

# The Starrucca House

## Railroad Station/ Hotel, Susquehanna, PA

June 1987



R. TILLEY 1987

Welcome to the Starrucca House, the oldest brick railroad station still in use in the United States. Completed in 1865, the Gothic revival, brick station hotel answered the needs of hungry, weary rail passengers traveling between New York and Chicago, an often bone-jarring trip lasting 36 hours or more. The Starrucca House staff welcomed its guests with sumptuous meals and comfortable, spacious hotel rooms. The development of dining and sleeping cars after the Civil War spelled doom for the great railroad hotels. The Starrucca House continued operating, however, as a passenger station, railroad office and as a "bunkroom" hotel for railroad work crews. It closed in 1969 and was largely neglected until 1980 when it was purchased privately for restoration. Listed by the National Register of Historic places, the Starrucca House is recognized by the Smithsonian Institution as an "outstanding architectural work" and by the Society of Industrial Archaeology as "unique as a station hotel . . . because it may be the only Gothic revival example to remain."

A Memorandum from

**WILLIAM S. YOUNG**

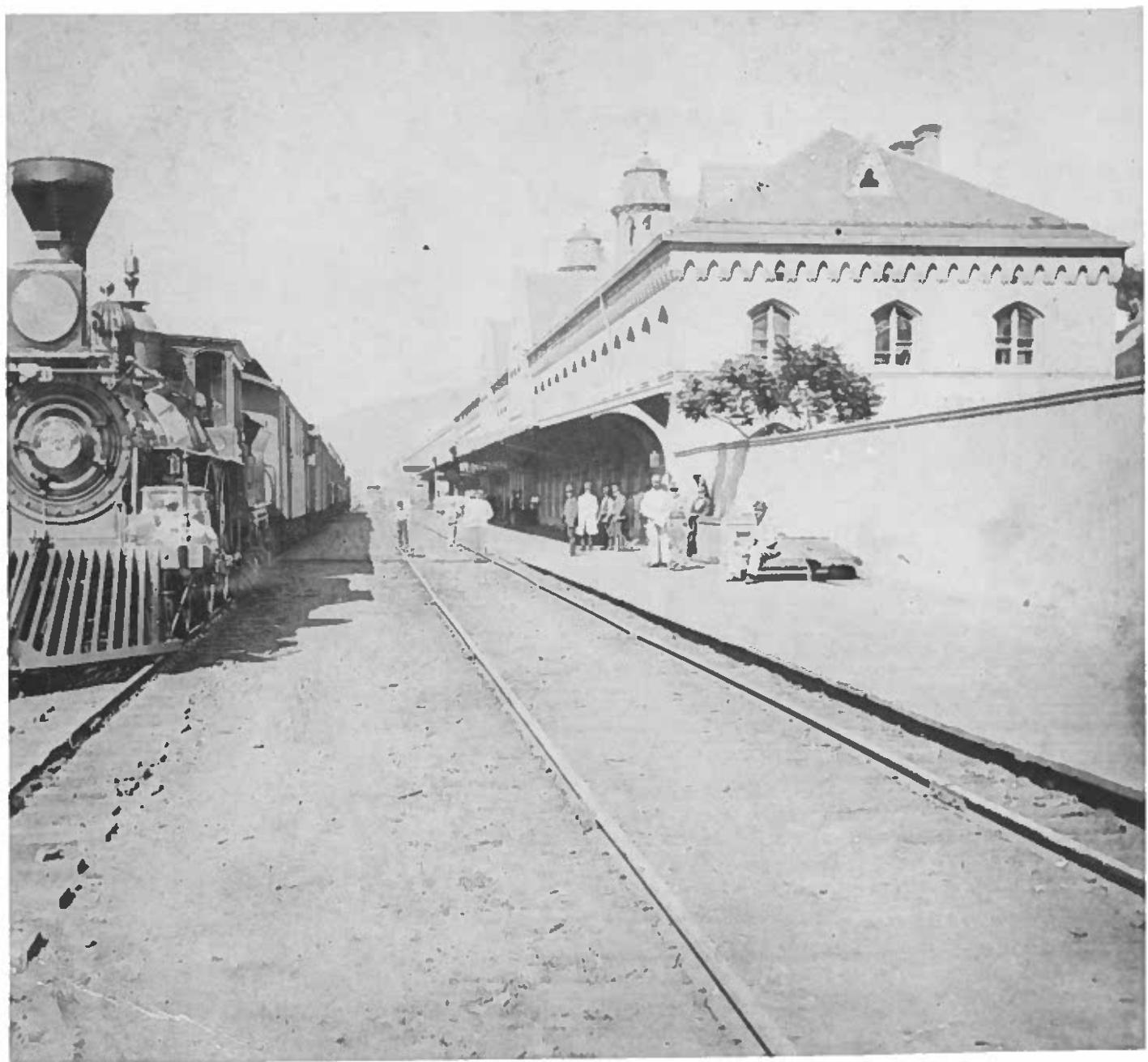
July 24, 1972

Robert:

The Susquehanna station went on the National Register June 19th. I know this only because Doug found out and let me know. But it wasn't until this morning, when I called Harrisburg, that I was sure. Previously they had told me that the papers were still in Harrisburg--this was on June 20th<sup>and as yet no response</sup> and about to be forwarded. Our state people seem to be demoralized by budgetary and staff limitations, not to mention the flood, and the machinery they claim to have for notifying interested parties of state and national registry completion does not work.

Our next step, it appears, will be the formation of a group to work for the rescue and adaptive use of the building. I daresay there'll be nothing more on this until vacations are over.

Bill



Starrucca House  
Erie RR Station  
Susquehanna, PA  
bld. ca. 1860  
From stereograph, RM Vogel 8-80

## Railroad glory might be restored

By JAMES E. ROTH

Starrucca House was an elegant rest stop for passengers on the Erie Line 100 years ago when railroad was king.

Then railroads gave way to interstates and airplanes, and the Susquehanna, Pa. station-hotel was converted less glamorous uses.

The station-hotel's future looked empty as its yawning brick frame after it was vacated by the YMCA in 1948 and suffered fire damage in 1964.

Michael Matis, a Susquehanna lingerie manufacturer, decided to breathe new life into the crumbling structure.

Matis discovered the old building a few years ago when he began leasing two box cars that he kept at the site.

"Three or four months later I noticed a lot of out-of-state cars coming to the building," Matis said.

Those cars brought railroad buffs and experts from the Smithsonian Institute to Susquehanna to see Starrucca House.

