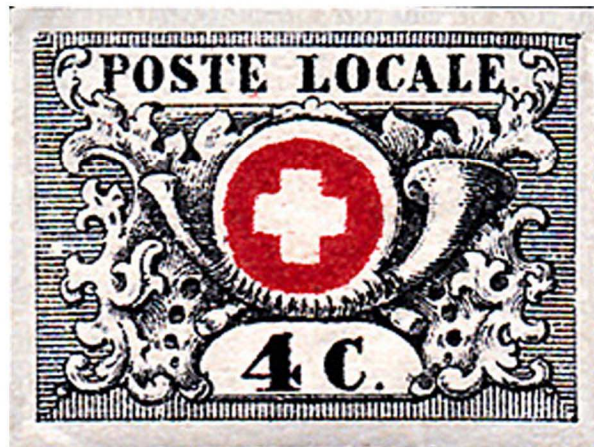


1849-1852 How the French Currency of Geneva became the Swiss Franc

Jean Voruz



Excerpt from the LONDON PHILATELIST OCTOBER 2012

1849-1852 How the French Currency of Geneva became the Swiss Franc

Jean Voruz

Introduction

The birth of the Swiss franc in Geneva was one of the most amazing processes in Swiss postal history. The subject has been studied by several philatelists for the last hundred years but remains understood only with some difficulty. This article shows the main stages of this transition using in particular a new synoptic table as a thread.

Context

Until 1849 Switzerland was a very fragmented country. The territory comprised 22 cantons which had a total sovereignty. In an area twice that of Wales, 17 independent postal services worked separately, more than 450 currencies were used throughout the country, about 400 custom barriers impeded trade between cantons, weight and measure systems were numerous. Last but not least there were almost no railways and topography was significantly tortuous.

Geneva suffered from economic underdevelopment too: the town was encircled by thick battlements which were going to be removed; thus urban growth and industrialization could really start.

The new federal state decided – among other things – postal and monetary unification. The standard was to be the franc of France which had already been used in Geneva for the previous ten years. The common unit of currency used by cantons for mail exchange was the kreuzer. But the latter did not exist as change for the population.

Starting status: 2 kreuzer = 5 rappen;

100 rappen = 1 Swiss £ = 1.43 franc of Geneva / of France

Goal to reach: 1 new Swiss franc = 100 rappen = 1 franc of France = 1 former franc of Geneva

Over a period of two years and three months a process supported the change of parity from 70 to 100 rappen for 1 franc of Geneva (Fig. 1). A series of hesitations, U-turns and improvisations characterised the way to reach the goal.

1. The situation until 30 September 1849

From 1843 Geneva had issued its own stamps. As for Zürich, it was the first continental postal administration to do so. Stamps were valid for local mail only and people were not enthusiastic about this new way of franking. In order to convince their users, the cantonal postal administration decided to reduce the price of its 5 cent stamps to 4 cents while unfranked mail was still charged 5 cents to be paid by the recipient.

Mail received from / sent to the different cantons of Switzerland was charged with postage due according to the successive postal services along the way (Fig. 2). For incoming mail the total amount in kreuzer was eventually converted into cents or decimes (10 cents) of Geneva.

2. Conversion to the nearest cent – 1 October 1849 to 21 January 1850

J-L. Collignon-Faure was the first head of the new federal *Arrondissement Postal I* (Fig. 3) which followed the *Poste de Genève*, the cantonal postal administration. The new Swiss Federal Post divided the territory in 11 postal districts. This new status gave wide autonomy to local management.

