

Lost No More: The Final Resting Place of Our Ancestors Near Galion, Ohio

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April 16, 2016 (Revised)

This article makes a tentative identification of the almost-forgotten burial place of Ludwig and Florentine (Althaus) Riedesel who came from Wunderthausen to Crawford County, Ohio with their adult children in 1845. Their five living children, many grandchildren, and related families moved on to Wheatland, Iowa where they became the nucleus of a remarkable settlement from Wunderthausen.

The emigrant couple of whom we write had more descendants in the United States than anyone could try to count. Their five children who came to America had at least 40 children and those who survived often had large families of their own—all before 1900. With the closely-related Schneider families from Wunderthausen, they were the magnet that ultimately drew more than 100 men, women and children from a remote German village to the fertile farmland around Wheatland.

These are the five Riedesel siblings, who, with their parents, lived for some years near Galion. Some readers may know these ancestors well yet not know of their parents, Ludwig and Florentine.



L. Henry
1818-1894

Anna Elisabeth
(Homrighausen)
1820-1909

J. Ludwig
1822-1910

George
1825-1901

John
1829-1904

Of Ludwig Riedesel (b. 1784) and his wife, Florentine Althaus (b. 1792) we have relatively few hard facts. No pictures have come down to us. Emma Wetter Hobbs' foundational 1947 book on these and related families gives no date for their deaths.² The sole clue we have comes to us from Gerhard Riedesel, a great-grandson through L. Henry Riedesel of

¹ I am deeply indebted to shirt-tail relative Mike Hocker of Galion for his help in finding and sharing historical materials from the area. While we agree on the conclusions drawn here, I accept responsibility for any errors of fact or interpretation that may surface.

² Emma Wetter Hobbs, *History and Genealogy of the Wetter-Miller-Schneider-Riedesel Families in Europe and North America*. Ogallala, Nebraska, 1947. Page 84.

Wheatland. Gerhard's father was the Rev. Charles Riedesel and the topic of the book was his father's ministry. In a brief historical background, Gerhard wrote:

"In about 1847 a deadly plague struck the community. In the Riedesel family it struck down the elder Ludwig and Florentine Riedesel, father and mother of Ludwig Heinrich; Amalia, the wife of Ludwig Heinrich, and several of their children. Other relatives and friends died too. The victims were buried in what was called the 'Settlement Cemetery.' The graves were not well marked and soon became unidentified; the part of the cemetery received little care and maintenance and soon grew up in brush and woods."³

While it is unlikely that actual plague was the killer, epidemic disease was no stranger to either frontier areas such as western Ohio in the 1840s or to established towns. Cholera, diphtheria and influenza claimed victims with grim regularity. In many years of research, I have found no further information or family stories about the old couple and their brief lives in this "promised land." Civil registration of deaths was not yet in place so there are no public sources.

How Did They Get Here?

Wunderthausen was and is a small village in the former *Grafschaft* (County) of Wittgenstein-Berleburg in central Germany (see maps at the end).⁴ Mountainous and isolated, the county was poor. By the 1800s few peasants owned any land outright and were burdened with myriad taxes and labor owed to the Counts. The feudal system was finally swept away between the Napoleonic conquest and the absorption of Wittgenstein into the Kingdom of Prussia following the 1815 Congress of Vienna. Our ancestors gained the "right" to buy the lands they had worked as tenants from the local nobility.

Out-migration from Wittgenstein had been going on for centuries, given the limited carrying ability of the poor soil. Most sought their fortunes in neighboring Hesse or the industrializing Ruhr area, but a limited number of Wittgensteiners made their way to America in the 1700s. A handful of young men and women from Wunderthausen immigrated to the mid-Atlantic states in the early 1800s (Baltimore; Warren County, New Jersey; Pennsylvania). However, the great swell of immigration across the ocean from Wunderthausen and the German states in general did not begin until the 1850s. It peaked around 1880.

