

Rails and Ales: Immigrant Opportunities in Renovo, Pennsylvania, 1880 - 1920s

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The establishment of the borough of Renovo, Pennsylvania is credited to its unique geography. Located on the Susquehanna River and nestled in the Allegheny Mountains, Renovo attracted a diverse population over the last 150 years, especially at the turn of the 20th century. Its central location in the heart of Pennsylvania convinced the Philadelphia & Erie Railroad Company to purchase the land at the base of the mountains north of the Susquehanna, which would eventually become the town of Renovo. Needing a place to build repair shops for their trains, the Philadelphia & Erie Land Company, an organization of Philadelphia philanthropists with ties to the Philadelphia & Erie Railroad, purchased the land that had once been sparsely-populated farmland in 1863. The company also chose the name

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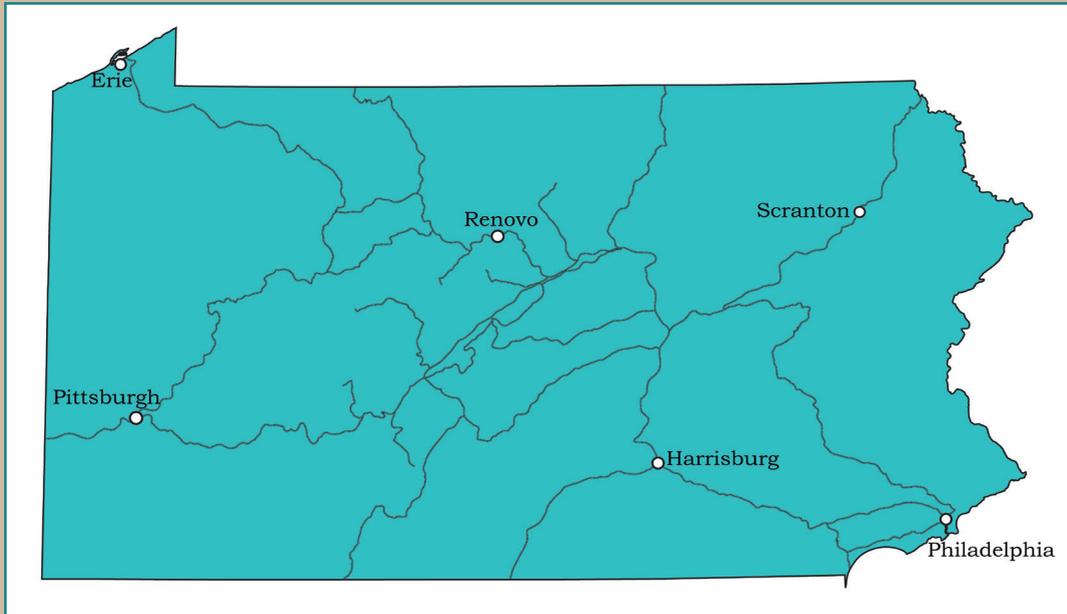


Fig. 1
Map of railroad connections to Renovo based on The Pennsylvania Department of Internal Affairs' "Rail Road Map of Pennsylvania" (1895). This map reflects the central location of Renovo that attracted the Philadelphia & Erie Railroad Company in 1863. The establishment of Renovo as a railroad town allowed for easy transportation both in and out of town. At the turn of the 20th century one could easily travel to and from Renovo via train, as this map of railroad tracks all connect to Renovo at some point.

