Ezra Allan 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 he 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 pnumbra; 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. 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" 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.

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. Savannah became his home around 1888 and Savannah architect A.S. Richberg became his employer. As a young draftsman, he entered the business at a time when Richberg was the busiest architect in Savannah. Witcover boarded at the Morrison House at 102 Droughton St. for the first two years of his Savannah residency, and 1892 becomes the year that his name begins a long tenure in the Savannah newspapers.
The October 15, 1883 Savannah Morning News reported the "opening hop" of the Young Men's Hebrew Association as "a most enjoyable affair." The paper included M. Witcover as a member of the organization's "committee of arrangements," and noted that the Association's membership was rapidly growing. 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.

Perhaps Jacob was the son of Nathan Gazan of 55 1/2 Abercorn Street; the same Nathan Gazan that Witcover boarded with from 1890 until sometime before 1894. Witcover can also be found at the Association's Second Annual Purim Ball that took place on the evening of March 5, 1890. Participating in the "bewildering scene" that the costume ball became, Witcover and others (Jacob Gazan included) in the "Cimarron Band" were awarded a 'handsome silver pitcher' for having been the prize group among some hundred or so maskers.

Five years later and twenty-three (almost twenty-four) years old, Witcover was a private in the Georgia Hussars. 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.J. Lichtenberg was there also. The Hussars left Savannah for Camp Atkinson on July 17 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. Lichtenberg, did not happen to be one of the other four.

Between the years of 1895 and 1900, Witcover boarded at no less than three different addresses: 37 Tall St., (Mrs. D. Solomon), 70 Tall St. (Juliet Berliner - who operated a dry goods business at 109 Conover), and the old Julaski House at the northwest corner of Tall and Bryan Streets. During this time he probably
began his ascension within the Scottish Rite Pantheon — perhaps influenced by Scottish Rite Mason and employer A. C. Schieffer in blue lodge Ancient Landmark, No. 231, Savannah. The 1900 Census for Chatham County — besides revealing that his father was German born and his mother a native of North Carolina — confirms that the Savannah city directory of 1900 denotes that after twelve years of craftsmanship, J.V. Hitover was now an Architect.

One of Hitover’s first major works as an architect was the Sacred Heart Church at the corner of Pala and 33rd streets in Savannah — “an imposing and attractive addition to the architectural beauty of that section of the city.”

He also had a hand in the construction of the Germania Bank building: Architects Bruce and Morgan of Atlanta designed the building with Hitover acting as “supervising architect.” After completion, Hitover made his offices in the same building in 1905. The “young Savannah architect” was also responsible for the “exceptionally beautiful and appropriate” design for the basin and approaches to Jasper Springs — a daughter of the American Revolution memorial to Sergeant William Jasper. His work in the residential area around 1903 is quite extensive; a morning news article entitled “City News” reveals that nearly all the new homes listed were designed by Hitover and his brand of “attractive architecture.”

The city fall cornerstone is a minor reflection on Hitover’s ingenuity. To keep moisture from penetrating the traditional cornerstone box, Hitover 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. Fay A. Horner wrote that the new City Fall would, “typify the 20th century Savannah, the Savannah of indomitable energy, of pushing progressiveness...” Shortly after the cornerstone ceremonies, Hitover completed
the plans for the National Bank building at Bull and Broughton streets, which once existed became the location of his offices in Savannah from 1906 until at least 1917.

Examination of assorted records of the Michwa Israel Congregation deposited at the Georgia Historical Society reveal more than once the name of V. V. Vitecover. 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. Mr. Hexter was the husband of the widow Bertha Hexter that Vitecover resided with on 32 E. Jones Street from 1903 to 1906. In the months of August and October 1902 Vitecover 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.

Vitecover himself was elected to serve on the Congregation's Board of Trustees on January 9, 1906. In a letter dated the same from the Rabbi George Solomon, "Vitecover is among a few members recognized for valuable assistance rendered during the rabbi's absence from the city." On a lesser note, Vitecover was appointed to the congregation's standing committee on Public Worship on January 12, 1911 and it appears though he still served on the board of trustees until at least the end of that year. Lacking further investigative time, the last record of his name coincides with a gap in these particular records that appears between 1911 and 1921. For sure, there was a more significant meaning of the year 1911 that existed to V. V. Vitecover...