Ludwig Riedesel was born February 21, 1784 as the fifth child of a family living in what is known in Wunderthausen as *Weymers* house.⁵ His father was a reasonably well-to-do peasant but tenancies passed by law to the oldest child. Ludwig was thus fortunate to marry the oldest child, Florentine Althaus, of another Wunderthausen house known then as

³ Gerhard A. Riedesel, *Blossoms on the Thistle: An Account of the Lives and Christian Ministry of the Rev. and Mrs. Charles H. Riedesel 1871-1960*. Pullman, Washington. Page 4.

⁴ Today part of the state of North-Rhine Westphalia but just over the border from the state of Hesse with which the county had closer ties.

⁵ To this day, "house names" are commonly used in the villages and are an important point of reference for historical research.

Haase. It was a small house, and I anticipate that it came with less (rented) land. She was born April 8, 1792, and they married February 8, 1818. Ludwig was thus in line to inherit the tenancy from his father-in-law, who died in 1824.

The couple was to have a total of eight children between 1818 and 1836. Three died as children (a sad but typical rate of mortality). While the promise of liberation from feudal duties had been made and the Prussian state made respectable efforts to increase the prosperity of this new province, progress was slow. Ludwig had not only his own family to support but a mother-in-law and siblings of his wife who had remained in the home. One was Elisabeth Gertraud Althaus who had a son, Ludwig Dürr who grew up with the family. Another was Maria Elisabeth Althaus who left for America in 1833 with a brother, who disappeared from view thereafter.

On the same ship that took Maria Elisabeth Althaus to Baltimore were some members of the Gerhardt family from the neighboring village of Elsoff.⁶ Johannes Gerhardt and his several sons received land patents in Crawford County soon after arriving. Sometime in 1834, son Christian Gerhardt married Mara Elisabeth Althaus. Their obituaries differ as to whether they were married in Baltimore or in Galion, but I suspect the former.

But why would the Gerhardts, fresh off the boat, make haste to the Ohio frontier to buy land? The answer almost certainly lies with the Schumacher families who had also recently settled in Crawford County. While the Schumachers had lived for a century in Pennsylvania, they trace back to Johann Jost Schumacher who came to America in 1738 from the village of Elsoff (home of the Gerhardts). The connection may seem unlikely after the passage of so many years, but the fact is that they owned land very close together in what was originally the Jackson Township of Crawford County⁷; the village of Crestline and the town of Galion lie not far to the east.

The map on the following page is from an 1855 Atlas of the county. The farms of brothers Daniel and Adam Schumacher (here “Shumaker”) are marked in yellow. Gerhardt (here “Gebhart”) lands are marked in green. Note particularly the cluster of farms straddling sections 11 and 14. The section line is to this day known as the Crestline Road. Railroad tracks cut at an angle through section 11.

⁶ I once thought the ship was the *James* landing on September 30, 1833 but this is almost certainly incorrect. No clear record exists of when exactly the Althaus and Gerhardt sibs arrived, but we know they did.

⁷ The Township was later divided with the western portion where our people lived re-named the Jefferson Township.



