

ELMHURST HISTORY HIGHLIGHT: Julius Baumer (1847-1917)

Julius H.B. Baumer was a German artisan and painter who called Elmhurst his home from 1897 through 1916. Though there is a fine art element to much of his work, his craft was viewed as a professional trade akin to carpentry or shoe cobbling. Baumer was something of a 19th-century graphic artist, using his skill for commercial endeavors like interior decorating and sign painting and illustrating postcards and trade advertisements. We have scant information on his life save for broad biographical outlines, but what we do have illuminates a narrative of an immigrant using his craft to make a living in 19th-century America.



*Julius Baumer in Elmhurst, circa 1910.
M2014.1.336*

Born in Munster, Westphalia in 1847, he was one of thousands of Germans who immigrated to the United States in the mid-19th century. For his profession, he followed in the footsteps of his father Johann, who was a sign and wood painter and a master tradesman in his guild.

After a traditional German gymnasium education in his youth, Julius joined his father's business as an apprentice. After completing his apprenticeship and passing the exam to be certified as a painter and glazier, he emigrated from Germany in 1868 at the age of twenty to seek out a new life for himself in the United States.

Baumer began his life in America in Omaha, Nebraska, where his uncle had been living since 1851. It was there that he met Pauline Aust, a German immigrant from Silesia. The two married in April 1870, had a son, and shortly thereafter moved to Chicago. Baumer went into business for himself as a skilled interior painter. His timing could not have been worse as the Great Chicago Fire of October 1871 destroyed Baumer's business as well as the homes of his potential customers. Julius toiled at several jobs for the next decade, at one point even moving back to Germany to try his fortunes again in his hometown of Munster. By 1880, the Baumer family was back in Chicago and running a successful paint and wallpaper store. Baumer eventually sold the business and moved to Elmhurst in 1896, which had long been a hub of German immigrant settlement in the suburbs of Chicago.



*Window detail at 117 Willow Road, created by Baumer.
M89.1.33*

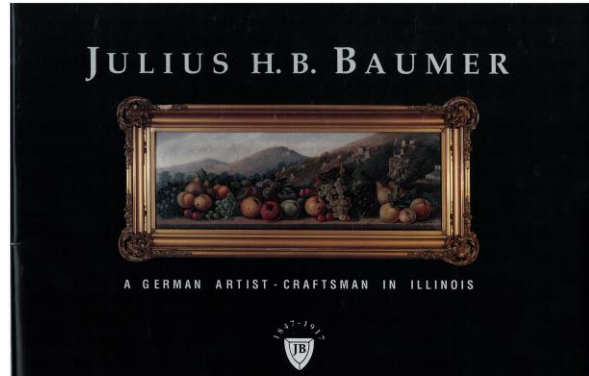
The Baumer family purchased a lot at 117 Willow Road and built a home that still stands today. The house is notable for painted dining room ceiling panels and illustrated glass windows—examples of the few remaining works that can definitively attributed to Baumer. He continued painting during his twenty years in Elmhurst, producing work for the Dalieden Church Goods House of Chicago and being hired at least once by the City of Elmhurst to produce a “City Hall and Clerk” sign. He also produced a full mural reproduction of da Vinci's *The Last Supper* at the Alexian Brothers' Hospital refectory in

Chicago circa 1910. Julius Baumer and his family left Elmhurst to move back to Chicago in 1916, and he passed away the following year.

During the later stages of his life, Baumer took the opportunity to travel. He wrote an account of a family trip to Germany in 1896 and created two travelogues about his western journeys titled *5000 Miles on the Santa Fe Railroad* and *Winter Journey to Mexico* in 1903. In his 1896 memoir, he gave a brief history of his own family for because “the remembrance of those departed family members and their memory vanishes for descendants.” This concern was justified in that this short chronicle is the only written history we have of Baumer and his family.

While paintings by Baumer are rare, the museum is fortunate to have eight paintings created by the artist. In 1989, the Elmhurst History Museum partnered with Northern Illinois University to create an exhibition, “Julius Baumer and the Art of Domestic Decoration,” and an accompanying catalog created by NIU professor Terry Zeller. The catalog remains a definitive accounting of Julius Baumer’s life and work.

*By Daniel Lund, Elmhurst History Museum Staff
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Exhibition catalog, Julius H.B. Baumer: A German Artist-Craftsman in Illinois, 1989. M2021.1.147.