



Emil Baur, ca 1870

BACKWOODSMAN CORRESPONDENCE:

A GLIMPSE INTO THE EMIL & BERTHA BAUR PAPERS

BY LESLIE S. EDWARDS

Claire Lewis moved to Cincinnati in 1974. While cleaning the basement of her new home, she found a cloth bag peeking out from behind the copper coils of the original water heater. The soot-covered bag contained stacks of 19th century letters written in English and German by Emil and Bertha Baur and other family members. The letters stoked Ms. Lewis's curiosity, and she discovered that in the 1860s, Baur had launched the ill-fated utopian community of Ora Labora in Michigan's Thumb Region. She guarded the letters for more than four decades. But when she downsized and moved to Minneapolis in 2018, she thought the letters should be in a research institution and sent them unsolicited to the Historical Society of Michigan. In 2019, the letters were transferred to the Archives of Michigan.

Processing a collection of German-language materials is difficult. Before arranging and describing the collection for researchers, we had to break through the language barrier, which included the old form of German cursive called "Kurrent." I contacted the Department of Linguistics & Germanic, Slavic, Asian and African Languages at Michigan State University for assistance. Professor Lynn Wolff put me in touch with Professor Emeritus Patrick McConeghy, who enthusiastically offered his assistance. Together, he and I devised a transcription/translation project. Archives assistant Peter Richards digitizes the documents, and Professor McConeghy transcribes them into contemporary German. They are then translated into English by archives assistant and graduate student Frances Heldt and volunteer Aaron Chappel, a graduate of the University of Michigan.

We began the project with the earliest documents (1850–1869), focusing first on those that appeared to relate to Ora Labora. While the process is time-consuming, the documents have already shed new light on the Baur family and their contributions to Michigan (and Ohio) history.

The Emil and Bertha Baur Papers, 1848–1905, comprise mostly correspondence and family photographs. The correspondence topics include: Baur family letters, Emil Baur's work as an educator and agriculturalist in Ann Arbor, his religious writings, the German colony of Ora Labora in Huron county, and the work of Baur's sister, Clara, and his daughter, Bertha, at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music.

In April 1850, at the age of 19, Emil Baur emigrated to the United States on the *Stad Antwerpen*. He likely made his first stop in Cincinnati, where his brother Theodor had settled two years earlier. He quickly set out across Ohio. A letter from

This is the cover of a small autograph booklet featuring Emil Baur's hometown of Reutlingen in Württemberg, Germany. The autographs in the booklet revealed a going away party for Baur in February 1850. He emigrated two months later.

Theodor, dated August 8, 1850, was addressed to Emil in care of Ohio Governor Allen Trimble. Emil became a convert to the Methodist faith, possibly through Trimble's son Joseph, who was a Methodist minister and leader in the Ohio Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Baur began to devote his life to missionary work in 1852, first in Cincinnati, then in the Pittsburgh German Mission District. In 1854, he was appointed to the Michigan Mission District and stationed in Ann Arbor and later in Detroit. He met his future wife, Bertha Johanna Christina Herzer, in Detroit through her brother Herman, who was also a missionary. From 1858 to 1862, Baur preached the Ohio circuit and was stationed in Cleveland and Canal Dover.

Baur met many influential religious leaders throughout his life, including German-born immigrant Wilhelm Nast, who in 1838 organized the German branch of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Nast also edited the German weekly paper, *Der Christliche Apologete*. Founded in 1839, it became the leading religious journal of German Methodists in the U.S. and had a following in Germany and Switzerland. Nast



O möchtest du von heiligen Gedanken an Gott u. Tugend nicht ein Haar breit wanken,
und immer ruhig an dem Vorhang stehen, und freudig, wenn die große Lösung kommt, mit
dir und Allen um dich her versöhnet, in jene höhere Sphären übergehn.

Reutlingen bei Fleischhauer & Comp.