1855 Crawford County Atlas (Jackson Township, partial)

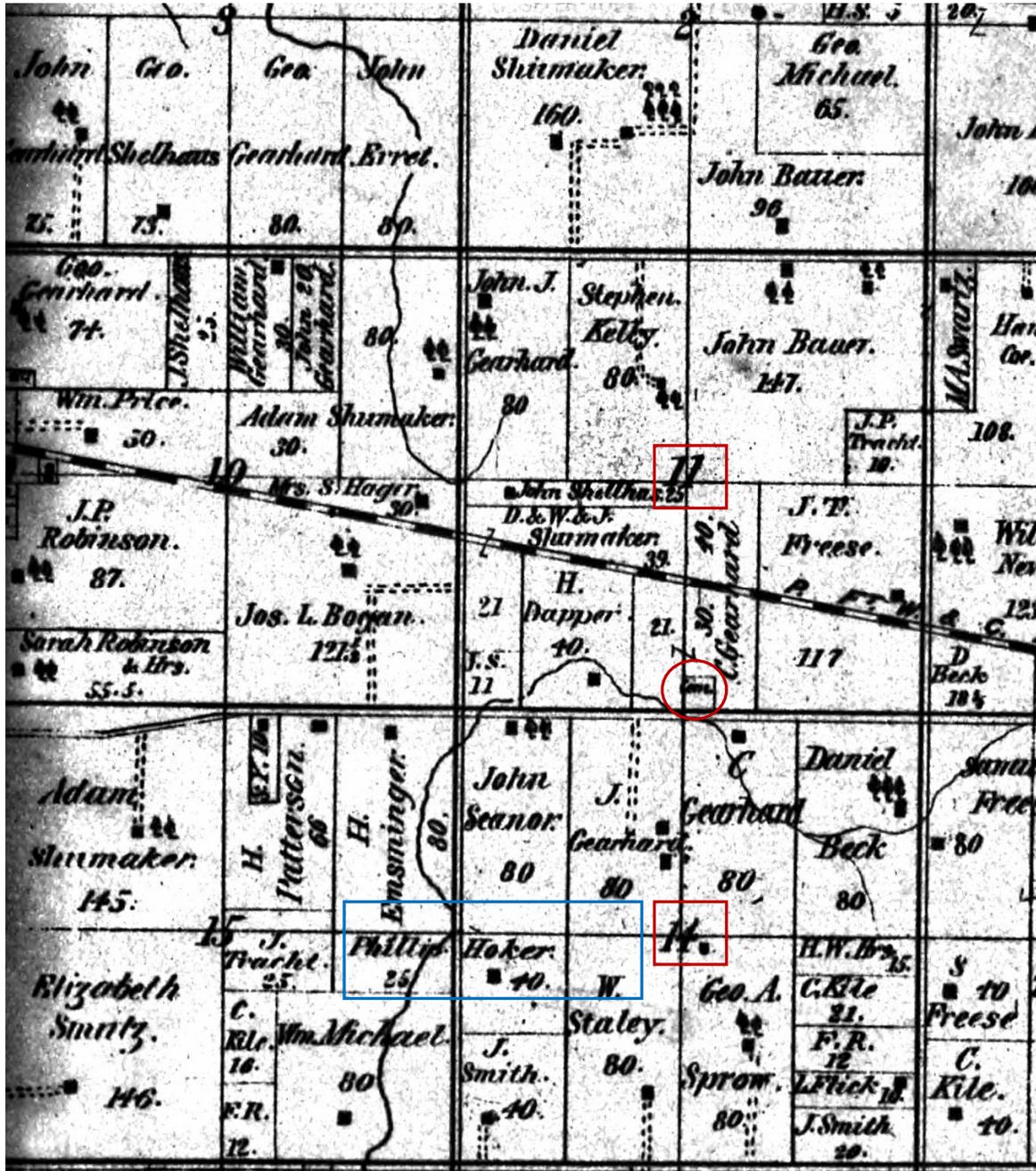
Note the symbols circled in red.⁸ They are on land owned by Christian Gerhardt.

Knowing as we now do that Florentine (Althaus) Riedesel had a sister in Crawford County removes the mystery as to why the Riedesel family landed there. The move actually began in 1844 when son J. Ludwig Riedesel, his cousin, Ludwig Dürr (see above) and Dürr's mother made the trip together. The rest of the family—including Catherine Schneider, the fiancée of J. Ludwig—arrived in 1845.⁹

⁸ This is a detail Mike Hocker pointed out that I probably would not have noticed.