		Cantonal Posts		Transitional Period					Federal Post	
				1 Oct 1849	22 Jan 1850	1 Oct 1850	1 Jan 1851	1 Oct 1851	25 Dec 1851	1 Jan 1852
Geneva Currency		1 Fr. GE	= 1 F France = 70rp	Conversion to the nearest cent	Conversion to the upper / lower 5 cents	Introduction of Federal Stamps	Adaptation exchange value of the 5rp Federal stamp	New Federal Currency in the 1st rayon	Federal Stampless Period	1 Fr. GE = 1 Fr. France = 1 Fr. Switzerland
Swiss Units of Account		1 £ 100rp	= 1.43 Fr. GE							
		2 Kreuzer	= 5 Rappen							
Cantonal Currencies		460 different currencies								
Mail Geneva	City	5c	Franked: 4c	Franked: 4c (as of 22 Oct)	2½rp = 5c 2½rp = 2½c (Printed Matter)					5c
	Canton			7c						
Mail Switzerland	1st rayon	Nyon, Rolle 15c		(2kr) 5rp = 7c	5rp = 5c	I (5c)	5rp = 7c	5rp = 8c		10c
	2nd rayon	Lausanne, Fribourg 25c		(4kr) 10rp = 14c	10rp = 15c	II (15c)				
	3rd rayon	Neuchatel, Bern 30-40c		(6kr) 15rp = 21c	15rp = 25c	II + I + I (25c)	II + I (22c)	II + I (23c)		15c
	4th rayon	Zurich, Basle 50c		(8kr) 20rp = 28c	20rp = 30c	II + II (30c)				
Mail France	Distant	(10kr) 25rp = 35c								35c
	Border Zone	(6kr) 15rp = 15c			(6kr) 15rp = 20c					25c

Figure 1. Summary of the process of monetary transition.

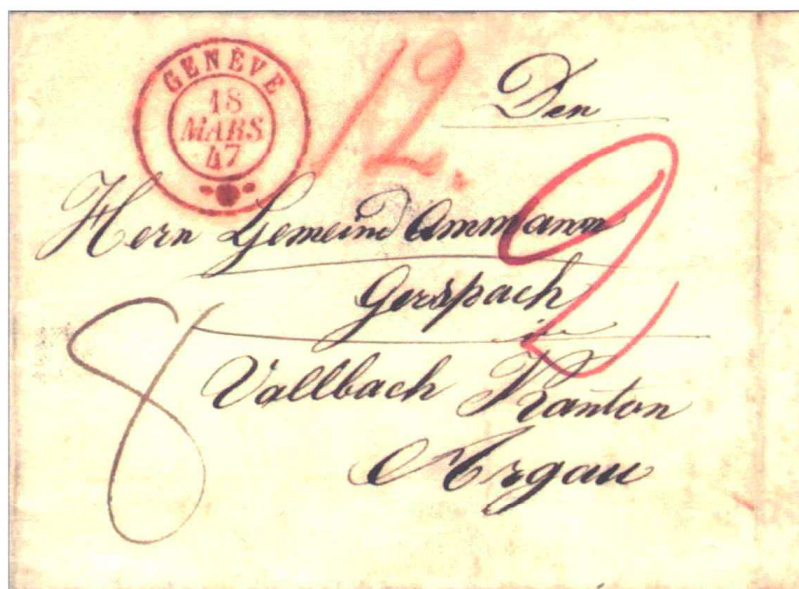


Figure 2. March 1847 – Letter to Vallbach, canton Aargau. 2 kreuzer for Geneva; 8 for Bern including the part due to Vaud; lastly a total of 12 charged by Aargau in local currency. Aargau then accounted for the due sums.

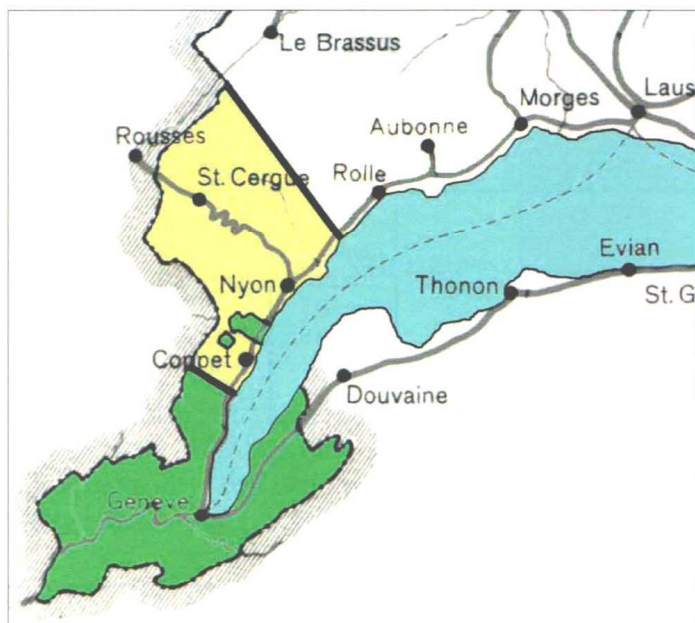


Figure 3. The new postal district I (Geneva) as from 1 October 1849.