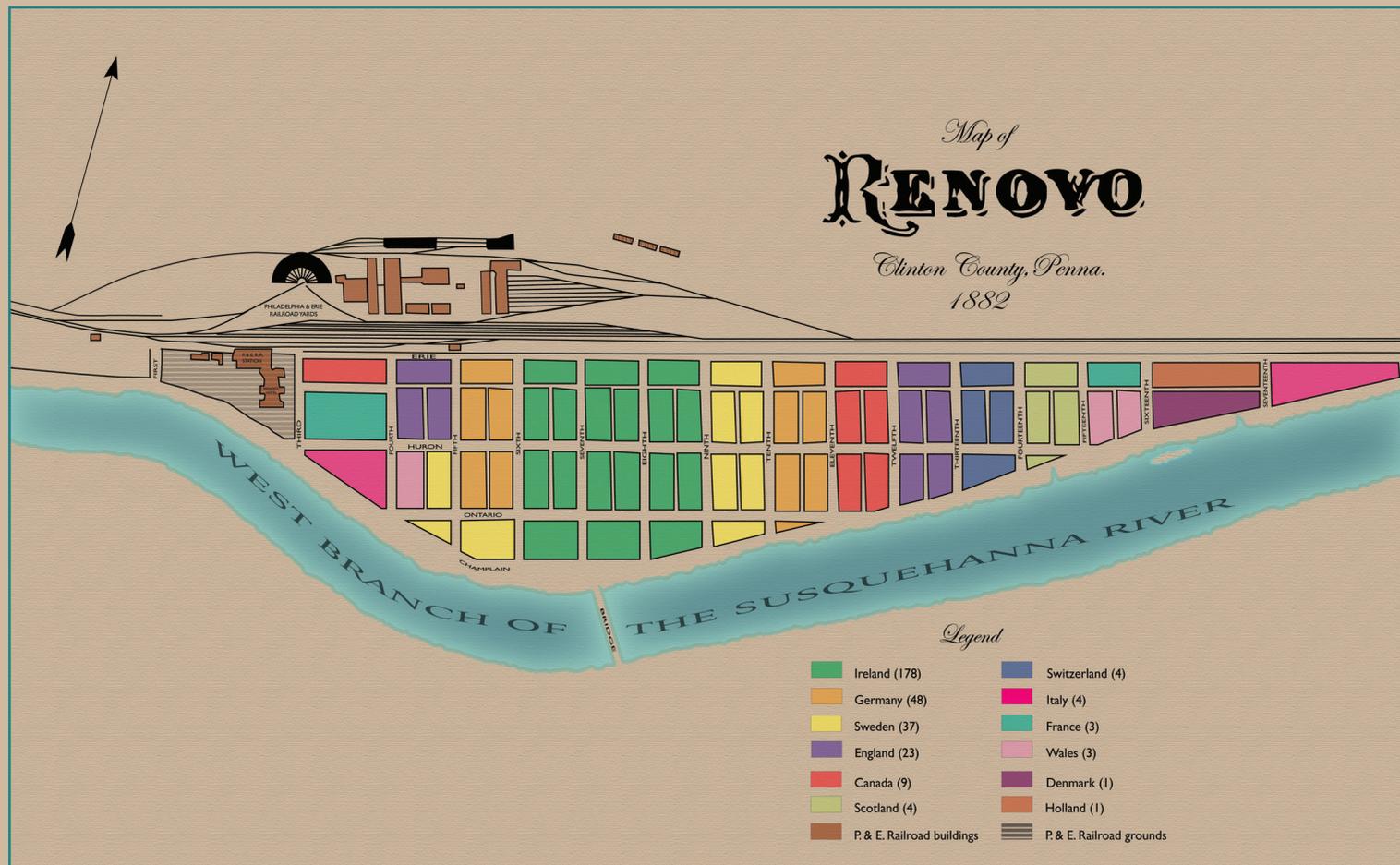


Fig. 2

Thematic map of immigration distribution in Renovo, based on census data from 1880.

This digitally enhanced map of from 1882 reflects the diverse population of the borough of Renovo, in 1880. The borough was divided into two wards: First Ward was the east end of town, from the east side of Seventh Street, Second Ward began on the west side of Seventh Street. The amount of color distributed in the blocks reflects the amount of immigrants in each ward. Each color represents a country of birth and can be identified in the legend on the right-hand side of this map.

