

The beginnings of organised philanthropy

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The Geneva tradition of mutual aid, born in the time of the Reformation, was transformed in the nineteenth century into organised philanthropy. Public-utility societies were founded to promote education, hygiene, workers' housing and poor relief.¹ The great banking and trading families financed these initiatives, sat on their committees and bequeathed funds to charitable institutions.

Public assistance was reorganised as well. The old Hôpital général, whose origins Part B has traced, gave rise to modern institutions of assistance, from which the Hospice général claims descent.² The coexistence of public assistance and private philanthropy, already observed in the sixteenth century, continued in new forms.

Nineteenth-century philanthropy prepared the role that Geneva would play in the twentieth century as a centre of foundations and humanitarian organisations. The founding of the Red Cross, described above, is its most celebrated expression. For the private bankers, philanthropy also became a service offered to clients: advice on the creation of foundations, management of their assets and support for donors. Part F will return to this dimension of the contemporary financial centre.

1 Notes

1. Société genevoise d'utilité publique, "Présentation" (archives.sgup.ch): private non-profit association founded in 1828 to "study and bring about the creation of institutions useful to the community"; its achievements include moderate-rent housing (1851), the International Red Cross Movement (1863), the Bureau central d'aide sociale (1867) and the first permanent fire station (1899). ↩

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2. Hospice général, “Notre histoire” (hospicegeneral.ch): Hôpital général founded in 1535, bringing together Geneva’s charitable works; the Constitution of 1847 made “the distribution of charity” a branch of public administration; “In 1869 the Hospice général was created and deals solely with the social field”; Geneva law on public assistance in force since 1981. ↩

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