

The Early Riedesels in Wittgenstein: A Cut Above

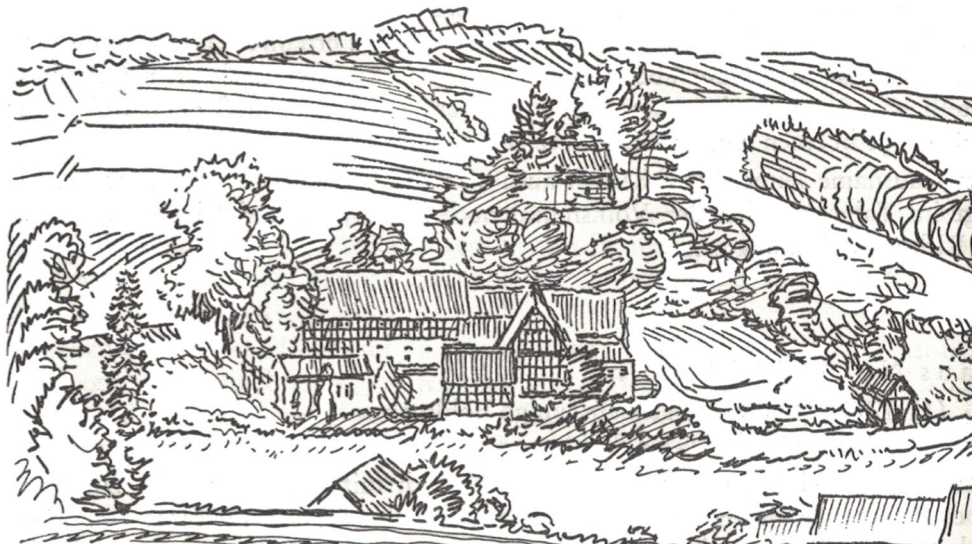
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Too many of us American Riedesels are enchanted with the idea that we are somehow related to the noble Riedesels of Lauterbach, Germany (technically the *Riedesel Freiherrn zu Eisenbach*) and specifically to [General Friedrich Adolph Riedesel](#) of Revolutionary War fame. He was, of course, a German commander of troops “rented” by the British. His experiences in North America were famously chronicled by his wife, Charlotte.

There is absolutely no substance to this presumption of a relationship. The genealogy of the Riedesel zu Eisenbach since the Middle Ages is quite complete and lacks any evidence of a member winding up with progeny in Wittgenstein. But there is circumstantial evidence that the Wittgenstein Riedesels descend from an independent line of Riedesel knights (viz. the *Riedesel zu Josbach*). They are well-documented for several centuries but disappear from records of the minor nobility by the 1600s. That doesn’t necessarily mean they died out; hereditary knighthood just no longer mattered. As warriors, armored knights had been made obsolete centuries before by gunpowder. The archives show traces of miscellaneous Riedesel knights or officials around Wittgenstein from the 1300s to the 1500s. We don’t know how they were all related, but they were there.

Whether the Josbach connection is accurate or not, the fact remains that the earliest confirmed Riedesels in Wittgenstein (and their immediate predecessors) enjoyed higher than average positions in society. This is the thesis of this note. To be sure, they were subjects of the absolutist rulers of Wittgenstein. But there was a stratification within the ranks of the peasantry, and the early Riedesels inhabited a higher level of status.

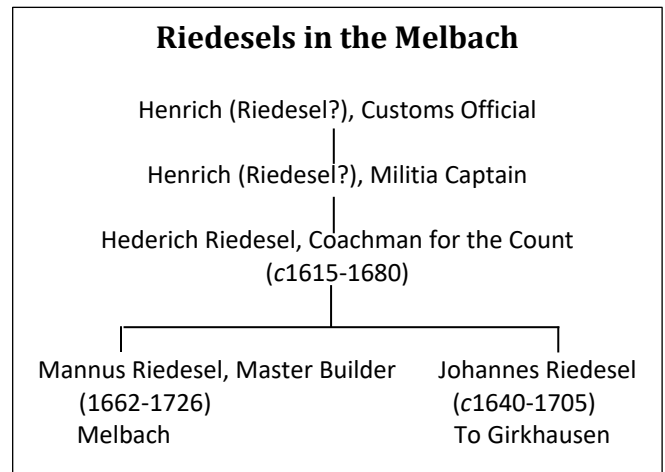
A property that we would call a “farmstead” in the hamlet of Melbach (near the town of Erndtebrück today) was home to these earliest generations. It is known as “Herjes Haus.”



Sketch of Herjes Haus in the Melbach by Helmut Richter

* I am indebted to my friend Stefan Riedesel of Leidenhofen, Germany, for his research into the status of the Riedesels in the 1700s.

