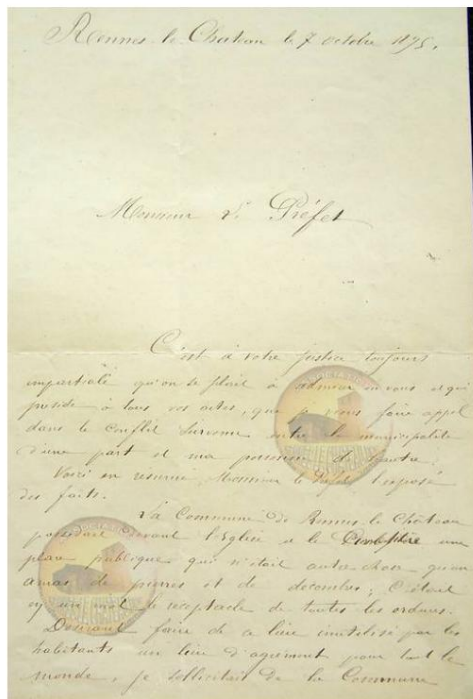


THE CASE OF THE FIRE OF JULY 14, 1895

The case of the fire that occurred in Rennes-le-Château on July 14, 1895, is well known to researchers. But what is less well known is how it unfolded through its unpublished documents, notably two letters that the priest sent to the prefecture.



Rennes-le-Château on October 7, 1895

Mr. Prefect

It is to your ever-impartial justice, which we are pleased to admire in you and which presides over all your actions, that I come to appeal in the conflict which has arisen between the municipality on the one hand and myself on the other.

Here, in summary, Mr. Prefect, is the statement of facts.

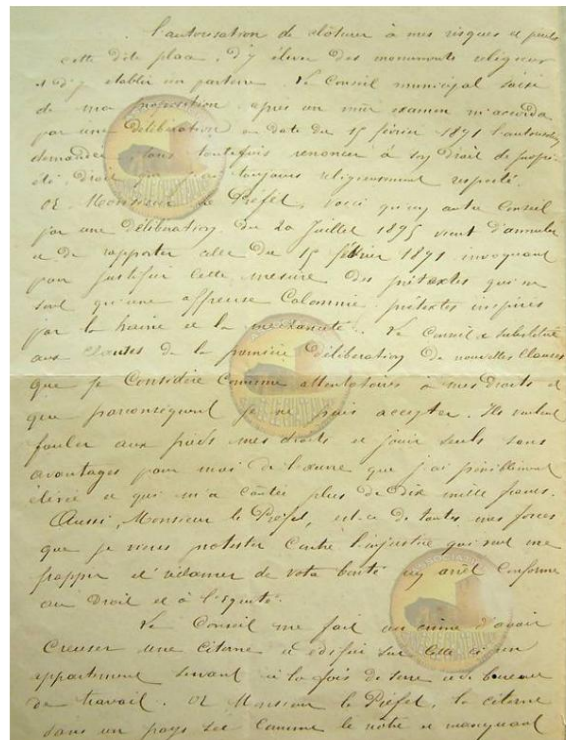
The commune of Rennes-le-Château had a public square in front of the church and the presbytery which was nothing more than a pile of stones and rubble; in a word, it was the receptacle of all rubbish.