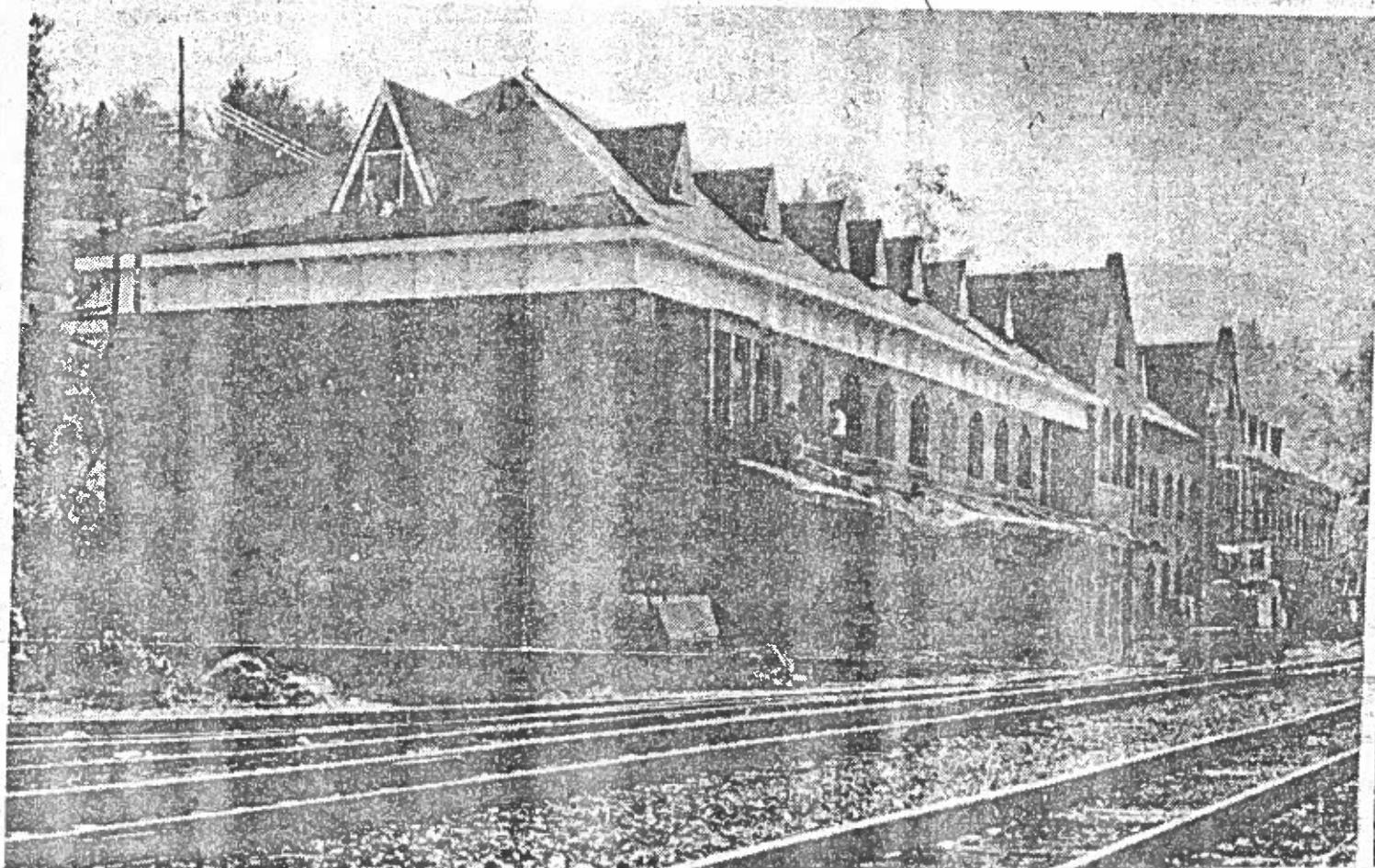
The town council decided to have the station-hotel studied.

Armed with the 1976 feasibility study funded by the National Trust for Historic Places, Matis began a three-year project to turn the dilapidated building into a proud reminder of the past.

Matis' plans include turning the railroad station into a restaurant and the hotel into a railroad museum.

"Back in those days, this was the focal point of the town," Matis said. Matis said he hopes it will soon be the focal point again.

The most important part of the project, said Matis, is restoring the cathedral-ceil-



places. Matis began a three-year project to turn the dilapidated building into a proud reminder of the past.

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"Back in those days, this was the focal point of the town," Matis said. Matis said he hopes it will soon be the focal point again.

The most important part of the project, said Matis, is restoring the cathedral-ceiling dining room to its original condition.

"In 1905, the railroad put in a third floor suspended from the ceiling and built a second floor. The dining room became a gymnasium.

"We are going to take the whole thing out and restore it the way it was," Matis said.

Matis isn't working alone on the project. His employees at Matis Manufacturing, Inc., friends and townspeople are contributing to the restoration.

"People in town have been coming forward with pictures of what the station used to look like," Matis said.

Matis said he tried to tap the brains of older residents for information about the building's past elegance.

"I think there was a beautiful chandelier in the main entrance once," Matis said. "I brought an 82-year-old man in here to explain just how it looked.

"He said it was just as it is now when he was a boy. I guess you would have to be 90 years old or older to remember what it was like."

Matis thinks the project will take three years, but said he hopes to open a railroad-theme restaurant in January.

"We are one third of the way done with the outside right now," he said.

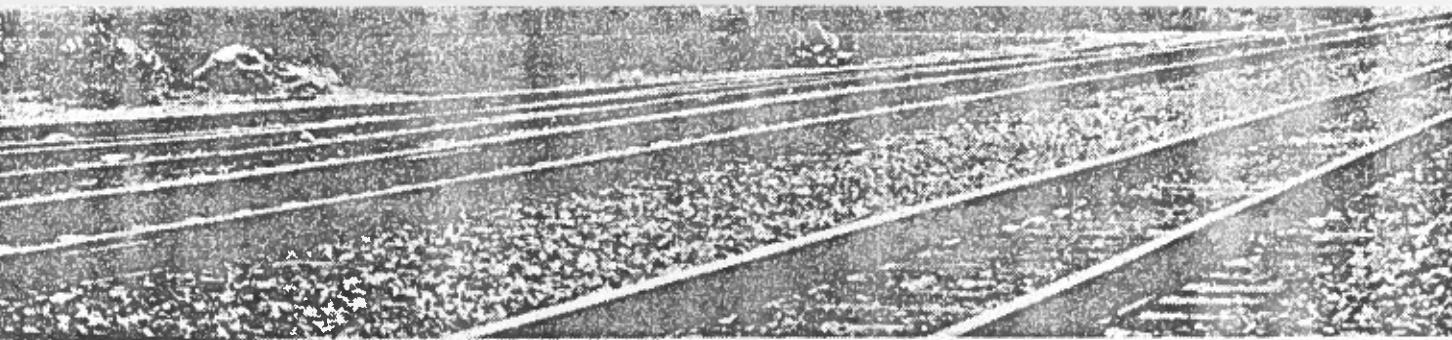
"We had to replace the roof and overhang. Now we are in the process of sand-blasting the outside to restore the brick to its original color.

"It was surprising what good shape everything was in after 20 years with weather beating on it."

All funds for restoration are coming from Matis' pocket, even though the building is on the *National Register of Historic Places*.

"I didn't apply for a grant because I wasn't sure what I wanted to do," Matis said. "I was not sure it was feasible.

"Now I think it is."

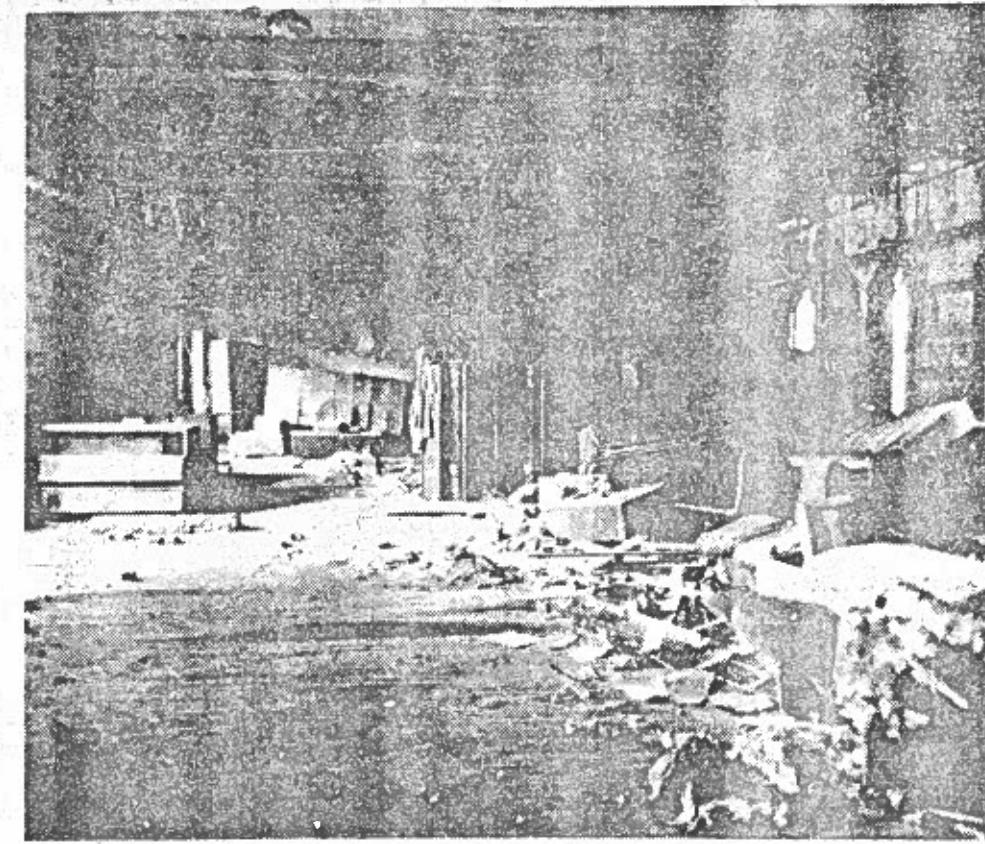


JAMES E. ROTH PHOTOS

It is said that the Susquehanna, Pa. railroad station-hotel is the only remaining example of this type of building. The 100-year-old structure is the target of a restoration effort that could make it the hub of the town.



