

History of Renovo

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Transcribed by Stephen F. Miller Jr.

Its First Settlers – The Early Lumbering Interests of the Valley – The Phila. & Erie Railroad – When the Preliminary Surveys Were Made – The First Locomotive in 1862 – Erection of the Company's Shops – The Railroad Men of 1862 – Building of the Renovo Hotel – The P & E Land Company – Churches – Schools – Secret Societies – Business Men – Etc., Etc., Etc.

In the year 1825, that part of the Allegheny mountains lying west of Lock Haven, along the West Branch of the Susquehanna and its tributaries was sparsely settled, only here and there at the mouth of the streams was erected a small log tenement, as the humble home of the hardy woodsman. – Deer and elk were daily seen pasturing in the swamps and low lands along the river, while the howl of the wolf, the scream of the panther, wildcat and catamount were nightly heard from every mountain top.

About this time one William Baird left Jersey Shore and with canoe loaded with provisions and some household goods, pushed his way 28 miles west of Lock Haven and settled on the bank of the Susquehanna river, in a small house that had been built a short time before – with the intention of clearing up a farm.

A few years afterward he married Miss Margaret Stout, and the fruits of their marriage were several sons and daughters. By their untiring industry – on teaching manhood and womanhood – they made the spot selected, by the father, a beautiful and fertile farm, and despite the want of educational advantages by study, became a family of scholars above the average.

They continued to cultivate and beautify the farm, nothing occurring of not to change the monotony of farm life until the lumbering interests of this region became a source of profit. This business the young men engaged in heartily and every year were well rewarded for their hard labor.

As the valuable resources of this region became known to men of capital, they conceived the idea of constructing a railroad through this valley. The preliminary surveys were made about 1847, and some ten years thereafter the projected road from Sunbury to Erie was put under contract, the work commenced in the east and gradually pushed westward.

In - , 1862, the first whistle of the locomotive was heard entering Renovo, engineered by John Tomlinson. This brought the "construction train" with material for the road and supplies for the workmen.

The old inhabitants of the place hailed this new element as a harbinger of prosperity in as much as it would enable them to obtain not only the comforts but as the luxuries of life in a few hours, while heretofore only the former could be procured by the slow wagon by land or the primitive canoe on the Susquehanna, requiring days of patient toil to visit the nearest market town and return.

Aside from this their minds were greatly exercised with the pleasing thought that future developments would exhibit sources of untold wealth much of which has been already realized, indeed far beyond their most sanguine expectations.

The Railroad, now being a fixed fact, (and thus far a grand success), the laying of the track was pushed on towards Erie; the western terminus of the road; and though this great enterprise was yet in its infancy, it required no hoary prophet to foretell its rapid strides to wealth and power. As trade and travel sought the convenience of this thoroughfare east and west, substantial workshops became a necessity of course.

The P. & E. R. R. Co, after a thorough canvass of this portion of the line of road concluded to locate their machine shops, etc., on this "plateau," on which was the farm of the aforementioned William Baird.

Several influential gentlemen at this juncture organized the Philadelphia & Erie Land company, and purchased his farm transferring all that part of it lying north of the railroad tract to the P. & E. R. R. Co. which at once set about erecting their shops for the accommodation of the growing interests of the road. The round house was the first building commenced. The foundation stone was laid in August 1863. This work was carried on under the supervision of H. R. Campbell, a gentleman whom many will remember as having a full supply of electricity in his composition – the scintillations of which were often felt and seen by those around him.

At this time skillful and energetic mechanics and laborers were in demand. They came from all parts of the county by scores, and thus the work went on until the machine shops, storehouse, offices and wood departments were completed. Those buildings are built of brick, almost all of which were made upon the ground near the works.

About the time the railroad was completed through to Erie, the site on which Renovo now stands was made the eastern terminus of the Middle Division and Mr. J. J. Lawrence was the first Superintendent. He was a competent officer and a genial gentleman, resigning his position in 1865, regretted by all.

A. M. Cleaveland was the first train-master here. Wm. H. Ginter, the first dispatcher, and F. Petrikin, the first express and ticket agent. The latter gentleman still travels around with his canvas covered book under his arm, attending faithfully to the interests of the express company.

Harry Alford, as engineer, brought the first passenger train from the east, and W. L. Forster as engineer, the first one from the west. The

latter gentleman also ran the first engine into the round house. He is now General Forman of all the railroad shops here.

The railroad depot was finished in the latter part of the year 1865, and for size and convenience it is hardly excelled on any road in the State. It is 112x75 feet, and is built of brick.

