

Genevan trade in the eighteenth century: routes, products and partners

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

Genevan trade in the eighteenth century rested on a twofold movement. The city exported valuable manufactured goods — watches, jewellery, enamels, indiennes, gilt thread — to France, Italy, Germany, the Iberian peninsula, the Ottoman Empire and, through the intermediary of large foreign houses, as far as Asia. It imported foodstuffs and raw materials: grain, wine, salt, timber, raw cotton, silk, precious metals. Genevan merchants also engaged in the commission trade, buying and selling on behalf of foreign correspondents.

Relations with France remained decisive. The kingdom was at once the principal market, the principal supplier and the principal debtor of the financial centre. Its customs and monetary policy weighed directly on the Genevan economy. In the middle of the century, the minister Choiseul even contemplated creating at Versoix, on the French shore of the lake, a new town with a port, intended to compete with Geneva and to divert part of its trade; the project was eventually abandoned.¹ The episode recalls the policy of Louis XI towards the fairs: a large neighbouring state may seek to capture the flows of a small centre by creating a competitor on its own territory.

Relations with the Kingdom of Sardinia, heir to the Savoyard states, were normalised in the course of the century. A treaty concluded at Turin in the middle of the eighteenth century settled questions of borders and jurisdiction that had poisoned relations between the two states.² This pacification facilitated trade with Savoy and Piedmont and consolidated the security of the Republic.

Genevan merchants maintained correspondents in the major ports and trading centres: Marseille for the Levant, Lyon for silk, Amsterdam and London for colonial products and public securities, Cadiz for trade with Spanish America. Some Genevan houses took part, directly or indirectly,

in colonial trade and its profits, including, for some of them, the financing of expeditions linked to the Atlantic slave trade, a dimension of Swiss economic history that research has brought to light in recent decades.³ This dimension, long passed over in silence, forms part of the history of the financial centre and must be acknowledged as such.

Caution. The history of Genevan trade and finance in the eighteenth century includes links with the colonial economy and the Atlantic slave trade. Recent research calls for these links to be integrated into the account of the centre's prosperity, with the same rigour as its successes.

1 Notes

1. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS) [Historical Dictionary of Switzerland], art. "Versoix": after the French embargo against Geneva of 1766, Secretary of State Choiseul conceived "a fortified trading town with a port that would control the land and lake traffic between Geneva and Bern"; the road from Lyon to Versoix opened in the summer of 1768; more than 1,200 Genevan natives were attracted in February 1770 by the promise of religious tolerance; "In December 1770, the disgrace of Choiseul cost the town its principal supporter". ↩
2. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. "Turin, traité de (1754)": treaty signed on 3 June 1754 between Geneva (negotiator Pierre Mussard) and Charles Emmanuel III, King of Sardinia; "Geneva ceded 6,973 poses of land in exchange for 5,357" and paid 50,000 écus; the inhabitants of the exchanged localities were allowed to practise their religion for twenty-five years; the treaty "normalised relations between the two states". ↩

3. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Esclavage”: “the participation of the Swiss in all its forms in the Atlantic slave trade led, from 1719 to 1830, to the displacement of more than 170,000 Black people”, or around 2 per cent of the captives embarked on European ships; houses from Basel, Neuchâtel and Geneva (Burckhardt & Cie, Pourtalès et Cie) involved through textiles and colonial shareholdings; Swiss investors in the Compagnie française des Indes and the South Sea Company; Swiss planters in the West Indies and the Americas (Jacques-Louis de Pourtalès, Jean Samuel Guisan, François Fatio). ↩

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-genevan-trade-in-the-eighteenth-century-routes-products-and-partners