

AGRICULTURE IN ALSACE

By Michael J. Nuwer, February 2023

Below is an image of the city of Haguenau, France from 1751. In the early modern era (1492-1789), Haguenau was an important commercial center for northern Alsace and the administrative capital for the Prefecture of Haguenau. One of Alsace's ten free cities, Haguenau was governed by a council elected from families of merchants and nobles. The jurisdiction of the Prefecture extended to 45 villages, including Soufflenheim. The city is nine miles west of Soufflenheim, and a direct road through the Haguenau Forest connected the two places. Before the French Revolution, Soufflenheim was ruled by the Prefecture, to whom it paid seignorial taxes.



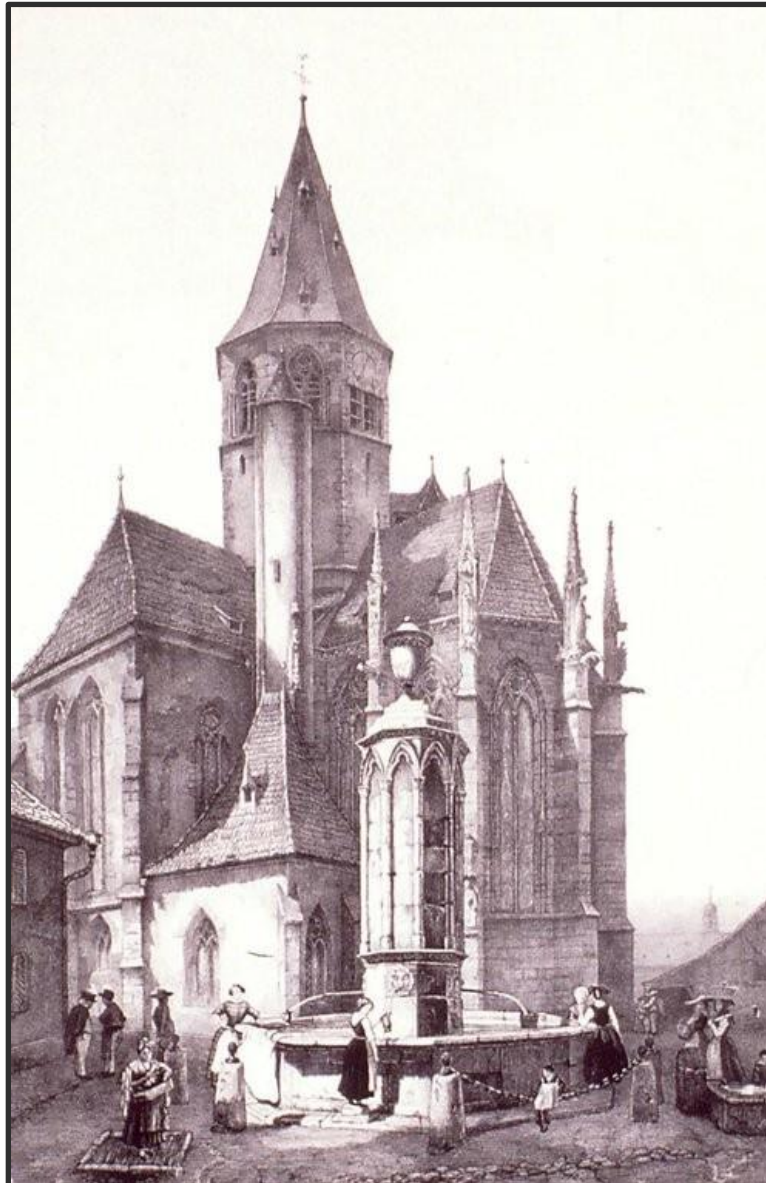
Source: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b102011807.r=Haguenau?rk=5064402;4>

Haguenau was also the home of St. George church, the main Catholic church of the region. Although the Protestant Reformation (1517-1555) gained importance in Haguenau, the Jesuits took charge of St. George church and stopped the Protestant progression in the city. The Church of St. Michael in Soufflenheim was a dependency of St. George church. In the above image, St. George is in the center – the tallest building in the city.

This image of Haguenau illustrates the organization of Alsatian cities, towns, and villages during Mediaeval and early modern times. Throughout the Middle Ages central government was generally weak and townspeople needed protection from bandits and lawless nobles. Rural populations therefore tended to cluster close together in order to ensure their common security.

Due to such social clustering, houses in the open country were very rare. A typical European clustered village consisted of houses on either side of a main street, each with a small garden. The plowed agricultural land was located away from the housing cluster. People did not live on their farmland.

A striking aspect of the agricultural system was the division of the plowed land into narrow strips. The above image highlights that agricultural organization. In the foreground, the horizontal and vertical rows are ridges of dirt which divide the fields into long narrow strips. Hence the term “strip farming” is sometimes used to describe the system.