Businessman Michael Matis is gambling his own funds on the restoration of the old building, which will serve as a combination museum and restaurant if his plans are realized.



A first look at the rubble-strewn interior or the dilapidated exterior would give the impression the old building is a total loss. But Matis was surprised to find the old train station remains basically sound.

FROM: DANIEL MORGUL, 10 MARY DRIVE, RD3  
BINGHAMTON, NY 13901.



Dining Room, Starrucca House, Erie RR,  
Susquehanna, Pa. BH ca 1867. From  
Stereograph by <sup>Chas</sup> Bierstadt, ca 1875.

Stereograph

Collection of H. C. Miller

Decor. Div.

# Matis is bringing back the days of glory

By ANN TRENEMAN

Michael J. Matis is proving that his dream is not just another illusion.

More than one Susquehanna, Pa., resident was skeptical when the 56-year-old businessman set out to return the dilapidated 116-year-old Starrucca House railroad station/hotel to its former splendor.

"That was the attitude of about 50 percent of the people because the building was so bad," said Matis. "It was a challenge."

Much of that challenge remains in front of Matis.

Enough work has been done, however, that passers-by can see the faded glory of Susquehanna's boom-town railroad days re-emerging from the 325-foot-long building's broken windows and faded bricks.

About one-third of the outside has been renovated and about 80 percent of the roof has been reshingled and in some places rebuilt. Bricks have been sandblasted, windows replaced, and new coats of white paint adorn the dormer windows.

Inside, work is being completed on the lounge bar — which Matis says will open in about a month. Next to open will be an adjoining dining room, and above the dining area will be 15 hotel rooms.

Matis then plans to recreate the Cascade Room — a massive dining room with arches spanning a 35-foot ceiling. He plans a balcony over the room and a railroad museum.

The enthusiastic businessman does not appear to see the piles of lumber, bricks and dust that mark what will be the 125-foot Cascade Room.

"By next spring this floor will be off," he said pointing to the first of two floors that must be removed for the Cascade Room. He talks in terms of what will be — cathedral ceilings, a balcony, massive arches — while sidestepping a pile of clutter.

In his mind's eye, Matis envisions the



Michael Matis hopes the restored Starrucca House will be a cultural center.

Cascade Room as a dinner theater. "I've been talking to John Gardner about it," he said. He said that novelist and playwright Gardner, a Susquehanna County resident, is creating a brochure for the building.

While bringing Starrucca House back to life is Matis' largest project, it's by no means the first for a man who seems to have made a habit of building things from almost nothing.

A native of Whitehall, Pa., Matis moved to Susquehanna in 1948 to manage a lingerie factory for Julius Kizer and Co. of Allentown, Pa. When the company planned to close the factory in 1956, Matis bought it and called it Matis Lingerie Inc.

"We started with 10 people," said Matis, who lives with his wife, Frances, at 423 Laurel St. in Susquehanna. Now, between Matis Lingerie and his 9-year-old Town Restaurant there are 150 people on the payroll of Matis Manufacturing Inc.

Matis renovated an old building on Susquehanna's Main Street that now houses the Town Restaurant.



BOB DANN

Three of his five children work with him at Matis Lingerie, and he says 15 employees at the factory have been working there since his first six months in business for himself.

His new project has taken about 30 hours a week of his time, Matis says. Six full-time and two part-time employees are working on the structure.

Matis — who says he isn't even an amateur carpenter — is remolding Starrucca House through the memories of elderly residents, faded photographs and historical data contained in a report prepared for the Susquehanna Borough Council on Starrucca House.

The project has no written plans and no architect. "There are no plans. Things have just fallen into place," he said. "We just take it from one day to the next."

He estimates the three-year project will cost between \$300,000 and \$350,000, and he admits he's not doing this for a profit.

"What I'm hoping will happen," he said, "is that it will become a cultural center. They're desperate for something like this. The tradition is here. Everyone

that lives here was somehow connected with the railroad."

It was the railroad that brought Matis to Starrucca House. Fabric for his lingerie business is shipped to Susquehanna by rail. During his trips to pick up the material, Matis became interested in the building.

"I'd see this old building," he said. "There was sort of an attraction to this place."

Matis started thinking about a renovation plan in March 1980. The Susquehanna Borough Council sold the building on its one-and-a-third-acre site to Matis for \$3,500 in July 1980, and since then he has bought two other parcels of adjacent land for parking space.

Even before Matis started his project, visitors came to see the dilapidated building listed in the borough's report as the last major railroad/hotel in the United States.

Matis obviously enjoys chatting with visitors about the past, present, and future. "It's taken hold," he said, looking at the building. "Now we're starting to see some results."









Council of the  
Borough of Susquehanna Depot

Susquehanna, Pennsylvania 18847

Phone (717) 853-3235

Norman D. Butts, President  
Catherine T. Hough, Vice-Pres.

F. Gerard Hough  
Secretary-Treasurer

September 24, 1975

Carlene E. Stephens  
Museum Technician  
Division of Mechanical and Civil Engineering  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D. C. 20560

In re: "Starrucca House" Report.

Dear Ms. Stephens:

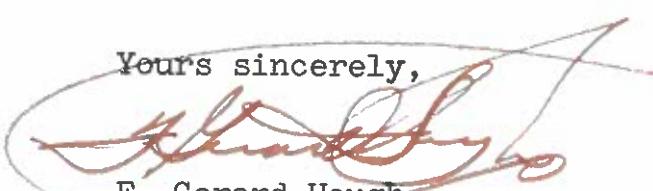
At present I am not sure if there will be any extra copies of the report as we only had a run of seventy-five copies because of the high cost (\$16.43) per copy for printing.

More distressing is the very distinct possibility that nothing can be done to save the building for future generations. The Borough has recently learned that the "Starrucca House" title was not transferred by deed of gift as a result of legal and tax problems of the owner. These problems were recently resolved but in the interim the major source of non-local funding through the Economic Development Administration dried up. This EDA Grant of \$500,000.00 was most important because it would have made possible the repair, reconstruction and restoration of the exterior walls, roof and fenestration plus the restoration of the Great Hall's spatial integrity which would have given an impetus to the project.

