

# The Federal Post, October 1, 1849

by Amédée Roueche

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The recovery of the cantonal posts by the Confederation on January 1, 1849 was decided almost without opposition and anchored in the federal Constitution in 1848 under Article 33. The effective date was October 1, 1849. The disadvantages of the cantonal postal services were all too evident – tariffs, the different currencies in use in Swiss territories, regionalisms, etc. From that time on, the mission of the federal Post has been to transport letters, packages, funds, and passengers.

The first step was to create a unique money system, which was realized in 1848 when the Confederation assigned to itself the authority over the currency. From then on, the franc was divided into 100 centimes. The German speakers maintained the term *Rappen*, the last vestige of the old currency. The first coins (5, 2, 1, and 1/2 franc) were struck in 1850 in Paris.

Later, it was necessary to unify further the measures of distance and weights. In 1862 the *loth* ceded its place to grams, and from 1876 the Swiss finally spoke in terms of kilometers.

In 1849, the Post was divided into eleven postal districts. Each postal district had its own directorate, which in turn was responsible to the General directorate in Bern. The creation of the postal districts was largely based on linguistic and cantonal boundaries and on the former regions of the cantonal posts.



Fig. 1. Reverse of a one-franc coin minted in 1850 with the stamp A, the mark of the Paris mint.

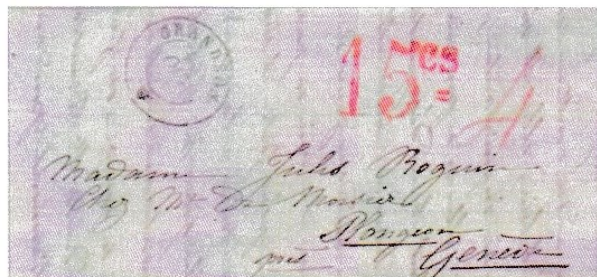


Fig. 2. Folded letter sheet from Grandson to Geneva, at the first weight level  $\leq 1/2$  loth and rayon 2 from 48 to 120 km. It was sent on October 10, 1850. It was assessed at Grandson at 4 kreuzers in the old money; in Geneva the letter was assessed 15 centimes (1 kreuzer = 2.5 cts, 4 kreuzers = 10 cts in 1850. The Geneva franc was valued at 1.43 Swiss francs of 1850, so 10 cts  $\times$  1.43 = 14.3 cts which was rounded to 15 cts.)



Fig. 3. Folded letter sheet sent from Albisbrunn, then Hausen am Albis (canton Zurich) October 5, 1851; the letter was still assessed on departure in the old cantonal currency, i.e. kreuzers. At its arrival in Geneva, the Post correctly assessed this letter coming from the 4th rayon, first weight step  $\leq 1/2$  loth, so 30 Geneva cts to be paid by the recipient. 1 kreuzer = 2.5 cts., 8 kreuzers = 20 cts (see the caption of Fig. 2)

The unification of the postage rates was realized on the first of October 1849 for. On May 18, 1850 the first federal stamps, Orts-Post/Poste Locale, appeared, and on October 1, 1850 the first Rayon I and Rayon II stamps were put into circulation.

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It remains, however, to track the Geneva franc, which was still aligned with the French franc. It was necessary to wait until January 1, 1852 for the Geneva currency to achieve permanent parity with the new Swiss franc, since until then the Geneva franc was valued at 1 franc 43 centimes. That was indeed, finally, the actual birth of the Swiss franc as we know it today. The long fight led by the federal

councilor from Solothurn, Josef Munzinger -- a predestined name -- came to an end. This worthy man lost his nerves and his health, so intense was the struggle. The following formula was finally accepted by parliament: "five grams of silver, or the standard of nine tenths of fine silver, constitute the Swiss monetary unit, and bears the name franc." \*

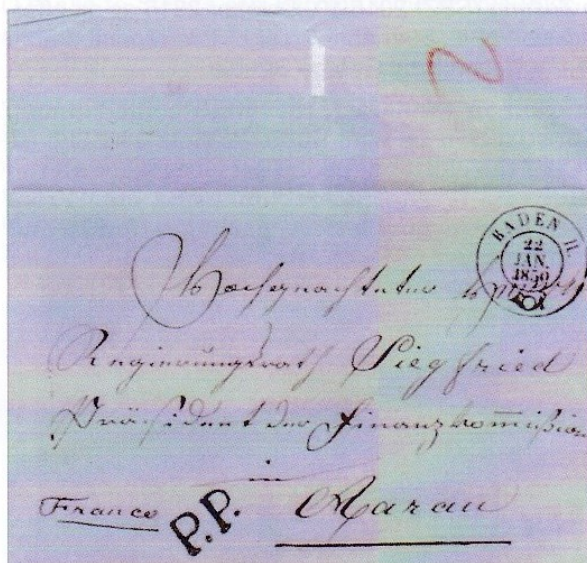


Fig. 4. Folded letter sheet from Baden (January 22, 1850) addressed to Aarau with PP, carrying on the back traced in red 2 kreuzers, therefore 5 cts for a letter of one demi-loth for the first rayon

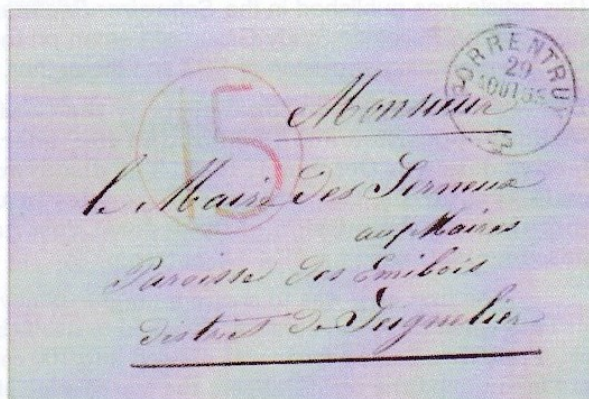


Fig. 5. Folded letter sheet from Porrentruy (August 29, 1863) to a destination of Emboi. The letter is not franked and was assessed 15 cts according to the new rates of July 1, 1962, therefore 5 cts more than if it had been franked by a stamp

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Apart from these Geneva exceptions, during the years 1850 and 1851, unfranked mail was charged in the old currency (kreuzers). The habit of not franking mail was difficult to give up. We had to wait until July 1, 1862 when finally the federal Post levied a surtax on unfranked mail, in order to favor the use of stamps and make more rational the work of the postal administration.

\* Extract from "Federal Council. Biographical Dictionary of the first hundred federal councilors," directed by Professor Urs Altermatt



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