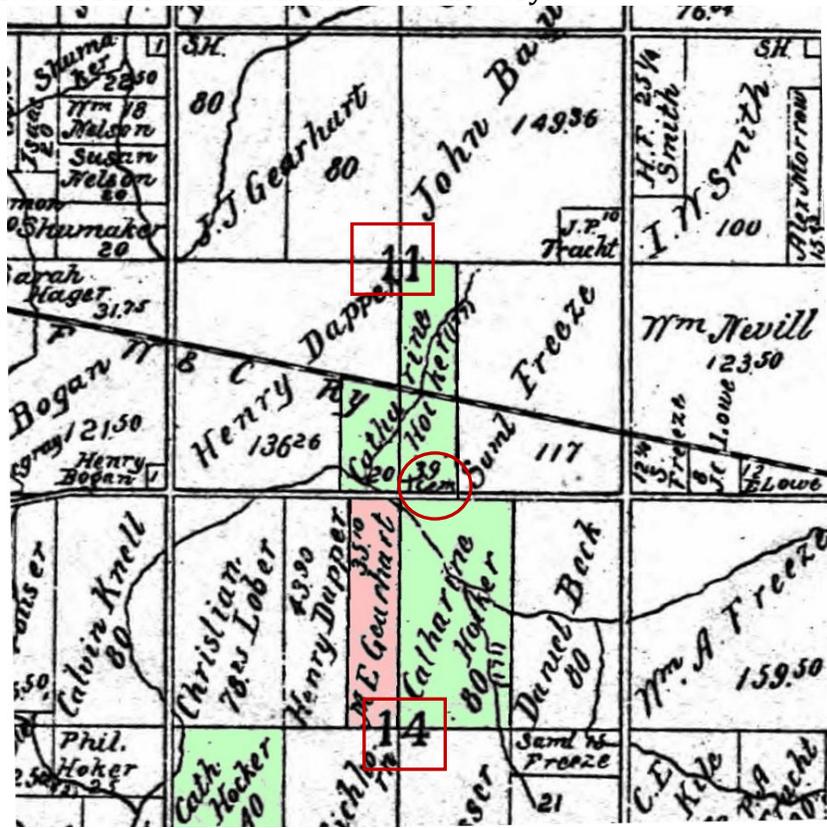
⁹ The 1844 party traveled on the ship *Lesmona* out of Bremen, landing in New York on June 24. The name of the vessel taken by the larger party in 1845 is unclear but it too sailed from Bremen to New York and landed on June 7.

It dates from beyond the end of our story but this (messy) 1873 map is also relevant.

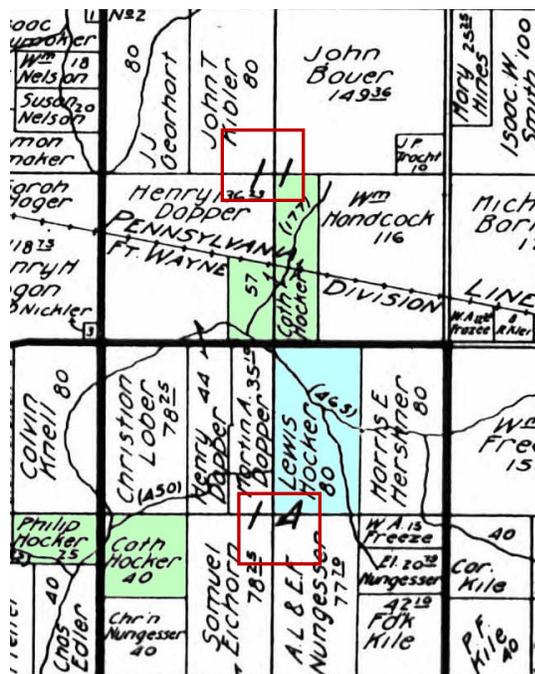


Christian Gerhardt still owns land in both sections 11 and 14. Their daughter, Catherine had married Phillip Hocker/Hoker as shown. The younger daughter, Elisabeth, had married George Riedesel and they were settled by now in Wheatland (to which the Christian Gerhardts would retire and eventually be buried). One can now make out—if barely—the symbol “CEM” on the Gerhardt land.

Two more of these old land atlases round out our story.



1894: M.E. Gerhardt was in fact deceased by then but a sliver of the family land was still in her name. Catherine Hocker, her daughter, was on the title of much of that land though her husband, Phillip, was still alive and well. And there is still a "Cem" on that land.



1912: The elder Gerhardts are long gone as was Phillip Hocker. Catherine died in November of that year but still held title to land either side of the railroad line. Son Lewis Hocker owned the 80 acres just south of Crestline Road.

We will return to the small symbols.