St. Georges Catholic Church at Haguenau

Source: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10227411m.r=Haguenau?rk=2854091;2>

The strips were long and narrow because farmers needed to minimize the number of times their plow-team had to turn around. As a rule, the longer dimension of a strip (its length) was determined by the distance a plow could conveniently be dragged by a team of oxen and the shorter dimension (its width) by the number of furrows the oxen could comfortably work in one day. The traditional size of a strip in English history was a furlong (220 yards) by a chain (22 yards), the area of which forms one acre. This is the historical origin of the acre in Great Britain, and the United States inherited that unit of measurement.

On the European Continent, the morgen was the traditional measurement of area. Like an acre, a morgen represented the amount of land that could be plowed in a unit of time—a “day’s work.” Of course, many barriers like rivers, streams, rocks, roads, and soil conditions modified the standard dimension of how much land could be plowed in a day. Thus, the size of a morgen varies from half to over two acres (2,000 to 10,000 m²) of land.

A single family would have use-rights (ownership or otherwise) to multiple strips of farmland, but the strips did not typically lie side by side. Instead, they were scattered among the open fields.

Like Haguenau, Soufflenheim’s agricultural land was located outside the clustered village and divided into long narrow strips. Survey maps from 1836 document almost 3,000 strips, which were owned by a population of about 560 families. This organization of land persisted well into the nineteenth century.

The Cadastre

During the rule of Napoleon Bonaparte (1799–1814), the French government put forth a plan to create a registry of property for the purpose of determining ownership and for assessing property taxes. This land registry is called the *Cadastre*. Beginning in 1807, a systematic land survey of France was undertaken. In each village, town, or city, plots of land were measured, classified according to usage, and detailed maps were drawn. The scattered plots of land were then combined into a registry for each owner. This determined the owner’s income, and that income was made the tax base.

Surveys in Lower Alsace (Bas-Rhin) began in 1808 and continued through 1844. Soufflenheim’s survey was conducted in 1836. For purposes of the *Cadastre*, the Commune of Soufflenheim was divided into four sections, each labeled with a letter A through D. The residential village was found in Section D. The other three sections contain agricultural land.

The following image shows the northern part of the Soufflenheim Commune as depicted in the *Cadastre* maps. The residential district is in the upper left of the image. The small dark squares represent houses. To the right in the image is plowed farmland, identified as Section A. Below the residential district is Section B of the maps. It too is farmland.



Image 1

The next image shows almost the whole of the Soufflenheim Commune. At the top is the residential district, designated Section D for the *Cadastre* maps. To the right of the residential district is the farmland of Section A. Below is the farmland in Section B and below Section B is more farmland designated as Section C. The area below Section C is lightly shaded and the shading protrudes into Section C; this is Soufflenheim's communal forest, where the inhabitants collected firewood and building materials.

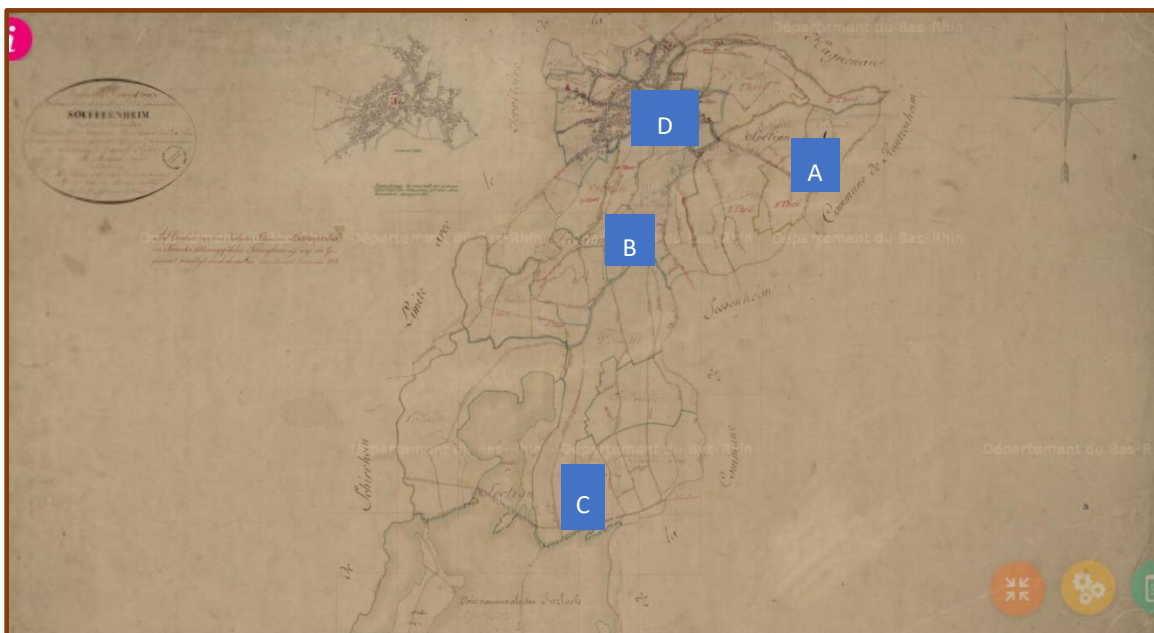


Image 2

The next two images, three and four, show closeups of the residential district. Detailed representations of streets, houses, outbuilding, and gardens can be seen. In image three, St. Michael's church is in the lower right; in image four the Oelberg cemetery is at the left.



