CHAPTER ONE

WHITE GOLD ON SPITZBERG HILL

This is a tale of salt. The people of the Dübener marshlands between Torgau and Wittenberg had always known that mineral springs lay untapped below. Stories had circulated among the peasants and townspeople as fluidly as did the brine itself, until one day, in the summer of 1713, rumors of salt near the town of Gommlö reached the Elector in Dresden. Expeditions were organized, workers were hired, and reports were penned of the tedious work of discovering and analyzing the mineral content of subterranean brine. In the end, very little would come of this expedition to Gommlö. Officials filed the papers away, as more productive centers opened at Artern, Kösen, and Dürenberg after 1725. Were it not for the large surveyors’ maps (Risse) tucked into the files, the events at Gommlö may have escaped the historian’s notice as well. But the drawings and their long-winded titles can attract the attention of one seeking to understand how mineral resources were tapped, and what sort of knowledge worked in practice [Fig. 2]: “By most gracious order from Dresden, August 12th 1713, most humbly completed, the location of the salt springs, and strike of salt formations and rivulets in the same region of the Gommlö moorlands in the Wittenberg jurisdiction, according to the dowser from Freiberg, Johann Caspar Göbels, sketched onto this map, done in August, 1713.”

The author of this statement and creator of the map was Johann Adam Schneider, a mine surveyor and second mine master (Vice-Bergmeister) at Schneeberg who had worked closely with a dowser from Freiberg. The record of their expedition—reports, expense accounts, letters—and two maps (one for the summer of 1713, one the summer of 1714) fill an official packet, and allows us to reconstruct much of these events. This becomes a short microhistory of prospecting for salt that introduces issues of central concern to all subsequent chapters. Mining officials like Schneider allowed that commoners who lived in the moor possessed important knowledge of the region, and they believed that dowsers could tap local knowledge and transmit it to them. Neither Schneider nor Nicolaus Voigtel, a second official who
Fig. 2. Mine surveyor Schneider’s first chart (1713) of Spitzberg Hill. A stream descends the hill and crosses the fields, dumping into a pond at left. Lines and coordinates mark the location of salt springs as proposed by the dowser.