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The man who invented the canton of Geneva: Charles Pictet-de-Rochemont, 1755 – 1824

Charles Pictet-de-Rochemont was a statesman and diplomat who defended the status of Geneva and prepared the declaration of Switzerland's neutrality at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Charles Pictet was born on 21 September 1755 at Cartigny near Geneva into an aristocratic family. At the age of 20 he went to France and for twelve years pursued a career in the French Army. It was his marriage in 1786 to Adélaïde Sara de Rochemont that gave him a triple-barreled name.

Two years later he entered the governing councils of Geneva and was made responsible for reorganizing the urban militia.

The impact of the French Revolution in 1789 on Switzerland in general and Geneva in particular was terrible. In 1792 the former city councils of Geneva were suspended and a provisional government took over, declaring all citizens equal. In 1794 Pictet was placed under house arrest for a year. His father-in-law, Jean-François de Rochemont, was less lucky; he was executed.

Later, Switzerland became a theatre of war and practically fell apart in the process. Napoleon had invaded in 1798 and everywhere egalitarian ideas took root and the old aristocracy was swept away. Armies devastated the countryside, and the winter of 1800 would long be remembered as one of misery and starvation.

Geneva was annexed to France. A few weeks later Napoleon issued a new constitution for a Helvetic Republic trying to replace the former archaic system of cantonal authorities with a centralized executive. This attempt to tinker with the cantonal system caused such a violent reaction that Napoleon withdrew his troops in 1802.

The power vacuum thus created set off a civil war, during which Napoleon cunningly offered his services as arbitrator. He urged the Swiss to come up with a constitution themselves. The new constitution restored the notion of autonomous cantons, created six new cantons and gave a new name to the country - the Swiss Confederation.

Meanwhile, in 1798, Pictet-de-Rochemont had acquired seventy-five hectares of land at Lancy, centred on the present mairie de Lancy, and led the life of a gentleman farmer. He concentrated on the breeding of merino sheep and introduced the culture of maize to the Geneva region.

Napoleon's downfall led to the liberation of Geneva by Austrian troops. A new republican government was declared on 1 January 1814 and Pictet read the proclamation, no doubt written by himself, to a joyful population. Napoleon's brief return to power in 1815 - the Hundred Days - ending at the

Battle of Waterloo does not seem to have had any effect on the events that followed.

Two apparently contradictory objectives of the new government, much favoured by Pictet, were to restore Geneva's independence but also to make Geneva part of the Swiss Confederation. To achieve this it was necessary to make Genevan territory homogenous (it consisted of several fragmented communes); and to connect it physically to the canton of Vaud and thus to Switzerland as a whole (Versoix was part of France). Pictet participated in the first deputation sent in 1814 to request that the Great Powers support Geneva's position. He then represented Geneva and Switzerland in several rounds of meetings held in Paris and Vienna during 1814 and 1815. While the victors were mainly interested in sharing the spoils of war, Pictet-de-Rochemont's political talent and diplomatic skills were aimed precisely at recovering Geneva's independence and joining it to the twenty-one cantons then forming the Swiss Confederation, Valais and Neuchâtel having just entered as full and equal cantons.

The first confrontation in Paris was not a success since the French negotiator, Talleyrand, refused to let go of any part of the Pays de Gex. Later, in October 1814, Pictet led a delegation to the Congress of Vienna and participated actively in the relevant conclaves and negotiations. The idea that Geneva should form part of the Swiss Confederation became a reality on 19 May 1815.

However, Geneva had not yet been able to consolidate its fragmented territory. But now, following the change in Geneva's status, Pictet could count on the backing of the Swiss Government and was given full powers to negotiate. He soon achieved the territorial success he sought.

North of the lake, six communes were transferred from the pays de Gex, thus giving Geneva its connection with the canton of Vaud. As had already been decided in Vienna and Paris, by the Treaty of Turin in 1816, on the left bank another twenty-three communes were transferred from Savoy and became part of the canton. This extension of the cantonal land became known as the "communes réunies", hence the road of this name in Grand Lancy. Into the bargain, the Great Powers meeting in Paris recognized the "permanent neutrality of Switzerland" and agreed that Swiss neutrality was, indeed, in the common interest of all European countries. Pictet himself wrote the text of the declaration of neutrality.

In the summer of 1816 Pictet-de-Rochemont returned to his sheep and his maize fields having perfectly succeeded in his mission. He died on 28 December 1824.