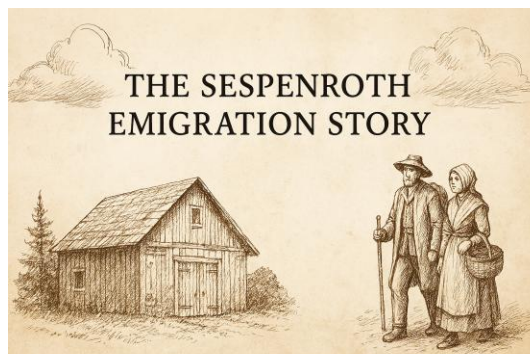




The following document, Guido Feig chronicles the 1853 mass emigration of the entire village of Sespenroth from the Duchy of Nassau to the United States, detailing the socio-economic crisis that prompted this unprecedented move, the legal and governmental processes involved, the journey, and the legacy of the emigrants in America.

- **Village economic decline:** Sespenroth was a small artisan village whose traditional crafts became unviable by the 1840s due to industrial competition, leading to poverty and state subsidies for the municipality. Land scarcity and heavy debts made the village economically unsustainable by 1852.
- **Petition for mass emigration:** In 1852, all 13 families of Sespenroth petitioned the Duchy of Nassau government to allow the entire community to emigrate to America, proposing to sell communal forest assets to fund the journey, an unprecedented request.
- **Government debates and approval:** The Duchy's First Chamber debated legal and social concerns about dissolving a municipality and selling communal property for emigration, ultimately approving the dissolution of Sespenroth and absorption of its land into Heilberscheid in 1853.
- **Emigration logistics and journey:** The village forest was sold to finance the emigration; official guidance was provided by the Nassau Emigration Society. On March 29, 1853, the 48 emigrants traveled by foot, steamboat, railway, and ship (brig Leander) to New York, arriving May 30, 1853.
- **Settlement in Milwaukee:** The emigrants settled in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, integrating into trades, farming, and local parishes. Over time, families dispersed across the state, showing upward mobility documented in various records. An oral account of a California gold-seeking group reflects frontier challenges.
- **Rediscovery by historian:** For over a century, Sespenroth's origins faded until Guido Feig's 1984 research in the U.S. uncovered church and civic records. This led to a symbolic 1984 reunion visit by Milwaukee descendants to Montabaur, reconnecting with the communities after 131 years.
- **Descendants and legacy:** Sespenroth survives as a vanished village and a diaspora in Wisconsin, with descendants carrying the original surnames. The emigration story exemplifies 19th-century German experiences of poverty, courage, and reinvention in America.
- **Poetic remembrance:** The emigrants left a village that disappeared, embarking westward to a new life. Though the village vanished, its spirit endures in stories and family memories bridged the old and new worlds.

The Sespenroth Emigration of 1853

Economic Crisis, State Intervention, and the Transatlantic Reinvention of a Village



"May this document contribute to many of the descendants of the emigrants listed here rediscovering their ancestors' roots in the Westerwald region and one day celebrating a harmonious reunion with the descendants of their siblings who did not make the long journey across the Atlantic." Guido Feig

The following translation is a portion of Guido Feig's research.

Introduction

This document presents a comprehensive narrative of the emigration of the village of Sespenroth, a population of 48 people across 13 families, located in the Gelbach Valley of the former Duchy of Nassau, to the United States in 1853. Based on extensive historical research and documentation compiled by Guido Feig, this summary traces the socio-economic conditions that led to mass emigration, the administrative processes involved, the journey to America, and the legacy of the Sespenroth emigrants in their new homeland, particularly in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Historical Context

Sespenroth stood between Heilberscheid and Bladernheim, a hamlet of barely two dozen buildings: modest dwellings, a few stables, a chapel, a bakehouse, and scattered workshops. Its residents practiced traditional rural crafts—broom making, basket weaving, buckle forging, tinkering—occupations that had sustained generations.

By the 1840s, however, industrialization had rendered these trades obsolete. Factories in the Rhine-Main region produced goods faster and cheaper than any Westerwald artisan could match. Poverty deepened. The village treasury survived only through annual subsidies from the Duchy of Nassau. Land was scarce, heavily mortgaged, and unevenly distributed. Even in the communal forest—the village's only significant asset—was burdened with debt.

By 1852, Sespenroth was no longer economically sustainable. The villagers knew it. The state knew it. And the crisis demanded a drastic solution.

1853 Emigration Process

On February 26, 1852, the residents submitted a remarkable petition to the government in Wiesbaden: permission for the entire community to emigrate to America. While individual emigration was common, the departure of an entire municipality was unprecedented.

The petition argued that:

- private assets were insufficient to fund the journey,
- the communal forest should be sold to finance emigration,
- and all families intended to leave.

The Duchy of Nassau, grappling with widespread rural poverty, took the request seriously. Emigration had recently been affirmed as a fundamental right by the Frankfurt Parliament, and the state increasingly viewed it as a release valve for social distress. Yet the legal implications were immense. Dissolving a municipality required legislative action, and selling communal property to fund private emigration pushed the limits of existing law. Still, the government moved forward.

Government Proceedings

The First Chamber of the Duchy of Nassau debated the Sespenroth case in April and June 1853. The transcripts offer a rare glimpse into mid-19th-century governance.

Concerns included:

- whether communal property could legally be liquidated for emigration,
- whether this would set a dangerous precedent,
- and what would happen to any residents who chose to remain.

Möller criticized the plan, arguing that the state should support the poor rather than dismantle a municipality. Von Marschall acknowledged the legal contradictions but insisted the process had advanced too far to reverse. Government Commissioner Giesse assured the chamber that any remaining families would be resettled in neighboring communities without coercion.

