

1798: the annexation

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

At the end of the eighteenth century the Republic of Geneva was an enclave within French territory, France having annexed Savoy and the Pays de Gex. Its independence became untenable. In 1798 French troops entered the city, and Geneva was annexed by the treaty of union of 26 April 1798.¹ It became the chief town of a new département, the département du Léman, which brought together Geneva, the Pays de Gex and part of northern Savoy. According to the Archives d'État, the population of this département was made up of 10 per cent Genevans, 17 per cent inhabitants of Gex and 73 per cent Savoyards.²

The Genevans nevertheless obtained the preservation of some of their institutions. The Collège, the Académie and the Hôpital général were retained.³ To preserve the collective property of the former Republic and prevent its absorption by the French State, the Genevans created an institution to administer it, the Société économique.⁴ This legal solution, which allowed collective assets to be removed from the reach of an outside authority by entrusting them to a separate entity, bears witness to the ingenuity of Geneva's lawyers. In the public sphere it foreshadows the wealth-structuring techniques that the financial centre would later develop for its private clients.

The annexation marked the end of the Republic of Geneva, independent since 1536. It came at the close of a decade of unrest, impoverishment and emigration. For many Genevans it was a humiliation. For others it brought the stability of a large state and integration into a vast market.

Key points. Annexed by France on 26 April 1798, Geneva became the chief town of the département du Léman. It nevertheless kept the Collège, the Académie and the Hôpital général, and it entrusted the property of the former Republic to an entity of its own, the Société économique, in order to preserve it.

1 Notes

1. Archives d'État de Genève, page "Économie", archives-etat-ge.ch (accessed September 2026). ↩
2. Archives d'État de Genève, page "Économie", cited above. ↩
3. Archives d'État de Genève, page "Économie", cited above. ↩
4. Archives d'État de Genève, page "Archives de sociétés" (archives-etat-ge.ch): the Société économique was created on 16 April 1798, upon the suppression of the Republic, to administer the property of the former Republic declared communal property of the former Genevans and to apply its income to education, Reformed worship and the support of industry; it was dissolved in 1847; its archives (minutes 1798–1847, accounts, inventories) also include those of the Compagnie des pasteurs, the Société maritime, the Comptoir patriotique and the Académie. ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/geneva-1798-the-annexation