934 and return to Burlington.⁸¹ According to the letters of the will, Witcover's daughter had married a Mr. Herbert Eastwood and they lived in Washington where she worked at the Emergency Hospital.⁸² The letters of 1934 also confirm that Witcover did indeed return to Burlington and lived with his two sons there.⁸³ On the evening of October 2, 1936, Hyman Wallace Witcover succumbed to his "long illness"; he was sixty-five years old.⁸⁴

At first it was believed that the funeral services would be held at the Supreme Temple in Washington.⁸⁵ For some reason, the services occurred at the All Souls Unitarian Church and Witcover's body was interred at the Fort Lincoln Cemetery.⁸⁶ His obituary lists his survivors as being

... a daughter, Mr. Herbert Eastwood, and two sons, H. W. Witcover, Jr., and David Carl Witcover, all of Washington;

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a brother, D. Witcover, president of the South Carolina Fair Association, and five sisters, Mrs. Henry Henning and Mrs. Simon Toabacher of New York, Mrs. Hyman Mechaber of New Bedford, Mass., Mrs. Ben Hilb and Mrs. M.S. Luniasky.⁸⁷

On October 16, 1936, the Savannah Public Library Board passed resolutions honoring the memory of H.W. Witcover and the services he rendered on behalf of the Public Library and the city of Savannah.⁸⁸ Details of his will appeared in both Savannah papers December of the same year.^{89,90} The will provided for a \$10,000 trust fund for the education of his children and another \$5,000 fund was designated as a wedding gift for Dorothy.⁹¹ It also provided for the disposition of the remainder of his estate - mainly his Masonic jewelry and other personal effects - and directed that his remains be cremated;⁹² the cremation seems to be out of line with his Jewish Orthodox background. Perhaps time changed something in him as it does in all men.

"He was a man of fine intellect and understanding."^{93,94} Simple as though the words may seem, they seem to apply well to this man distinguished in not only Architecture and Freemasonry, but also in matters deemed by us today as perhaps meaningless, though in his own time they were regarded with admiration and appreciation. Among all men, he was not outstanding and yet among all good men he certainly has a place. Further research is highly recommended because so many things remain unanswerable. Because of the vast ocean of information still to be fully realized in the Savannah newspapers during Witcover's adult life, other sources beyond Savannah have for now escaped investigation. The many months of years reviewed and countless groping longshots escape bibliographic mention because of the depth involved; surely then the notes would be more than the paper itself. For further research the Scottish Rite Library in Washington would be a great help; so would more time and a index to newspapers (1900 - 1935).

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9. "Young Hebrews" p.8
10. "The Hebrew Association," Sav'h Morning News, 15 Jan 1890, p.8.
11. Sav'h City Directory, 1891.
12. "From Behind Masks," Sav'h Morning News, 6 March 1890, p.8.
13. "Behind Masks," p.8.
14. "To Ride to Camp Atkinson," Sav'h Morning News, 5 July 1895, p. 8.
15. "Camp Atkinson," p.8.
16. "Hussars Ride in the Rain," Sav'h Morning News, 6 July 1895 p.8.
17. Sav'h City Directory 1894-1900
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- ²² "Gerrania Bank's Eight-Story Building," Sav'h Morning News, 24 Oct. 1902 p. 12.
- ²³ Sav'h City Directory, 1905
- ²⁴ "Prayed in Marble," Sav'h Morning News, 7 Oct., 1902, p. 10.
- ²⁵ "Many New Homes," Sav'h Morning News, 1 Feb. 1903, p. 20.
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- ²⁷ William Harden, A History of Sav'h and S. Ga. (Chicago: Cherokee Publishing Co., 1913; reprint ed., Atlanta, 1969) p. 490.
- ²⁸ "Plans are Ready for Skyscraper," Sav'h Morning News, 19 Aug 1904, p. 10.
- ²⁹ Sav'h City Directory 1906-1917
- ³⁰ Mickva Israel Synagogue Misc. Papers, deposited in microfilm at Georgia Historical Society, Sav'h, Ga.
- ³¹ Sav'h City Directory 1903-1906
- ³² Mickva Israel Synagogue Papers
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- ³⁷ "Midnight Funeral Over Dr. R. J. Nunn," Sav'h Morning News, 30 June 1910, p. 12.
- ³⁸ Historical Survey of Sav'h Masonry : Official Program, 25 May 1914, p. 3.
- ³⁹ Official Program, p. 33.
- ⁴⁰ "Midnight Service St. John Church Over Dr. Nunn's Remains," Sav'h Morning News, 1 July 1910, p. 16.

41. "Mr. Witcover Made Inspector General," Sav'h Morning News, 22 Oct. 1911,
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47. "Mayor Will," p. 14.
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49. "Public Library Plans Approved," Sav'h Morning News, 18 August-1914,
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50. "Pooler's New Masonic Temple," Sav'h Morning News, 23 August 1914, p. 19.
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55. Official Program, p. 33.
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57. "The Scottish Rite," p. 5A.
58. "Witcover Eligible as Mason's Leader," Sav'h Morning News, 26 July 1914,
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59. "Moore Elected Grand Commander," Sav'h Morning News, 9 Oct. 1914, p. 1.

⁶⁰ "Last Will and Testament of Agnes Dillon Witcover, Chatham County Probate Court, Savannah, Ga. Will no. 1375.

⁶¹ Savannah City Directory 1914

⁶² Savannah City Directory 1915

⁶³ Savannah City Directory 1916

⁶⁴ Savannah City Directory 1917

⁶⁵ Savannah City Directory 1918

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⁶⁸ Savannah City Directory 1921

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⁷³ "Death Claim," p. 14.

⁷⁴ "Men of Affairs," p. 1.

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⁷⁸ Papers of the Savannah Kindergarten Club, deposited at the Ga. Hist. So., Collection no. 694.

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⁸¹ Will of Agnes D. Witcover

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87. "Children Inherit Witcover Estate," Sav'h Evening Press, 9 Dec 1936, p. 18.
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90. "Witcover Estate Goes to Children," Sav'h Morning News, 10 Dec 1936, p. 9.
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