

General Friedrich Adolph Riedesel Freiherr zu Eisenbach (1738-1800)

Dr. Paul Riedesel



General F. A. Riedesel FzE
(1738-1800)

General Riedesel is without question the best-known member of his lineage, and certainly so among the Americans with whom he shares his last name though no blood kinship. Almost as well-known is his wife, who was born Luise Charlotte von Massow. Her written observations of their experiences during the American Revolution were published in both German and, later, English.

This account is based largely on a chapter in the work of 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; 1961).

Ancestry.

The titled Riedesels of Friedrich Adolph's day, and all that follow, are descended from Hermann IV (1481-1529). In an unusual move, Hermann divided his possessions and rights between two of his sons. A further division two generations later resulted in a system of four "houses" which endured until 1756 when one of them died out. Members of the four lines had their own residences and properties, but managed certain affairs collectively. In 1680, male members of all lines were granted the dignity of "Freiherr (Baron) zu Eisenbach" by the German Emperor. They were not and are not "von Riedesels." They were and still are Riedesels Freiherrn zu Eisenbach.

The most vigorous house was Haus Burg, and it was into this lineage that Friedrich Adolph was born on June 3, 1738. His father was Johann Wilhelm (1705-1782), who lived within the town of Lauterbach in a small palace known as the Hohhaus (today a city museum). Like most others, Johann Wilhelm served the higher nobility to supplement the meagre revenues from the Riedesels' tenants. He was married twice, but had children only with his first wife, Sophie Hedwig von Borcke (1705-1769). They were:

Wilhelm Hermann (1735-1764)

Luise Dorothea Margarethe (1736-??)

Friedrich Adolph (1738-1800)

Ludwig Volprecht (1740-1758)

Johann Conrad (1742-1812), 25th Erbmarschall
Ernst Georg Albrecht (1744-1745)
Carl Georg (1746-1819), 26th Erbmarschall

Education

Until he was about 15, says Baron von Galéra, Friedrich Adolph was expected to enter the ministry. The Riedesels were staunch Lutherans, and church office was a respectable vocation for someone from the lesser nobility. However, his father then decided that he should pursue diplomatic service instead and dispatched the young man to study law at the University in Marburg. This was not a life that appealed to Friedrich Adolph. He neglected his studies, preferring to watch a local battalion drill on the Marburg parade grounds. An officer played a cruel trick on him by telling the young man that he had secured permission from his father, Johann Wilhelm, to become a soldier instead. Friedrich Adolph's joyful letter of thanks to his unwitting father brought, in return, an angry letter and a cutting off of his allowance.

Early military career and marriage.

Friedrich Adolph then joined the battalion of the Landgrave of Hesse (Marburg) at the age of about 17. During times of peace the German princes were eager to rent out their troops, and Friedrich Adolph soon found himself in London on such an assignment. The Hessian battalion returned to the Continent in 1757 to fight in the Seven Years War between Prussia (with whom England was allied) and Austria. The overall commander of the various rent-a-regiments was Duke Ferdinand of Brunswick (Braunschweig). Riedesel distinguished himself in this campaign and was recognized by the Duke and even Frederick the Great (King of Prussia) himself. At the age of 23, Friedrich Adolph found himself in command of two Brunswick regiments.

Posted to the city of Minden, Riedesel met the daughter of a Prussian Commissioner to Duke Ferdinand in 1760--Charlotte von Massow. (A popular book by Louise Tharp refers to her as Frederika, one of her several given names, but she is known as Charlotte among the Riedesels of Lauterbach). She was only 15, but he begged her to marry. Before the marriage could take place, duty called again. Friedrich Adolph was now fighting the French and was wounded in August, 1762. He returned to Minden to be cared for by Charlotte and her family. Charlotte was older and prepared to marry, but there were difficulties. The von Massows were relatively poor as titled families went, and this did not sit well with Johann Wilhelm. But the Riedesels relented and the wedding took place near Paderborn in December, 1762.