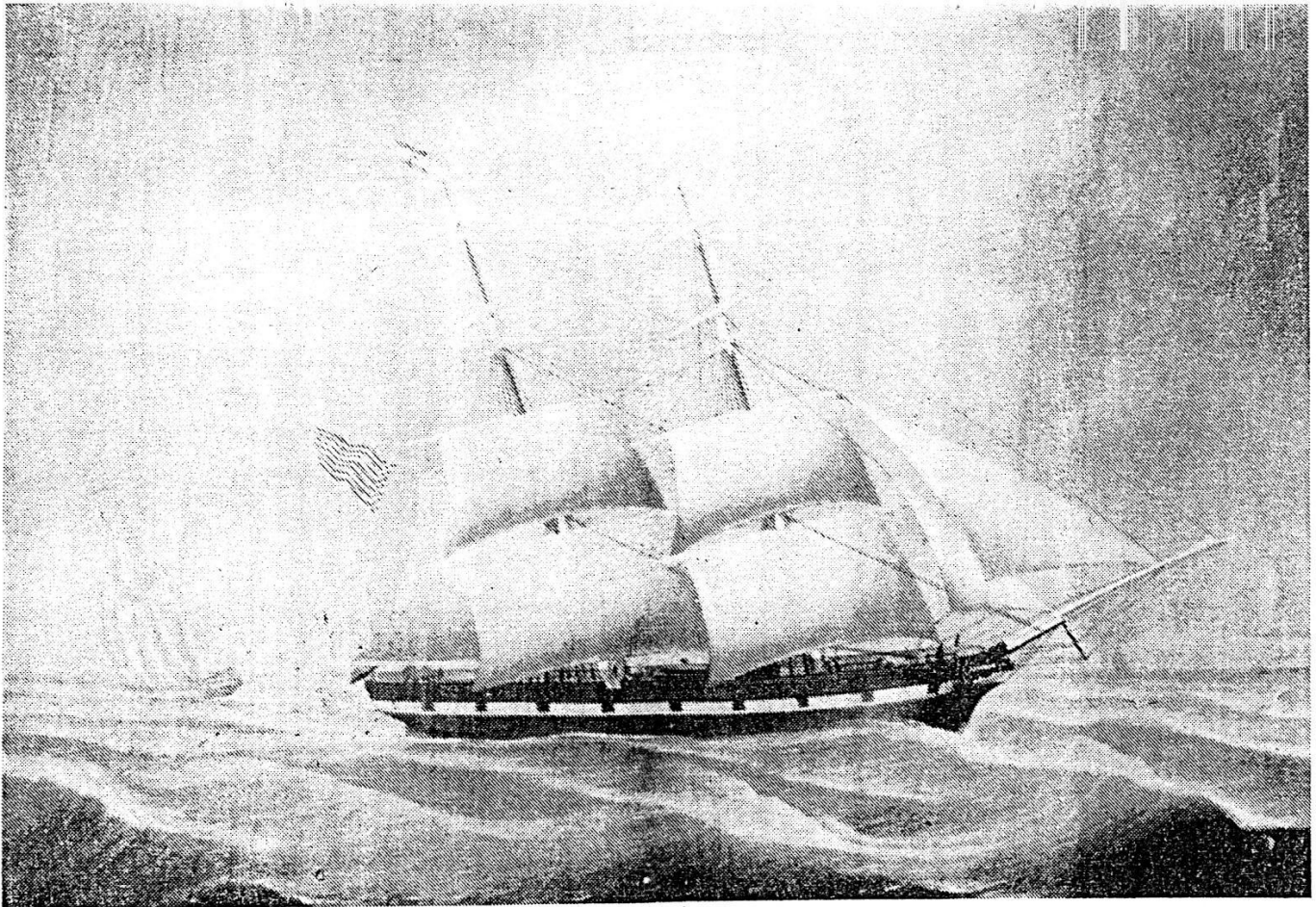
Ultimately, the chamber approved of the dissolution. Sespenroth ceased to exist as a political entity, and its land was absorbed into Heilberscheid.

Journey to America

The village forest—139 acres of mature woodland, was auctioned for 8,573 florins, purchased by Heilberscheid. Additional funds came from rural relief coffers. The emigrants received guidance from the Nassau Emigration Society, including a printed manual detailing ports, routes, fares, baggage rules, and warnings against fraud. Emigration had become both bureaucratic and deeply uncertain.

On March 16, 1853, the Ministry of the Interior authorized final arrangements. Passage to Milwaukee had already been secured through the Nassau consul in New York.

On Easter Tuesday, March 29, 1853, the 48 emigrants left Sespenroth with two handcarts. They walked to Koblenz, traveled by steamboat to Cologne, by rail to Bremen, and by barge to Bremerhaven. There they boarded the brig *Leander*, a two-masted vessel owned by C. Melchers & Co. under Captain Hans Jürgen Wilmsen. The ship departed on April 11 and arrived in New York on May 30, 1853. The passenger manifest lists every emigrant by name, age, and occupation—an invaluable genealogical record.



The brig "Leander" was the ship on which the Sespenroth residents sailed to America. She left Bremerhaven on April 11 1853 and reached the port of New York on May 30, 1853

Settlement in Milwaukee

Upon arrival, the group was received by Consul General Kobbe. Their onward journey took them by rail to Albany, then along the Erie Canal and the Great Lakes to Milwaukee. By early July 1853, the Sespenroth families stood in their new city—penniless but free, with a future to build.

Milwaukee in the 1850s was a thriving German immigrant center. The families settled between 9th and 15th Streets, north of the Menomonee River. Over time:

- the Brühl family became tinsmiths and later successful farmers,
- the Klein, Stiehl, and Diel families entered trades and small businesses,
- the Hoffarth and Nebgen families integrated into Old Saint Mary Catholic Parish.

As the decades passed, descendants spread across Wisconsin to towns such as Appleton, Menasha, and Brillion. Naturalization papers, tax rolls, and land deeds trace their steady upward mobility.

A dramatic oral tradition—recorded by Josef Meurer in 1907—claimed that a group seeking gold in California was attacked by Native Americans, with only two survivors returning. While partially supported by American records, the full account remains unverified, reflecting the dangers of the frontier era.