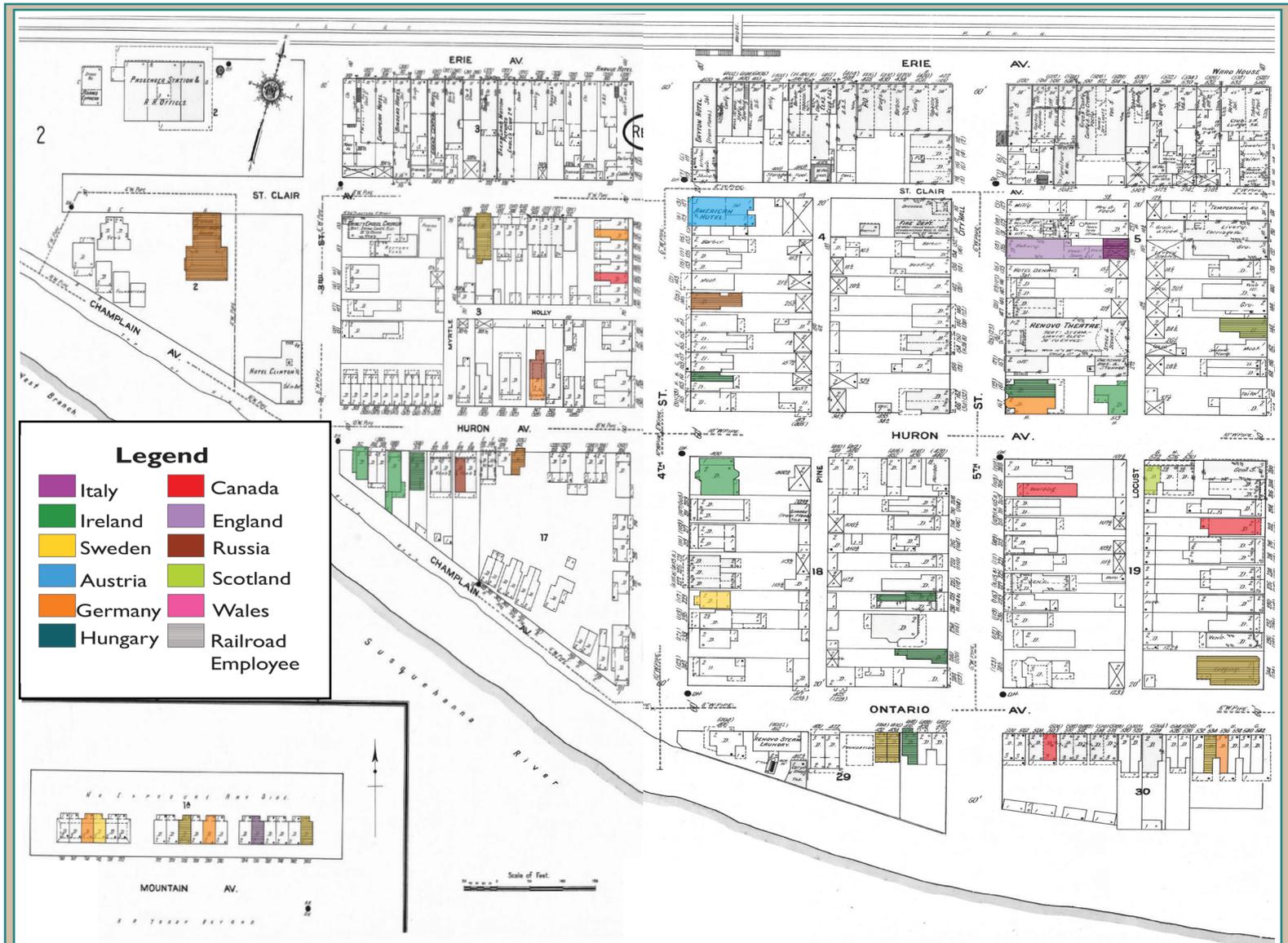