D. 49.



became one of Baur's spiritual advisors. As an itinerant preacher often traveling to remote areas, Baur agonized over the conditions of the poor, and especially to what he considered to be the plight of widows and their "orphaned" children. He envisioned a Christian community that would house and care for those in need. He wrote to Nast about his ideas for an orphanage. Nast responded in a letter dated May 9, 1854, "I consider it not good to open it for different reasons . . . we have to build churches, to entertain preachers, to support mission, Bible and tract societies, before we go on to build orphanages . . . everything has its time. We have different work. I do not believe that we are appointed to this work, at least not now."

As Baur continued to preach his circuit, he also found time to visit cooperative religious communities—the Shakers, the Harmony Society in Economy, Pennsylvania, and the Zoarites

Caseville Township in Huron County, 1875. Emil Baur, who still held 4,500 acres of Ora Labora colony lands, worked as the agent for the proprietors, Jacob Henrici and Jonathan Lenz of the Harmony Society.

in Ohio, which had been established by German separatists from his homeland of Württemberg. He imagined a Utopian community in which German Methodists could live in mutual cooperation and harmony following the principle tenets of Methodism. In early 1861, Baur began to set his plan in motion. He corresponded with his friend, Michigan State Geologist Alexander Winchell, about the agrarian benefits of land in mid-Michigan, and with S. S. Lacey, Commissioner of the Michigan State Land Office, about the availability of such land through the Homestead Act. By the end of the year, Baur had received approval from a committee of German ministers from the North Ohio Conference. He used Nast's *Apologete* as his

sounding board for formalizing his plans, marketing the colony and recruiting members. The Emil and Bertha Baur Papers contain a March 13, 1862, draft of Baur's formal appeal, which shows an early name for the colony—"der deutsche christliche Hinderwälderwohltätigkeitsverein" or the "German Charitable Backwoodsmen's Benevolent Society." The name eventually became the "Christian German Agricultural and Benevolent Society of Ora et Labora" or "Ora Labora" (pray and work).

By September 1862, Baur and a land-search committee secured 166 acres along Wild Fowl Bay in Huron County, with