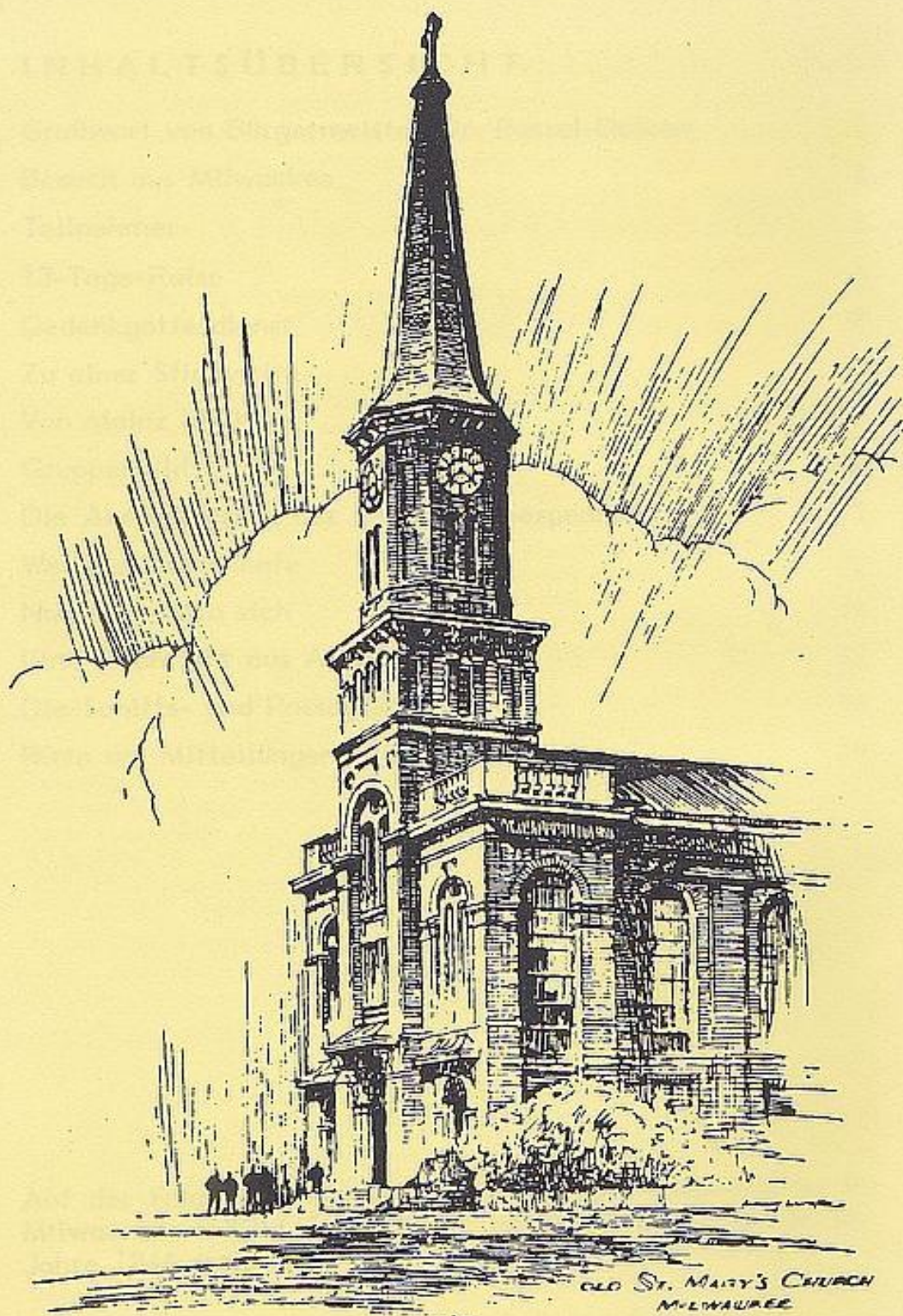
Later Rediscovery - Guido Feig's Research (1984–1992)

For more than a century, no letters or records returned to Westerwald. Sespenroth's land reverted to forest. Only a stone cross marked the vanished village. Meanwhile, the emigrants' descendants blended into American life, their German origins fading.

In 1984, historian Guido Feig traveled to the United States for five weeks to trace the Sespenroth emigrants. Through church archives, historical societies, and public records, he uncovered:

- the 1855 Milwaukee baptism of Elisabeth Stiel,
- the naturalization certificate of John Klein,
- numerous surname variants in Milwaukee directories.

Later that year, on October 10, 1984, a group of 26 travelers from Milwaukee—led by Father Franz Josef Sanfelippo of Old Saint Mary Parish—visited Montabaur. Welcomed by Mayor Dr. Possel-Dölken, they toured local institutions and held a memorial service for the Sespenroth emigrants. After 131 years, the two communities were symbolically reunited.



Broadway at Kilbourn Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53202

Descendants and Legacy to Union Mills, Wisconsin

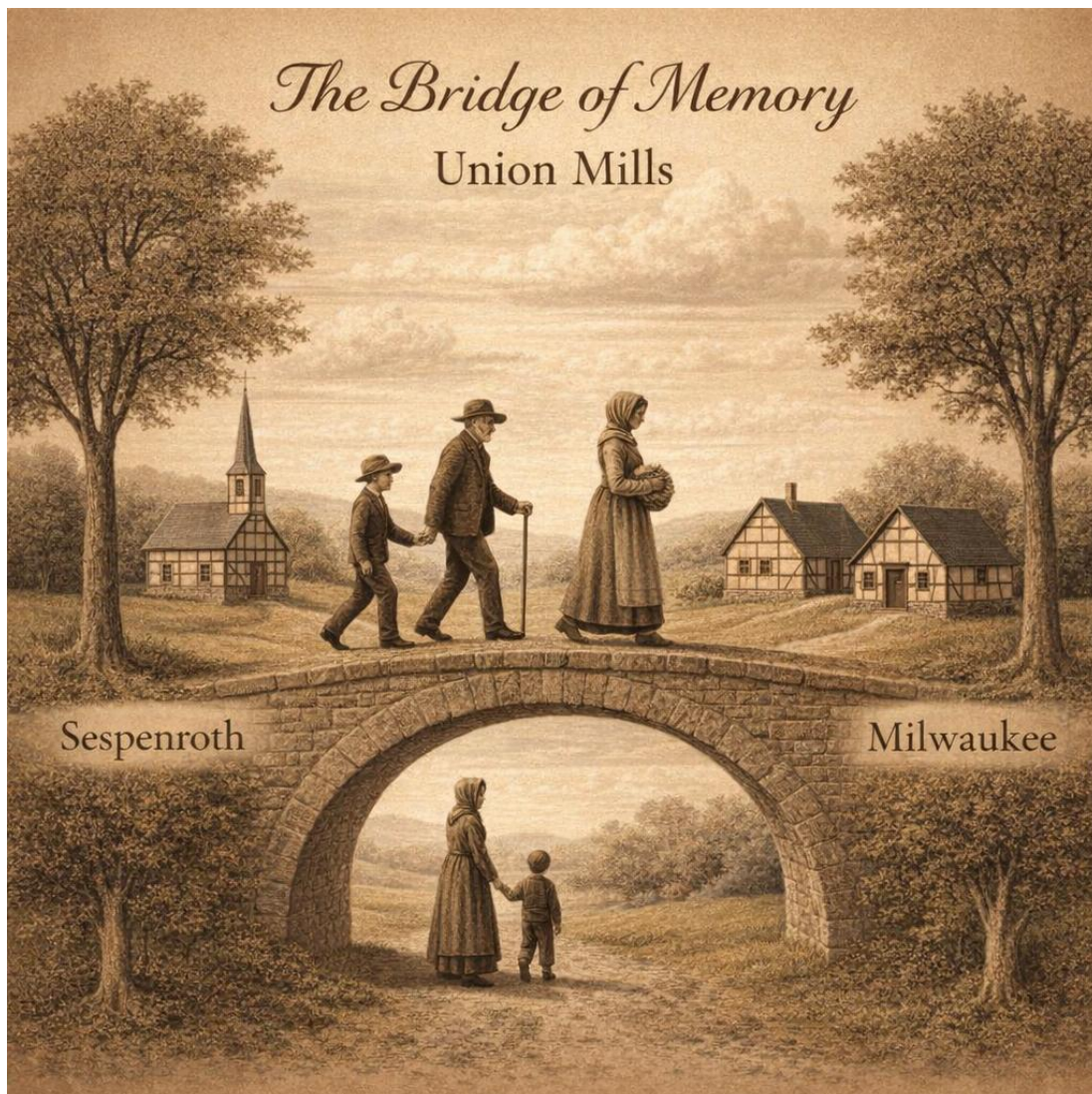
Today, Sespenroth exists in two forms:

- as a vanished village in the Gelbach Valley, reclaimed by forest,
- and as a living diaspora in Wisconsin, where hundreds—perhaps thousands—bear the names Brühl, Diel, Stiehl, Klein, Ickenroth, Meuer, Nebgen, and Hoffarth.

