

A Look Inside the Cadastre Land Registry

Michael Nuwer (March 2024)

During the rule of Napoléon 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 Napoléonic 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. Owners of the scattered plots of land were then combined into a registry. These registries listed each parcel of land, identified their respective tax rate, and set the tax amount for each parcel.

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 contained agricultural land.

Figure 1 shows almost the whole of the Soufflenheim Commune. At the top is the residential district, designated Section D. 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.

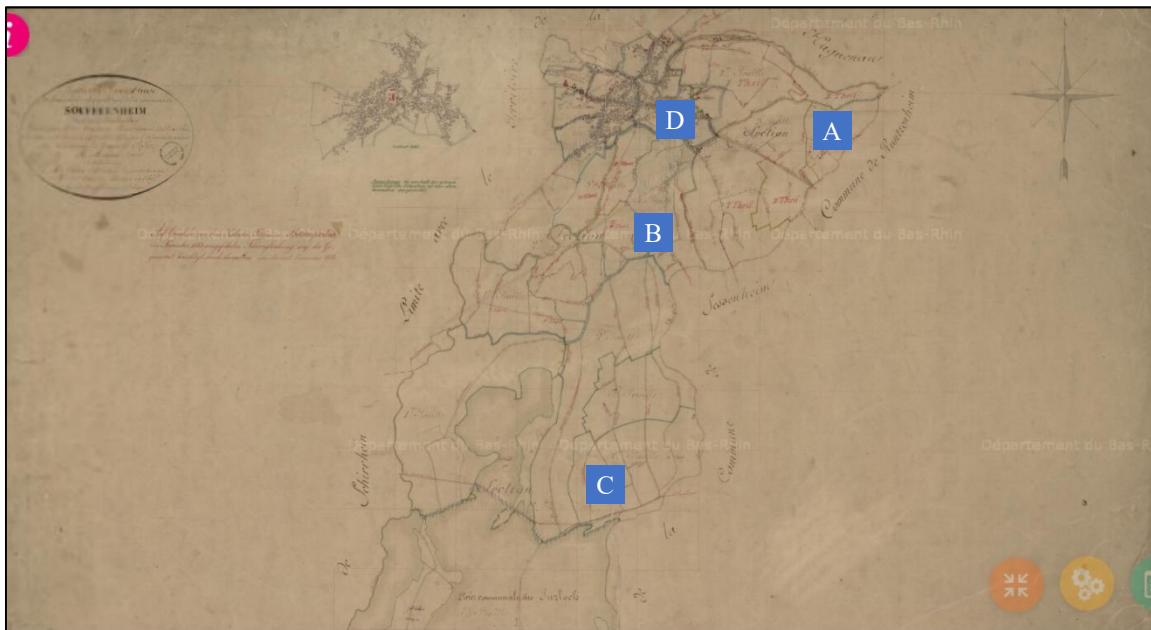


Figure 1: Soufflenheim, 1836

The following pages present an example of what we might learn from the Cadastre. For this example, we will look at the registry for Vincent Messmer. When the 1836 population census was taken at Soufflenheim, Vincent Messmer was 32 years old. He was married to Marie Anne Rund, and they had a 6-month-old child who was also named Marie Anne. According to the census, Vincent Messmer worked as a well digger. This family lived at house number 355 which was in Soufflenheim's *Oberdorff* district (literally the "upper village"). The house was just east of St. Michael's Church. Today Vincint Messmer's former house is on the street named Rue des Tailleurs.

Figure 2 shows the 1836 census entry for Vincent's family. The third column is the house number—355 in this case. The fourth column is the census sequence number counting each individual and the fifth column is the sequence number counting each family. In the column at the right, we see that Vincent was 32 years old, his wife was 33, and his daughter was 6 months.