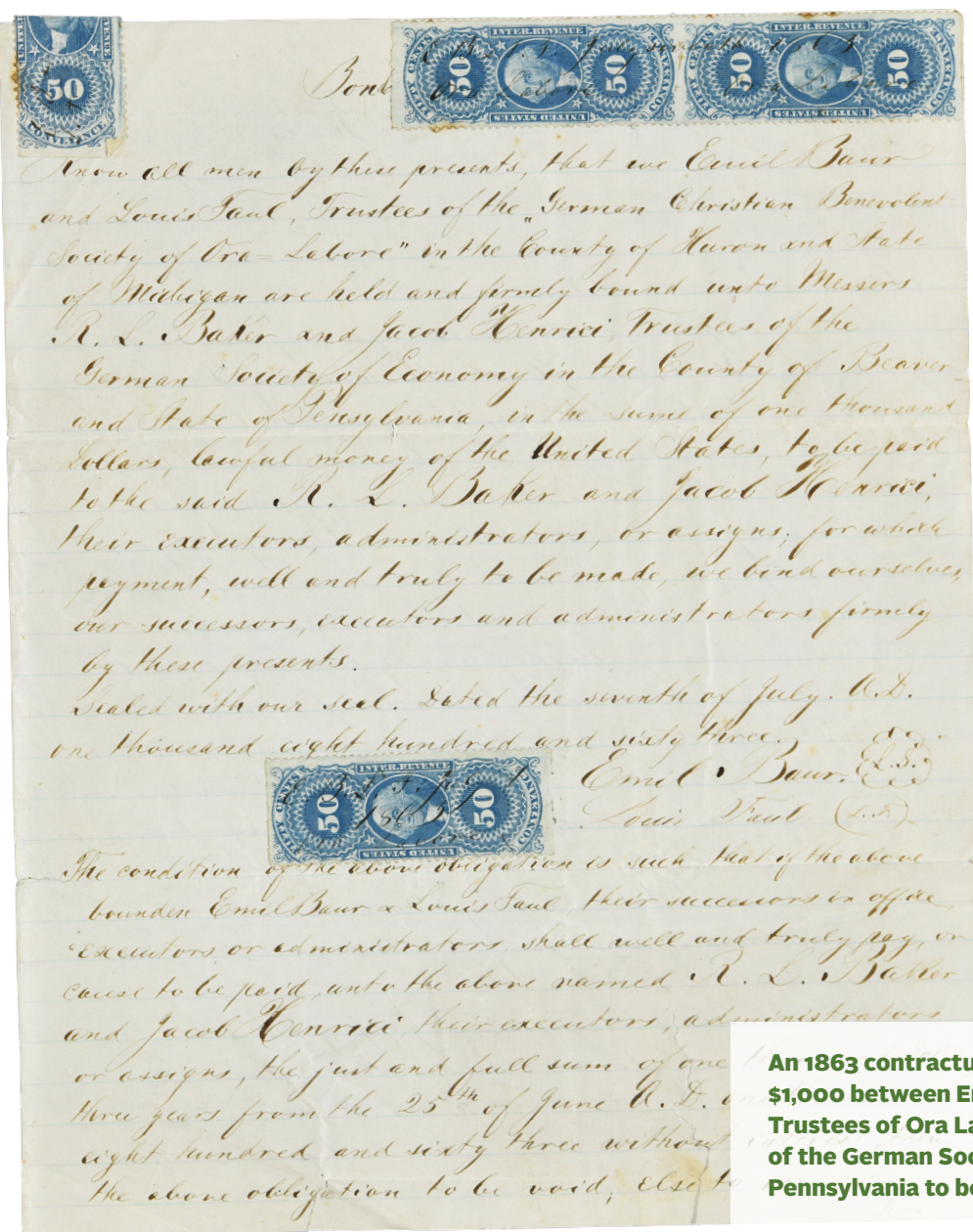
additional lands set aside for acquisition by the colonists through the Homestead Act. The site for Ora Labora was a half mile from the bay, on a dune ridge surrounded by forested wilderness and swamp lands. In December, Michigan's Board of Control passed a resolution setting aside the state swamp lands for colony use on the condition that drainage ditches be dug. Additional lands were purchased by Emil Baur as representative for the colony. In the spring of 1863, several colony members journeyed ahead to clear land and build houses in preparation for settlement. By the summer, the colony's constitution was finalized; Ora Labora had an

established post office; and the Baur family, among others, moved to the colony.

The hardship of wilderness living soon took its toll. Colony members, who were primarily trades and craftsmen unaccustomed to pioneer life, quickly discovered the difficulty of clearing land, digging ditches and building roads, especially with the incessant mosquitoes. The colonists lacked money and supplies; cooperative and harmonious living evaporated. Discouraged and disgruntled members began to abandon Ora Labora, many of them blaming Baur. Exhausted, in ill health and impoverished, the Baur family returned to Ann Arbor in the fall of 1867.

Emil Baur's dream had ended. He could not manage the colony affairs from afar, and the financial and emotional burdens overwhelmed him. The trustees agreed that the colony system was unsuccessful, and Ora Labora was dissolved. For "God's work in the backwoods," Baur had risked his life, his honor, his assets and the health and happiness of his family. In March 1879, he wrote to his daughter Bertha that he sometimes felt as if no one loved him.