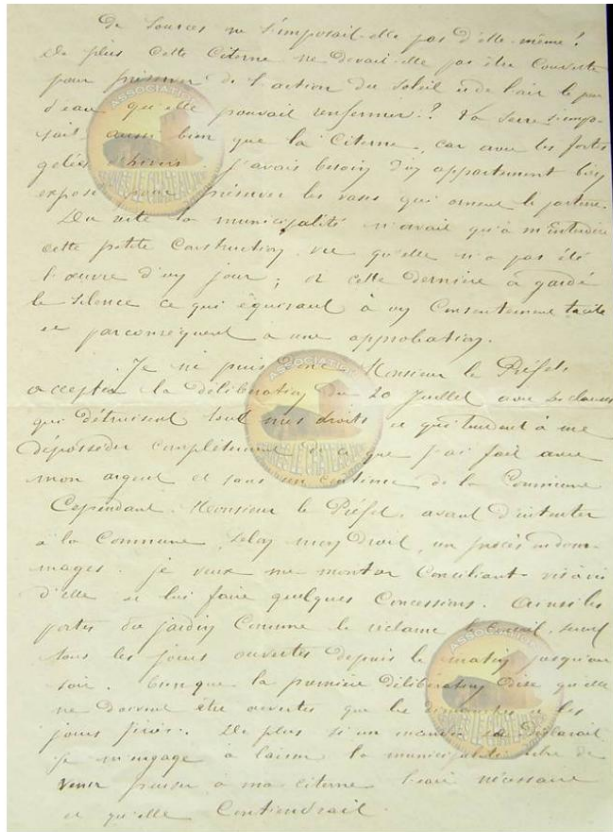
Wishing to make this place unused by the inhabitants a place of pleasure for everyone, I requested from the municipality the authorization to enclose at my own risk this said place. To erect religious monuments there and to establish a flowerbed. The Municipal Council, seized of my proposal after a careful examination, granted me by a deliberation dated February 15, 1891 the requested authorization without however renouncing its right of ownership, a right which I have always religiously respected.

Now, Mr. Prefect, here is another Council, by a resolution of July 20, 1895, which has just annulled and repealed that of February 15, 1891, invoking to justify this measure pretexts which are nothing but a dreadful slander, pretexts inspired by hatred and malice. The Council has substituted for the clauses of the first resolution new clauses which I consider to be prejudicial to my rights and which consequently I cannot accept. They want to trample on my rights and enjoy alone, without any benefit to me, the work which I have laboriously erected and which has cost me more than ten thousand francs.

Therefore, Mr. Prefect, it is with all my strength that I come to protest against the injustice that seeks to strike me and to demand from your kindness a judgment in accordance with law and equity.

The Council makes it a crime for me to have dug a cistern and built on it an apartment serving both as a greenhouse and a work office. Now, Mr. Prefect, was not the cistern in a dry country like ours and lacking in springs a necessity? Moreover, should not this cistern be covered to protect from the action of the sun and the air the little water it could contain?





If the Council accepts them, I will maintain them. If not, the court will rule on our respective rights. However, before engaging in a trial which is always boring, I wanted, Mr. Prefect, to submit the case to you and ask you to intervene in order to resolve this unpleasant conflict as wisely as possible. The judgment you will render cannot be doubtful to me. It will certainly be in accordance with my rights, I call your fairness and loyalty to witness. In this hope, I have the honor to be, Mr. Prefect, your very humble and devoted servant.

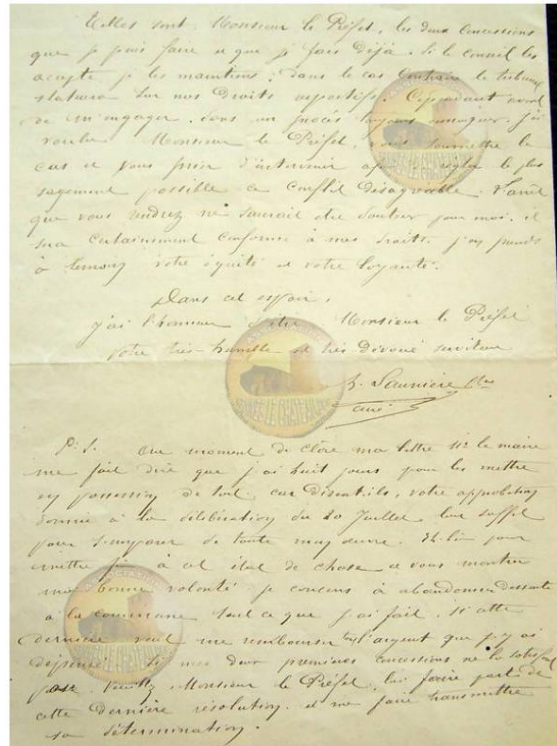
B. Saunière Priest

P.S. As I close my letter, the Mayor informs me that I have eight days to put them in possession of everything because, they say, your approval given to the deliberation of July 20 is enough for them to seize all my work. Well, to put an end to this state of affairs and show you my good will, I agree to immediately abandon to the commune everything I have done, if the latter wants to reimburse me all the money I have spent on it. If my first two concessions do not satisfy it, please, Mr. Prefect, inform it of this last resolution and have its determination transmitted to me.