	355	1832	363	Messmer	Mmeit	faulauin	1			39
	355	1832	363	Rund	Marie Anne			1		33
	355	1832	363	Messmer	Marie Anne			1		61

Figure 2: 1836 Census Entry for Vincent Messmer

Additional information about Vincent Messmer and family

Vincent Messmer was born in Soufflenheim on 22 Jan 1804;
he was the son of Joseph Messmer and Margretha Buckmuller

Marie Anne Rund was born in Soufflenheim on 15 May 1802;
she was the daughter of Michael Rund and Margretha Lehmann.

Vincent Messmer and Marie Anne Rund were married in Soufflenheim on 2 Feb 1833.

The couple had four children born in Soufflenheim:

Marie Anne Messmer	30 Sep 1833	died: 30 Jul 1834
Barbe Messmer	4 Dec 1834	died: 2 Jan 1835
Marie Anne Messmer	11 Dec 1835	
Josephine Messmer	3 Mar 1838	

The family of four emigrated in 1839. They traveled from Soufflenheim with four other families. These were Joseph Schall and Marie Anne Messmer (Vincent's sister), Ignace Obermeyer, Emmanuel Schmitter and Madelaine Lengert, and the widowed Marguerite (Messmer) Lengert—a total of 24 travelers. The group boarded the Ship *Lausanne* at Le Havre, disembarked on 2 July 1839, and arrived at New York Harbor on 6 September, a very long 66-day Atlantic crossing!

Vincent Messmer settled in the city of Buffalo, New York, where Marie Anne Rund gave birth to two more children. Vincent was found in the 1850 U.S. Census and the 1855 New York State Census. He was identified as a well digger in the former and a pump-maker in the latter.

Vincent Messmer's Cadastre account was found in registry (or folio) number 523. The image in Figure 3 shows that registry entry.

Columns 3 through 8 describe the parcels of land owned by Vincent Messmer. Consider line 3, first. This line describes Vincent's house in the village. Column 8, titled "*de la nature de la propriété*" indicates the parcel was a "*maison*." Column 7 identifies the districts and subdistricts of Soufflenheim and tells us that Vincent's house was in the "village." Column 6 gives the house number, which was 355. That house number matches the house number given in the 1836 census.

The house corresponds to a parcel number found on the Cadastre plan (i.e., the maps). The parcel number is shown in column 4, which is 735 in this case. Column 3 tells us the parcel is in Section D of the Cadastre plan. Thus, we can locate Vincent Messmer's house on the Cadastre maps, it is in Section D, parcel number 735 (see Figure 4 below).

ANNÉE de la MUTATION		INDICATION					CONTENANCE IMPOSABLE			REVENU		
des parcelles acquises.	des parcelles vendues.	de la Section.	du Numéro du Plan.	de la fraction représentant les portions de parcelles.	du No du Terrier et du No des Maisons.	des CANTONS ou LIEUX DITS	de la nature de la Propriété.	par parcelle.	TOTALE.	classe.	par parcelle.	TOTAL.
						Gewanden.		H. A. C.	H. A. C.		Fr. C.	Fr. C.
1	1840	C	68		40	fructu lanzenzann	terre	12 80	40 70	3	2 32	14 27
2			489		99 100	aufm Weibholz	is	10 50	47 30	4	4 58	5 52
3	1839	D	735		356	Village	Maison		11 7	6	3	1 12
4	1839		735			is						
5	1841		1412		120	Gefäll	Sol et dép.	3 40		1	1 19	
6					1867	Gefäll	terre	14 00		5	1 12	

Figure 3: Registry for Vincent Messmer

Next, consider line 4 in Vincent’s Cadastre registry. This line describes the land on which Vincent Messmer’s house was built. The “nature of the property” was “*sol et dép.*,” which means the yard (or grounds) and outbuildings. Notice that the properties in both line 4 and line 3 have the same house number (column 6) and the same plan number (column 4). Together lines 3 and 4 are the house and the yard surrounding it.

In addition to his house and yard, the land registry shows that Vincent Messmer owned three parcels of farmland. They are described in the registry as “*terre.*” One of these parcels is enumerated on line 5. It is located in Section D, and it is parcel number 1412. Within Soufflenheim, the parcel was located in the district called “Gefäll.” (See Figure 6 below.) The other two parcels of farmland were located in Section C of the Soufflenheim Cadastre plan. The first is parcel number 68, the second is parcel number 489. (See Figures 7 and 8 below.)