Religious Life

We know that the Riedesels—notably L. Henry—were instrumental in founding and sustaining the German Reformed church in Wheatland. Henry and his cousin, Ludwig Dürr, are said to have studied theology with the Rev. Max Stern in Galion and to have led services at Wheatland before (and after) a formal church was organized. Back in Wunderthausen, virtually everyone was born into, baptized and confirmed in the protestant church.¹⁰ Established churches were never long on passion among the laity or clergy. Nevertheless, the history of the Wheatland church gives evidence that at least some of the emigrant Wunderthäuser took their articles of faith quite seriously.¹¹

Histories of early Crawford County note the scarcity of trained ministers but record that a number of German Reformed churches existed.¹² Those that endured to the present time were folded into the United Church of Christ, of which the German Reformed Church was a major partner. While doubtless incomplete, early records of these congregations make no mention of Riedesel, Gerhardt, Schumacher or the related Schneider families.¹³ Nor do seemingly complete inventories of burials in existing cemeteries include any of this first generation.¹⁴

This all seems very curious. Gerhard Riedesel's report was of an abandoned "Settlement Cemetery" where Ludwig, Florentine and other victims of the 1847 (or was it 1848?) epidemic were laid to rest. Yet the evidence suggests that some were observant Reformed souls, and it seems unlikely that they would not at least seek out Christian baptism and burial. Western Ohio was a frontier, but it was not the Wild West.

The Old Atlases Had the Answer All Along

I am satisfied that the answer to this riddle lies in the small notations shown on the atlases. The 1874 and 1894 indications of a Cem(etry) are clear enough. Whether the 1855 atlas says "CH" (as in Church) or "CM" (for Cemetery) is ambiguous though the symbol to the left could well represent a building—such as a church. They are not present on the 1912 map. By the turn of the century these families were affiliated with other Reformed congregations such as Windfall Emmanuel only a mile south and were using cemeteries such as Fairview which was established in 1900.

Note that the cemetery was part of the land owned by Christian and Maria Elisabeth Gerhardt and their estate until at least 1912. The cemetery obviously existed by 1855 and

¹⁰ By the 1840s when our people left Germany, the Reformed and Lutheran churches were in the process of unification under the leadership of the King of Prussia. However, their parish church—yoking Girkhausen, Wunderthausen and Diedenshausen—had over two centuries of strictly Reform (Calvinist) preaching, confirmation and ritual.

¹¹ The most complete history of the congregation's development comes from their 50th year celebration in 1911, written mostly in German. Rev. John Gatermann, *Denkschrift zum fünfzigjährigen Jubiläum der Deutschen Ref. St. Pauls Gemeinde zu Wheatland, Iowa, Wheatland 1911*.

¹² Notably the publishers Baskin and Battey, *History of Crawford County and Ohio*. Chicago, 1881.

¹³ The Schneiders arrived from Wunderthausen in 1848.

¹⁴ Kudos to the Crawford County Chapter of the Ohio Genealogical Society;
<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~ohccgs/index.htm>

could have been 20 years older. Family burial plots were not uncommon, and this plot was almost certainly used by the Gerhardt family. Perhaps Christian and Maria Elisabeth had only the two daughters we know of (Catherina and Elisabeth) but the odds are that they buried additional children, now lost to history. His brothers farmed nearby and would have suffered the loss of family members as well including their parents.¹⁵

Assume that this family burial ground was established by the 1840s. The sister and family of Maria Elisabeth (Althaus) Gerhardt had come to the area in 1845 and within two years that sister, her husband, and others were dead. *Where else would they be buried?* With so many deaths in a short while and being yet-poor emigrants, paying for stone markers was probably out of the question.

It appears likely that there was once a small church structure by the cemetery. There needn't have been a settled minister. They were not only scarce but expensive to maintain. Lay preachers were known in the area into the 20th century, and we know that our people continued the custom of lay ministry while at Wheatland.¹⁶

Science favors the simplest possible explanations, and credulity is not stretched in the least by proposing that this small group of German emigrants with common roots forged their own religious community with a meeting house and a place to bury the dead. Christian Gerhardt was a successful farmer by all appearances so giving up an acre or so was a small sacrifice he could make. As the families became assimilated, it was natural enough to join up with a larger congregation with a "real" preacher.¹⁷ The church house lost its purpose and at some point, they chose to use active cemeteries. Thus the family cemetery "received little care and maintenance and soon grew up in brush and woods" as Gerhard Riedesel wrote.