Figure 4. 21 December 1849 – Letter from Chaux-de-Fonds (3rd rayon). 21c postage due (6 kreuzer).

Mr Collignon-Faure decided to adjust Genevan rates as close as possible to the first federal tariff (Ref. 1). A series of amazing marks were then locally produced for incoming mail: 7cs, 14cs, 21cs, 28cs (Fig. 4) depending of four levels of distance (Fig. 5). Other postage rates for multiple weight letters such as 32c were handwritten in red (Fig. 6).

The population showed disapproval of the new rates. Cantonal mail cost 40% more than before (Fig. 7) and the different rates in general seemed complicated to use.

As from 22 October the postal district issued the famous 4 cents stamp known as the '4 of Vaud'. This allowed franked local mail to be close to the 2½ rappen of the federal tariff.

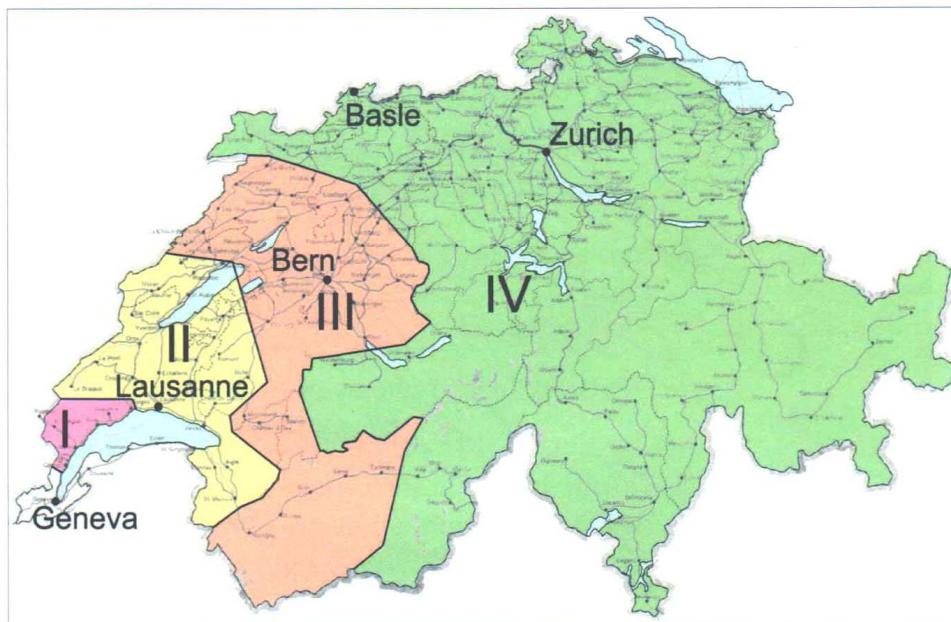


Figure 5. The four Swiss rays from Geneva.