Johann Nebgen, the last mayor of the Gelbach community, is buried at St. John's Cemetery in Union Mills, Wisconsin.

Last marriage in Sespenroth was Anton Meuer also buried at St. John's in Union Mills and Elisabeth Ickenroth (Eckenroth) St. Joseph, River Grove, Illinois.

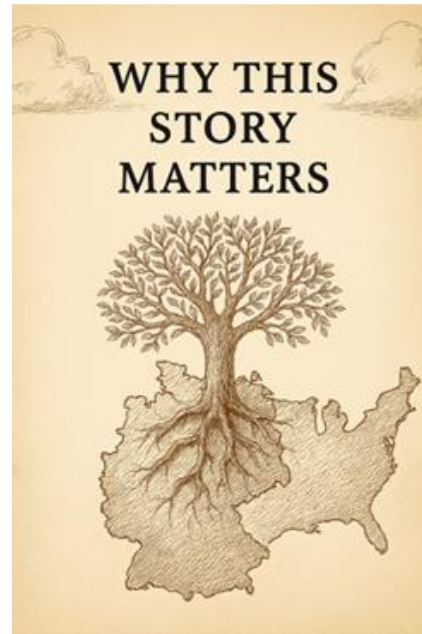
The Sespenroth emigration was more than a relocation. It was a transformation—of a community, of families, and of the meaning of home. The village disappeared from the map, but its people did not disappear from history. They carried it across an ocean and continued it in a new land.



Poetic Epilogue:

“From valley paths to ocean wide,
Their faith and hope became their guide.
Though Sespenroth has passed from view,
Its spirit lives in me and you.”

“From Gelbach’s hills to Milwaukee’s shore,
A village lost, yet lives once more.
Through faith and toil their legacy grew,
Sespenroth endures — in me, in you.”



Where the Road Turns West

They left a village whose name was already fading, a cluster of hearths dimming under Nassau’s rule, and stepped into the long uncertainty of distance.

Behind them, the lanes of Sespenroth held the echo of boots on early spring earth, the last smoke rising from chimneys soon to belong to others.

Ahead of them, the road bent west—first to Bremen, then to the waiting sea, where the *Leander* rocked like a promise not yet spoken.

Weeks later, the horizon opened into New York Harbor, and the world widened in a single breath.

In Wisconsin, they rooted themselves again—first in unfamiliar soil, then in familiar rhythms, until the land became home. Fields replaced forests, and children learned a language their grandparents never knew.

Yet in quiet moments—between the toll of the church bell and the turning of the seasons—the old village lived on in stories, in names, in the way a family gathers as if distance had never been a barrier at all.

We remember them not as wanderers, but as builders of two worlds: one left behind, one created a new, with a bridge of memory stretching gently between them.

Appendix 2:

Sespenroth & Family Heritage



Historic Street in Montabaur

A narrow cobblestone street lined with half-timbered houses is the architectural traditions of central Germany, flanked by half-timbered buildings with steep roofs. Erika and Guido Feig are standing on opposite sides of the street.



International Gathering

Edward Rosenthal (Meuer),
Kathy Barr, Carolyn Meuer, and
Berthold Meuer, family members
pictured attending the 150
Sespenroth 150th Anniversary.



1. April 2013
Familientreffen
der
Becker's & Meuer's
in Heiligenroth

Irmtrud Thome,
Brigitte & Berthold Meuer
gehörten an diesem
Nachmittag auch zum
Becker-Meuer Clan.

Becker-Meuer Family Reunion (2013)

This collage (built by Peter Becker) documents a family reunion held on April 2013, in Heiligenroth. The main photo shows a large group of Beckers and Meuer relatives. Inset photos feature Brigitte, Kathy, and Margret indoors, and Berthold and Irmtrud Meuer in a candid moment. The event highlights multi-generational connections within the Becker and Meuer families.

Sespenroth

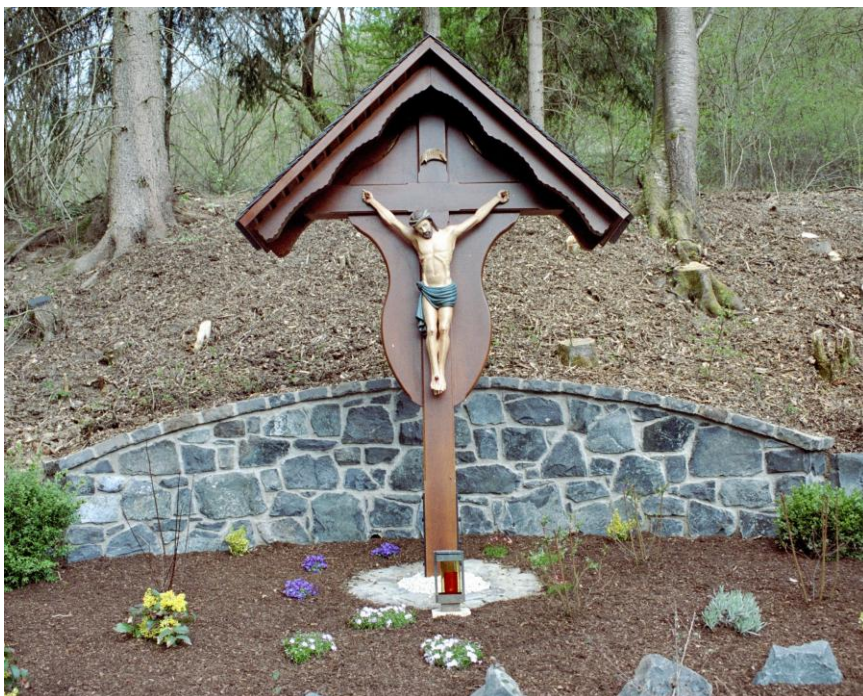
Historical Signboard

This informational signboard provides historical context about the abandoned village of Sespenroth in the Gelbachtal Valley. The village, part of Heiligenroth, was deserted in 1532 for unknown reasons. Archaeological excavations in 1982 uncovered the foundations of five buildings. The sign includes a map and coats of arms, commemorating the site's historical significance.