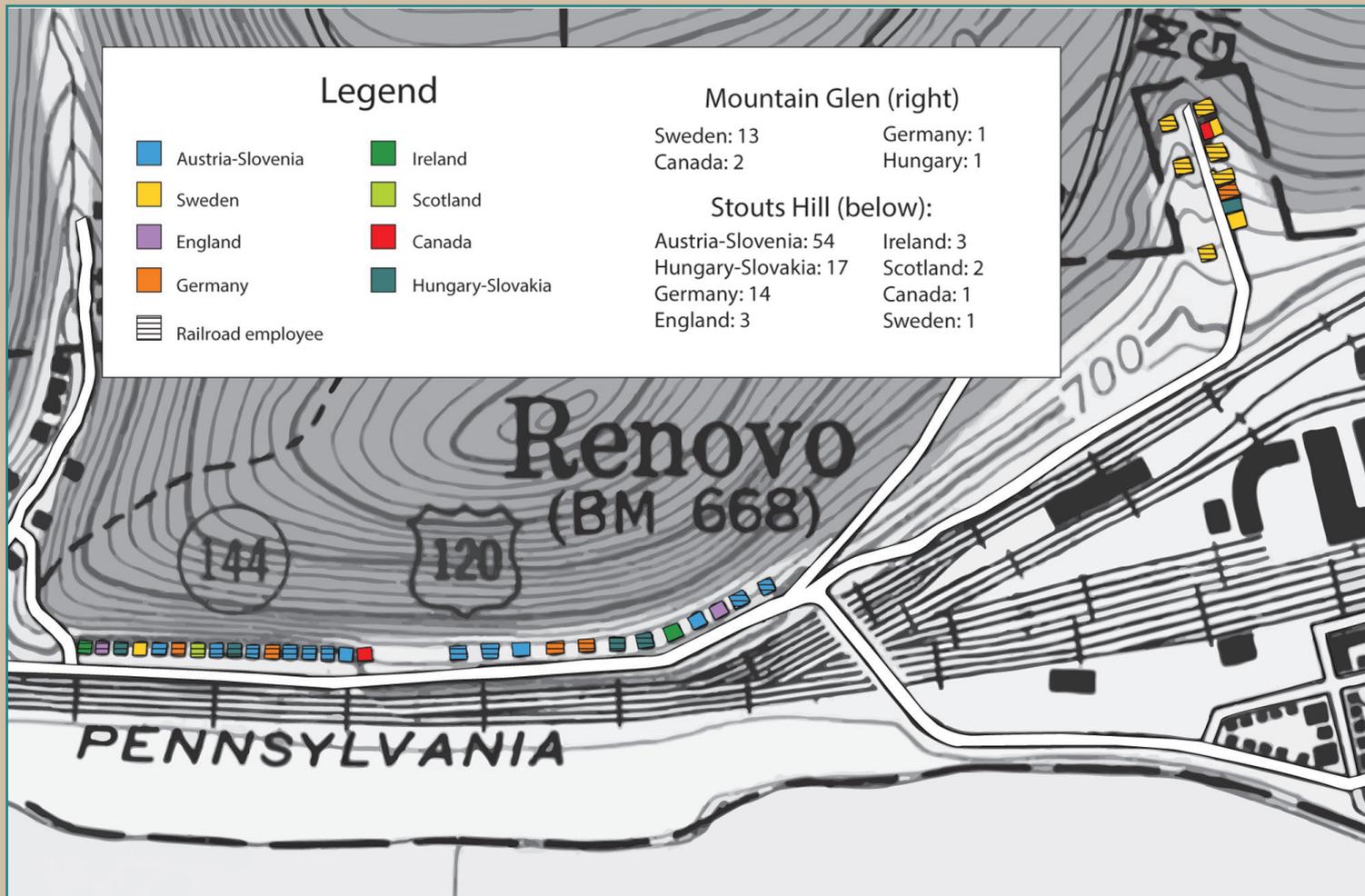