The Cadastre land registry contains more information about the parcels of a landowner. First, the document records the “taxable area” (*contenance imposable*) of the land and second, it records the tax assessment owed by the owner (*revenue*). Both values are given per parcel and as a total for the owner. The taxable area is measured in hectare, are, and centiare. These are shown for Vincent Messmer’s registry account in Table 1.

Table 1: Size of Properties

Line	Plan Section	Plan Parcel #	H. (hectare)	A. (are)	C. (centiare)	Acre
1	C	68		12	80	0.32
2	C	489		10	50	0.26
3	D	735		-	-	-
4	D	735		3	40	0.08
5	D	1412		14	00	0.35

Hectare, are, and centiare are measurement units of area in the metric system. An “are” is equal to 100 square meters and is equivalent to 0.0247 acre. A hectare is equal to 1,000 square meters or 100 ares (“hector-” + “are”). A centiare is one square meter (“centi-” + “are”). The total area of Vincent Messmer’s four parcels of land (his house had no area) summed to 40.70 ares, which is equivalent to one acre.

In addition to the quantity of land, the Cadastre registry identifies the assessed tax for each parcel of property. These are measured in francs and centimes. The taxes that were assessed on Vincent Messmer’s account are presented in Table 2. To compute the tax, each piece of property was assigned a type (like plowed land, house, yard, garden, orchard) and a class. Each type and class of property

had a corresponding tax rate, and the tax assessment was derived from this rate. The tax rates for Soufflenheim are presented in Tables 3 and 4 at the end of this article.

Table 2: Tax Assessments on Vincent Messmer

Line	Plan Section	Plan Parcel #	Type of Property	Class	Tax Rate (francs)	Tax (francs)
1	C	68	plowed land	3	22	2.82
2	C	489	plowed land	4	15	1.58
3	D	735	house	6	8	8.00
4	D	735	yard (<i>sol</i>)	1	35	1.19
5	D	1412	plowed land	5	8	1.12
Total Tax						14.71

Consider Vincent Messmer’s house. The Cadastre contained seven classes of houses. Class 1 was the highest quality house, and it carried a tax rate of 40 francs per dwelling. Class 7 was the lowest quality house with a tax rate of 4 francs per dwelling. Vincent’s house was defined as a class 6 dwelling, which had a tax rate of 8 francs. Thus, Vincent was assessed 8 francs for his house. This is recorded on line 3 of his account.

Residential yards in Soufflenheim (the grounds around the houses) were all judged to be of the same quality, and all were given the same classification (class 1). The tax rate for a yard was 35 francs per hectare. Vincent’s yard was 0.0340 hectare, and so his tax assessment was 1.19 francs (35×0.0340). The tax assessment on Vincent’s three parcels of plowed land were derived in a similar way. For example, the parcel on line 1 of his account was $0.1280 \text{ hectare} \times 22 \text{ francs per hectare}$, which is equal to an assessment of 2.82 francs.

Another piece of information found in the *Cadastre* registry is the year when each parcel of land was transferred. The first two columns of the registry contain this information. The first column identifies the year the parcel was acquired (*Année de la Mutation: desparcelles acquises*) and the second column identifies the year the parcel was sold (*Année de la Mutation: desparcelles vendues*).

In Vincent Messmer’s registry, the year acquired is blank for all five parcels. This means that he owned the parcel at the time the Cadastre was introduced, i.e., 1836 for Soufflenheim. Vincent sold the parcels in three different years. His house and yard were sold in 1839, the same year he emigrated to North America. His farmland was sold after he was living in Buffalo, New York. The two parcels of farmland located in Section C were sold in 1840 and the parcel located in Section D was sold in 1841.