Sespenroth Outdoor Crucifix Installation

The image shows a crucifix mounted on a wooden structure with a pitched roof and is placed against a stone wall with a garden bed of flowering plants. Surrounded by trees, the installation serves as a spiritual landmark for prayer and reflection for the families of Sespenroth.



foundations of five buildings. The sign includes a map and coats of arms, commemorating the site's historical significance.



Sespenroth Ceramics Exhibit

A display board presents ceramic fragments labeled 'Sespenroth Keramik vor 1853,' meaning 'Sespenroth Ceramics before 1853.' The board features a semi-circle of shards at the top and a diverse collection of fragments below, showcasing historical craftsmanship and materials offering insight into daily life before abandonment.



St. John's Union Mills, Wisconsin

St. John's is a small, rustic stone church nestled in a wooded area, built in 1871. St. John's features a simple architectural design with a white door, arched windows, and a steeple topped with a cross. Surrounded by tall pine trees and fallen autumn leaves, the setting conveys a serene and secluded atmosphere, ideal for quiet reflection or community gatherings built by family members that left Sespenroth in 1853.

Appendix 3: Visiting the United States from our extended Sespenroth family

The photographs and captions in this collection document the ongoing efforts of descendants, researchers, and community members to preserve the intertwined histories of the Sespenroth, Niedererbach, and Union Mills families. Spanning multiple generations and two continents, these images capture the living legacy of the Meuer, Becker, Brühl, Eckenroth, Reckenthaler, and Nebgen families—lineages shaped by migration, resilience, and enduring cultural memory.

This document brings together visual records of that work: the creation of extensive descendant charts, the reconstruction of family trees, the celebration of regional customs, and the collaborative efforts to maintain historic sites such as St. John's Cemetery, Union Mills, Wisconsin. Each photograph reflects not only a moment in time but also a shared commitment to remembering the people and places that shaped the community's identity.



Visiting the United States

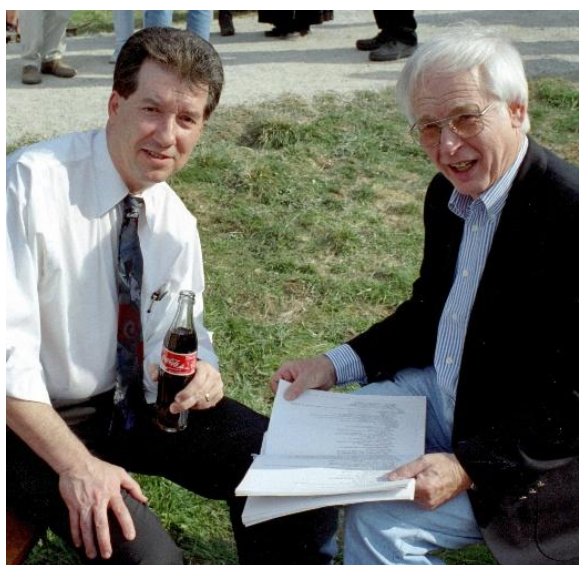
Guido Feig inspiring students in a German Class during his many visits to the Chicago area.



Erika and Guido visiting NBC in Chicago.

Berthold & Brigitte, Elke, Frank, Dennis Meuer visiting Navy Pier in Chicago





Reviewing the Meuer Family Lineage

Edward Rosenthal (Meuer) and Berthold Meuer of Niedererbach review detailed multi-generation family charts tracing the Meuer line across Germany and the United States. Their collaboration reflects a shared commitment to preserving the family's transatlantic history with Berthold's copies of nearly 100 Meuer genealogy records from his research.



Documenting Easter in Montabaur

Peter Becker of Montabaur photographs the family's Easter traditions, preserving a local celebration passed down through generations. His work highlights the Becker family's enduring connection to the region and its cultural rhythms.



The Becker/Meuer Descendant Chart

Created by Peter Becker, this extensive chart maps hundreds of descendants across multiple generations. Its scale demonstrates decades of genealogical research and the complexity of the family's interwoven lines.



Kathy & Bruce Becker Barr at the Sespensroth Celebration

Kathy and Bruce Barr participate in the Sespensroth commemorative events, honoring the history of the abandoned village and the families who once lived there. Their presence underscores the continued bond between descendants and their ancestral homeland.

Traditional Sespensroth Clothing of the 1800s

Dressed in period attire, Kathy Becker Barr brings to life the clothing once worn in Sespensroth during the 19th century. Her outfit reflects the everyday garments of rural families in the Gelbachtal valley.

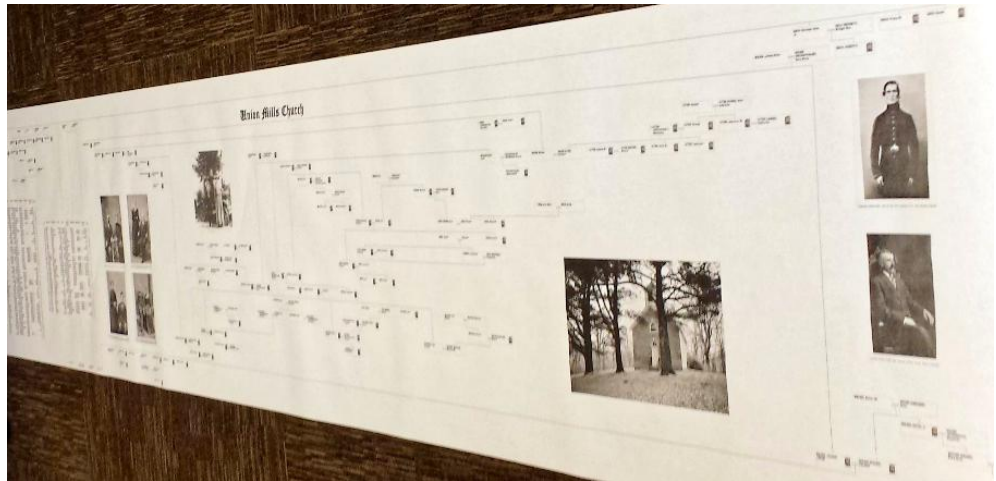


The Bruehl Family: Marion Bruehl Grosser, Carl Bruehl and daughter Becky Bruehl Bestul

The Bruehl family is one of the many interconnected families tied to the Sespensroth region. Becky's great grandfather was just a baby for the emigration.