Fig. 3 (above): Map of immigrant residences in Renovo based on 1910 census data (west end), plotted on 1911 Sanborn Map. The map is color-coded to reflect the home countries of each foreign-born resident. The section labeled "Mountain Av." above was located across the tracks behind the railyards.

Fig. 4 (below): Digitally enhanced map of area west of Renovo featuring immigrants living in Mountain Glen and Stouts Hill. Austrian-Slovenians and Hungarian-Slovakians dominated the hillside homes, which no longer exist due to the rerouting of state highways Rt. 144 & Rt. 120.



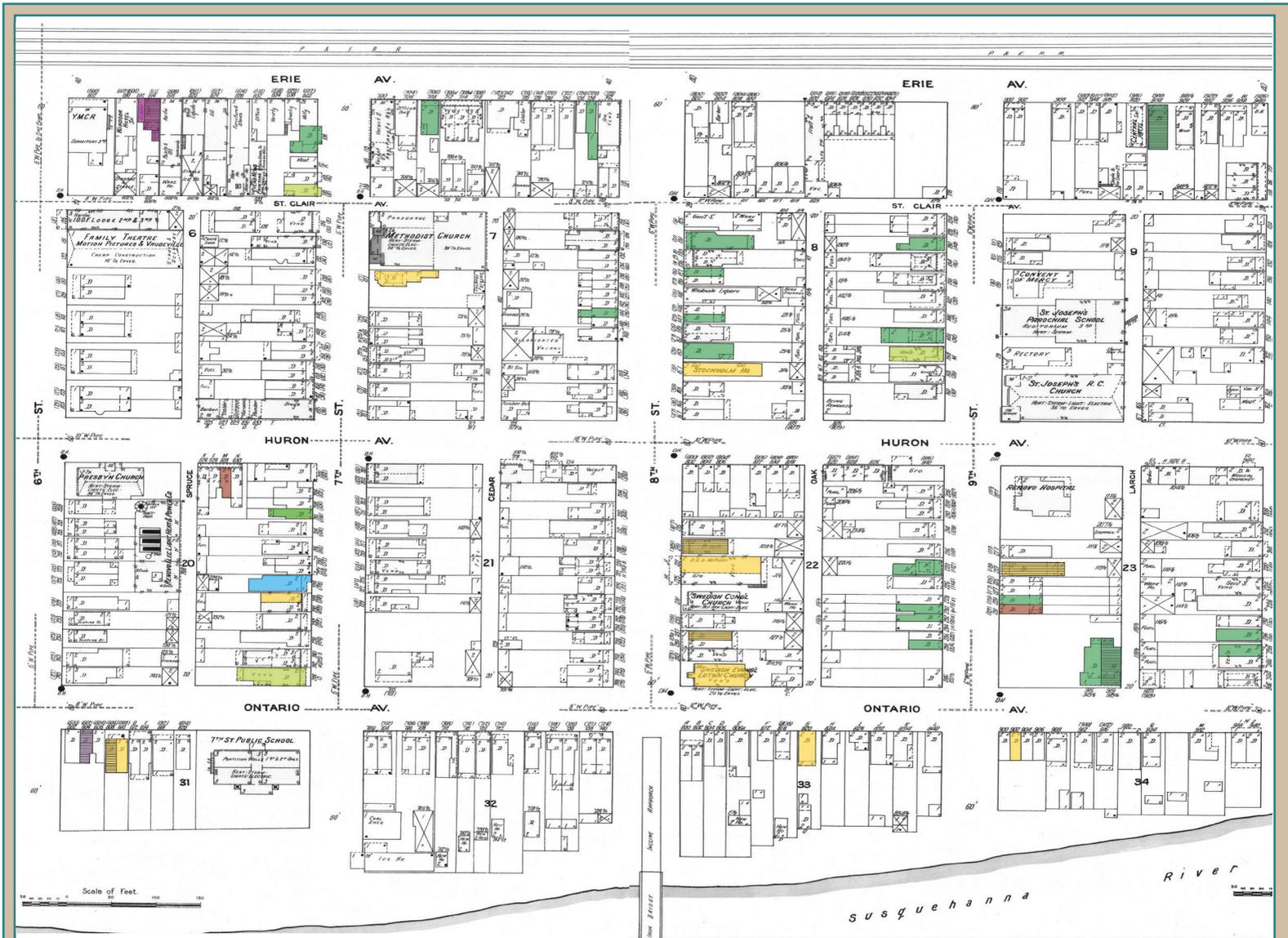
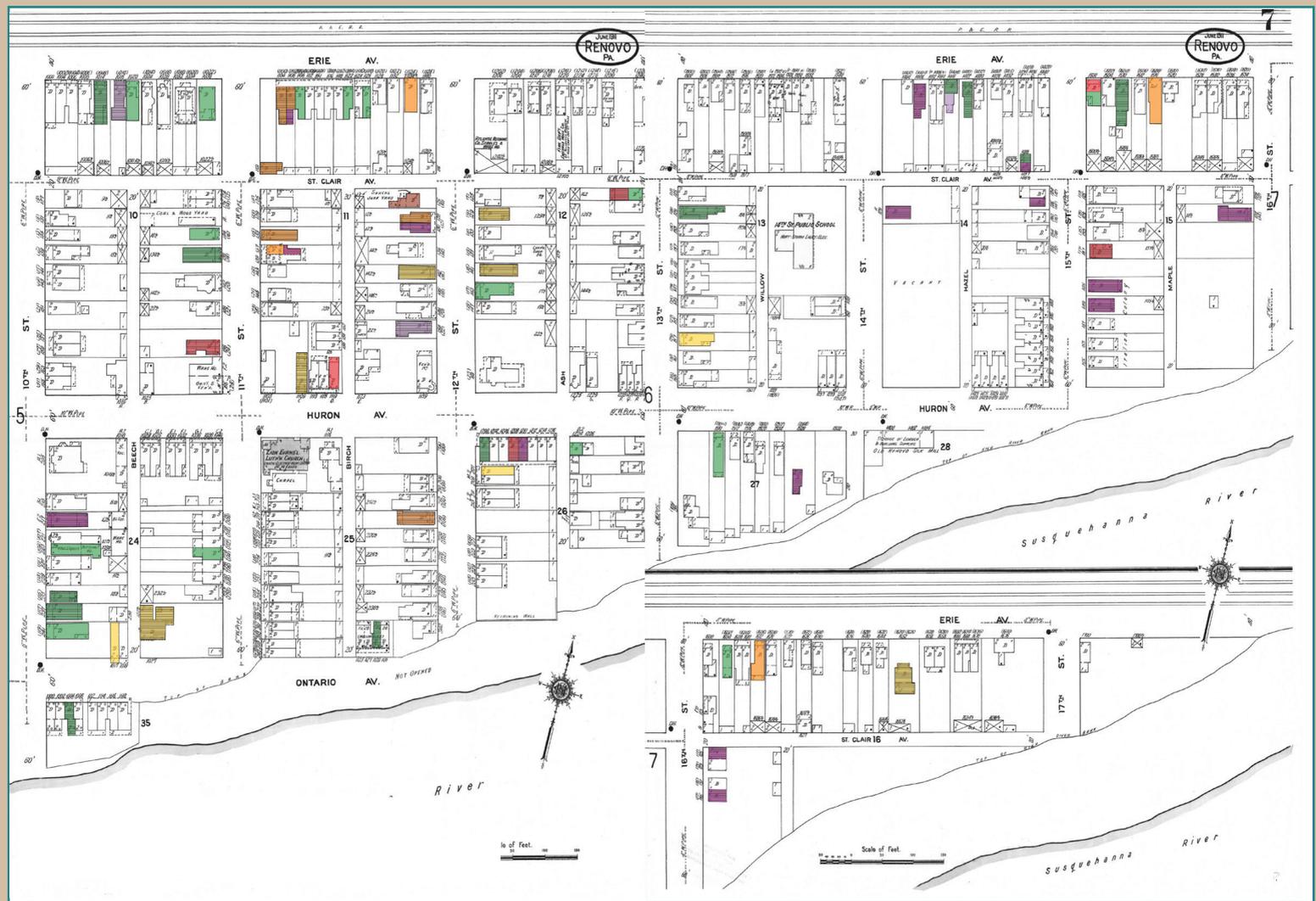


