

Citation

GAUTIER Pierre, “The Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters of Villefranche-en-Beaujolais”, translated by Adèle Verdier and edited by Alexandra Woolley, *Les Papiers d’ACA-RES, Brefs historiques*, put online in March 2020.

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The Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters of Villefranche-en-Beaujolais

The Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters of Villefranche-en-Beaujolais (known today as Villefranche-sur-Saône) was envisaged as soon as 1677, but only officially created on the 25th of August 1680. Its first public session was held in the house of the jurist Alexandre Bessie du Peloux’s (who died in 1718) under the authority of the Archbishop Camille de Neufville de Villeroy (1653-1693). However, the Academy was only officially recognised in 1695 thanks to the Kings’ brother, Philippe of Orleans. He intervened to become the Academy’s patron after Villeroy’s death in 1691 and obtained regal permission to call the modest institution *Académie royale*. It can be read on the patent letters and rules of the “*Académie Royale en Beaujolais*” of 1695: “we know that our Province in Beaujolais is fertile in clever minds” (« *Nous savons que notre Province en Beaujolais est fertile en bons esprits* »). This royal title reinforced Villefranche’s position, giving the town a privilege that only the provincial cities of Angers, Soissons, Arles and Toulouse benefitted from. This honour was given to the city five years before the *Académie royale* of Lyon, which was founded by Claude Brossette (1671-1743) in 1700. The intellectual path that the Academy took focused on Literature and Philosophy. Its beginnings were full of enthusiasm which gradually slowed down, with some phases of high activity during the Eighteenth Century.

Indeed, after Alexandre Bessie du Peloux’s death in 1718, the Academy remained inactive for nine years, until 1727. In 1728, François Bottu de Saint-Fonds (1675-1739) was appointed as new Permanent Secretary. On the 13th of March of the same year, the young King Louis XV granted new patent letters confirming the Academy’s statutes, thanks to the new Duke of Orléans, Louis the 1st, son of the Regent. The new rules raised the number of Academicians to twenty, substantially as many as the number of founders observed in 1695, although the Eighteenth and Nineteenth academician chairs were not filled. Sessions were held on Thursdays every fortnight in the great hall of the *Hôtel de Ville* and each year a director’s name was drawn on the 25th of August. However, the intendant of the *Généralité de Lyon* in 1739, Bertrand René Pallu (1691-1760) felt that the intellectual life of the Academy was abating, so he urged Bottu de Saint-Fonds to resolve internal quarrelling, but in vain.

The Academy came back to life thanks to Alexis Noyel, criminal assessor of the Beaujolais bailiwick, who directed his subjects of interest towards mathematics, physics and agriculture. Local history, which had been neglected, raised interest thanks to the works of Jacques-Guillaume Trolieur de la Vaupierre (1707-?), who based his research on Pierre Louvet’s (1617-1684). These productive years, during which reports and sessions were carefully recorded, constitute the main primary sources on the Academy, that can be examined today *in situ*¹.

¹ See reference 3M5 from the archives of city’s library: *Bibliothèque municipale de Villefranche-sur-Saône*.

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From 1746 and for unknown reasons, the Academy's activities slowed down and eventually stopped, only to start up again in 1772, thanks to a new Director, Jean-François Pezant, and his permanent Secretary, Bernard Pierre Châtelain Dessertine (?-1793). This period, which lasted for about seventeen years, represented a new golden age for the Academy². The Minister of Interior to-be, Jean-Marie Roland (1734-1793) became a member of the Academy during this period, among other public figures. They debated on botany or the *belles-lettres* and the Academy seemed opened to any kind of novelty, such as animal magnetism called "*mesmérisme*". The Academy even welcomed a Protestant pastor little before the *Édit de Tolérance* of 1787 (probably M. Formey³), showing its open-mindedness.

The French Revolution put a stop to the Academy, which had been open for nearly a Century and a half. The Revolutionaries executed seven Academicians, and, on the 6th of November 1793, they had plans to execute the Academy's protector from the Maison d'Orléans Louis-Philippe, known as "*Philippe Égalité*". If all the Academies in France were affected and abolished by the law of the 8th of August 1793, some of them reopened at their own pace, such as the one in Paris in 1795 or the one in Lyon in 1801. The Academy of Villefranche had to wait until the 21st of December 1899 to be replaced by the "*Société des sciences et arts du Beaujolais*", under the presidency of Abel Besançon and it is still active today.

Archival Sources

Villefranche-sur-Saône, *Fonds anciens* from the municipal library

3M5 : registre des séances de l'Académie (1739-1746). 3M6 : registre des séances de l'Académie (1772-1782).

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² Under the reference 3M6 from the archives of the *Bibliothèque municipale de Villefranche-sur-Saône*. It covers a decade, from 1772-1782.

³ Johannes Heinrich Samuel Formey (ou Jean Henri Samuel, 1711-1797).