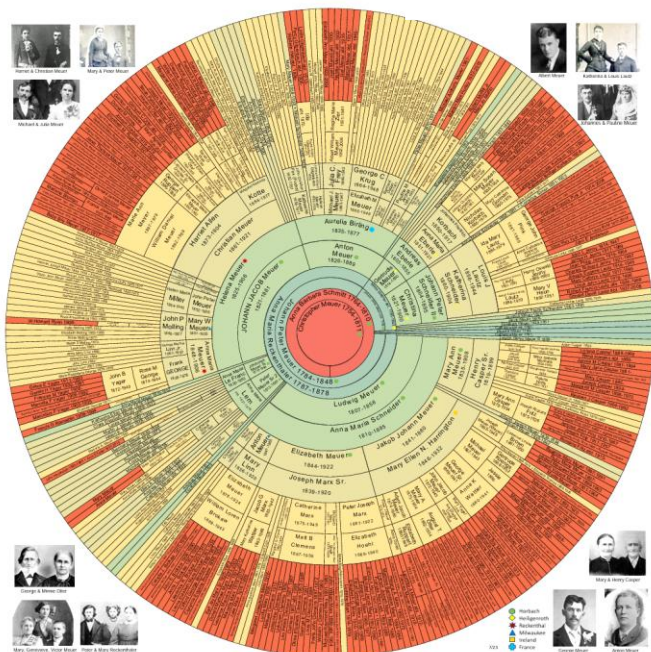
Joan Bennett, Author

Joan Bennett, author of *A Place Called Union Mills*, documents the origins and development of the Wisconsin community founded by German immigrants. Her work preserves stories that might otherwise have been lost.



Descendant Charts at St. John's Union Mills

Each year, families at St. John's Union Mills in Wisconsin present their lineage charts, many extending more than 14 feet in length. These displays celebrate the enduring legacy of the German immigrants who founded the community.



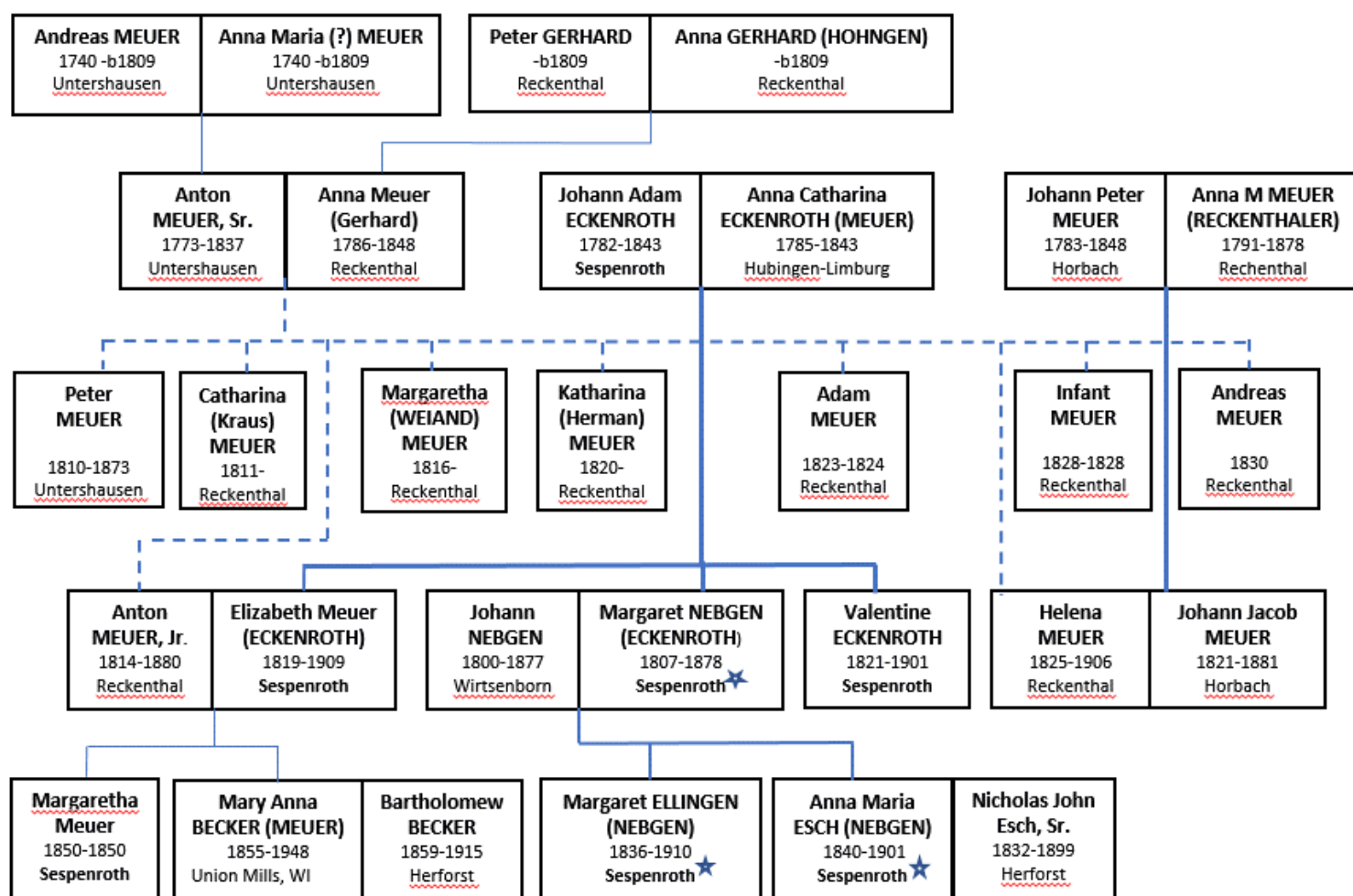
The Meuer Family Chart

This expansive Meuer family chart displays the remarkable size and reach of the Meuer lineage. Its detailed branches reflect generations of careful documentation and the family's growth across continents.



St. John's Cemetery Sign Project Team

Michael Meuer, his son Eric, Edward Rosenthal (Meuer), son Edward Jr. (Ted), Vicky Nadler (Meuer), and Lynnette Litchfield (Meuer) collaborate the first St. John's Cemetery sign. Their teamwork reflects a shared commitment to honoring the community's ancestors.

