

The Early Dreisbach Emigrants to Pennsylvania and their Home Towns

1. Simon Dreisbach (1698-1785)

Simon Dreisbach's relationship to his home town, *Oberndorf*, was eclipsed by great pain on a much larger scale.

Simon Dreisbach was born in 1698 in Oberndorf in southern Wittgenstein. As its name indicates, Oberndorf is a village situated above (*ober*) or higher than a related village (*dorf*), which is the nearby Ruppershausen. These two communities have always been closely associated.

In 2015, during four days in the month of May, the villages of Ruppershausen and Oberndorf jointly celebrated the 650 documented years of their existence. (Both villages were mentioned for the first time in a document from the year 1365.) It is thus that Simon Dreisbach's birthplace has joined the many other Wittgenstein villages which have celebrated the anniversary of their considerable age by organizing a *Dorfjubiläum*.¹

Simon Dreisbach was definitely a son of Oberndorf, but only because his father Gurg (Georg Wilhelm) Dreisbach had had no prospects of inheriting the house of his birth in the village of Steinbach. Gurg married Margreth Sassmannshausen of Oberndorf who stood to inherit the house she was born in, and its associated lands. This house was situated on the outskirts of Oberndorf on a gentle rise south of the village. Like all village houses in Wittgenstein it had a name. The hill on which it stood was the Aberg, and the house was known as *Am Aberge*, meaning (*the house*) *on the Aberg hill*.

Gurg Dreisbach's father-in-law Johannes Sassmannshausen was said to be a cooper or barrel-maker in Oberndorf. He was also a master builder of half-timbered houses typical of the region. As time went on there were three generations living in the *Am Amberge* house, and one wonders if Johannes Sassmannshausen may possibly have added some enlargements to the house. This we cannot know, however, for a reason to be made clear in a future *Ecke*. In this house Simon Dreisbach was born, and here he lived with his wife Katarina (Kette) and their children until the night in 1743 when they slipped away and started the long journey to Philadelphia.

Simon's career as *Hausmann* or leaseholder did not begin until about 1729 (after the deaths of his father, his step-father, his maternal grandparents and last of all his mother). This rental arrangement was an agreement between leaseholder and count, renewable every eight years, with conditions of payment which included making various edible contributions to the kitchens of Castle Wittgenstein, and also obligatory manual labor by all the village's

¹ In a coming *Ecke* there will be information on a *Dorfjubiläum* of Dreisbach interest later in 2021.

leaseholders. Until 1735 Simon Dreisbach had the life of an ordinary villager who was expected to meet the requirements of the Count, work hard on the lands associated with the house, attend Sunday church services in Feudinggen and abide by the rules of the *Church and School Ordinances* which had a history going back to 1565. And then Simon Dreisbach's world collapsed.

In 1735 Simon was imprisoned after having participated in some amateurish local attempts to produce counterfeit coins. Despite mitigating circumstances and false information from a fellow suspect, Simon was condemned to one and a half years of hard labor on a construction site in Castle Wittgenstein. Having asked for and obtained a slightly earlier release from prison for the necessary spring plowing at home, Simon was ordered to 'reimburse' the Count for his absence from the castle's work force. It was also stipulated that he was to make certain other 'contributions' to the Count's coffers for the rest of his life. It is less than surprising, then, that just six years later Simon and his family fled from their home in Oberndorf to start anew in Pennsylvania.

Simon Dreisbach's reputation among his fellow villagers in Oberndorf would have been 'contaminated' by his relatively minor illegal actions in which he was almost never alone, and was never the leader. The whole family doubtless lost in local esteem. The two eldest sons were teenagers in 1735-37, and can have been subjected to much unpleasantness when not at home in *Am Aberge*.

Six years after his release from Castle Wittgenstein Simon Dreisbach, then forty-five, took his family to North America. There were now six children in the family, as a daughter, Anna Catherina, had been born a year after Simon's return. In Pennsylvania's Northampton County these young Dreisbachs would be able to follow their individual paths without the burden of being known as the sons or daughter of a man who had spent a year and a half in prison.

Ardis Dreisbach Grosjean, 4 July 2021

For documented accounts of these events in the life of Simon Dreisbach see the DERR articles on this website, in particular DERRs no. 11, 12, 13, and 14. Thanks to our "distant cousin" Heinrich Imhof of Weidenhausen in Wittgenstein we have photographs of a number of sources of information on Simon and other Dreisbachs. They are found in holdings WA D 14, WA D 53 and WA P 464 of the Princely Archive of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein in Bad Laasphe.