Friedrich Adolph and Charlotte purchased a home in Wolffenbüttel and lived there during the ensuing 13 years of peace. While he was on good terms with the rest of his family by now and eventually assumed his right as a member of the family Condominium, Friedrich Adolph spent almost none of his adult life in Lauterbach. Nor did he ever ascend to the title of Erbmarschall of Hessen, an ancient title borne by the eldest male among the three remaining Riedesel houses. Friedrich Adolph's two younger brothers each held the title in their last years.

Five children were born to Charlotte in the next few years. The first two, a son and daughter, each died at less than a year of age. Auguste (1771-1805) outlived her father but not her mother. Friederike (1774-1854) and Caroline (1776-1861) lived longer lives. During this time, Friedrich

Adolph was appointed Adjutant General to the Duke and had to commute back and forth to Brunswick.

War in America

The intrigues and inconvenience associated with court service in Brunswick paled in comparison to the hardships that the family were to experience over the next years. The colonial uprising in America sent the English crown scrambling for soldiers to help squelch it. Numerous German princes--in Hesse, Ansbach, Nassau, Brunswick--were all too ready to rent out their soldiers and officers. The current Duke of Brunswick, writes Baron von Galéra, was a notorious spendthrift with debts of 12 million Thalers (on the backs of only 150,000 subjects who could barely support the Duke's interest payments). So sending his regiments to the wilds of America on a mercenary basis was too good an opportunity to pass up. [The soldiers themselves--incorrectly lumped together as "Hessians"--were not mercenaries or soldiers-of-fortune in the 20th century sense.]

In January, 1776, the Duke of Brunswick contracted with England to send 3,964 foot soldiers and 336 light cavalry to America. They departed from Brunswick in February under the command of Friedrich Adolph Riedesel FzE, newly promoted to Major General. About two dozen Lauterbachers were in this army, though they had no special relationship to the General. They marched to the port of Stade and sailed in sixteen vessels on March 18, 1776. The first stop was Portsmouth, England. The final voyage across the North Atlantic required six weeks. They reached North America in mid-May and finally debarked in Quebec on the first of June. Charlotte, pregnant with their daughter Caroline, was still in Wolfenbüttel.

At this point, the British were more concerned about saving Canada than in recovering New England and the other rebellious colonies. (The reader is referred to any history of the American Revolution for details.) The Americans suffered setbacks in clashes on the Great Lakes and in upper New York state, but all went into winter quarters before the strategic situation changed very much.



Battle flag of the Brunswick infantry regiment commanded by General Riedesel

Meanwhile back in Brunswick, Charlotte had begun preparations to join her husband. Only two months after giving birth, she was on her way to England on May 14, 1776. The modern mind is puzzled by the idea of a soldier's family joining him in the field, but this was a frequent practice among officers and not unknown among common soldiers. Thirty or so other women (wives, as far as I know) traveled with the army. Friedrich Adolph was a soldier by profession and he had, in effect, been transferred. (The high British commanders did not always send for their wives, and resorted instead to borrowing the wives of subordinate officers.)

Charlotte's journey to and stay in England were costly and frustrating. She spoke no English and was not there in any official capacity such that government would offer help. Finally, she was taken under the wing of an officer who had known her husband during the Seven Years War. This led eventually to an introduction to the King and Queen who marveled at her courage. After

eleven months in England, the little family succeeded in boarding a ship headed for the theatre of war. On the voyage and in the following years, they had at least three servants in their employ. Only the coachman Rockel is ever named, but Charlotte had two maidservants as well. In America they had a cook and additional servants commensurate with the General's rank. The convoy of 31 vessels had an uneventful voyage, arrived safely in Newfoundland on June 26, 1777, and proceeded to Quebec where they landed on July 11. After several more days, the family was reunited in Chambly. The British were beginning a campaign against the Americans so Charlotte and the children were sent back to Trois Riviere (along the St. Lawrence River) where the General had prepared a place for them to live. However, they were soon back with the army.

The objective of the British campaign in 1777 was to cut off New England from the southern colonies by driving east and south from Canada to Albany. The terrain was rugged wilderness, but the Americans were believed to have few forces and little will (or ability) to fight against the well-trained British forces and their German auxiliaries. Things did not go as planned. The competence of the British commander, General Burgoyne, has long been questioned, and most historians agree that he was foolish in excluding General Riedesel from strategic and tactical planning. As Americans, we can be grateful for that! Against Riedesel's strong advice, Burgoyne dispatched a force of men under a Brunswick lieutenant against an American position at Bennington, Vermont, in the middle of August, 1777. The Germans were out-manuevered. About 200 of the Germans were killed and another 700 were captured. This is regarded as a turning point in the campaign.