Locating Vincent Messmer's parcels on the *Cadastre* maps

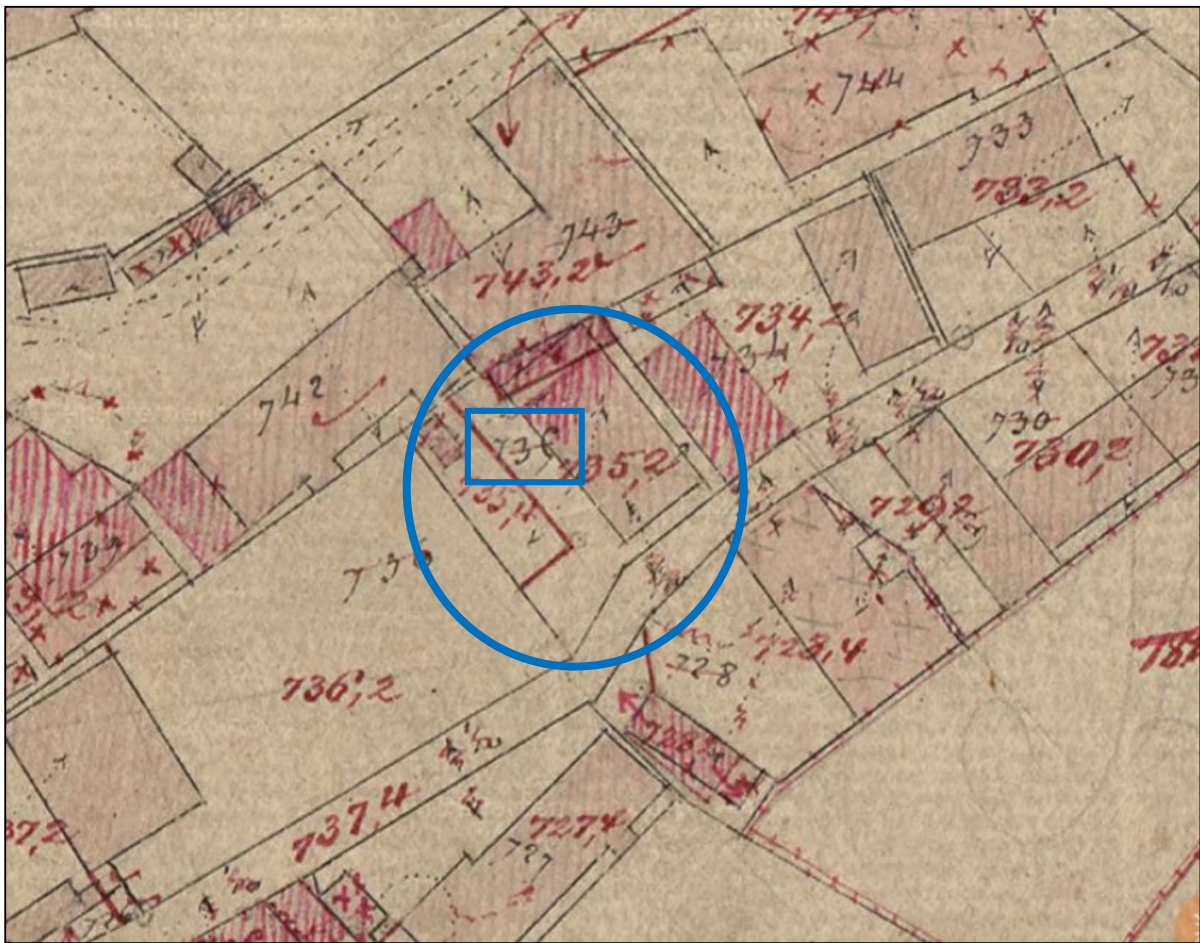


Figure 4

Vincent Messmer's house was number 355, which corresponded to parcel number 735 on the Cadastre plan. The house is found on Section D, Sheet 2 of the Soufflenheim maps. The black numbers are the original parcel numbers. The red numbers are updates from a later time.