I believe that we have found the "Settlement Cemetery." Following is an image from Google Maps. The full section we see is section 14 as shown on earlier maps. Above it is section 11 where the cemetery was once marked (through which a railroad still cuts a diagonal). "X" surely marks the spot.

¹⁵ The widowed Father Johannes appears in the 1850 Census living with Christian and his family.

¹⁶ Christian Lober farmed land in section 14 (noted above) in the late 1800s and also preached at the Windfall Reformed Church (just south of our focus) and elsewhere.

¹⁷ The German word *Gemeinde* can mean both a religious congregation and a "community" more generally.



Afterthoughts

At the age of 60, Ludwig Riedesel was an old man after 50+ years of unrelenting, hard work. He had gone from being a subject of the Count in Berleburg to one of Emperor Napoleon to one of the Grand Duke of Hesse (briefly, 1815-1816) and then the King of Prussia, all without leaving home. There was the prospect of finally owning his own property, but then again it is entirely possible that the debts and other burdens were simply too much. Perhaps the promise of an easier life and better land in Ohio was too good to ignore.

Even so, tearing up roots at his age was uncommon and certainly wrenching. Perhaps it was his adult children who lobbied for emigration. A few others from their village had gone before. It is pretty certain that the Riedesels never owned land in Crawford County. They worked for others or perhaps rented land, but when they did accumulate enough cash, it was invested in land around Wheatland, Iowa.¹⁸

Of Florentine we can speculate even less. She wasn't yet 60 but life was hard for women as well as men. She had buried three children back in Wunderthausen. For a few brief years, she was together again with her sisters in America and all her immediate family.

¹⁸ We know that the small house in Wunderthausen was sold to Daniel Müsse but I have no information about the terms of the sale. At best it may have covered their passage to America. Or perhaps their "rich relatives" in America made it possible. It is said that Ludwig Dürr who came in 1844 had his fare paid by someone in exchange for building a barn, he being a carpenter.

I see no cause to blame anyone for the disappearance of the burying ground. As noted, Christian and Maria Elisabeth Gerhardt eventually moved to Wheatland leaving the family plot behind. I don't have a history at this time of the land ownership in the past century, but it is clear that family connections to the little cemetery withered long ago. Later generations of Gerhardts and Hockers belonged to "proper" churches and were interred in the more-permanent cemeteries of the area.

Family records concur that the following died near Galion around 1847 and are presumably all buried in what was once the "Settlement Cemetery" along with an unknown number of earlier Gerhardt family members:

- Ludwig Riedesel (b. 1784 in *Weymers* house in Wunderthausen)
- Florentine Althaus, wife of Ludwig Riedesel, (b. 1792 in *Haase* house in Wunderthausen)
- (Maria) Amalia Beitzel, wife of L. Henry Riedesel (b. 1822 in the house *Unter der Leye* in Wunderthausen)
- Anna Elisabeth Riedesel, daughter of L. Henry and Amalia (b. 1842 in *Haase* house)¹⁹