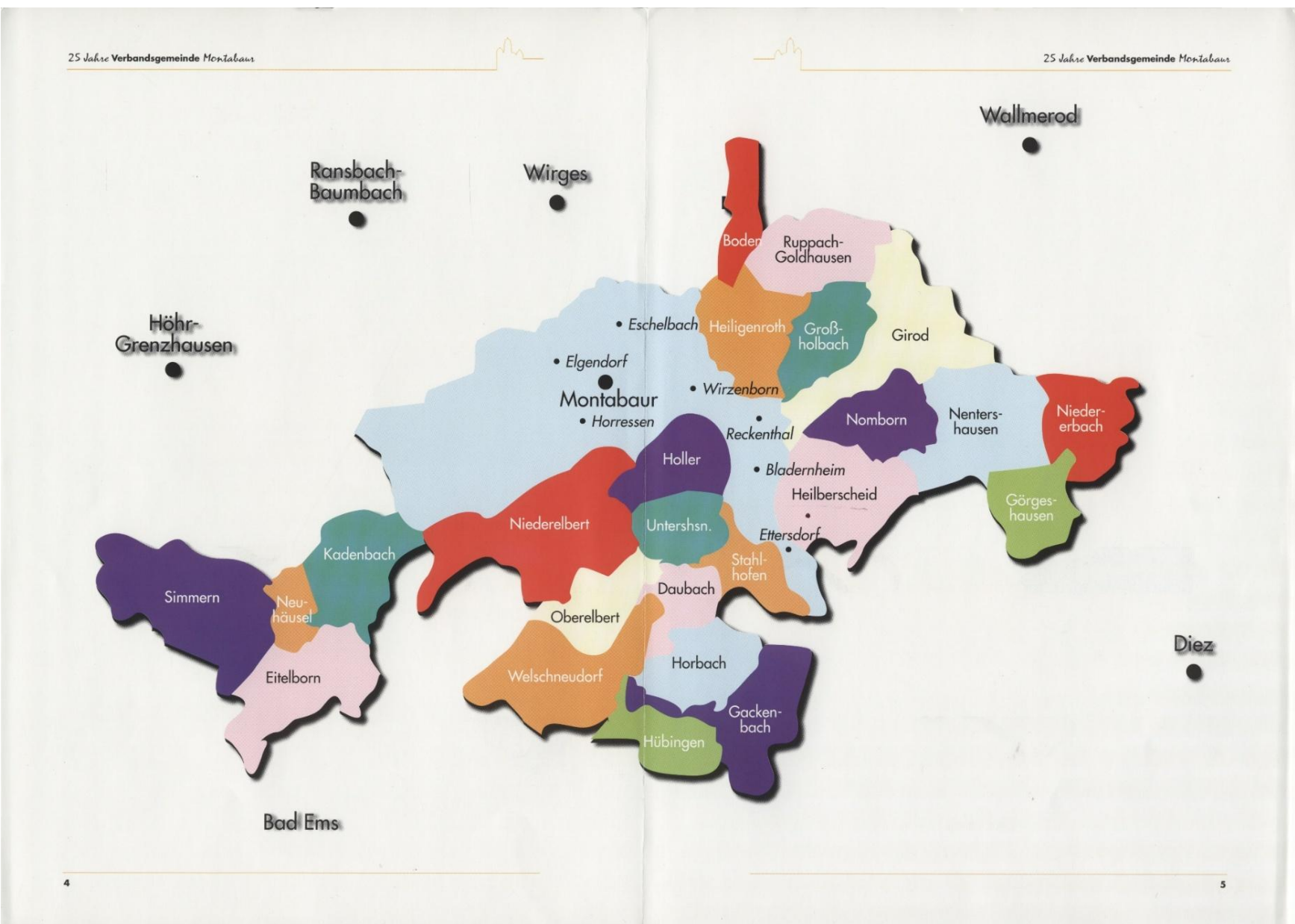


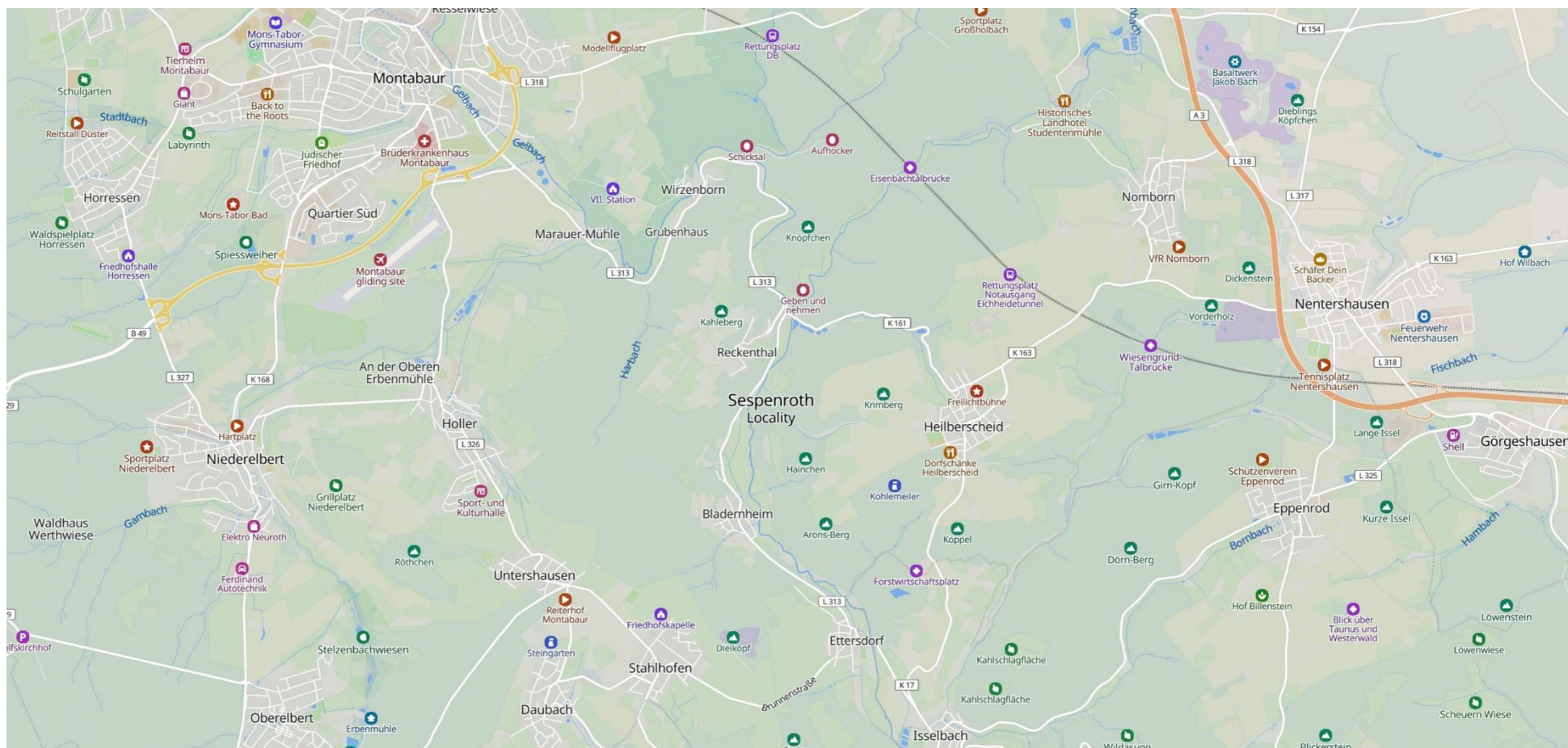
Family Tree of the Sespenroth-Area Families