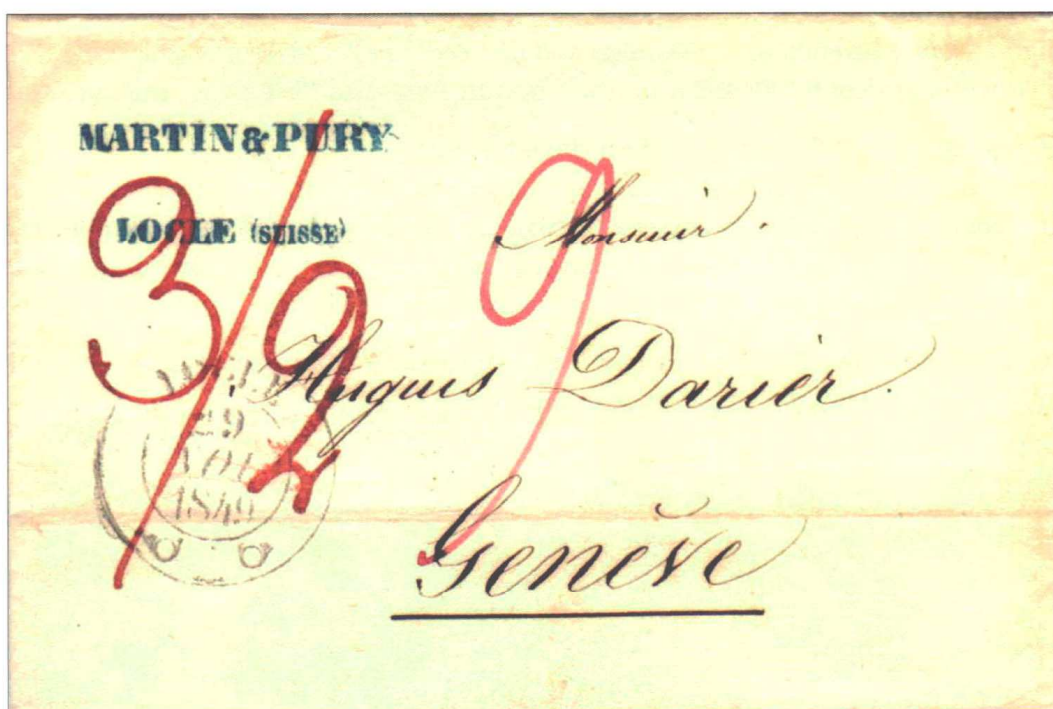


Figure 6. 29 November 1849 – Letter from Locle. 1½ postage 32c (9 Kreuzer).

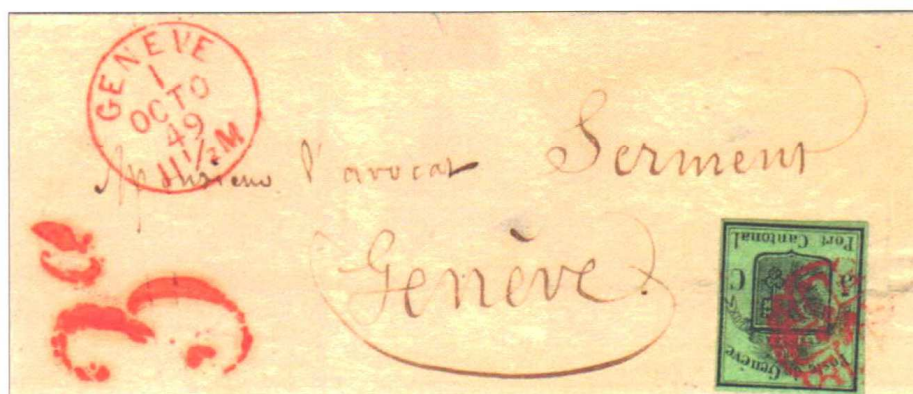


Figure 7. 1 October 1849 – 1st day of transitional system.
Local letter franked with a 5c stamp (sold 4c) and 3c charged due, total 7c.