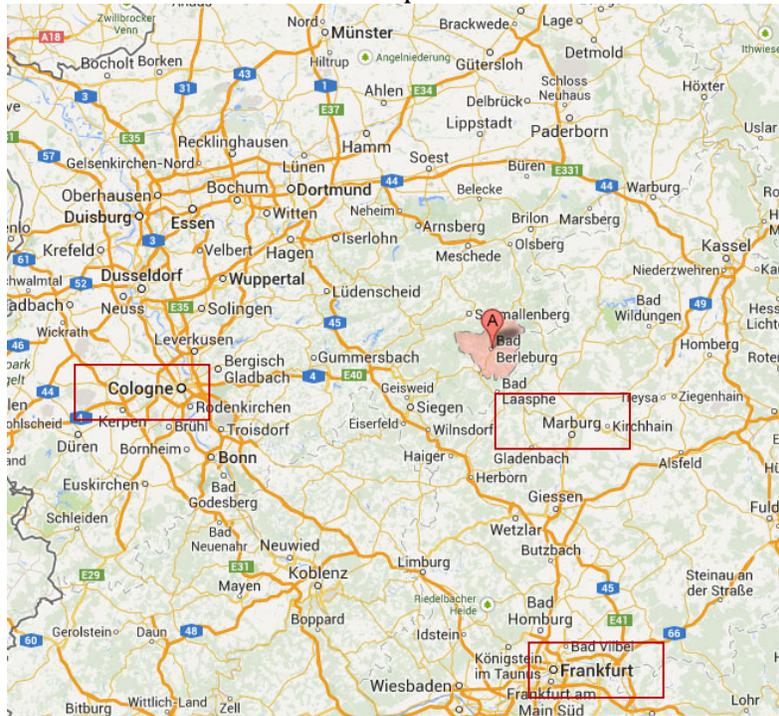
In addition, I am certain that Elisabeth Gertraud Althaus (b. 1795 in *Haase* house) is there as well. The many descendants of Ludwig Dürr, her son, thus also have a tie to this Ohio field.

Lassen sie alle in Frieden ruhen.

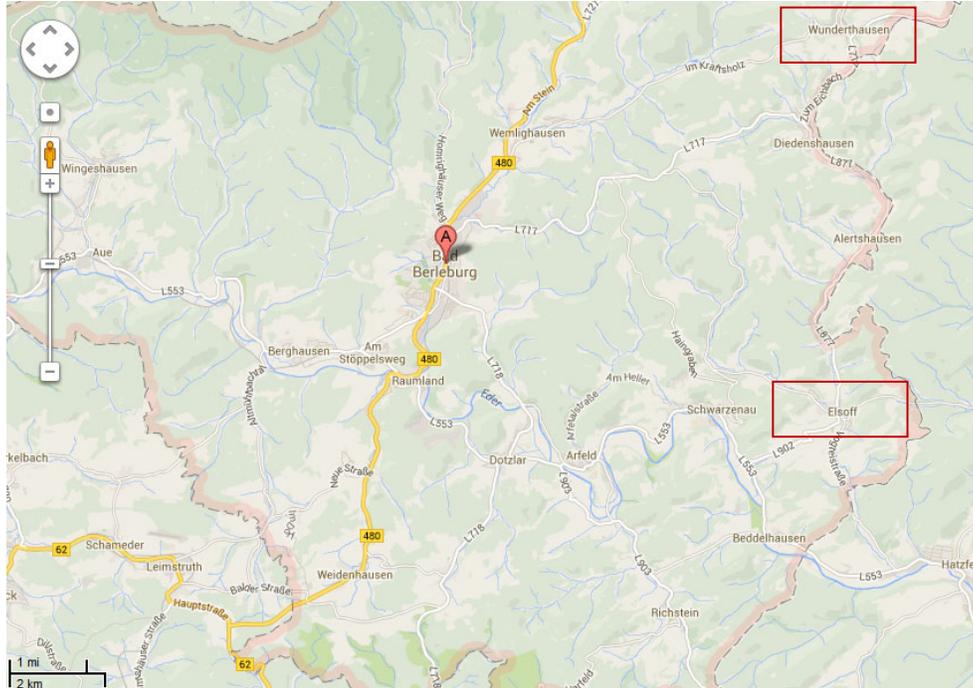
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¹⁹ Gerhard Riedesel alluded to other children, but I believe that in fact there were no others belonging to L. Henry and Amalia.

Maps



The town of Berleburg legally includes a set of surrounding villages; this area is at the center of the map. Note the relation to Frankfurt, Marburg and Cologne.



Wunderthausen and Elsoff are very close by modern standards—perhaps 10-12 minutes on the good road. The pink border just to their right is the border between the states of North Rhine-Westphalia to the west and Hesse to the east.