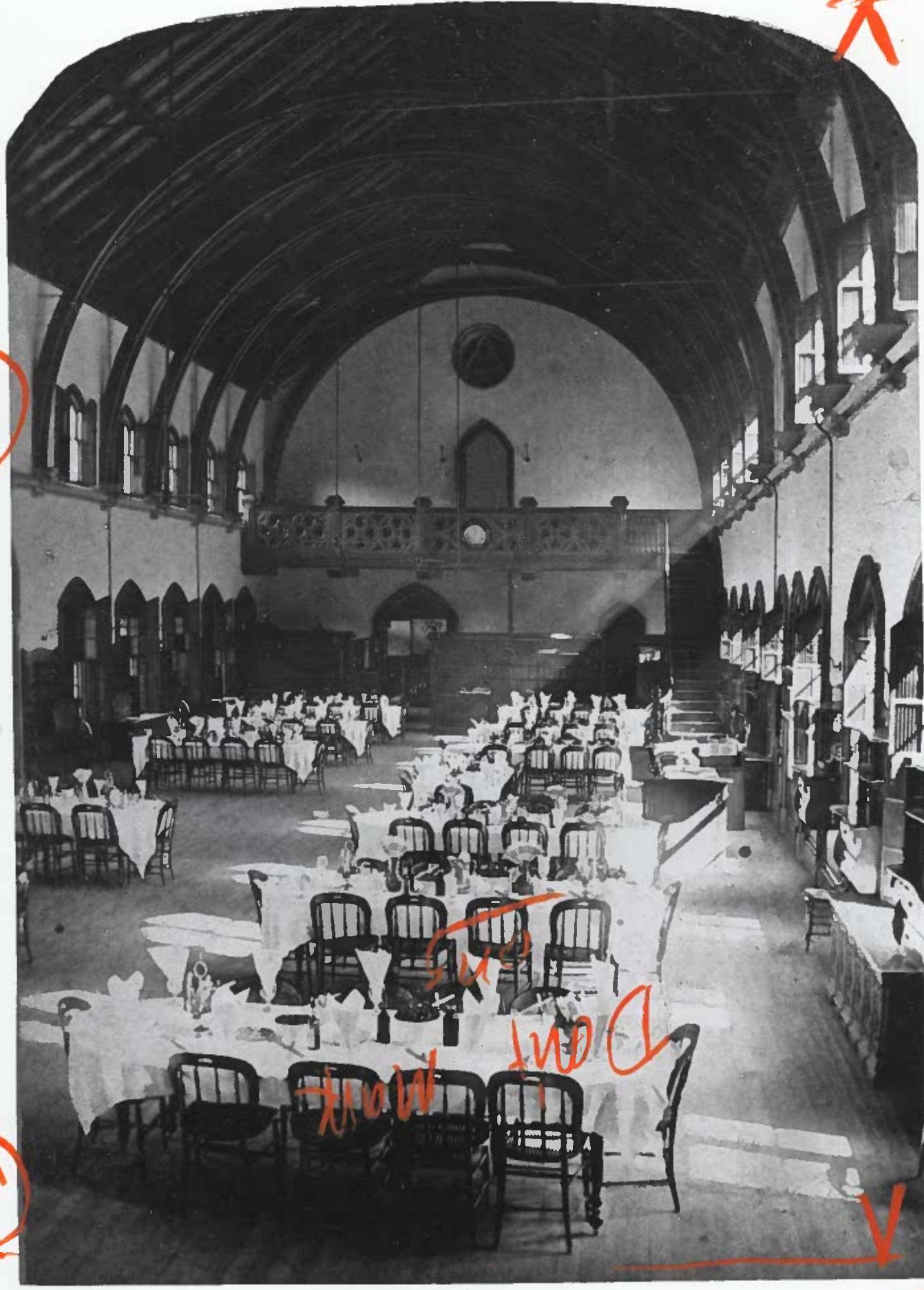
Now, the future of the "Starrucca House" is in great doubt because we do not have the resources locally for a 100% local share restoration. Beyond this is the possibility that the oncoming Winter freeze/thaw cycle will destroy the structural integrity of the building, causing large sections of the North (Trackside) and South Facades to collapse. If this should be the case, the complete demolition of the building is seen as the only alternative. Thus the bringing about of the lose of the last of the great 19th Century Station-Hotels.

If you or anyone in the Division of Mechanical and Civil Engineering have any suggestions, we would appreciate hearing them. With thanks for your consideration, I am

Yours sincerely,

  
F. Gerard Hough  
Secretary-Treasurer  
BOROUGH OF SUSQUEHANNA DEPOT

FGH/mrs



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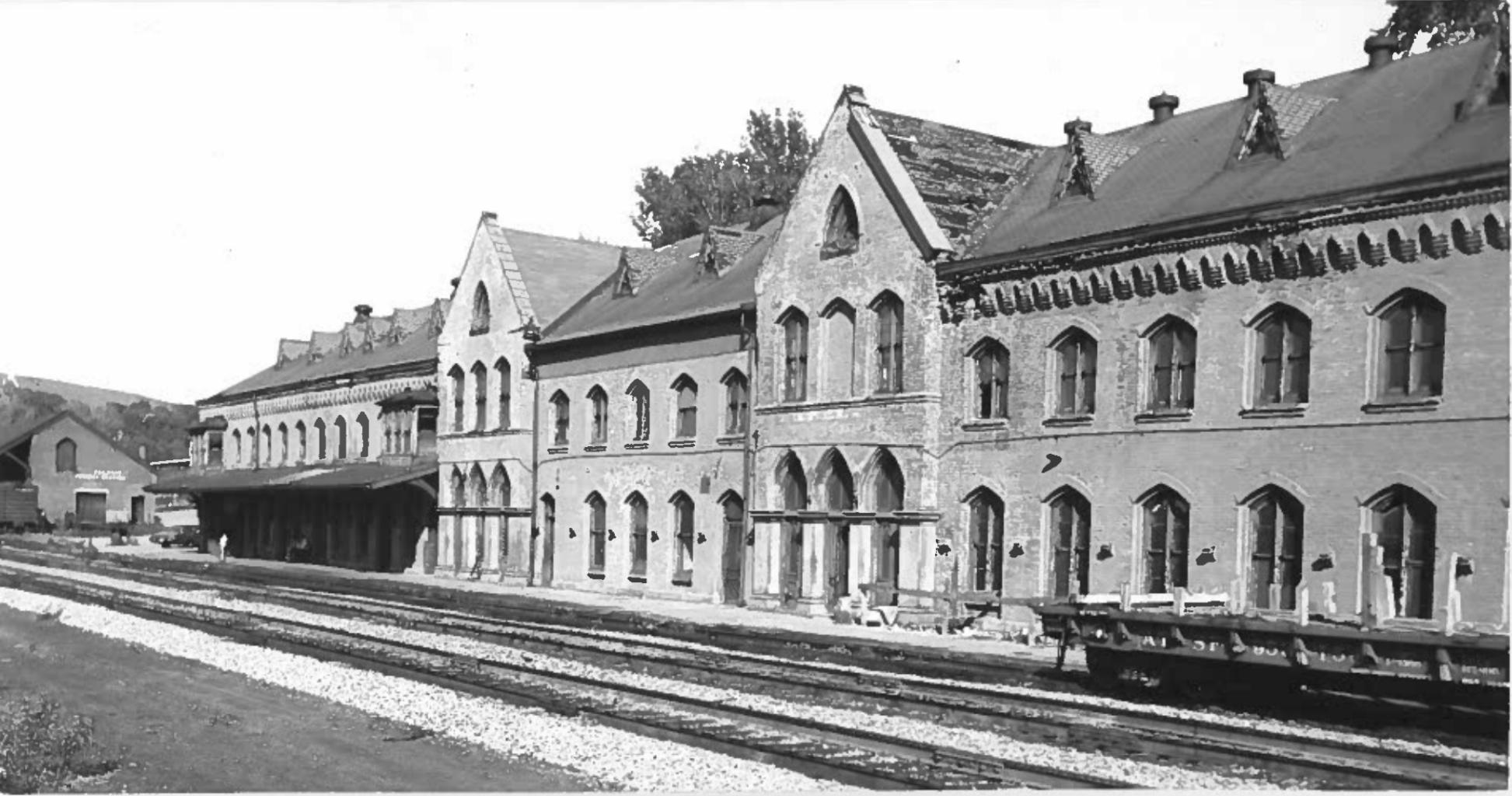
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Eric Ry.

Starrucca House dining hall  
station, Susquehanna, Pa.  
from stereo of c. 1875

Collection of Kathy Hoeft

WILLIAM S. YOUNG  
STARRUCCA VALLEY PUBLICATIONS  
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STATION HOTEL SUSQUEHANNA PA

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STATION/HOTEL, SUSQUEHANNA PA.

