

# The Riedesels, Freiherren zu Eisenbach

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This page serves as an introduction to the Riedesel Freiherren (Barons) of Lauterbach/Hessen for the benefit of the English-speaking reader. Within the United States, the best known member of this family is no doubt General Friedrich Adolph Riedesel, Freiherr zu Eisenbach (1738-1800) who led a contingent of German troops on behalf of the British during the American Revolutionary War. As will be clear, there is no provable blood relationship between the General, his family and any of the Riedesel families in North America today. The latter all descend from a line of peasant farmers in the counties of Wittgenstein and surrounding areas.

Most of my account is based on a 1961 history written by Dr. Karl Siegmund Baron von Galéra entitled *Vom Reich zum Rheinbund: Weltgeschichte des 18. Jahrhunderts in einer kleinen Residenz* (Degener & Company, Neustadt an der Aisch). He worked from the extensive archives of the Riedesel family in Lauterbach. I also draw on a few other documents and personal correspondence.

## Origins

The Riedesels trace their origins to Ritter (Knight) Dietmar Riedesel who was born around 1200 and is first mentioned in a document of 1226. Two men who are presumed to be brothers--Ludwig and Ortwin--follow, but it is unknown if they were the sons or grandsons of Dietmar. One of them--most likely Ortwin--had a son, Johann, who is the ancestor of all who followed. The family was then based at Melsungen, which is north of Lauterbach. There were other Riedesel men-at-arms who are documented in medieval history who were not part of the lineage that was eventually based around the town of Lauterbach. The author believes that the Riedesels of Wittgenstein descend from these "other" Riedesels, not the progeny of Ritter Johann. A German cousin and I have published an extensive article exploring these connections, and it is available in both the original German and an English version in the Riedesel Document Library.

One of the most important figures in the family tree was Ritter Hermann Riedesel (mentioned in documents from 1407-1463). He took possession of the "castle" (*Schloß*) Eisenbach, and the territory surrounding it around 1430. Hermann was also the first Erbmarschall (hereditary Marshall) of Hesse amongst the Riedesels. The allegiances and obligations between the various members of the German nobility were very complicated, but in theory they were all subject to the Holy Roman Emperor (a German selected by a small number of Electors).

The Riedesels had ties with the courts of Hesse-Kassel and Hesse-Darmstadt, along with the Prince Bishop of nearby Fulda. The town of Lauterbach itself was a free (Imperial) city with its own government. The Riedesels were influential in town affairs but were not sovereign.

A crest (*Wappen*) of the Riedesels, Freiherren zu Eisenbach. Such heraldic symbols belong to specific families, not just anyone with the same name. Other Riedesels, such as those of the Josbach line or who worked for various lords around Marburg and Feudingen, had their own *Wappen*.



This lovely old painting depicts the Burg in Lauterbach itself. It is still in use for family business. To the far right is the town church, built in 1763-1767. The original watercolor was done by Wilhelmine Riedesel Freifrau zu Eisenbach in the early 1800s.

Schloß Eisenbach remains in the private possession of the family.



## **Separation of the Four Houses**

As was the practice throughout Europe, property and other rights passed to the oldest son. This kept the domains intact. However, the line split in the 1500s into four lines or houses. They were known as:

- Hermansburg (residence near Stockhausen); died out in 1756
- Ludwigseck (residence near Trunsbach)
- Altenburg (residence near Alsfeld)
- Burg (in and near Lauterbach)

Typically such a division would have threatened the long-term viability of the family's powers. However, a very unusual contract or arrangement was agreed to in the late 1500s. Although the heads of the respective lines each had his own possessions, they agreed on a joint governance structure that exists to this day! Professor von Galéra refers to it as an oligarchy. It was still a form of absolutism, but decisions were made in semi-annual Conferences of the men in the family who were of age (24 or older). In practice, only the senior members of the four lines were active in the decisions. In contrast to most other states of the time, there was no longer a single ruler or Baron (a title they received later). The oldest male in the family took the title of Erbmarschall and led the Conferences. The Conferences decided on expenditures, petitions from subjects, certain criminal matters, and all matters of law.

The old Schloß Eisenbach remained a symbol of their power and was used as a residence, particularly in times of war, though not the sole or even principal residence. A small garrison served as watchmen, but the territory of the Riedesels was much too small to support any kind of military body. The Riedesels, of course, served as officers for greater nobility which supplemented the revenues from their subjects.

The Hermansburg line died out in 1756 and the possessions were distributed across the other three Riedesel lines. The other three lines still maintain their identities.

## **Elevation to Freiherren**

On October 22, 1680, the Riedesels were awarded the status of Freiherren by the Emperor. From this time on, all males of a certain age took the appellation of "Freiherr zu Eisenbach" (FzE) after their names. The standard English translation is "Baron."

Given the unique governing structure, this meant that no one man was "The Baron." General Friedrich Adolph FzE is properly referred to as Baron Riedesel, but it is incorrect to refer to him as "the Baron."

He was never the senior member of the larger family and thus never the Erbmarschall. He did not live at Schloß Eisenbach but spent most of his adult life in Braunschweig (Brunswick) or in the field as a soldier. His father's principal residence was in the town of Lauterbach in what was called the Hohhaus.

Neither before nor after 1680 was it customary to use "von" as part of the family name. Some histories--including almost all those about his wife--refer to him as "General von Riedesel", but this is incorrect.

## **The End**

Absolute rule over the peasants outside of Lauterbach itself and other possessions lasted from 1436 to the first few years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, the smaller German states (including that of the Riedesels of Lauterbach) were incorporated into fewer larger states. While losing their sovereignty, the Riedesels kept many of their holdings (especially forests) and ancient title. The old Conference structure has been transformed into a kind of family corporation or holding company which oversees various businesses and takes care of all family members.



The coat of arms of the town of Lauterbach. They feature Saint Simplicius.

## **About Those Americans**

Between the mid-1800s and early 1900s, several dozen Riedesels from the counties of Wittgenstein (mostly the village of Wunderhausen and the town of Erndtebrück) emigrated to the United States. There are now 200 or so families in the U.S. with this ancient name. I have been able to connect all but two Riedesel emigrants to their precise German origins.

I believe that we descend from a different branch of the knightly Riedesels who broke off long before the others were established at Eisenbach, and well before they received the status as Barons. By 1600, the Riedesels of Wittgenstein were peasants subject to the absolute authority of the counts of Wittgenstein like everyone else. We have our own legacy to be proud of, but it is not one of castles, knights and coats of arms.

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