

SOCIETY FOR INDUSTRIAL ARCHEOLOGY NEWSLETTER

Volume 10 Number 2

Spring 1981

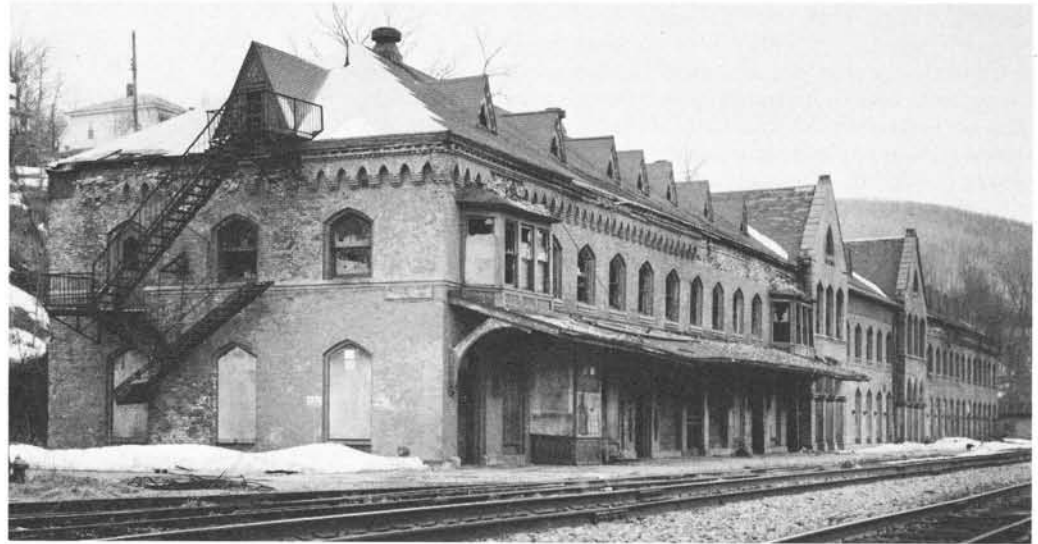
SUSQUEHANNA STATION-HOTEL SAVED—MAYBE

Almost given up for gone, the Starrucca House—one of the last and certainly the grandest of the 19th-c. railroad station-hotels—may be struggling back to life. Hidden away in the small northeastern Pa. town of Susquehanna, the awesome 1865 building has come to symbolize the frustrations of trying to save a major industrial landmark located in an economically unpromising environment. (See SIAN Jan. 75:1, Nov. 75:4, and Nov. 77:4 for previous episodes of this cliffhanger.)

Its seeming savior is Michael Matis, a local lingerie manufacturer. Matis has made a personal project of the station restoration, aided by townspeople and his own employees. Immediate plans are to put a restaurant in part of the building and eventually to establish a railroad museum in the rest.

But if Matis's plans perhaps seem all too ordinary for station restorations, the structure is not. Its 325-ft. facade, baronial dining hall, and industrial-gothic architecture (attributed to E.J.M. Derrick) make it a gem by any standard. In addition, since the demolition of the Queen City Hotel in Cumberland, Md., in 1972 [SIAN Jan. 72:2], it is the most significant survivor of a rare species in railroading. The combination station-hotel design flowered briefly but magnificently in the 1850-75 period, just before rapid improvements in dining and sleeping cars made meal and night stopover facilities superfluous. Their locations—usually in the center of railroad yards—were hardly appealing to the more general hotel clientele, and most were closed down by the turn of the century. The hardier ones struggled on as dingy railroad office buildings, and at least five survived into the 1960s. Now there are two: Starrucca House and an almost unknown B&O building at Newark, Ohio.

Built by the Erie RR during a rare flash of prosperity, Starrucca House was located at a key operating point roughly midway between Jersey City and Buffalo (and, coincidentally, close to the hallowed Starrucca Viaduct). Besides being the site of the Erie's principal repair shops, Susquehanna was the junction of a major coal feeder branch as well as a helper station for the heavy mainline grade over the divide separating the Susquehanna and Delaware River watersheds. The spot thus was picked primarily for operating rather than commercial convenience, a choice that now complicates finding a practical use for the huge structure. But at least it was kept reasonably intact. Thanks largely to the Erie's intense conservatism (and perennial poverty), it never was replaced or even modernized. When its original purpose vaporized, it merely



Starrucca House, Susquehanna, Pa., as it appeared in 1978. *Thomas Trencansky photograph.*

was adapted for more humdrum railroad needs, including partial use as a YMCA for train crews. In the process, its vaulted 50-ft.-high dining hall disappeared under added second and third floors and became a prosaic gymnasium.

But even these functions wilted with traffic and operating changes during the 1960s and '70s—notably the 1961 Erie-Lackawanna merger, closing of the adjacent shops in 1969, and EL's disappearance into Conrail in 1976. By then the station was simply a wayside point on a secondary freight line. Its useful life ended several years ago when Conrail moved out the last railroad office, leaving it a large and ragged orphan. Its subsequent status has been one of alternating hope and gloom—and, most recently, complete despair. Nobody disputed the structure's significance, but nobody knew what to do with it either. It simply was too big and too decomposed for the small, depressed town to restore and support. (Susquehanna, unhappily, was a classic railroad town, and its economic fortunes fell with the railroad activity. Near not much of anything else, its principal present tourist attractions are the viaduct and station—visited mostly by a scattering of unaffluent historians and railfans.) Until Matis took it on, the crumbling building seemed destined for demolition. At one point, in fact, a contract was ready to be let.

So far the walls have been stabilized, cornices covered temporarily, and work started on the restaurant. Matis reportedly has three years under his purchase agreement to start a going business in the building. Yet while his aim is noble, the practical economics remain, unfortunately, questionable. Susquehanna is small, remote, and poor, and much work remains. Yet, says one knowledgeable native, "Mike Matis is the only person in town who could pull off something like this." We hope. *H.H.H.*

Published by the Society for Industrial Archeology Editor: Carol Poh Miller

Room 5020

National Museum of History & Technology

Smithsonian Institution

Washington, DC 20560