

Neuchâtel - History :

History of Neuchâtel

1011 – novum castellum

The history of Neuchâtel begins under the Second Kingdom of Burgundy which stretched from the banks of the Mediterranean Sea up to Basel. The first mention of a “novum castellum” – a new castle – dates from 1011, in the reign of Rudolf III (993-1032). The name obviously refers to the recent character of the foundation and to the construction of a castle, erected on a hilltop overlooking the plain and the lake, probably at the site of the Prisons Tower. The historical document attesting to the donation made by Rudolf III of Burgundy to his spouse:

"e dono ei novum castellum, regalissiman sedem, cum servis et ancillis et omnibus appendiciis suis"

Neuchâtel's name evolved from Nuefchastel (1251), to Neufchastel (1338) and Neufchâtel (end of 17 th century). The present-day form has been used since the 18 th century. The French-speaking town, which lies near the French-German language border, has ever since also had a German name – Neuenburg.

1033-1395 - The House of Neuchâtel

One year after Rudolf III died, the kingdom of Burgundy merged into the Holy Roman Empire. At Neuchâtel, the Fenis, a noble family, established themselves at the abandoned castle and soon assumed its name as their own, founding thus the House of Neuchâtel. The most prominent and adventurous figure from that family is Count Louis (1305-1373) who took part in the European wars of the 14 th century and had built the excellent cenotaph of the Collegiate Church.

1395-1707: The House of Zähringen, Margraves of Hochberg and the House of Orléans-Longueville

At the end of the 14 th century, the Duchy of Neuchâtel passed by marriage to the House of Zähringen, a noble family from Freiburg (Breisgau), who ruled it for half a century, then to the Margraves of Hochberg (1458-1504) and, at last, to the House of Orléans-Longueville, a bastard branch of the French Royal House (1504-1707). The best-known figure of this period is Philip of Hochberg (1454-1503) who started his career at the court of Burgundy under Charles the Bold, then served the French King. Under Louis XI and Charles VIII, he successively took on several important functions, like Marshal of Burgundy, governor and Great Seneschal of Provence, and at last, General Lieutenant of the King in Languedoc. Thank to his merits and high position he could arrange for his daughter to marry a prince of royal blood in 1504 – Louis of Orléans.

Except for an interval of 17 years (1512-1529) during which the Swiss cantons occupied the Duchy, under the pretext of protecting it from the French (they were at war with France), the Orléans-Longueville ruled Neuchâtel until 1707. Under their reign, Neuchâtel joined the Reformation in 1530, with William Farel establishing the Reformed Church, and the Duchy became a sovereign principality in 1648.

1707-1848: Neuchâtel becomes Prussian under the House of Hohenzollern

After Mary of Nemours died in 1707 without direct heirs, the estates of Neuchâtel could elect a new ruler. Above all, they feared that French and, thus, Catholic influence in the Calvinist principality might develop. Therefore, they decided to offer the crown to a Protestant prince – Frederick I, King of Prussia. Still, Neuchâtel did not become a part of the Kingdom of Prussia or the Holy Roman Empire, but was linked to the Hohenzollern dynasty by a personal union.

The rule of the Prussian kings lasted 140 years, from 1707 to 1848, with a French interval between 1806 and 1814 (Napoleonic Wars). Following the collapse of the Empire, the great powers united at the Congress of Vienna to

reorganize Europe restored the principality of Neuchâtel to the Prussian king, while allowing it, at the same time, to join the Helvetic Confederation in 1815.

Neuchâtel - Berlin - Neuchâtel

As LatLon-Europe also dedicates a website to Berlin, former capital of Prussia, presenting the city as a tourist destination, we would just like to point out some interesting historical connections between the two cities, situated at a distance of almost 1,000 kilometers. Actually, several places at Neuchâtel remind of the Prussian period, like the Maison du Prussien (House of the Prussian), the cave of the Prussian King (Frederick William III visited it in 1814, Frederick William IV in 1842) on the river Doubs, and numerous restaurant and place-names refer to Frederick the Great. Neuchâtel University was founded in 1838 with support from Berlin, and a lot of paintings and other objects from the time of Prussian rule can be found in the historical museum of Neuchâtel.

In Berlin, you need to look twice, but, for a start, both cities were Protestant and took in many Huguenot refugees. There was a colony of settlers from Neuchâtel and also a barracks (Koloniestraße, near Gesundbrunnen), as the principality was obligated to send soldiers as well as families to repeople some parts of Prussia devastated by war and pestilence. Two streets in Berlin bear the name of the Swiss town (e.g. Neuenburger Straße, near the Jewish Museum) and some historic personalities are closely associated with it, like the physiologist and rector of the Berlin university (now, Humboldt University) Emil Dubois-Reymond.

March 1 st, 1848 – Neuchâtel, a Republican Swiss Canton

The historic date all Neuchâtel citizens know best is March 1 st, as it is a holiday for the whole canton. Neuchâtel had been in contact with Helvetic democracies for centuries, coming to appreciate the autonomy of the Swiss cantons. The first attempt to introduce a republican form of government, in 1831, was not successful. But when the republicans, led by Fritz Courvoisier, marched from Le Locle in the mountains down to Neuchâtel on the lakeside in 1848 to drive out the Prussians, the revolution finally succeeded and the modern age began in Neuchâtel. Alexis-Marie Piaget presided the provisional government and the first council of state. He also drafted the constitution and the legislation of the new republic. A counterrevolutionary attempt failed in 1856 and as a consequence the Prussian Crown officially renounced on all rights to the canton.

Today, the Canton of Neuchâtel has 165,000 inhabitants living in six administrative districts. La Chaux-de-Fonds is the biggest city (37,000 inhabitants), followed by the capital of the canton – Neuchâtel – with 32,000 inhabitants and Le Locle ranking third with 12,000 inhabitants.

We hope this summary has allowed you to become better acquainted with the history of the canton of Neuchâtel. If you would like some more information, have a look at the following books about Neuchâtel, available at the bookstore Librairie Payot or at the tourist office. Don't miss the chance to hire the service of tour guide to visit the old town of Neuchâtel and learn more about its history.

Books about Neuchâtel:

"Promenades touristiques" is an excellent guidebook published by the Tourist and Transport Office of the City of Neuchâtel. It contains eight walking routes, described in detail, on which you will get to know and appreciate the town.

You can buy the book at the tourist information, at bookstores or online: www.neuchatelville.ch ISBN 2-940210-00-4 (-01-2 German) / 12 CHF

"Funi-Nature" - 12 CHF

"Coup d'oeil sur la nature en ville de Neuchâtel" - ISBN 2-940041-04-0