June 30, 1910 found Vitecover in New York where his mother was ill. Back in Savannah the community was mourning the death of Mr. Richard Joseph Dunn - the "much beloved" overseer (Grand Inspector General for South Carolina) of Georgia. A pupil and "intimate, devoted" friend of Dr.
Youn, Mitcover shared in the loss and sent a telegram regretting his inability to be present and participate in the special midnight Kadish services.¹⁰

At the next biennial session of the Supreme Council of Scottish Rite Masons in Washington, D.C. on October 21, 1911, R. V. Mitcover was elected to replace the late Dr. Youn as Active Sovereign Grand Inspector General for Georgia.¹¹

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.¹²

Masonry served to complement Mitcover'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 years;¹³—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. Mitcover. Mainly it was the year of the new Carnegie Library.

With Carnegie money, the city of Savannah and the library commission elected Mitcover to design the library on June 2, 1911.¹⁴ With the celebration of New York architect and library specialist, Mr. Beverley S. King,¹⁵ Mitcover 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 Swant to enter into a contract with Mitcover.¹⁶ It was only fitting that a man 'actively affiliated with the library work in Savannah since the inauguration of the Public Library'¹⁷ Mitcover had been one of the original members of the Public Library's Board of Managers and became chairman
in 1922 should take part in this educational cultural contribution to the city of Savannah. The final plans were approved by the Commission on August 17, 1914.

In the same year, 1915, Witcover completed plans for a Masonic Temple for Savannah, Georgia; a two story structure "based with red brick and marble trimmings in symbolic design." He also busied himself with the plans for the Confederate Memorial; basically it was an extensive external reconstruction of an already existing structure designated as "No. 608 Drayton Street." All details of his work seemed important to him; the eagle that adorns the Chauncey 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. Lownis of the Yale Art School. The Armory itself was designed by Witcover. 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 Gas Co. Factory, Bryan Garage and "hundreds of other buildings of all types."

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. The Scottish Rite Temple (1916-1920) in Savannah, at Bull and Charlton Streets, was the work of Witcover, who felt that once completed it should "reflect the dignity and importance of the Masonic Institution." 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 roof, there being a space of a foot between the walls of the room. The practical features of the building were established by the time symbolisms.

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 20, 1914, Mitcover became one of few men (29) eligible to replace him. George E. Moore, lieutenant grand commander, was elected instead on October 8, 1914. 59

Mitcover had three children: Dorothy, Lyman Wallace, Jr., and David Carl. From ages given in his wife's will (1932-1933), 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. Lyman and his wife Agnes left their residence at 205 w. Harloton to live at 1220 Farnam street in 1914. 61 The city directory for the next year, 1915, indicates another move to 317 E. Holton street, 62 and in 1916 they moved to 312 W. Henry Street, which remained their residence in Savannah until 1923. 63-64 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 culmination of years that made him "one of the most brilliant men the fraternity ever produced in the South." 3

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. 71 He designed the Temple 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-
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a brother, D. Witcover, president of the South Carolina
Fair Association, and five sisters, Mrs. Henry Henning
and Mrs. Simon Teabacher of New York, Mrs. Hyman Mochaer
of New Bedford, Mass., Mrs. Ben Hilb and Mrs. N.S.
Lusinsky. 67

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. 83 Details of his will appeared in
both Savannah papers December of the same year. 69, 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 dis-
position 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).
"NOTES"

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29. Savannah City Directory 1905-1917.


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32. Mickva Israel Synagogue Papers.

33. Mickva

34. Mickva

35. Mickva

36. Mickva


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"Vicoover Eligible as Mason's Leader," Sav'nh Morning News, 26 July 1914, p. 28.

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

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Savannah City Directory 1915
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Savannah City Directory 1917
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