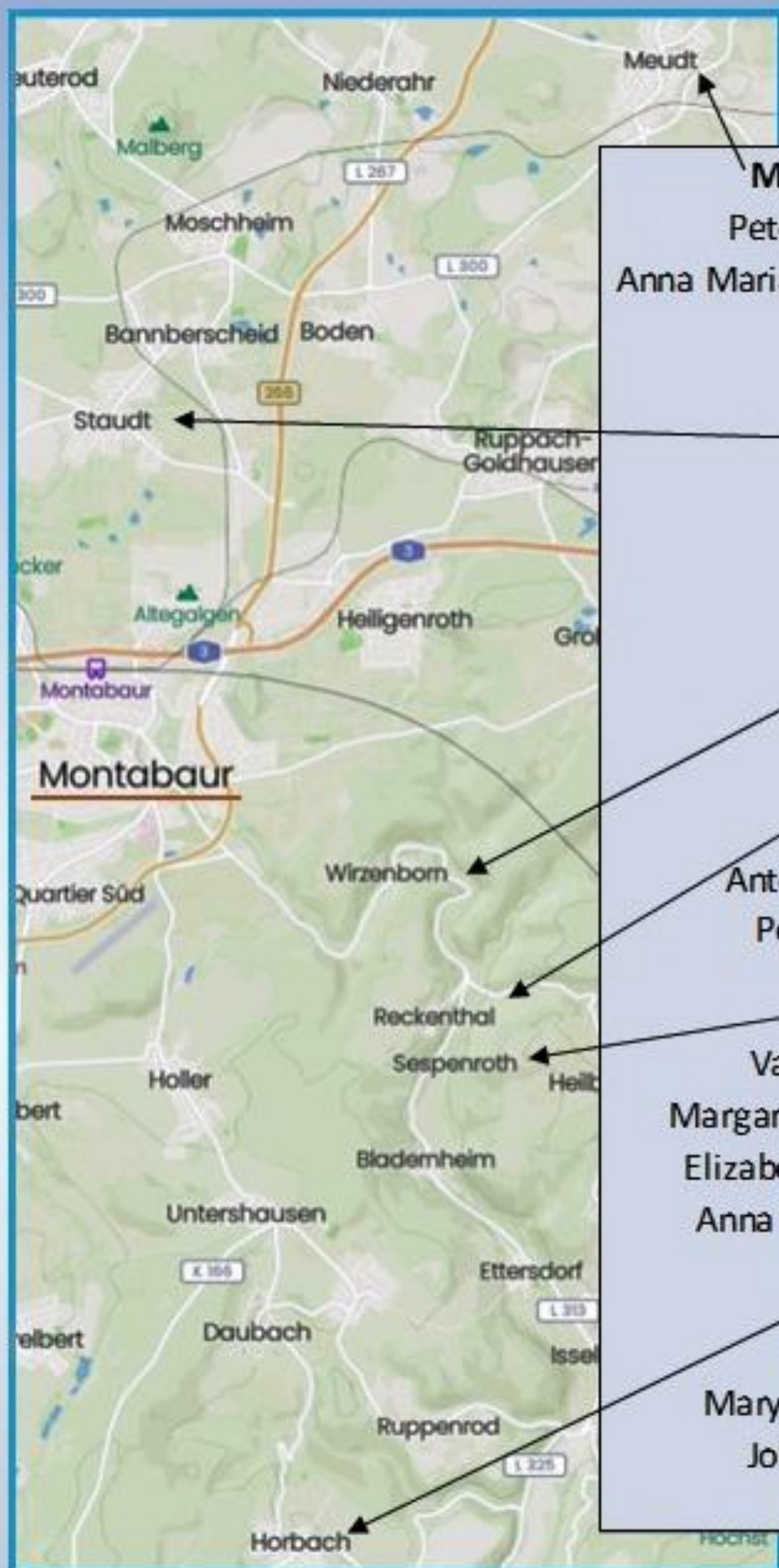
This family tree brings together the Eckenroth, Meuer, Reckenthaler, Becker, and Nebgen families, all connected to the Sespenroth region. It illustrates the shared roots and intertwined histories of these ancestral lines, many of whom later settled in Union Mills, Wisconsin.

Appendix 4: Maps

This section presents historical maps provided by Bethold Meuer from the early 1800s of the Sespenroth area and surrounding towns, highlighting Sespenroth's location relative to Reckenthal, Montabaur, Horbach, and Holler.







Meudt & Molsberg

Peter Joseph Dochnahl
Anna Maria (Woersdorfer) Dochnahl

Staudt

Adam Heibel

Wirzenborn

John Nebgen

Reckenthal

Anton & Helena Meuer
Peter Reckenthaler

Sespenroth

Valentine Eckenroth
Margaret (Eckenroth) Nebgen
Elizabeth (Eckenroth) Meuer
Anna Maria (Nebgen) Esch

Horbach

Ludwig Meuer
Mary Ann (Meuer) Casper
Johann Jacob Meuer
Jacob Meuer II

5512
5612

5513
5613

80 (rrh) Abbildung

Abb. 81 (rrh) Holzappel



5612/5613

81 (rrh) Abbildung

Topographische Aufnahmen rheinischer Städte durch französische Ingenieure
geographen unter Oberst Tranchot 1803-1813 und durch preussische Offiziere
unter Generalmajor F. v. Müffling 1815-1820 mit Erläuterungsblättern
1820-1828.
Die Originalen befinden sich in der Staatsbibliothek
— Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz — in Berlin.
Aus dem Originalabdruck 1:25.000 in den Maßstab 1:25.000 reduziert.



81 (rrh) Holzappel
Herausgegeben von 1813
von Leutnant Dürbaum
und Leutnant v. Thümmel

Längemaßstab 1:25.000 (1 cm der Karte = 1 km der Natur)

Publikationen der Gesellschaft für Rheinische Geschichtskunde
XII - 2. Abteilung - Neue Folge
Reproduziert mit Unterstützung des Ministeriums für Unterricht und Kultur
des Landes Rheinland-Pfalz

Landeskundliche Durchmusterung durch H. Müller-Ming
Herausgegeben
Landesvermessungsamt Rheinland-Pfalz
1979

Benennung der Bodenbenutzung (Kulturräume)

Ackerland	weiß
Gärten	farbiger oder weißer Untergrund, rot oder blau Punkte und Linienmarkierungen
Heumache Wiesen und Weiden, Bau- gärten oder Ob- stgärten	grün, olivgrün oder weiß, olivgrün mit Baum- markierungen oder Punkten
Wälder	hellgrün
Wiesen und Wälder	grün bis olivgrün, je nach Benutzung rot oder blau schattige Punkte oder Baummarkierungen
Heide	rosa-olivgrün gelblich, je nach Benutzung rot oder blau Baummarkierungen
Wald	weiß oder grau: Untergrund mit Baummarkierungen

(Holzmarkierungen wurden allgemein durch Baummarkierungen
oder Punkte dargestellt)