In 1869 the Pennsylvania railroad company erected the Renovo House, a large and commodious brick hotel attached to the depot, 72x180 feet, and three stories high. – The interior is finished and furnished in the most modern style. The grounds around it are adorned with choice trees and shrubbery and three attractive trout pools – all gotten up with much taste and skill. There is no better place calculated as a summer resort than this for health and pleasure. The hotel is kept by Capt. W. H. May, an affable and accommodating gentleman, and one who knows how to keep a hotel. Capt. May was one of the first settlers. He kept the Otziuachson, the first hotel and boarding house in the town. It was erected in 1868, when there were but three houses in the place.

In this connection I would state that the depot and hotel stand on ground set apart for the purpose by the Land Company when the town was laid out. They are located at the west end of town, south of the railroad; and the enclosure contains several acres, including the ground on which the old Baird mansion stood.

Some time after the purchase of the farm, the Land Company proceeded to lay out lots and named the town Renovo, a name new and novel in the beginning but soon became a household word to many.

Early in 1864, Maj. G. J. Ball, a member of the P. & E. Land Company, a gentleman of education and fine business capacity, was made the agent of the company, and under his supervision they offered their lots for sale upon such easy terms that almost every man could establish a home for himself and family. Lots were eagerly bought and of necessity, houses – both small and great – sprung up side by side with the workshops.

Boarding houses were erected and at once filled a little fuller than their capacity would comfortably admit, as many now here can attest who partook of the hospitalities of the old Renovo House in its palmy days, when a bed for three “spoonneys” was a luxury and the unlucky one who lost his foothold at meal-time though himself fortunate if he got off with only bruised shins and a battered head.

Almost every house in town was a boarding house as late as 1865; about this time the U.S. Hotel was built by Jacob Von Ulrich. – Here many of the mechanics and roadmen were accommodated with board and lodging.

At this stage of prosperity and growth of the town, churches and schools were not forgotten.

There were some men here who believed that God had something to do with towns as well as individuals and Rev. (?) Rodall, Presbyterian minister, assisted by some good friends, erected a small chapel on the Common – the site is now on Fourth street – and dedicated it to God and free schools. It was occupied in common for a time, by the various religions elements but it soon proved too small to accommodate all, consequently Rev, J. B. Mann of the Methodist persuasion, who was never far behind any one else conceived the idea of building a chapel of like dimensions, and with the aid of a few friends of the cause, in labor and money, the building 24x80 feet, was erected and appropriately dedicated. The church building now stands on Seventh Street and is still used for school purposes.

From these small beginnings the Presbyterian and Methodist congregations grew and strengthened until 1867, at which time they were both able to build commodious and substantial brick churches, ornaments to our youthful town, and a credit to our enterprising citizens.

The Catholic congregation here is quite large. They have built a fine chapel and a beautiful residence for their pastor, and have secured an

eligible plot of ground on which they mean to build a large and elegant church.

Miss Brown taught the first public school in Renovo, and Miss M. A. Heverly the second. Both these young ladies were fully competent to teach the usual branches of learning taught in the public schools, as well as most of the higher branches. I had the pleasure of frequently visiting the school of the latter lady, and during those visits I noticed that she possessed, in a high degree, that admirable faculty of governing her pupils with a grace and ease that always commands obedience and respect. I think that the farthest advanced of the “strong minded” of the present day, would have readily admitted that her education in that regard had not been neglected.

Miss Heverly is a graduate of Mt. Washington Seminary, Md. Her capacity to impart to the juveniles the virtue and power of a fine education is an honorable tribute to her Alma Mater.

In the early part of 1865, the R. R. Co. erected a row of double dwelling houses on 6th street accommodating twelve families. As late as the close of that year there were less than a dozen houses east of that street, now there are over two hundred. The following year they put up – principally for the officers and foreman of the shops and road – a number of fine and commodious dwellings in that romantic glen north of the railroad at the base of the mountain, beside the still waters of “Swampoodle.”

From this period the rapid growth of Renovo commenced; property increased in value and soon the fields around the town were dotted with houses and the streets were filled with an industrious, energetic and prosperous population, numbering in 1870, over 2,000 – at present estimated at from 2,600 to 3,000. This sufficiently indicates the rapidity of its growth, which is more rapidly known than at any former period.

In the Spring of 1866, Renovo was chartered a corporate borough, and on the (20th?) of May, the first election for town officers was held, and the following named gentlemen elected:

Chief Burgess – Capt. J. S. Hall

Councilmen – Jacob Givler, Patrick Shelley, J. Y. Rothrock, W. H. May,
Peter Quinn

Constables – Wm. Hartzig, D. M. May, (Bor.)

Justices of the Peace – W. P. Baird, John Reilley

School Directors – P.C. Moyer, James Murphy, J.S. Hall, W.P. Baird,
Joseph Whitby, M. Forbes

Overseers of the Poor – Dr. S. Reynolds, R. Walthall

Judge of Election – Joseph Whitby

Inspectors – W. H. May, J.B. Given

Auditor – J. R. Kendig.