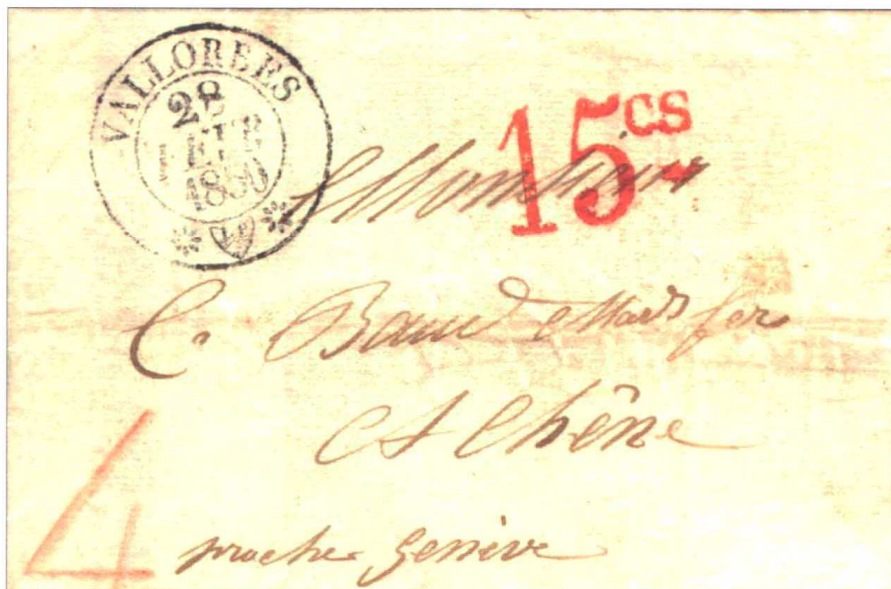


Figure 8. 30 April 1850 – Letter from Vallorbes (2nd rayon). 15c postage due (4 kreuzer).

3. The simplification to the nearest 5 cents – 22 January to 30 September 1850

Mr. Collignon-Faure listened to the protests and decreed a new transitory scale (Ref. 2). It set up rounded converted prices to the upper or lower 5cents. As a result this gives rather arbitrary rates:

2½ rappen	5 cents of Geneva (mail for the town);
5 rappen	5 cents of Geneva as well (mail for the 1st rayon);
10 rappen	15 cents of Geneva (mail for the 2nd rayon) (Fig. 8). Thus a letter for Lausanne is charged triple price of a letter for Morges, both being neighbouring towns in the canton Vaud.

Local mail could be franked with the new ‘5 of Vaud’ (the ‘4’ transformed into ‘5’ from the same lithographic stone) or with the late 5 cent cantonal stamps.



Figure 9. 21 October 1850 – Letter to Bern (3rd rayon) franked with two blue stamps sold at 5c and one yellow stamp sold at 15c, total 25c.

4. First use of federal stamps – 1 October to 31 December 1850

The introduction of federal stamps at Swiss level didn't need to modify the rates valid in Geneva. Two stamps were issued and sold all over Switzerland:

Rayon I (dark blue) 5Rp. sold 5 cents in Geneva;

Rayon II (yellow) 10Rp. sold 15 cents in Geneva.

As a consequence the franking of mail (Ref. 3) can be confusing:

1st rayon: 1 stamp of 5rp (5 cents)

2nd rayon: 1 stamp of 10rp (15 cents)

3rd rayon: 1 stamp of 10rp + 2 stamps of 5rp (25 cents) (Fig. 9)

4th rayon: 2 stamps of 10rp (30 cents)

Two stamps of 5rp were not equivalent of one of 10rp (Figs 10 and 11). During this period franked mail was really scarce despite the population of Geneva having become accustomed to stamps for the previous seven years.



Top: **Figure 10.** 24 December 1850 – Letter to Morat (2nd rayon) franked with a 10rp stamp sold 15c.
Bottom: **Figure 11.** 2 August 1851 – Letter from Morat franked with two 5rp stamps. Such a franking would not have been possible from Geneva to Morat as the two stamps would in fact have been sold at 10c only.

5. Value adjustment of low rates – 1 January to 30 September 1851

As one may guess, the price charged for the 1st rayon was too low. People had to pay the same price within the town as for Morges which was 10 leagues (30 miles) away.

As a consequence the price for the 1st rayon was adapted so that 5rp = 7 cents of Geneva. We have no official rule confirming this rate but two reliable presumptions are:

- i. As of 1 January 1850 mail for the 3rd rayon had to be franked with 1 Rayon II + 1 Rayon I only. The total price to be paid thus amounted to 22 cents of Geneva. We know of seven letters in 1851 with such a franking. The four bearing the former franking were all reported in 1850.
- ii. The second proof is a very explicit document (Fig. 12). This receipt of July 1851 was issued by the postal District of Geneva according to Swiss federal rules. Pre-printed is the fixed federal duty of 5rp to pay in addition to the franking itself. The equivalence of the value of 5rp to 7 cents of Geneva is proved by the addition $6.00 + 0.05 = 6.07$

