

Geneva in 1815: a city to be rebuilt

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

The canton of Geneva that came into being in 1815 differed markedly from the old Republic. Its territory had been enlarged by the communes ceded by France and by the Kingdom of Sardinia, whose population was predominantly Catholic.¹ The Protestant city now had to integrate a sizeable Catholic minority, which altered its political and social balance. The canton adopted a conservative constitution that reserved power to an elite of notables and restricted political participation through property qualifications.²

The Genevan economy emerged weakened from the French period. The Fabrique had to win back its markets in a climate of heightened competition, in particular from the watchmakers of the Jura and Neuchâtel. Printed calicoes had declined. Trade suffered from the customs barriers separating Geneva from its Savoyard and French hinterland, despite the free zones. The capitalists, who had placed a large part of their fortunes in French government annuities, had seen their income melt away.

The city nevertheless had assets. It possessed an educated elite, intact international networks, a reputation for reliability and a position now protected by Swiss neutrality. Its institutions — the Academy, the Collège, the Hôpital général, the Société économique — had survived. And the Genevan families established in Paris, London or elsewhere had kept their ties with their city of origin. These assets would make the rebirth of the financial centre possible.

The Restoration period, between 1815 and the early 1840s, was also a period of intellectual and scientific brilliance. Geneva welcomed scholars, writers and travellers from all over Europe. Tourism developed, drawn by the lake, the Alps and the city's cultural reputation. Wealthy foreigners settled in Geneva or stayed there for extended periods, creating a potential clientele for the city's bankers.

Key point. In 1815 Geneva was economically weakened, but it retained an educated elite, international networks, solid institutions and a reputation for reliability. Swiss neutrality now gave it a security it had previously lacked. These assets made the rebirth of the financial centre possible.

1 Notes

1. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Communes réunies”: by the Treaty of Paris of 20 November 1815, France ceded to Geneva all or part of the communes of Versoix, Collex-Bossy, Le Grand-Saconnex, Pregny, Vernier and Meyrin (49.3 km², 3,343 inhabitants); by the Treaty of Turin of 16 March 1816, the King of Sardinia ceded twenty-four communes or parts of communes, including Carouge (108.8 km², 12,700 inhabitants), territories of Catholic confession that made the canton confessionally mixed; the negotiations were conducted for Geneva by Charles Pictet de Rochemont. ↩
2. Ville de Genève, “Entrée dans la Confédération” (geneve.ch): constitution drafted by a council of seven members and adopted by popular vote on 14 August 1814; Geneva became the 22nd canton on 19 May 1815; Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Restauration”: the constitutions of the new cantons were marked by “the reintroduction of a restrictive property-based franchise and the predominant role of the executive”; DHS, art. “Rossi, Pellegrino” (member of the Representative Council from 1820). ↩

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-geneva-in-1815-a-city-to-be-rebuilt