

Archives as infrastructure: registers, notaries and memory

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The Geneva institutions produced a considerable mass of archives: registers of the Council, registers of the Consistory, books of habitants and bourgeois, notarial minutes, accounts of the Hôpital général, criminal trials. These documents, preserved in the Archives d'État, constitute today an exceptional source for historians.¹ In their own time, they also performed an essential economic function.

A public register makes it possible to prove a right, to trace an undertaking, to verify a person's identity and status, and to ascertain the encumbrances on an asset. It reduces uncertainty and transaction costs. A merchant lending to an inhabitant of Geneva could verify his status, retrieve the notarial deed recording the debt and obtain its enforcement. A buyer could satisfy himself that the seller was indeed the owner of the asset sold. The keeping of registers thus constitutes an infrastructure of trust, in the same way as the administration of justice.

The contemporary financial centre rests on comparable infrastructures: the commercial register, the land register, registers of shares and of beneficial owners, securities custody systems. The question of the transparency of these registers has taken on considerable importance with the fight against money laundering and tax evasion. Switzerland has set in motion the creation of a federal register of the beneficial owners of legal entities, whose implementation practitioners must follow closely.²

The tension between transparency and the protection of privacy, which the Geneva financial centre knows well, finds a concrete expression here. Registers must be sufficiently accessible to prevent abuse, and sufficiently protected to preserve the legitimate confidentiality of persons. The balance between these requirements varies according to period and country; it constitutes one of the major issues of contemporary financial regulation.

Key point. Public registers reduce uncertainty and the cost of transactions. Reformed Geneva produced them in abundance, and the contemporary financial centre rests on modern registers, whose accessibility is the subject of a constant trade-off between transparency and the protection of privacy.

1 Notes

1. Archives d'État de Genève, pages "Présentation" and "Conseils" (archives-etat-ge.ch): around 30 linear kilometres of documents, the oldest authentic document dating from 1099; the registers of the Council, registers of decisions, have been preserved without interruption since 1409; the Registres du Conseil de Genève 1409-1536 were published in thirteen volumes (1900–1940) and the edition of the Registres du Conseil de Genève à l'époque de Calvin (1536-1564) has been in progress since 2003. ↩
2. Federal Act on the Transparency of Legal Entities (Loi fédérale sur la transparence des personnes morales, LTPM), adopted on 26 September 2025, register of beneficial owners entering into force on 1 October 2026 (see Part H, Chapter IV; PwC Switzerland, "Registre suisse de transparence", January 2026). ↩

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