<http://archives.bas-rhin.fr/detail-document/LIGEO-1513781#visio/page:LIGEO-1513781-14317>

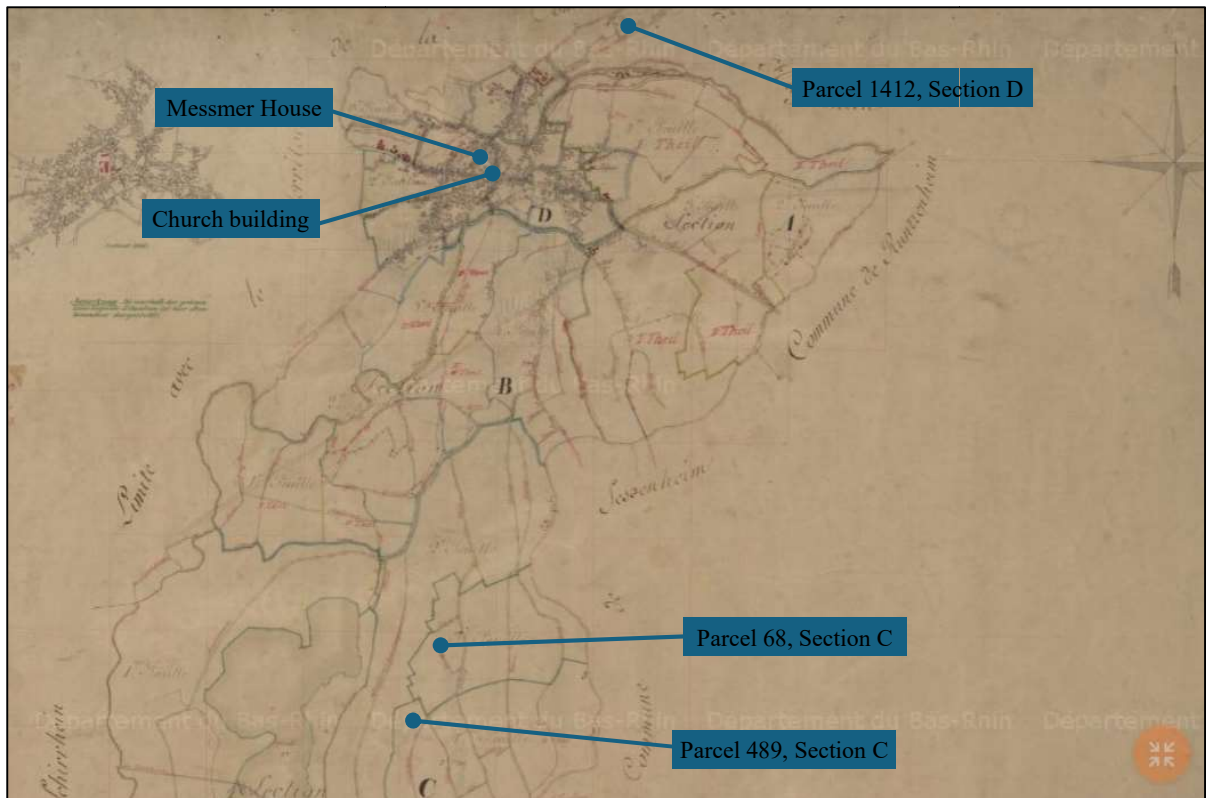


Figure 5
Relative locations of Vincent Messmer's land

<http://archives.bas-rhin.fr/detail-document/LIGEO-1513765#visio/page:LIGEO-1513765-14312>