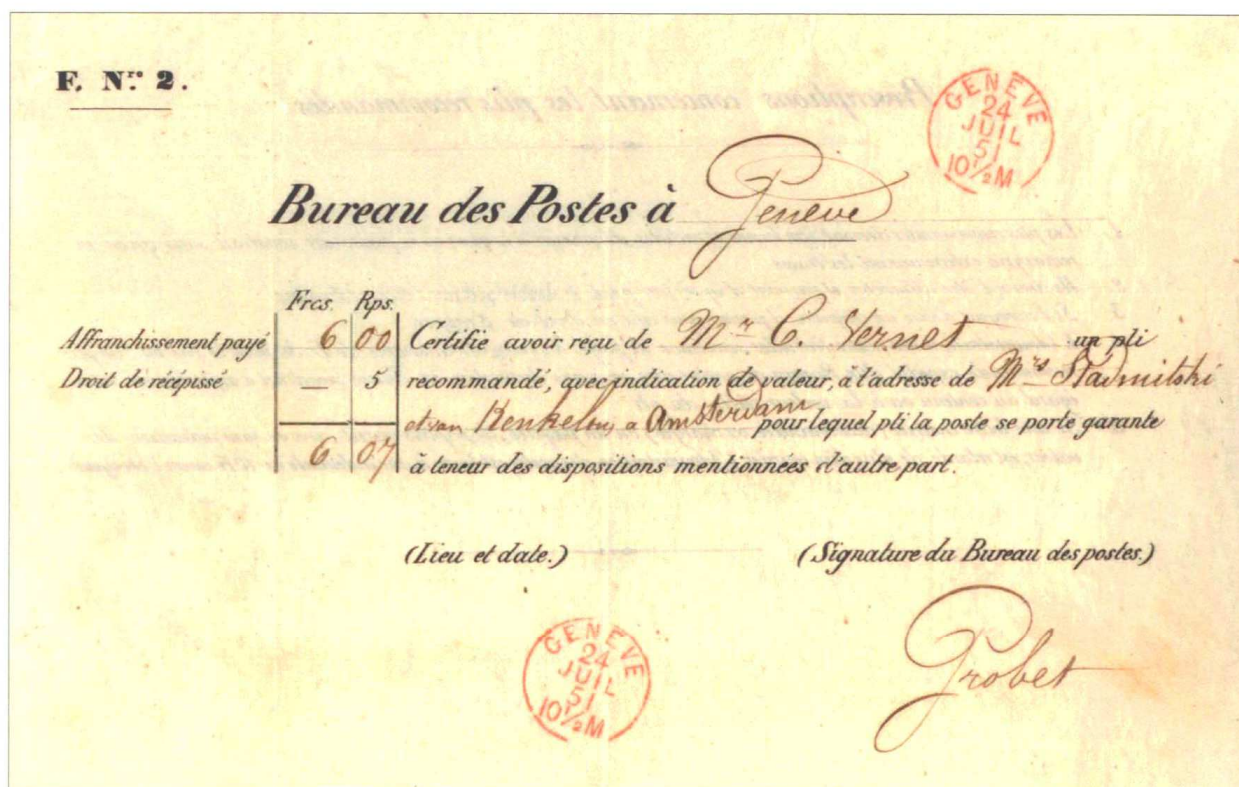


Figure 12. 24 July 1851 – Receipt for a postage of 6 francs of Geneva. The federal duty of 5Rp. is added so that total amounts to 6.07 francs of Geneva. *Reduced.*

In the meantime Geneva issued the famous *Neuchatel*, a new 5 cent stamp which looked like the federal 2½rp *Poste Locale*. The latter was refused and had been sent back to Bern in 1850 as its value was stated in German. It is, though, accepted in 1851 and used for franking printed matter. The rate applied was probably 1:1 but so far we have no formal confirmation.