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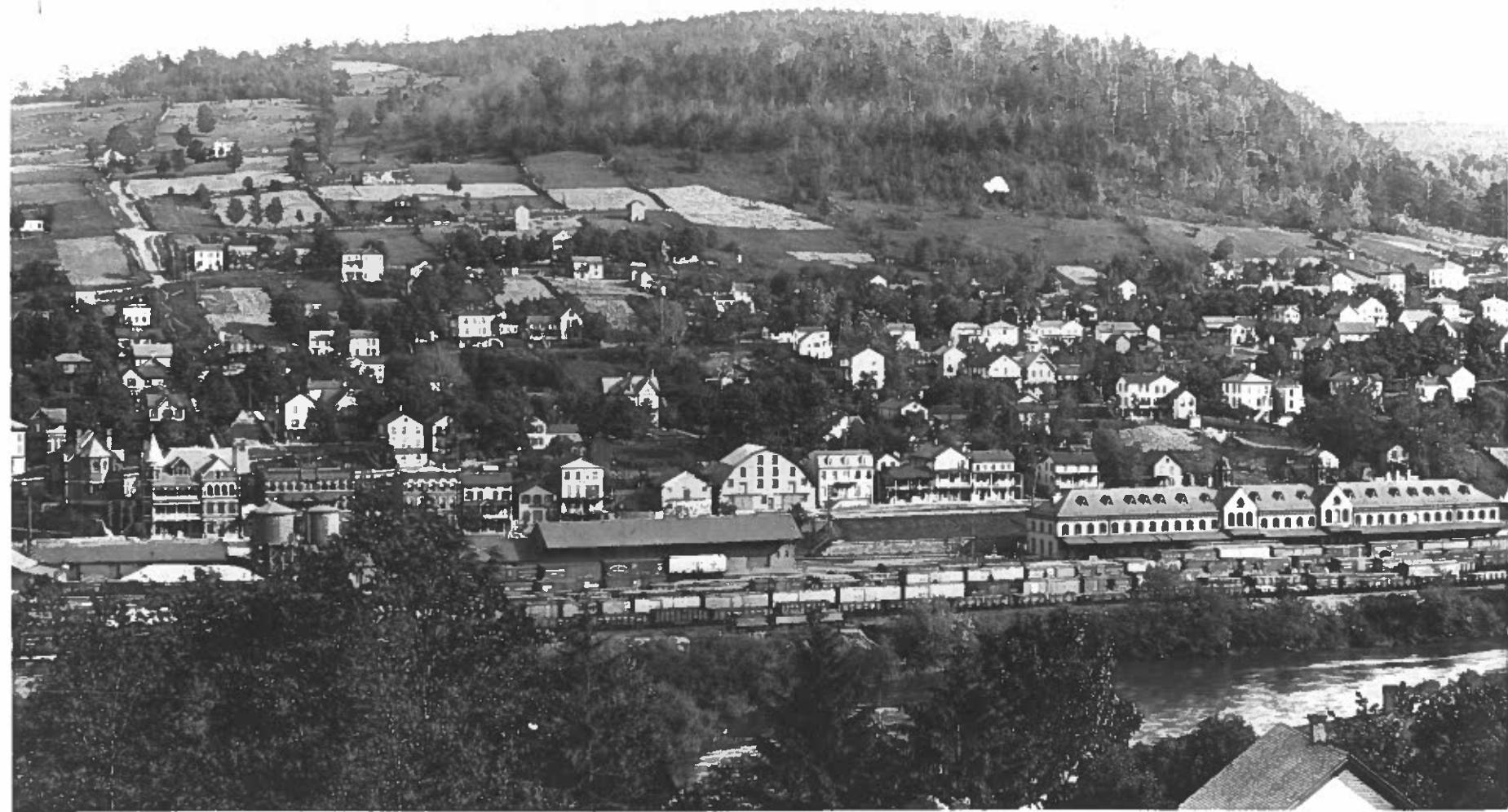
NEW YORK, APRIL 10, 1863.

