

The Château d'Annecy

A Castle Born of Exile

The story of the Château d'Annecy is really the story of a dynasty that lost its own capital.

The Imperial Context

To understand why this castle exists, you have to understand the strange political geography of the medieval Alpine borderlands between the Kingdom of Burgundy, the Holy Roman Empire, and the expanding House of Savoy.

In 1032, the last King of Burgundy died without heirs and bequeathed his possessions — including Geneva — to the Holy Roman Empire. But imperial power remained nominal; real authority stayed with local lords, particularly the counts and bishops. The region around Lake Geneva and the Alpine passes was a patchwork of competing jurisdictions, all technically under the distant suzerainty of the Emperor but effectively autonomous. Three powers jostled for control: the Counts of Geneva, the Bishops of Geneva (who held separate temporal authority over the city itself), and the increasingly ambitious Counts — later Dukes — of Savoy.

The County of Savoy was a feudal principality of the Holy Roman Empire from the eleventh century onward. In 1365, the Count of Savoy received the title of “perpetual and hereditary vicar” for Savoy from Emperor Charles IV, and in 1416, Emperor Sigismund elevated the county to a duchy. The Savoyards controlled the critical Alpine passes between France, the Empire, and Italy — a position of immense strategic value that would sustain their ambitions for centuries.

The Counts of Geneva Lose Geneva

The Counts of Geneva (*comes gebennensis*) are attested from the eleventh century. Gérold, the first identifiable Count of Geneva, appears around the mid-eleventh century; he was a great-nephew of Rudolf III, the last King of Burgundy. Their possessions sprawled across the Pre-Alps from Lake Léman to the shores of Lac du Bourget.

But here lies the paradox that gave birth to the Château d'Annecy: the Counts of Geneva never securely held the city of Geneva itself. Temporal power over the city escaped them in favor of the Bishops of Geneva, who were placed under the direct suzerainty of the Emperor. The Emperor was, in fact, the feudal superior of the Count of Geneva. The counts retained only limited powers in the city — the role of *avoué* (defender of the Church) and the execution of criminal sentences — while their castle at the Bourg-de-Four offered only a precarious foothold.

The critical break came in the early twelfth century. Count Aymon I was in conflict with the Bishop of Geneva over control of the city. The bishop excommunicated the count, and to have the sanction lifted, Aymon consented to the loss of Geneva through the Accord of Seyssel in 1124. Further treaties at Saint-Simon (1156), Aix-les-Bains (1184), and Desingy (1219) progressively eroded what little authority remained. Then in 1162, Emperor Frederick Barbarossa definitively established the bishop's independence, recognizing him as an immediate prince of the Empire.

Pushed out of Geneva, Count Amédée I had to establish himself at Annecy, where the castle of the Counts of Geneva would rise. The first fortifications — initially wooden, later stone — went up on the rocky spur of the Semnoz overlooking the outlet of the lake and the Thiou river. The earliest known mention of the fortress as *castra* dates to 1219.

Annecy Becomes the Capital

From around 1350 onward, the Counts of Geneva chose Annecy as their principal residence, having been progressively driven from their territories around Geneva. Moving from the manor of Novel into the castle, they transformed the town into the capital of the County of Geneva.

The castle grew in tandem with the dynasty's ambitions and anxieties. After a devastating fire in 1340 destroyed much of the structure and the town, Count Amédée III financed the reconstruction, including the Tour de la Reine, which still stands today. The Grande Salle des fêtes and other ceremonial spaces transformed the castle from a mere defensive work into a true princely residence.

In 1356, Amédée III obtained from Emperor Charles IV the right to mint coinage at his workshop in the Palais de l'Isle at Annecy — a mark of growing prestige despite the county's modest size. By the fourteenth century, the county comprised around thirty *mandements* or castellanies, stretching from the gates of Geneva to the approaches of Lac du Bourget, dotted with towns like La Roche, Thônes, Cruseilles, Rumilly, and Seyssel.

But the squeeze continued. From the late twelfth century onward, the county's northern territories fragmented as the Counts of Savoy and the Dauphins of Viennois exploited succession rights to carve away the seigneuries of Faucigny, Gex, and Vaud. By 1250, the Counts of Geneva possessed nothing north of Lake Léman. The encirclement intensified after Savoy acquired the Pays de Gex in 1353 and Faucigny in 1355.

The Antipope Born in the Castle

The most extraordinary figure to emerge from the Château d'Annecy was the last scion of the house. Robert de Genève was born in 1342 at the castle. He was the fifth son of Count Amédée III and Mahaut de Boulogne. He studied at the Sorbonne, became Bishop of Thérouanne, Archbishop of Cambrai, and cardinal by 1371.

Then came the Great Schism. After Pope Gregory XI returned the papacy from Avignon to Rome and died in 1378, the Roman mob pressured the cardinals into electing an Italian pope, Urban VI, who turned out to be an autocrat. The French-dominated college of cardinals organized a conclave at Fondi, where on October 31, 1378, they elected Robert de Genève as Pope Clement VII. His election triggered the Great Western Schism — the forty-year split that divided Christendom into rival obediences centered on Rome and Avignon. France supported Clement VII; England backed Urban VI. Europe was torn in two.