The officers at this election were:

Judge of Election – Joseph Whitby

Inspectors – J. D. Glenn, A. Shenfelt

Clerks – N. L. Irvin, E. Metz

Under the administration of the “borough fathers” of 1869 and ’70, the principal avenues and streets were graded and board walks laid. The ordinance passed lately by the Town Council requiring all property holders to comply with the charter regulations in making and keeping in repair their side walks, has been promptly acted upon by many.

Our old and much esteemed townsman, Nather Sterner, has been the pioneer in putting down brick pavement. We hope our citizens will follow his example and thereby have in front of their houses solid and substantial pavements.

The first dealers in merchandise in Renovo were Messrs. Lowe & Munday. They started business in 1863 and soon afterward sold out to Messrs. Newton Wells and Z. M. P. Baird – the latter was our first Postmaster and the former is now our gentlemanly and obliging “public functionary.” The storehouse occupied by Wells & Baird was erected on the bank of the river in 1863 and was subsequently moved to its present site on Erie avenue. The basement is occupied by Mr. D. M. May and kept as a Grocery and Variety Store, while in the upper story may be

found the printing establishment of the Renovo Record and the "*sanctum sancternm*" of its gentlemanly editor.

In 1864 the firm of Wells & Baird changed into that of Wells, Murphy and Co., and afterwards to James Murphy & Co.

J. B. Givin & Son commenced business here in the latter part of 1865 – the business being carried on by George W. Givin.

About two years ago a Co-operative store was started in the name of G. W. Sapp & Co. They now occupy the large and beautiful storeroom under the Odd Fellows Hall. After the 1st of January 1872, they will do business under a charter – Obtained in May last – in the name of the "Renovo Industrial Co-operative Association, No 1."

The stores above named keep a general assortment of goods and are among the leading business houses of the town.

In addition to these there are six Dry Good, six Grocery and Confectionery stores, six Millinery and Dress-making establishments; one Tobacco and Cigars, and two first-class Drug Stores; three Merchant Tailors, two Bakeries; two Meat Markets, one Store and Tin Ware establishment, one Furniture store, one Banking House, a News Office and a large and well-selected Public Library and Reading Room. There is a Town Hall, an Odd Fellows Hall, a Masonic Hall, a Building and Loan Association; and among our interesting institutions, we have a Cornet Band and although only active a few months its members have arrived at a high degree of proficiency in the musical art.

The town supports six graded Schools, nine Secret Societies, three Physicians, one Lawyer, and strange as unusual as it may seem, but one able-bodied loafer.

The Secret Societies referred to are as follows:

Masonic Order,
Independent Order of Odd Fellows,
Patriotic Order Sons of America,
Independent Order of Good Templars,

Knights of Pythias,
Machinists and Blacksmiths Union,
United Order of American Mechanics,
Supreme Mechanical Order of the Sun,
And the delectable order of the "Johns?"

This being a "Railroad town" the inhabitants thereof are, of necessity, a working people; the substantial growth of the town the comfortable homes established, and the wonderful improvements made in the short period of eight years are highly creditable to them and suggestive of determined energy and enterprise.

Nor do they intend to stop here while there are other sources of wealth and improvement lying almost at their doors – True, the land on the other side has been set up edgewise and is not well calculated for farming purposes – a fact, I think, that even Mr. Greeley would endorse without trying the experiment. The surface indications would most likely, be sufficient evidence to satisfy his philosophical mind. Yet in the ponderous bosom of these grand old hills there are millions of wealth inviting capital and skilled labor to develop it.

Then there are never-failing streams of water on the borders of our borough, sufficiently large enough to drive all kinds of manufacturing establishments. Drury's Run on the west and Paddy's run on the east empty into the Susquehanna.

The derivation of these names are not known, but were probably named in honor of the earliest settlers on those steams.

We need not look beyond this romantic region for the sublime and magnificently beautiful natural scenery of Spring and Autumn nor for exciting legendary tales of the olden times.

A story has been handed down from the early settlers that a fierce battle was fought on the high ground, about a mile north of this, between Revolutionary home guard and the Indians, in which the noted chief Rattlesnake was killed.

At that early period this region was a howling wilderness and with a few exceptions the Indian held undisputed sway. – Here the silent tread of “Mr. Lo” was heard, on the war path; here he bent his bow while the arrow sped with sure aim to the heart of his victim; here too, he nimbly paddled his bark canoe on the beautiful waters of the Susquehanna.

Where is he now? Gone in obedience to the demands of advancing civilization! No longer does the woodbine twine its wreaths around his rude wigwam; his war-whoop is here no longer heard, but on the extreme western conflues of his “native land” his is found, battling for the last remnant of his natural possessions.