We have documentary evidence of a man named Riedesel living in Herjes in the early 1600s. Sources vary, but the scholarly opinion of what he was called by is Hederich. He is the earliest verifiable ancestor of all the Riedesels of Wittgenstein and of almost all American Riedesels. Tax records show that the previous occupant of Herjes was named Henrich, though no family name is recorded. This Henrich was the head of something like a small militia force (*Rottmeister der Schützen*), which suggests a modest level of importance. His predecessor was also named Henrich, and he was some kind of customs/toll official. The latter two may or may not have been Riedesels, but the odds are good.



Getting back to Hederich Riedesel, he is estimated to have been born around 1615 there in the Melbach and died there in 1680. He served for several years as a coachman to the Count in Berleburg during the 30 Years War (1618-1648). A coachman was no noble, but it gave him some intimacy with the ruling family. Through two marriages he had ten known children. One of them was the most famous Riedesel to ever live in Wittgenstein: Mannus (christened Johann Hermann, 1662-1726).



The Ludwigsburg in Berleburg
WikiCommons

[Mannus Riedesel](#) was a master builder in his day, and a number of structures he built still exist as jewels of half-timbered construction. The most spectacular is the "Ludwigsburg" in the town of Berleburg. It was built for a brother of Graf Casimir between 1707-1709. Another was the forester's lodge at the site of the defunct village of Dambach; it is now a Pension. The well-known chapel/school in Sassenhausen was originally built just as a church but was later modified to accommodate a (small) school room.

Research in recent years has uncovered significant additional indicators of his elevated social status. His mother, Gerthrut Dickel (1640-1703) appears to be a descendant of a woman fathered by a member of the ruling Sayn-Wittgenstein family. Illegitimate children were not uncommon on those times but typically lived at the bottom ranks of society. In contrast this child was well taken care of and married a prominent official.

A record has also been found of an elegant petition that Mannus made to the ruling Count in around 1721. While many peasants had some "letters" (as they used to say), Mannus was clearly far more literate. The elevated style and vocabulary of the petition seem to imply that Mannus stood closer to the Count than others. He makes use of a little French and Latin and avoided the local (peasant) dialect found in other petitions at the time.

I have no evidence that Mannus' immediate descendants stood out from other peasants. However, descendants of his half-brother Johannes (1640-1705) continued to hold some at least modest advantages. Johannes and his family relocated at some point from the Melbach to the village of Girkhausen in northern Wittgenstein. Data from Girkhausen are in short supply, so I don't know where these Riedesels fit in society. However, the story of this Johannes' son Wilhelm (c1678-1748) suggests he and his offspring enjoyed certain advantages.



Sketch of Girkhausen by Helmut Richter

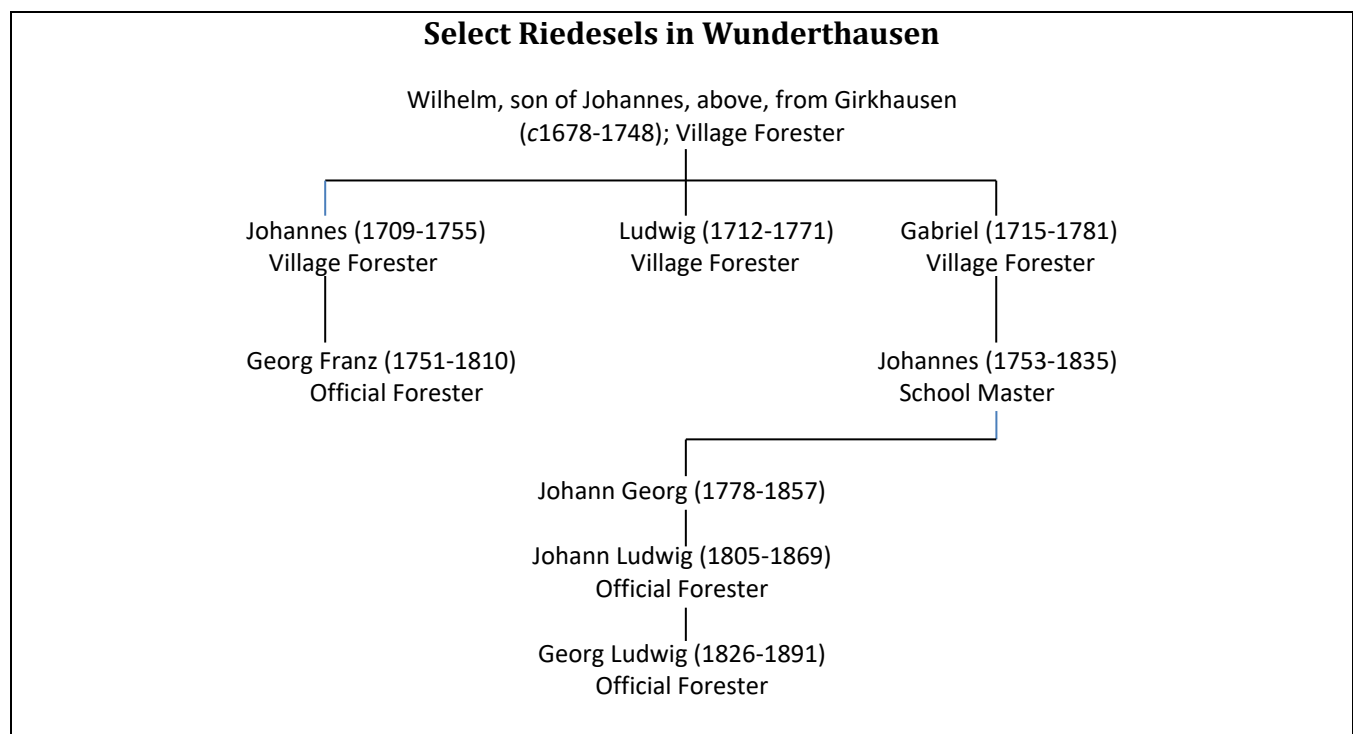
Wilhelm was born in Girkhausen but married a woman from Wunderthausen in 1703. She was Anna Margaretha Spies (b. 1679) and the heiress to one of the largest (and most-highly taxed) houses in Wunderthausen.[†] The implication is that this was an advantageous marriage for Wilhelm, but you also assume that Anna Margaretha's family saw him as worthy of marrying in. Actually, her father had died in 1698, and Wilhelm took over the taxes even though they did not marry until 1703.