6. The neighbouring canton anticipated the new Swiss Franc – 1 October to 24 December 1851

The canton of Vaud anticipated the use of the new Swiss franc three months before the official monetary unification. In such circumstances the postal district of Geneva had to modify the way to convert the price of 5rp. A new federal legal rule (Ref. 4) demanded the rounding of the result to the next cent. $5rp \times 1.43 = 7.15$ rounded to 8 cents.

This new rate was to be valid until the unification which meant a short time. The postal district, however, ordered the making of an 8 cent postal marking. We know only ten covers bearing it (Fig. 13).



Figure 13. 20 November 1851 – Letter from Coppet (1st rayon). Postage due 8c and no longer 7c because of rounding to the next cent for the last three months of 1851.

7. The Stampless period – 24 to 31 December 1851

A few days before unification the head of the postal district invited (Ref. 5) people who owned federal stamps to give them back to the post office. They were bought back at their sale prices and would be re-sold as from January at the new lower federal prices. In the meantime mail had to be sent without any franking.

Covers from that period are not that spectacular but obviously scarce (Fig. 14).



Figure 14. 30 December 1851 – Letter to Vevey (2nd rayon) during the stampless period. Postage due 4 Kreuzer.

8. The Federal unit – as from 1 January 1852

Swiss postal service simplified not only the way of franking but also the structure of rates. The standard rate for the whole of Switzerland amounted to 15rp (15 former cents of Geneva) with a reduced price to 10rp for a nearby rayon of less than 10 leagues. Local mail for the canton of Geneva remained fixed at 5 cents (5rp). Until September 1854 all the stamps that had been sold in Geneva from the beginning in 1843 remained valid. For the very common franking of 5 cents this meant that 11 different stamps could still be used even though only the 5rp clear blue was actually sold.

Mail from or to France – and other countries via France – was never regarded during the whole period of the transitory process since calculations of postage rates were based on the same currencies. So dealings with foreign postal administrations were clearer than with Switzerland!

Conclusion

Geneva had 2½ miles of border with the rest of Switzerland while its boundaries with France and Sardinia measured 70 miles. Its trade and postal relations were more important with those neighbours than with Switzerland. One could understand why Geneva ‘walked backwards’ in this process of unification, that was mainly driven by German-speaking public officials in Bern.

On the other hand Geneva could be proud for having inspired the whole of Switzerland. Its modern monetary and postal systems are indeed still operational today.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Henri Grand, Jean-Pierre Vuilleumier and Louis Vuille, all fellows of the *Consilium Philateliae Helveticae*, who provided their knowledge and a huge documentation for my researches.

References

1. *Taxentarif für die Briefpost, Werthgegenstände, Pakete, Zeitungen und Reisenden in Kraft getreten am 1 Oktober 1849.*
2. *Feuille d'avis du canton de Genève, 22 janvier 1850.*
3. *Circulaire du Directeur des Postes du 1er arrondissement, 23 septembre 1850.*
4. *Arrêté du Conseil fédéral concernant le paiement en nouvelle monnaie des taxes postales encore existantes, 14 août 1851.*
5. *Circulaire du Directeur des Postes du 1er arrondissement, 9 décembre 1851.*

Other sources

6. *Handbuch Postgeschichte von Genf*, R. Schäfer: various examples of covers.



Fellowship of the Society

Christine A. Earle FRPSL, Hon. Secretary

Fellowship is an honour bestowed upon members and allows the recipient to use the initials ‘FRPSL’ after their name. The fellowship committee normally meets once a year in November to decide who to recommend to Council for fellowship. The criteria used when considering the granting of fellowship include:

- Service to the Society
- Presentation of a display or paper before a meeting of the Society
- Publication of a major article in *The London Philatelist*
- Making a significant contribution to philately in the UK or overseas.

Recommendations for fellowship can be made by any member of the Society, but they should ideally be done using the special form for the purpose. This form can be photocopied from page 332 of this edition of the *LP*, and is also available from the office or as a download from the www.rpsl.org.uk website. To find it, log on to the website, then select RPSL > Society Business. It is available as a pdf or as a Word document. If the form is downloaded, it may be emailed to the Hon. Secretary via adminmanager@rpsl.org.uk.

Nominations must be received by 14 October each year.