Historian Christopher Ward provided the following description of General Riedesel. "Of the Germans, Baron von [sic] Riedesel was the most distinguished. He had been a soldier in the Hessian and Brunswick armies for more than twenty years. At the outset of the Seven Years' War he was attached to the staff of the Duke of Brunswick and was employed by him in special duties which called for the use of delicate tact, good judgment, and personal courage. His reputation for intrepidity thus established was later confirmed by his conduct in many dangerous enterprises. He possessed the essential qualities of of a good soldier; he was cool and discreet in danger, swift in action. His clear understanding had been studiously applied to the principles of his profession, and now, at the age of thirty-eight, he was at the height of his mental and physical powers. He was of medium height, strongly built, vigorous and hardy. His florid face was full and round, his features regular, his blue eyes notably large and clear. His amiable disposition was displayed in his care for the comfort and well-being of his men." *The War of the Revolution*, 1952. Pp. 403-404.

As the British regrouped and licked their wounds, the American forces were growing rapidly. In September, the British advanced, slowly, to the heights of Saratoga (New York), where they encountered the Americans under the command of General Gates. Sporadic fighting continued for days, but this was entirely to the advantage of the Americans. The British lines of supply were over-taxed. General Burgoyne finally consulted his senior staff about their options. Riedesel argued for a retreat while it was still possible, but the others dissented. The ring was closing. After more heavy fighting, the British commanders realized that they were trapped; it was too late to retreat. The capitulation was completed on October 17, 1777. The terms were that the English and Germans would be returned to Europe with the promise of not returning to the

war. For various reasons, this did not happen and the troops remained Prisoners of War for the duration.

Prisoners.

The General had been on duty in the New World for less than a year and a half, but was to spend almost six more years in North America before returning home. The experiences for the family were sometimes difficult, but there is no question that they lived far better than the average American farmer (Patriot or Loyalist) in the middle of this protracted war.

Charlotte, the children, and their servants were with the army through the campaign toward Saratoga. Though inevitably living more comfortably than the privates, they endured the same rough food and weather. She did not hesitate to help with the wounded and the dead.



THE RIEDESEL HOUSE, CAMBRIDGE.

The defeated army was marched to Boston where the disarmed troops were placed in barracks. The Riedesels were first quartered in the attic of a farmhouse, but were soon moved to a fine house in Cambridge where they were stay for about a year. (The residence still stands, next door to the home of the poet Longfellow.) Charlotte was able to hold a Ball for Friedrich Adolph's 40th birthday. They came up with the money to purchase various furnishings. The opposite sketch is attributed to Longfellow and was published in John Benson

Lossing's "Pictorial Field Book of the Revolution" (1837).

The above-named author Lossing wrote more of this house:

"Upon a window-pane on the west side of the house may be seen the undoubted autograph of the accomplished general, inscribed with a diamond point. It is an interesting memento, and is preserved with great care. The annexed is a fac simile of it." [also credited to the poet, Longfellow].

From the relative comfort of the Boston area, the captured troops (British and Brunswickers) were ordered to march south to Virginia with General Riedesel at their head in late 1778. Along the way they encountered Lafayette, who accepted the Riedesels' invitation to eat with them and to visit in French. The trek continued until the middle of February. Living conditions for the soldiers were grim, but the General was able to pay to have a small house built for the family. They all suffered in the heat. The General himself suffered a heat stroke in the summer as well as suffering from depression.

Their fortunes changed when the General was exchanged and permitted to move back to British-held New York in late 1779. Here they lived very well in the country home of the British General Clinton; between the family and servants, the household numbered 30 people! Their sixth child (and fifth daughter), named Amerika, was born in March (she lived until 1840). Later that summer, both the General and their daughter, Auguste, were ill with typhus. All in the household survived, but Charlotte had her hands full.

Back on Duty.