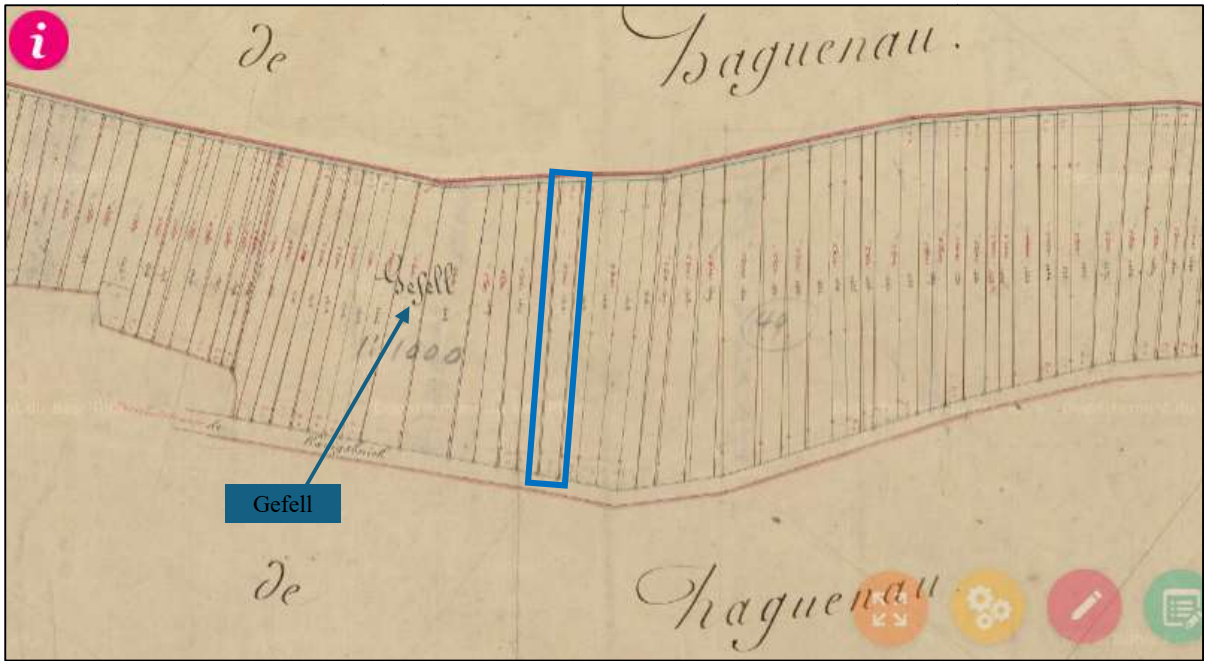


Figure 6
Parcel #1412. Section D, Sheet 4

<http://archives.bas-rhin.fr/detail-document/LIGEO-1513783#visio/page:LIGEO-1513783-14316>



Figure 7
Parcel #68 in Section C, Sheet 3

<http://archives.bas-rhin.fr/detail-document/LIGEO-1513776#visio/page:LIGEO-1513776-14320>

