

## History of Courthouse buildings

### **The Convent of Santa Clara (1474 - 1535)**

The current site of the courthouse was first occupied by the convent of Santa Clara, built in 1474 at the initiative of the pious Duchess Yolande, regent of Savoy and sister of the King of France, Louis XI.

The life of the *Clarisses* sisters, a catholic order, was particularly austere. If the authorities maintained their blessings, it was only in counterpart of their prayers for the prosperity of the city. This apparent harmony did not resist the reform movement, which spread out in Geneva in 1535.

At that time the convent has been ransacked. The *Clarisses* abandoned Geneva in August 1535 to take refuge in Annecy (France).

### **The General Hospital (1535 - 1712)**

The convent was then converted into a hospital, called the General Hospital, supposed to accommodate not only ill but also deprived people.

The general appearance of the convent had not been amended. The chapel had remained a place of worship, while the monastery was transformed into dormitories.

### **The new General Hospital (1712 - 1860)**

However, the confined space - and the honor of the Republic represented by these buildings - prompted the authorities to rebuild a new hospital, more imposing, on the same site. The new buildings were also more aerate to help cure the ill.

The construction started in 1706 and the new hospital was completed in 1712. Only the chapel of the former convent has been preserved. Its high roof and bell tower have been demolished to allow its integration into the new building.

### **The Courthouse (since 1860)**

The building designed to be spacious and open while constructed around two inner courtyards, became the "Palais de Justice", or Court House, in 1860.

Indeed, after the completion of the Cantonal Hospital in 1856, which replaced the old General Hospital, a decision was made to transfer courts, which were previously cramped at the city house.

Since then, with regards to the needs of the Judiciary, many adjustments (courtrooms, offices) have been made inside the main building.

Nowadays, the criminal Court deliberates in the chapel of the former convent (where the *Clarisses* used to implore divine mercy!). In the hall of audiences also remains a gothic arch, still visible, which separated the sacristy from the chapel, under which the judges of the criminal Court used to pass to enter audience.

A few years ago, amusingly the Court of police and the accusation Chamber sat respectively in a mess room and in the bakery of the former General Hospital.

### **About the building of Saint Antoine**

#### **From the “Discipline” to the Prison of Saint-Antoine (1712 - 1977)**

The General Hospital premises included a so-called “correction” chamber, intended to confine persons perceived as “out of society”, such as lazy people, beggars and, of course, offenders.

However, the cohabitation of the latter with other inmates was difficult and it was rapidly feared that it might become a place of “corruption”. This led to the decision to build - together with the new General Hospital - an independent building for the “Discipline” that was completed in 1712.

After several different assignments, the “Discipline”, called “Prison of Saint-Antoine” from 1866, served as preventive detention facility. This situation, which should have been provisional, prevailed in fact for more than a century, until 1977, when the new – and still in function - *Champ Dollon* prison opened.

#### **Discovery of important archaeological remains**

The rehabilitation of this building has led to interesting excavations, first in the inner courtyard separating the rear of the courthouse and the former prison. Archaeologists have revealed Roman remains when the old prison of Saint-Antoine was renovated, and which premises were inaugurated in May 1995.

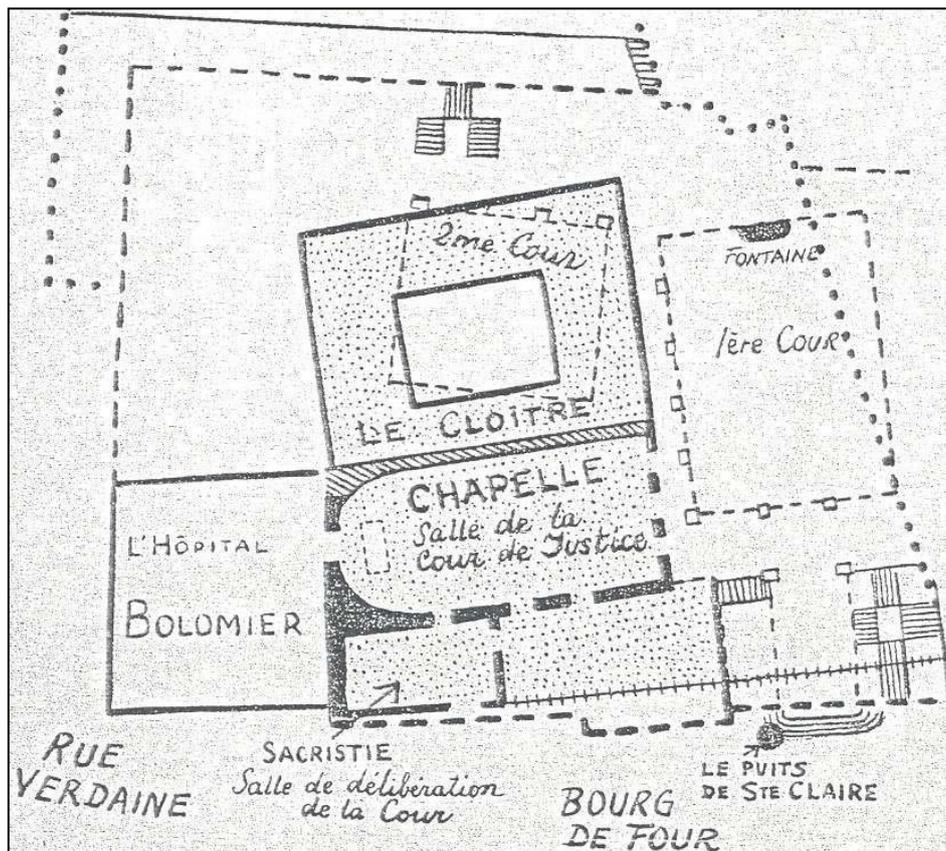
The renovation work started in the basement of Saint-Antoine confirmed the existence of a luxurious residence, built between 20 and 40 AD, and identified thermal basins from a “villa”.

Most Roman frescoes now revealed on the Saint-Antoine building belong to the painted walls of this residence. About 700 pieces have been reconstituted into a large puzzle that is visible nowadays on the extension’s wall. This decorative style

used to embellish the Roman “peristyle”, a 30x16 meters wall surrounding the gardens. These dimensions measure the magnitude of this massive and expensive construction.

This discovery recalls the artistic affinity that existed between Geneva and the province of Narbonne, since similar decorations have been found along the Rhone Valley.

These Roman paintings represent so far the most preserved and oldest heritage of its kind in Switzerland.



**Plan of the Clarisses chapel** (currently room A3, for the criminal Court), located in the convent of the Order of the same name (XV-XVI century).

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