Fig. 5 (above): Middle section of Renovo, continued from Fig. 3 showing a large concentration of Irish immigrants between 8th and 10th Streets.

Fig. 6 (below): East end of Renovo, continued from Fig. 5 with a diverse distribution of non-native born residents.



of Renovo, as its Latin translation meant, “to restore” or renew and would become incorporated in 1866. This fitting title referenced the P. & E.’s intentions to repair or rebuild trains in the town. By 1872 the land company had sold all of the lots within the 1.13 square miles of Renovo, as an influx of railroad workers and their families migrated to the new town and required housing.¹ This railroad town would see a steady growth in population until the Great Depression, with an initial jump in 1870 of 1,940 residents to 3,708 in 1880.

Many of these railroad employees, as well as those who merely saw opportunity in providing goods and



Fig. 7 (Above): Blacksmith shop railroad employees, c. 1900. Many immigrants found work in Renovo as laborers, carpenters, blacksmiths, boilermakers, and other jobs. Photo from Short’s The History of Renovo, Pennsylvania (1866-1925), digitally enhanced by author.

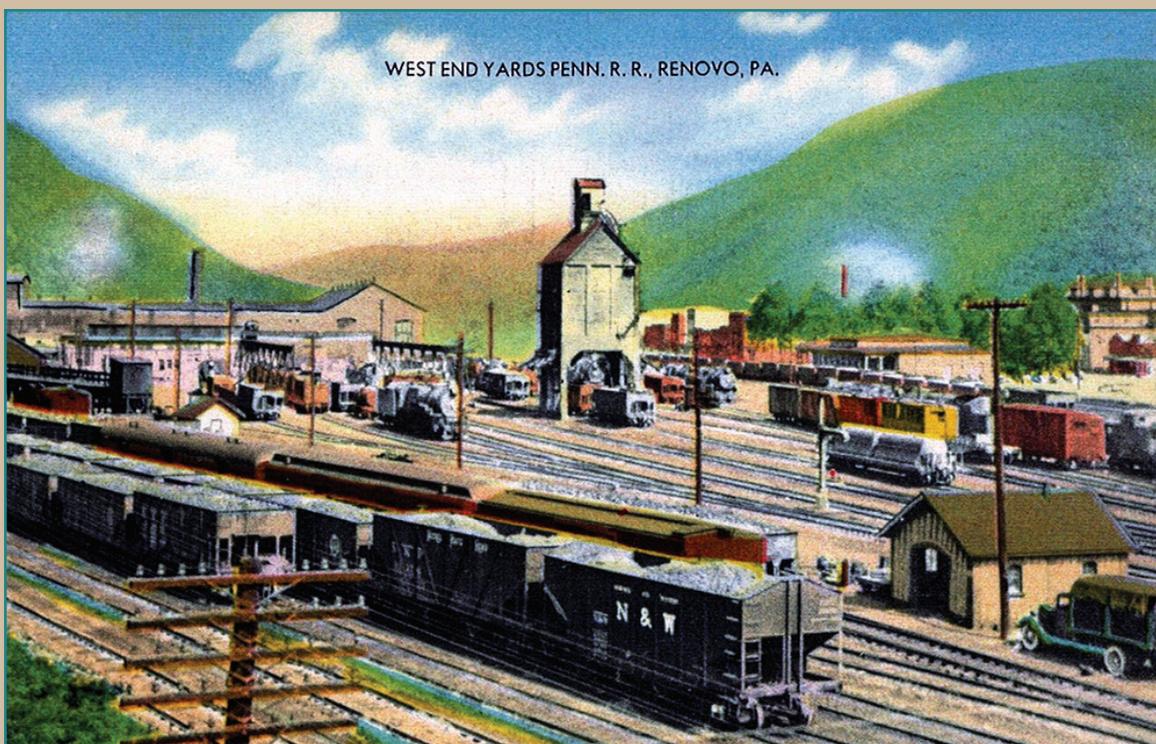


Fig. 8 (left) Post card of Renovo’s west end railyards, c. 1910s. Image from author’s collection.

services to these employees, came not only from outside of the general area, but from a wide range of European countries. By 1880, a total of 315 residents were listed as being born in a foreign country, which was 8.5% of the town’s total population. Out of the 315 residents, 198 were employed in some fashion with 150 of the workers being employed by the railroad. The largest group of immigrants in Renovo at this time came from Ireland, with 178 Irish residents, followed by 48 from Germany. Swedish and English immigrants numbered 37 and 23, respectively.² By 1883, the total number of railroad employees (native and foreign born) amounted to 703. This was also the year that electricity was installed in all of the workshops in Renovo, just a year after Edison had opened his first “central electric-light power plant” in New York City.³

The number of immigrants in Renovo grew as the general population did as well. By 1910, Renovo’s population numbered 4,621, with 8.7%

or 404 of residents having been born in another country. Out of the 216 employed, 186 immigrants worked for the railroad. Out of all the residents, the majority of immigrants came from Italy in 1910 with 87, followed by Ireland with 83, Sweden with 73 and Germany at 42. Compared with 1880, immigrants from Austria, Hungary, and Russia had migrated to Renovo by 1910, reflecting larger national trends in immigration at the time.

Other Opportunities

While the railroad dominated the economic situation of Renovo by employing most of its foreign-born residents, there were other options available for immigrants to cash in on. Merchants, tailors, shoemakers, and hotelkeepers were also viable career paths for those not interested or able to do the demanding physical labor that the railroad industry required. One such merchant was Samuel Gunzberg, who had emigrated from Russia in the 1860s to the United

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States. Samuel Gunzberg leased a building at 332 Erie Avenue in 1894 to open “Gunzberg’s Star Clothing House” which he would operate until 1907. At that point, Ricca Gunzberg (most likely a relative of Samuel’s), bought and demolished the old wood frame building and built a new brick building in its place. The new store was renamed “R. Gunzberg, Clothier, Tailor and Furnisher” and was managed by Isaac S. Gunzberg, Samuel’s son.⁴ With a prime location just a few doors down from the railroad’s passenger station, Gunzberg undoubtedly profited from travelers and residents alike.