Despite his installation at Avignon, Clement VII's Annetian origin conferred considerable prestige on the town. In 1394, he elevated the church of Notre-Dame-de-Liesse to a collegiate church, reinforcing Annecy's spiritual prominence. The church, originally founded by the counts as their dynastic necropolis, became a center of popular pilgrimage.

But Robert/Clement VII was also the end of the line. The five sons of Amédée III succeeded one another at the head of the county — Aimon III, Amédée IV, Jean, Pierre, and Robert — all dying without legitimate heirs. Robert designated as his heir Humbert de Villars, the son of his sister Marie. Humbert died without issue in 1400, and his uncle Odon de Villars ultimately sold the county to Amédée VIII of Savoy for 45,000 gold francs.

The Savoyard Castle

With the acquisition in 1401–1402, the Château d'Annecy became a possession of the House of Savoy — the same Amédée VIII who would himself become an antipope (Felix V) a few decades later, in one of history's more improbable rhymes.

Duke Louis, around 1450, built the Logis and the Tour Perrière at the castle. But the real flourishing came in the sixteenth century, when the Dukes of Savoy granted the county as an *apanage* (endowment for younger sons) to the Savoie-Nemours branch. The Savoie-Nemours dukes made major enlargements, most notably the Logis Nemours, which remains one of the castle's most prominent buildings today.

This branch began with Philippe, younger brother of Duke Charles II, who was titled Duke of Nemours by King Francis I of France. His son and grandson, Jacques and Charles-Emmanuel de Nemours, served as governors of the Lyonnais during the Wars of Religion before retiring to the Château d'Annecy. In 1600, Henri IV of France was received at the castle during the Franco-Savoyard War — a sign of the building's continued political significance.

The Ghost of Geneva

There is one more twist connecting Annecy back to Geneva. In the sixteenth century, Geneva adopted the Protestant Reformation under Calvin. The Catholic authorities — the very bishops who had displaced the counts centuries earlier — were in turn expelled from the city in 1536 and found refuge in Annecy, in the deeply Catholic Duchy of Savoy. It was in this context that Saint Francis de

Sales became Bishop of Geneva while living in Annecy — a bishop-in-exile of a city his see could never reclaim.

The Savoyards never stopped trying to recover Geneva. A final attempt failed spectacularly in 1602 during the “Nuit de l’Escalade,” when Savoyard troops attempted to scale the city walls under cover of darkness and were repulsed. Geneva celebrates the anniversary to this day.

Decline and Afterlife

The castle was abandoned in the seventeenth century after repeated fires. By the mid-seventeenth century, the Savoie-Nemours line returned to the main ducal branch through marriage, and the castle lost its function as a princely residence. It was later repaired and served as military barracks until 1947.

The city of Annecy purchased the castle in 1953 and transformed it into a museum. It has been classified as a *monument historique* since 1959. Today it houses the Musée-Château, with collections spanning regional art, Alpine natural history, and medieval archaeology.

The Château d’Annecy is, in a sense, a monument to being pushed out. The Counts of Geneva built it because they lost Geneva. They made it grand because it was all they had left. The last of them was born there and went on to split the Catholic Church in half. And when the dynasty died, the Savoyards — the very neighbors who had been squeezing them for centuries — bought the whole thing for the price of a good castle. The building on the hill above the old town is a physical record of that entire arc, from defensive tower to princely court to barracks to museum.

Key Dates

- 1032** — Kingdom of Burgundy absorbed into the Holy Roman Empire
- 1124** — Accord of Seyssel: Counts of Geneva lose control of the city of Geneva
- 1162** — Barbarossa recognizes the Bishop of Geneva as an immediate prince of the Empire
- c. 1170s** — Amédée I establishes the comital seat at Annecy
- 1219** — Earliest documented mention of the castle (*castra*)
- 1340** — Devastating fire; Amédée III rebuilds the castle
- 1342** — Robert de Genève (future Antipope Clement VII) born at the castle
- 1356** — Emperor Charles IV grants minting rights at Annecy
- 1378** — Robert elected Clement VII at Fondi; Great Western Schism begins
- 1394** — Death of Robert/Clement VII; extinction of the Counts of Geneva
- 1401–02** — Amédée VIII of Savoy purchases the county for 45,000 gold francs

- 1416** — County of Savoy elevated to a duchy by Emperor Sigismund
- c. 1450** — Duke Louis builds the Logis and Tour Perrière
- 1514–1659** — Savoie-Nemours *apanage*; major enlargements including Logis Nemours
- 1536** — Bishop of Geneva expelled by the Reformation; exiled to Annecy
- 1600** — Henri IV received at the castle during the Franco-Savoyard War
- 1602** — Failed Savoyard assault on Geneva (Nuit de l'Escalade)
- 17th c.** — Castle abandoned after repeated fires; later used as barracks
- 1953** — Purchased by the city of Annecy and restored
- 1959** — Classified as a *monument historique*

Sources include: Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (article "Genève, de"); Pierre Duparc, Le comté de Genève, IXe–XVe siècle; Wikipédia FR (articles "Comté de Genève," "Clément VII (antipape)," "Histoire de la Savoie au Moyen Âge"); Musée du Patrimoine de France; Ville de Genève archives; Matthieu de la Corbière, L'invention et la défense des frontières dans le diocèse de Genève (2002).