

The Hôpital général

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

The reorganisation of poor relief is one of the most lasting achievements of the Geneva Reformation. As early as 1535, the authorities brought the old charitable institutions together under a single administration, the Hôpital général (General Hospital), financed largely from secularised church property.¹ The Ecclesiastical Ordinances of 1541 entrusted the deacons with the administration of the property of the poor and the care of the sick.

The Hôpital général performed multiple functions. It housed and fed the poor of the city, orphans, the elderly and the sick. It distributed relief to people in their homes. It placed children in apprenticeships. It provided work for the able-bodied poor. It also provided part of the medical care. Its administration, entrusted to procurators chosen from among the notables, was subject to regular accounting and to control by the authorities.²

The Geneva model formed part of a European movement to reform poor relief, which also affected Catholic cities. It nevertheless displayed characteristic features: the centralisation of resources, the distinction between the able-bodied and the infirm poor, the obligation to work imposed on the former, the moral supervision of those receiving relief and the role of lay people in the administration. These features would reappear in the social policies of the following centuries.

The Hôpital général was to survive, in various forms, into the contemporary era. After the French annexation of 1798, the Genevans obtained the preservation of some of their institutions, among them the Collège, the Académie and the Hôpital général.³ This continuity testifies to the importance the Geneva community attached to its institutions of poor relief and education.

1 Notes

1. Archives d'État de Genève (archives-etat-ge.ch), "La Réforme": on 14 November 1535 the Conseil général decreed the creation of a single hospital bringing together the existing institutions; Hospice général, "Notre histoire" (hospicegeneral.ch): "Foundation of the Hôpital général, bringing together the Geneva charitable works"; Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. "Habitants (Genève)": security paid to the Hôpital général by foreigners admitted to residence from the sixteenth century onwards. ↩
2. Archives d'État de Genève, "Archives hospitalières": Hôpital général created by decision of 14 November 1535, bringing together the assets and revenues of the hospitals abolished at the Reformation, administered by procurators and a hospitaller; records classified in the 14th section of the archives; Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. "Réfugiés protestants". ↩
3. Archives d'État de Genève, page "Économie", archives-etat-ge.ch (accessed September 2026). ↩

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-the-hospital-general