A more notable immigrant to find success in Renovo due to its location was Luke Binder, who owned both a brewery and a hotel in town. Luke Binder was born in Germany in 1844 and immigrated to the United States with his family at the age of seven with his parents and older siblings.⁵ The Binder family settled in Carrolltown in Cambria County, roughly 100 miles southwest of Renovo. In Carrolltown, Luke’s father was a shoemaker, which would have been Luke’s trade if he had stayed in Carrolltown, as he was listed as an apprentice in the 1860 Federal Census.⁶ As child Luke attended public school and then studied at St. Vincent College in Latrobe, Pennsylvania.⁷ From Carrolltown, Luke went to nearby Johnstown where he worked at the rolling mills, then on to Altoona. There he learned the craft of brewing beer and in 1871 married his wife, Maximiliana (Mary) Endress, who was also born in Germany. The following year Luke would purchase an existing brewery in Renovo and operate it under the name “Binder’s Brewery,” and subsequently purchase a hotel at 312 Erie Avenue in 1887, just few doors up from Gunzberg’s future clothing store.

The location of the brewery about three-quarters of a mile west of Renovo proper was instrumental in its success. Touting its use of fresh spring water from Brewery Run, Binder’s Brewery had a slogan of, “It’s pure.” The purchase of a hotel was an added benefit to Binder. The hotel’s saloon was an ideal place to sell his beer, especially as his brewery was the only one in town. Railroad workers, out of town visitors, and anyone who needed a beer found the



Fig. 9 (top): Top image: Scene from 1912 of the 300 block of Erie Avenue in Renovo. Buildings were decorated to celebrate the 93rd anniversary of the Odd Fellows of America. (Short, 346). Photo from author’s collection.

Fig. 10 (bottom): The second image is a 3D creation by the author using a 1911 Sanborn Insurance map and the software, SketchUp. The first image provided architectural details for the digital version.

Binder House to be a convenient location on Erie Avenue.

Upon Binder’s death in 1897, the brewery went to Edward L. Binder, Luke’s son. The death of Luke Binder was lamentable for the town, as his obituary stated, “Renovo Loses One of Its Most Valuable and Active Citizens” and mentioned the he was also a “prominent stockholder and director of the First National Bank” at one point. At the time of his death from liver disease, Binder was also president of the Edison Electric Light Company. His obituary also claimed he had a preference for employing local people over “outsiders,” and was a “great friend of the town and its people.”⁸ His preference for hiring locals was interesting, as Binder was once an outsider himself.

Legacy of Immigrants

Many immigrants made Renovo their home and stayed to raise their families. As the railroad industry left Renovo, many families followed its path. In 2010, Renovo’s population was 1,228, slightly lower than the population in 1870.⁹ While the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that a total of only nine

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Fig. 11: 3D image of Erie Avenue with key to buildings from 1911. The businesses along Erie Avenue flourished as they faced the railyards on the opposite side of the street. Workers and visitors to the area provided a steady stream of revenue for these businesses, some owned by immigrants, such as the Binder House & Saloon owned by Luke Binder. Image created by author.

residents were born outside the United States as of 2014, many of the families in Renovo today have roots in those that immigrated from Europe in 1880 – 1920.

References:

1. Wayne E. Short, *The History of Renovo, Pennsylvania (1866-1925)*, vol. 1 (Lock Haven, PA: Reese's Print Shop, 2003), 9.
2. United States Census Bureau, "Federal Decennial Census, 1880: Renovo, Clinton County, Pennsylvania," 1880.
3. Homer Tope Rosenberger, *The Philadelphia and Erie Railroad: Its Place in American Economic History* (Potomac, Md: Fox Hills Press, 1975), 458.
4. Short, *The History of Renovo, Pennsylvania (1866-1925)*, 1:271.
5. "Death of Luke Binder," *The Renovo Record*, May 7, 1897.
6. United States Census Bureau, "Federal Decennial Census, 1860: Carrolltown, Cambria County, Pennsylvania," July 27, 1860, 184.
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8. "Death of Luke Binder."
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