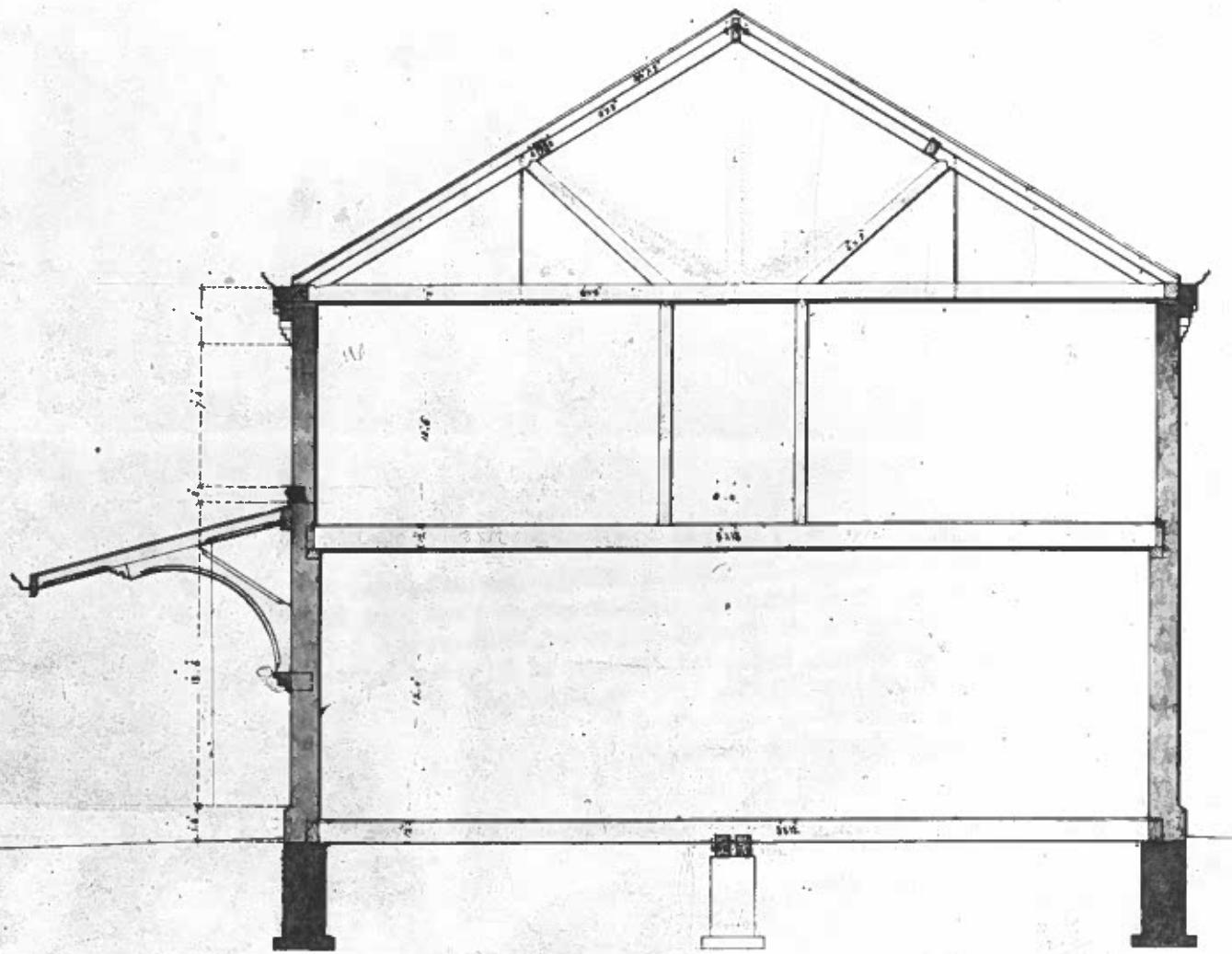




2. Dining Hall, Starucca House, Susquehanna Depot.

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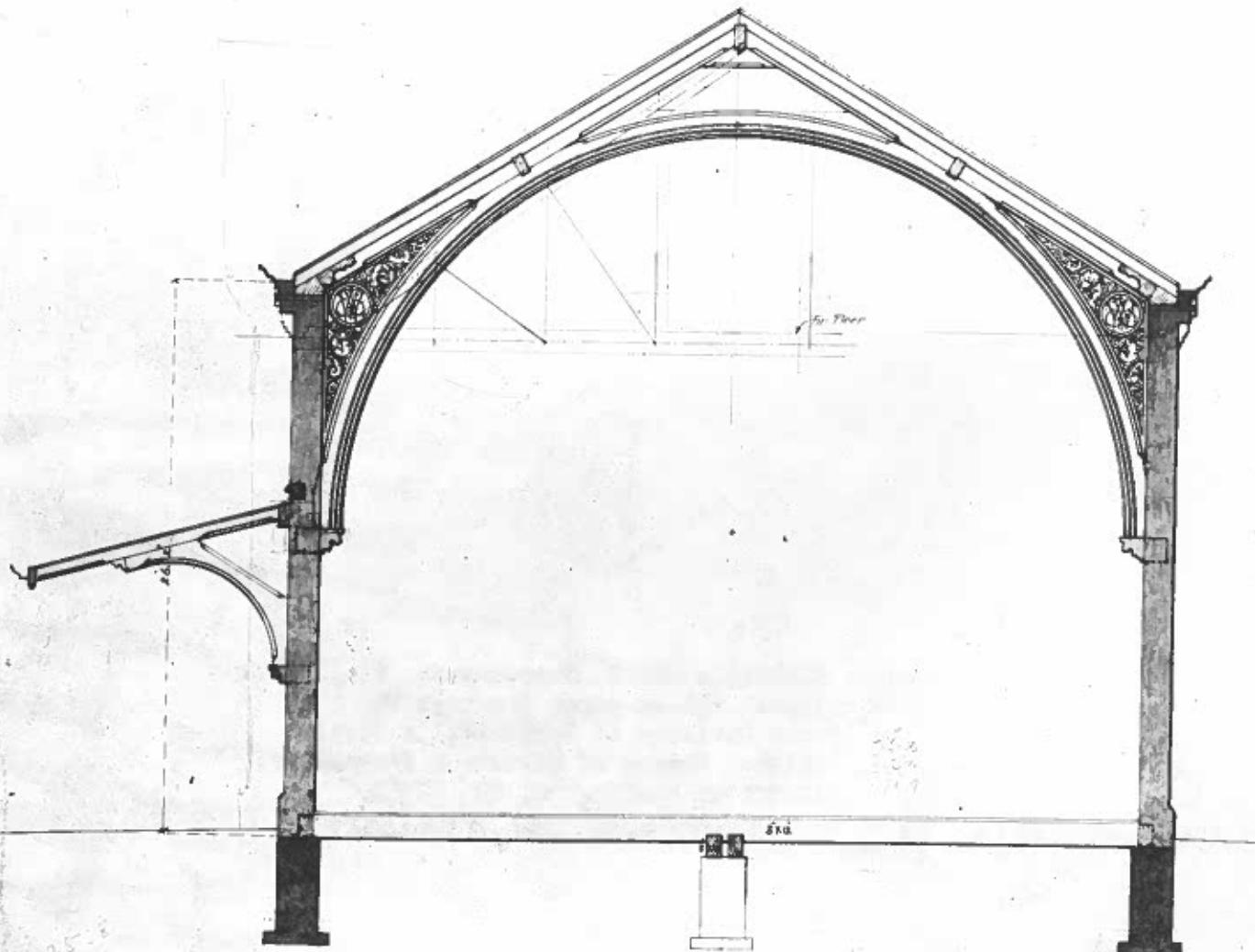
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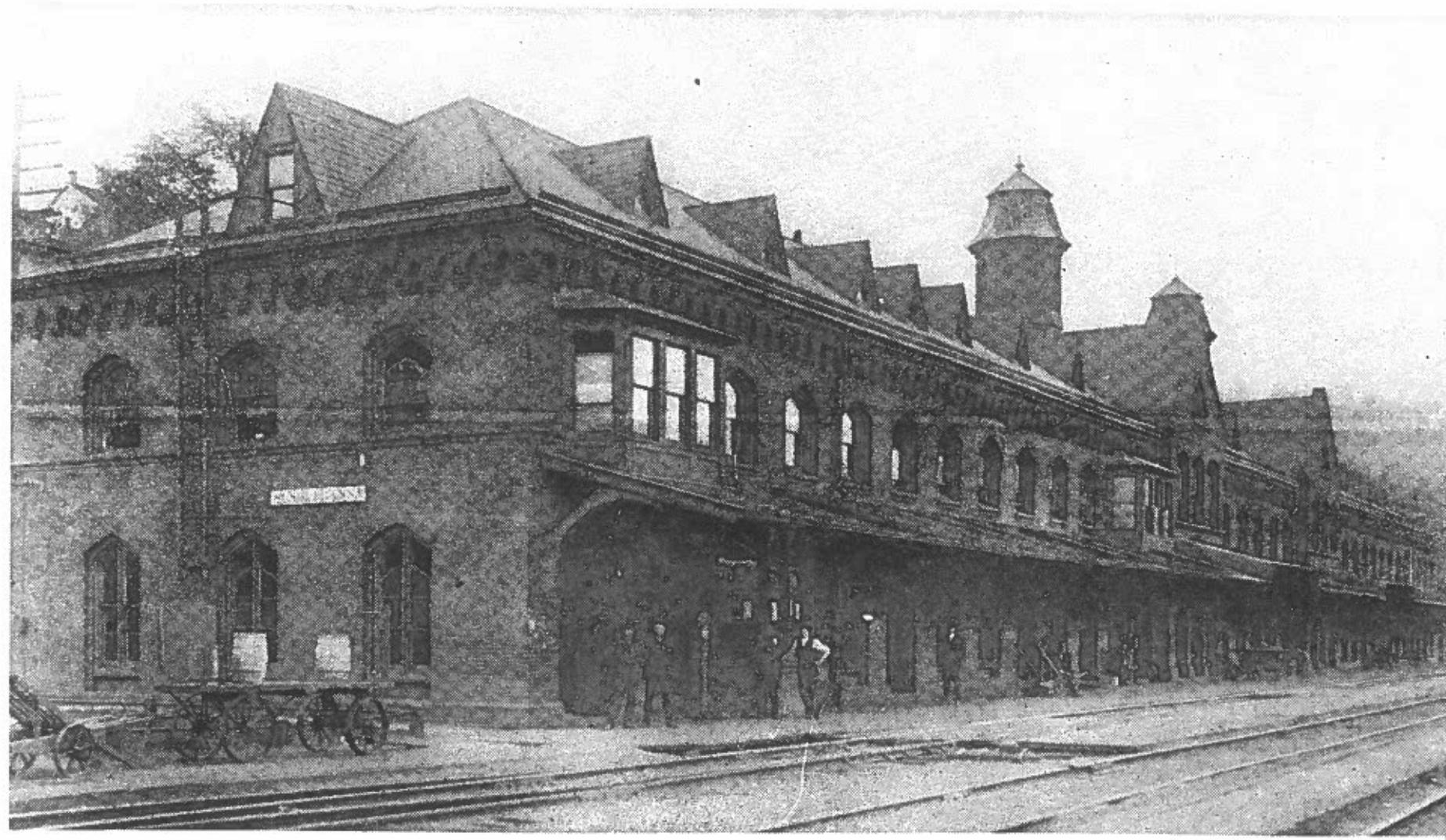
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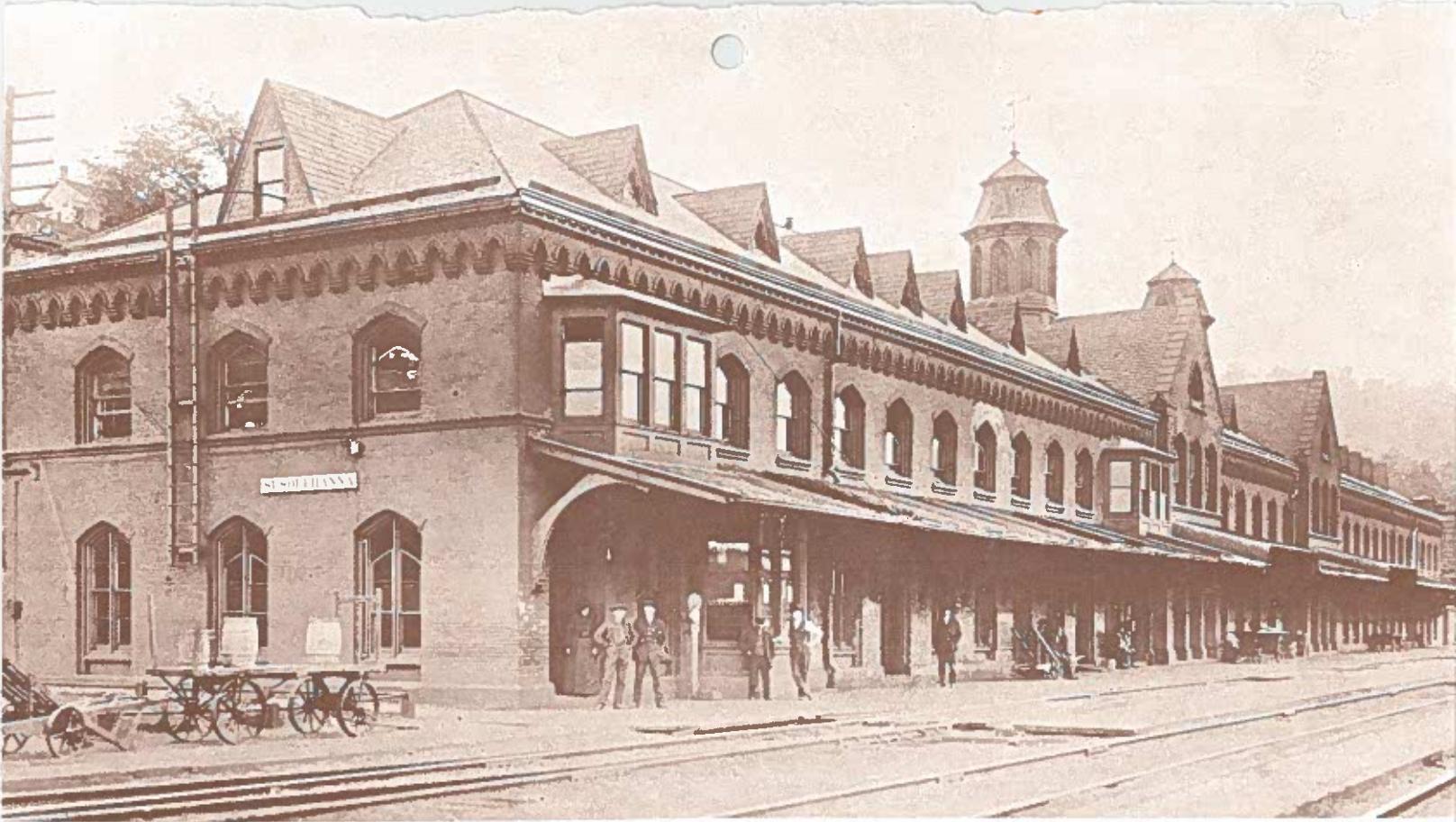