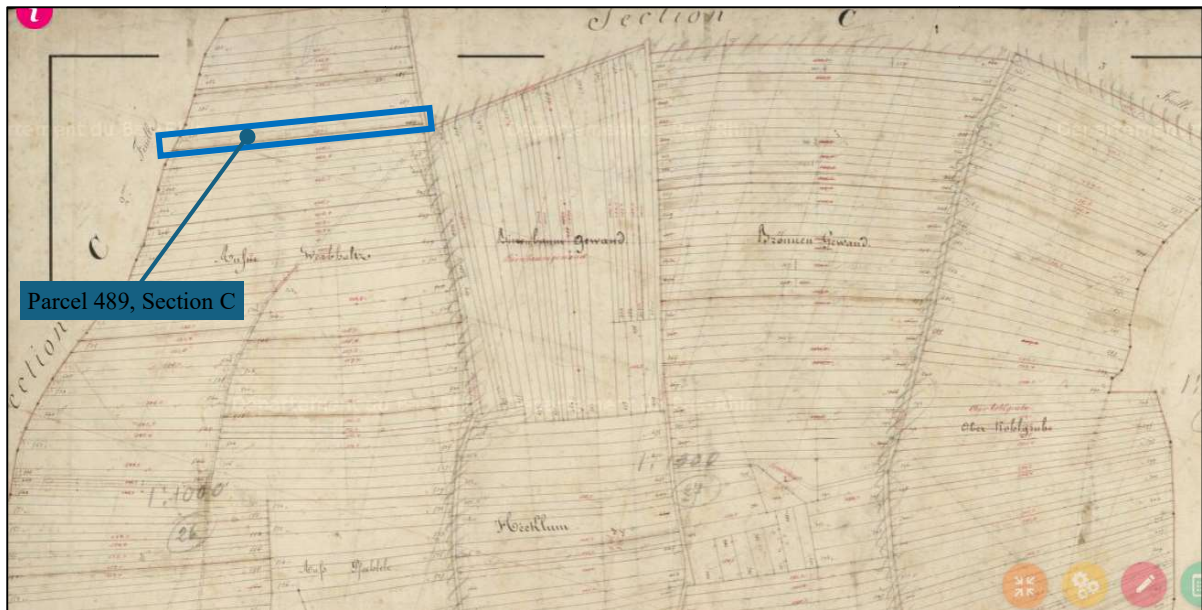


Figure 8
Parcel #489 in Section C, Sheet 4

<http://archives.bas-rhin.fr/detail-document/LIGEO-1513777#visio/page:LIGEO-1513777-14319>

Table 3: Tax Rates for Soufflenheim Houses

Classes	Tax rate per building (francs)	Number of houses	Tax revenue (francs)
1	40	10	400
2	32	14	448
3	25	34	850
4	20	96	1,920
5	15	180	2,700
6	8	208	1,664
7	4	9	36

Table 4: Tax Rates for Unbuilt Land

Type of land	Class	Tax rate (francs)
plowed land <i>terres labourables</i>	1	35
	2	30
	3	22
	4	15
	5	8
meadows <i>prés</i>	1	35
	2	30
	3	23
	4	16
	5	10

planted land	<i>terres planties</i>	1	18
orchards	<i>vergers</i>	1	35
		2	28
		3	20
gardens	<i>jardins</i>	1	40
		2	35
forests	<i>forêts</i>	1	18
hops fields for beer	<i>houblonnières</i>	1	22
		2	8
brush lands	<i>broussailles</i>	1	5
wastelands	<i>terres vaines</i>	1	6
Gravel/sand pits	<i>gravière</i>	1	8
pastures	<i>paturage</i>	1	8
clay quarries	<i>carriers de terre glaise</i>	1	8
fishponds	<i>vivier</i>	1	16
dike	<i>digue</i>	1	8
mill canals	<i>canal du moulin</i>	1	40
private paths	<i>chenien partielier</i>	1	35
house grounds (yard)	<i>sol de maisons</i>	1	35

Additional Resources

Robert Wideen, “Cadastral Records” (in English)

<https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/c0db0dfe-27d2-4632-889f-eeb26fbb14e1/downloads/Cadastral%20Records.pdf?ver=1711293050834>

Bas-Rhin Archive, “Searching cadastral documents” (in French)

<https://archives.bas-rhin.fr/rechercher/aide-a-recherche/un-lieu-ou-un-monument-/mener-une-recherche-dans-documents-cadastraux/>

Hélène Both, “How to find a House when you know the owner” (in French)

<https://archives.bas-rhin.fr/eCommunityDocuments/996A4DC5-7B41-4352-A704-F3DF616B220D/278/Retracer%20l%27histoire%20d%27une%20maison%20lorsque%20l%27on%20conna%20le%20propre%20taire..pdf>

Cadastral documentation, Bas-Rhin Communes

<https://archives.bas-rhin.fr/detail-document/LIGEO-1462305>

Click on the town (for example, “3 P 446 - Dettwiller”)

Scroll down, click on “Cadastre napoléonien”

Scroll down, click on “Plans”

Scroll down, ...

You will see a list of links. These correspond to maps of different parts of your town.

“Tableau d'assemblage” is the whole town showing the location of each “Section” map. Some Sections are divided into multiple “Sheets.”

Click on the map you wish to view.

Then, in the upper right part of the screen, click on “Visionneuse” to see the map.

Only the maps are in a digital format. The registries are not digitally available.