Though he worked as a German language teacher and horticulturist in Ann Arbor, he spent the remainder of his life



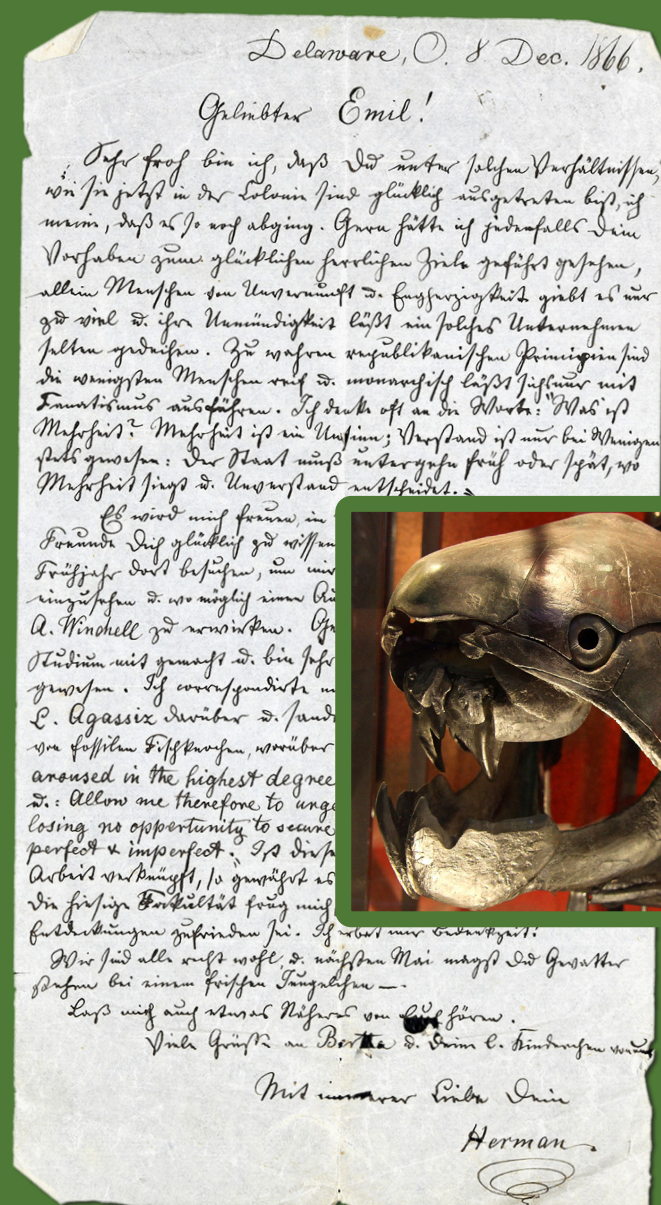
An 1863 contractual loan agreement for \$1,000 between Emil Baur and Louis Faul, Trustees of Ora Labora and the Trustees of the German Society of Economy in Pennsylvania to be paid back by 1866.



Emil Baur poses with his three sons, ca 1880.

negotiating lands for colonists who chose to stay in the area, fighting with state land office representatives and trying to find ways to pay off the debts of the society. John Duss, senior trustee of the Harmony Society, tried to reassure Baur in a letter dated January 24, 1893: "There will be no trouble for the entire society . . . besides you have done nobly and if you should make mistakes even we would not feel bad—so once more—compose yourself and feel at ease." One year later, on March 8, 1894, Emil Baur shot himself in the head. In a letter to his widow, Bertha, Baur's sister Clara wrote "why did I not understand that the cries of his spirit were for exclusive labor in Christ's Kingdom. Added to this were the unsufferable agonies brought upon him by the cares of the Colony and thus his great heart and brain received the death blow."

The Emil and Bertha Baur papers continue to shed new light on the story of Ora Labora. Once the translation project is completed, portions of the collection will be available online at Michiganology.org.



In this letter dated December 8, 1866, Baur's brother-in-law Herman Herzer refers to his discovery of fossil fish bones. Herzer sent drawings and photographs to naturalist Louis Agassiz, who wrote, "Allow me therefore to urge upon you the importance of losing no opportunity to secure every part of these bones however perfect & imperfect."

Herzer was credited with the first discovery of several Late Devonian fossil fish bones in the banks of the Olentangy River in Delaware, Ohio. Commonly known as "Herman Herzer's terrible fish" due to their prehistoric armor and sharp teeth, the fossils were identified and named "*Dinichthys herzeri*" in 1873.