Image 3



Image 4

The last two images, five and six, show closeups of the plowed agricultural land. We see clearly the fields divide into long, narrow strips. Image five is from Section A of the maps and image six is from Section B.



Image 5



Image 6

The 1836 population census for the Commune of Soufflenheim found 2,942 inhabitants living in 562 households. The *Cadastré* survey identified and numbered each strip of land in the agricultural fields. There were about 3,000 strips, which is an average of about 5 strips per family. The *Cadastré* registry

maintained an index of these strips of land along with their owner. Information kept in the registry included the year a plot was purchased, the year it was sold, its location on the survey maps, its use, and the net income it generated.

The *Cadastre* data set makes it possible to identify the house and farmland owned by Soufflenheim families beginning about 1836. Digital copies of the survey maps are available online (hyperlinks are listed below); however, the registries of owners are available only at the Bas-Rhin Archive in Strasbourg. As of February 2024, the Soufflenheim Genealogy, Research, and History network has high quality images of the registry index for the Napoleonic *Cadastre* which covers the period 1836-1888. From this index, the registry (or folio) page for a landowner can be identified.

Hyperlinks to Soufflenheim's *Cadastre* Maps

- Index of maps : <http://archives.bas-rhin.fr/detail-document/LIGEO-1513765#visio/page:LIGEO-1513765-14312>
- Section A, sheet 1 : <http://archives.bas-rhin.fr/detail-document/LIGEO-1513766#visio/page:LIGEO-1513766-14306>
- Section A, sheet 2 : <http://archives.bas-rhin.fr/detail-document/LIGEO-1513767#visio/page:LIGEO-1513767-14305>
- Section A, sheet 3 : <http://archives.bas-rhin.fr/detail-document/LIGEO-1513768#visio/page:LIGEO-1513768-14311>
- Section A, sheet 4 : <http://archives.bas-rhin.fr/detail-document/LIGEO-1513769#visio/page:LIGEO-1513769-14313>
- Section B, sheet 1 : <http://archives.bas-rhin.fr/detail-document/LIGEO-1513770#visio/page:LIGEO-1513770-14323>
- Section B, sheet 2 : <http://archives.bas-rhin.fr/detail-document/LIGEO-1513771#visio/page:LIGEO-1513771-14318>
- Section B, sheet 3 : <http://archives.bas-rhin.fr/detail-document/LIGEO-1513772#visio/page:LIGEO-1513772-14309>
- Section B, sheet 4 : <http://archives.bas-rhin.fr/detail-document/LIGEO-1513773#visio/page:LIGEO-1513773-14308>
- Section C, sheet 1 : <http://archives.bas-rhin.fr/detail-document/LIGEO-1513774#visio/page:LIGEO-1513774-14307>
- Section C, sheet 2 : <http://archives.bas-rhin.fr/detail-document/LIGEO-1513775#visio/page:LIGEO-1513775-14315>
- Section C, sheet 3 : <http://archives.bas-rhin.fr/detail-document/LIGEO-1513776#visio/page:LIGEO-1513776-14320>
- Section C, sheet 4 : <http://archives.bas-rhin.fr/detail-document/LIGEO-1513777#visio/page:LIGEO-1513777-14319>
- Section C, sheet 5 : <http://archives.bas-rhin.fr/detail-document/LIGEO-1513778#visio/page:LIGEO-1513778-14314>
- Section C, sheet 5, part development A and B :
<http://archives.bas-rhin.fr/detail-document/LIGEO-1513779#visio/page:LIGEO-1513779-14322>
- Section D, sheet 1 : <http://archives.bas-rhin.fr/detail-document/LIGEO-1513780#visio/page:LIGEO-1513780-14310>
- Section D, sheet 2 : <http://archives.bas-rhin.fr/detail-document/LIGEO-1513781#visio/page:LIGEO-1513781-14317>
- Section D, sheet 3 : <http://archives.bas-rhin.fr/detail-document/LIGEO-1513782#visio/page:LIGEO-1513782-14321>
- Section D, sheet 4 : <http://archives.bas-rhin.fr/detail-document/LIGEO-1513783#visio/page:LIGEO-1513783-14316>