Although he was a peasant farmer like everyone else with taxes to pay and labor owed to the Count, Wilhelm had some significant side duties. The 30 or so households in Wunderthausen at the time had rights to the use of some forest land around the village (virtually all land belonged to the Counts). This included things like firewood and a limited amount of wood for construction. These rights were overseen by a small committee of men, and Wilhelm was one of them. It is possible that he knew a bit more about forest management than average, but in any case this was a position of influence. They enforced the rules about sharing, illegal logging, wood for making charcoal, etc.

[†] By law, the oldest child of a family was heir to a tenancy (house and lands). Women could thus inherit, but all rights transferred to her husband.

Documents also refer to Wilhelm as a forester. This could be an official position with a great deal of responsibility to the Count for both the health of the forests and enforcement of poaching and wood-use laws. Official foresters indeed had to have considerable technical knowledge. This was a full-time and relatively high-status job. However, the label of forester (*Förster*) was also applied to men entrusted by their village to look after their local forests as well. References exist to Wilhelm as a forester (no doubt of the latter variety) as well as to three of his sons. In the poor villages of Wittgenstein in the 1700s, there was not much occupational differentiation. That these Riedesels consistently enjoyed some standing as minor officials in addition to being tax-paying peasants is noteworthy.

A grandson of Wilhelm (Johannes Riedesel, 1753-1835) was volunteered to serve as the village school master. There was no school building until much later, so instruction would have taken place in his (or other) homes. Remuneration could only have been scanty, but he must have been somewhat more literate than others. Another grandson, Georg Franz Riedesel (1751-1810) was a forester in service to the Count and the first tenant in the Wunderthausen house known, significantly, as *Försters am Lotzenberg*. He began as a kind of forester's assistant but was eventually promoted. A later descendant (Johann Ludwig Riedesel (1805-1869) also served as an official forester after marrying the daughter of a forestry official in Girkhausen. Their house name? *Försters hinter der Huthe*. A son followed in his footsteps.



This is not to say that every Riedesel in Wunderthausen in these times was of high social standing. Later-born children had less of chance to inherit larger tenancies or high-status positions. Some were certainly talented. Some were certainly not. I think any consistent advantages had dissipated by the early 1800s. There was no shortages of Riedesels who got the heck out of Wunderthausen for better opportunities in America.

Let us return to Girkhausen. A grandson of the afore-mentioned Johannes, Georg Wilhelm Riedesel (1703-1777), found his way out of Wittgenstein and was employed as gardener there in service of the noble family von Nordeck zur Rabenau. At this time, a gardener was far from being a menial employee. He needed to have considerable practical knowledge about plants and forestry. It is hard to imagine that Georg Wilhelm would have qualified for these duties without being immersed in them from a young age. There was no Wittgenstein A&M University to study at. It thus stands to reason that the Riedesels in Girkhausen were also involved in the care of the Count's most-valuable assets: the forests. You could not call them "middle class" as you could a handful of merchants in the town of Berleburg, but they would also seem to be a cut above most other peasants.



Burg Garden of the von Nordeck zur Rabenau

Were the early Riedesels admired? Resented? We'll never know. But the evidence is clear that many enjoyed a higher social status than most other commoners.

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