By being returned to British-controlled New York, the General was free to resume a military role. Promoted to Lieutenant General in 1781, he was placed in command of forces around New York City and Long Island. The family settled briefly into a house in Brooklyn along the Hudson River. This proved to be a hazardous location due to regular raids by the Americans, so the entire family moved back to Canada. The General's job was to organize the German troops there. Charlotte set up housekeeping at Sorel in Quebec, and this was to be their home for two more years. He saw no more military action. It was during this final sojourn in Canada that the General is credited with introducing the custom of the Christmas tree to North America as portrayed in this painting. The original painting is in the Governor's Museum in Sorel, Quebec.



A daughter named "Canada" was born to them in November of 1782, but she died only a few months later and is buried at Sorel. Shortly after the death of their daughter, the General received news of the death of his father back in Lauterbach. The war was winding down, so the Riedesel family and the surviving soldiers of the Brunswick regiment set sail in August, 1783. They went first to London where the General made a report to the King. It was October before the little

army was again on its parade grounds at Brunswick and the family in its home Wolffenbüttel. Only around 2,400 of the 4,000+ soldiers came back.

[Of 23 soldiers from the area around Lauterbach, six returned home at this time. Eight were known to have died. The rest remained in America either voluntarily, as POWs, or having escaped (with unknown fates thereafter). The Americans had some success in inducing the German soldiers to come over to their side.]

Final Years in Brunswick.

The General spent more time in Lauterbach than he had before the American campaign, though still as a temporary visitor. In April, 1785, Charlotte gave birth to a long-awaited son, Georg, and in 1788, to their last child, Charlotte.

Part of what we know as Holland and Belgium today was under Austrian rule at the time, but this had been a source of conflict for centuries. In 1788, a revolt forced the Austrian Governor out of Brussels. The Duke of Brunswick once again rented out his troops--this time to the Austria--to suppress the uprising. Three years of campaigning lay ahead for General Riedesel. His brother, Johann Conrad, was now serving as an officer in a Brunswick cavalry regiment; during the Seven Years War they had served in opposing armies. And again, Charlotte and the children moved to be with the General in Maastricht. Their teenage daughter, "Fritze", left a legacy of letters that show a keen wit and a condescension for the social scene in Maastricht. About a birthday ball she wrote of the "small, awful, dirty little room that was the dance hall, and the women . . . they wore house dresses!"

The local rebellion was finally put down, but an even greater threat to the old order now spilled into the Netherlands--the French Revolution. The Brunswickers succeeded in dislodging the invading French from Maastricht in 1792 and were finally sent home. In later years, the French were to occupy much of the Rhineland and Lauterbach itself.

By now, the General's health was deteriorating, and he took to visiting the spas at Aachen and elsewhere. He participated more often in the family conferences in Lauterbach, though travel was complicated during the Napoleonic wars. He was at home with much of his family in Brunswick when death came on the night of January 6, 1800. The family wished that he be buried at Lauterbach, though this meant traveling through several small (and sovereign) states. Charlotte was able to prevail on the various rulers to let them pass through without the normal tolls.

Charlotte's health was not the best either. She left Brunswick for good in favor of her native Berlin in 1801. Their daughter, Auguste, died at the age of 34 in 1805 after a year's illness, which was another severe blow to her mother. Charlotte died on March 29, 1808 in Berlin.

Next Generation.

Five daughters lived to adulthood, though Auguste died relatively young. The only surviving son was Georg (b. 1785) who married his distant cousin, Caroline Friedrike Louise Riedesel (1784-1857). They had only a daughter, Marie Caroline, so the General's male lineage came to an end. Georg died in 1854 in the service of the Archduke of Saxony-Weimar.

In summary, the family of Friedrich Adolph and Charlotte consisted
Hermann (1767-1767)
Philippine (1770-1771)
Auguste (1771-1805); married Count Heinrich von Reuss
Friederike (1774-1854); married Count Friedrich Wilhelm von Reden
Caroline (1776-1861); never married
Amerika (1780-1856); married Count Ernst von Bernsdorff
Canada (1782-1783)
Georg Karl (1785-1854); married Caroline Riedesel
Marie Caroline (1809-1878)
Charlotte (1787-1848); married Wilhelm von Schöning