Passenger Station,  
Susquehanna, Pa.

Erie Railway. STARRUCCA HOUSE, Susquehanna, PA..  
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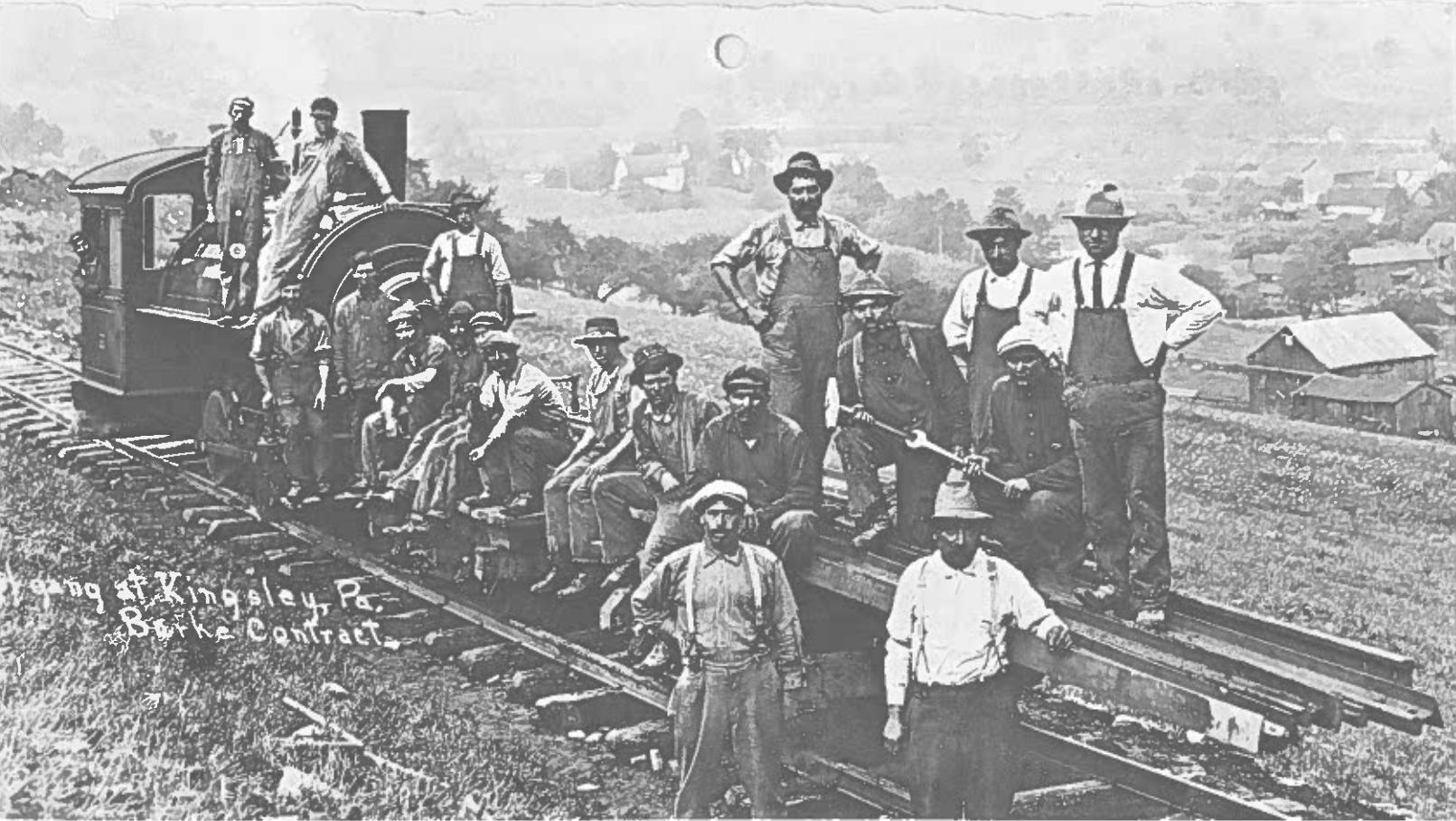


RMV

## Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania

### This Year's Calendar Theme: OUR HISTORIC RAILROADS

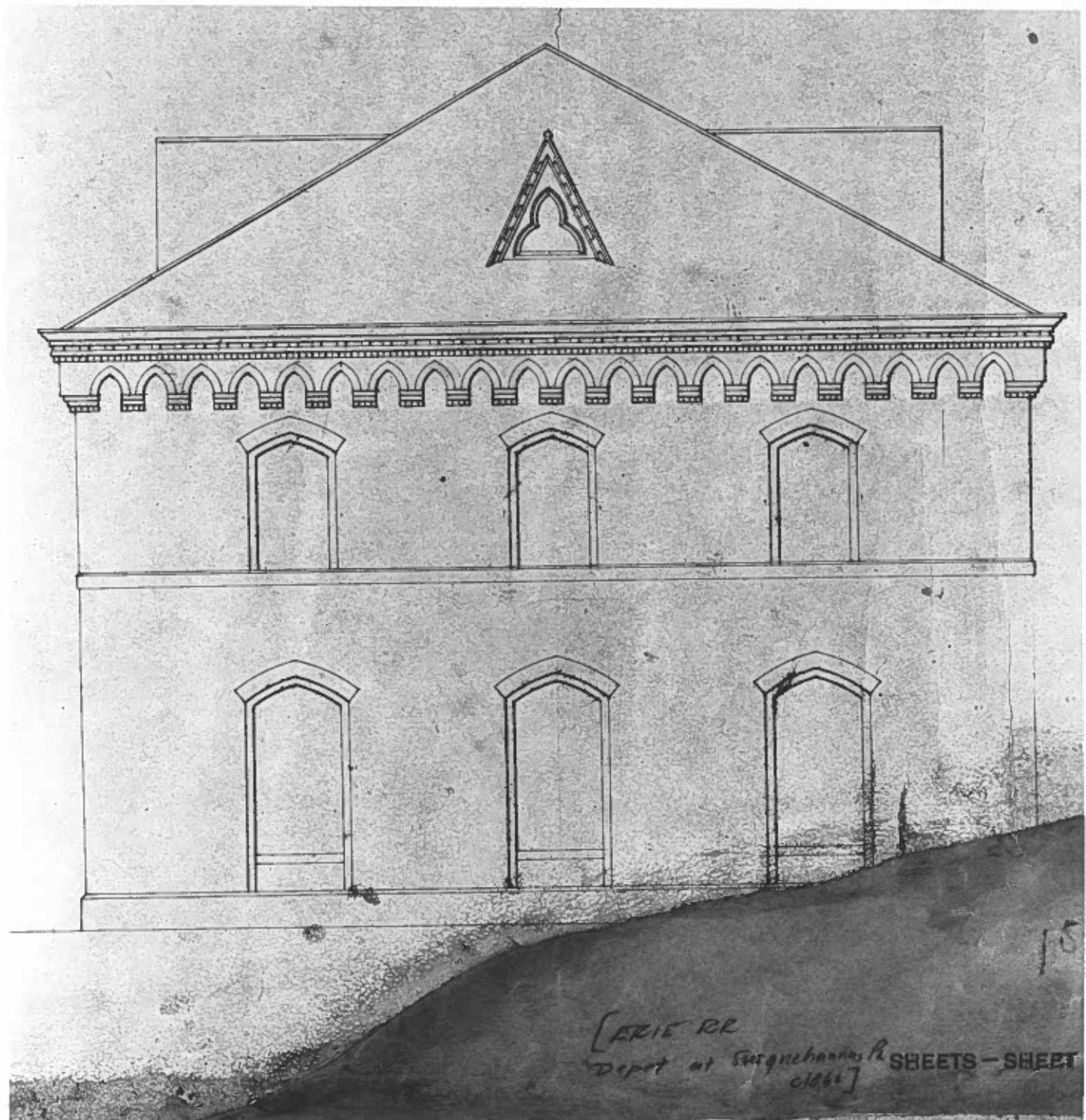
Susquehanna's Gothic brick Erie depot, shown as it appeared about 1910, is the nation's last outstanding example of a station-hotel. The hotel, the Starrucca House, was closed in 1903 and its great vaulted dining hall filled in. Susquehanna acquired the 110-year-old building in 1975 with a view to restoring it to its former grandeur.



## Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania

### This Year's Calendar Theme: OUR HISTORIC RAILROADS

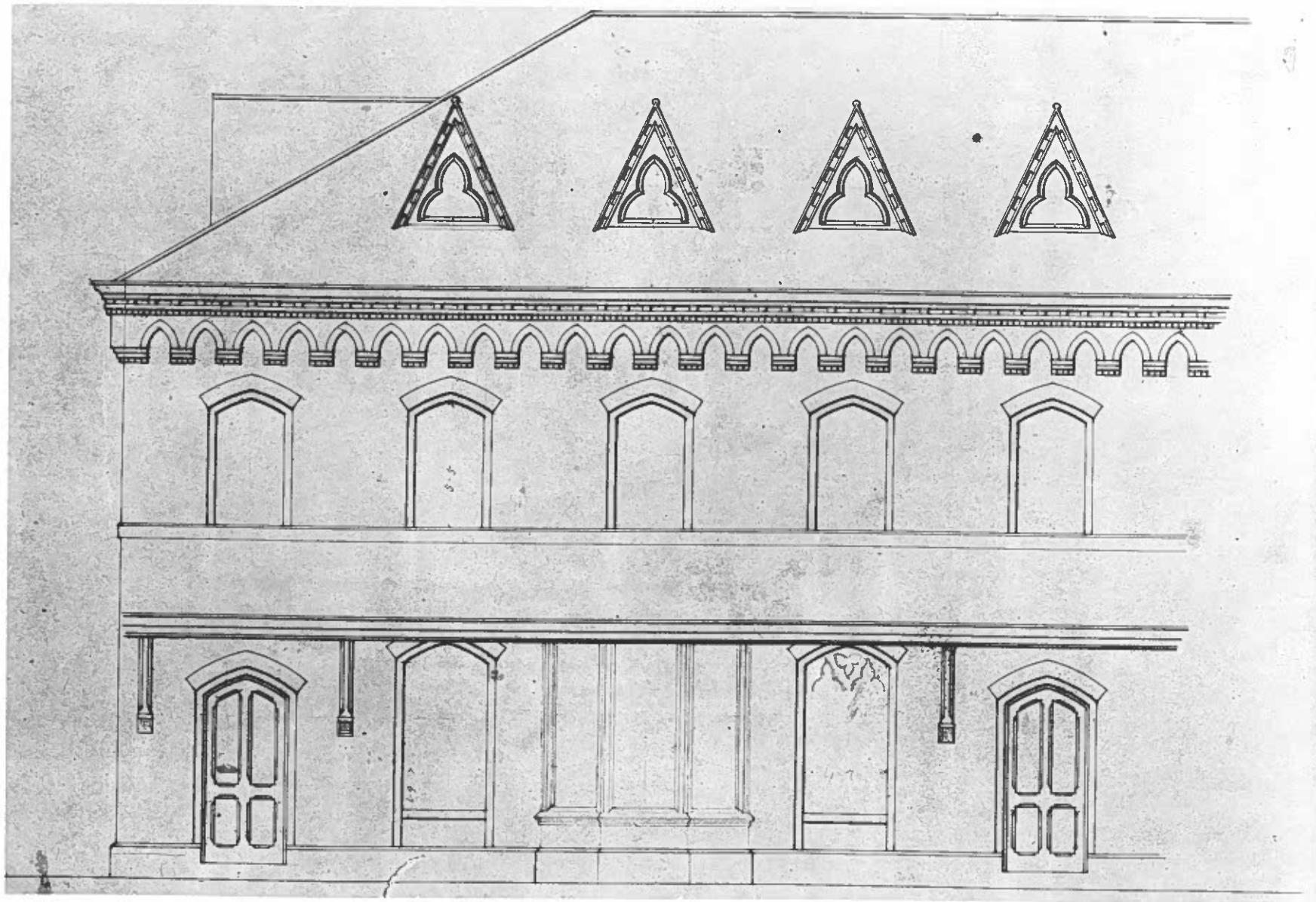
Among the greatest railway engineering achievements of the early twentieth century was the 39-mile cutoff opened by the Lackawanna from Clarks Summit to Hallstead in 1915 at a cost of 12 million dollars. Workmen for contractor Timothy Burke of Scranton pose at Kingsley with a dinkey train used to build the cutoff. *Photograph by Julian A. Campbell*



PRODUCE  
PURPLE

Erie Railway. STARRUCCA HOUSE, Susquehanna, PA.,  
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