The greenhouse was just as necessary as the cistern because with the severe winter frosts I needed a well-exposed apartment to preserve the vases that adorn the flowerbed.

Besides, the municipality only had to prohibit me from this small construction since it was not the work of a day; and the latter remained silent which is equivalent to tacit consent and consequently to approval.

I cannot therefore, Mr. Prefect, accept the deliberation of July 20 with² the clauses which destroy all my rights and which tend to completely dispossess me of what I have done with my money and without a cent from the municipality. However, Mr. Prefect, before suing the municipality for damages under my law, I want to be conciliatory towards it and make some concessions. Thus, the garden gates, as the Council demands, will be open every day from morning until evening, although the last resolution states that they should only be open on Sundays and public holidays. Furthermore, if a fire breaks out, I undertake to leave the municipality free to come and draw the necessary water from my cistern, which it contains. These, Mr. Prefect, are the two concessions that I can make and that I already make.



In this letter, Béranger Saunière provides unprecedented information by writing that the construction of the cistern and the apartment above it cost him more than ten thousand francs.

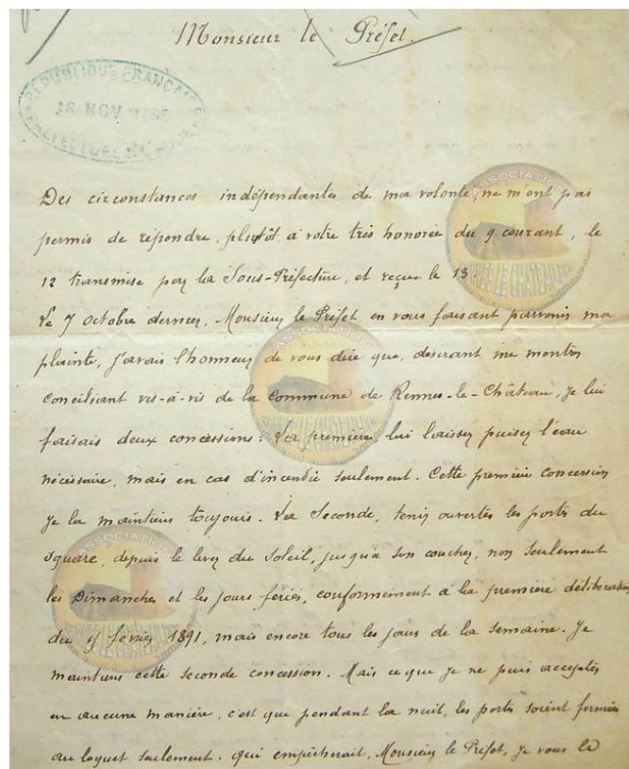
¹ This small building, which the administration considers a pavilion, was erected by the priest in 1894. <https://>

² www.rennes-le-chateau-doc.fr/Villes%20Villages/ville%20rennes%20le%20chateau/Registre%20conseil%20municipal/images/Reposoir 21 07 1895.pdf

After learning of this letter, on the following 15th of October, the Prefect of Aude addressed the municipality of Rennes-le-Château. Apparently, by his words, Father Saunière had touched the Prefect, who seemed to take up his cause: "The priest, who, by virtue of the resolution of 15th February 1891, had carried out all the beautification work in the public square at his own expense, is prepared to plead. However, to avoid a trial, the priest agrees to leave the garden gates open every day from morning until evening and, in the event of a fire, to make the cistern available to the inhabitants. I ask you to inform the Municipal Council of the concessions granted by the priest, inviting them to consider whether it would not be appropriate to accept them." If these two concessions were not accepted by the Municipal Council, the Servant would be willing to immediately abandon the works in question to the municipality on the condition that the latter reimburse him for the sums he has spent on these various constructions.

On November 9, 1895, the Prefect sent a letter to the Sub-Prefect in which only a third point of contention appeared to remain unresolved: "The mayor and deputy mayor of Rennes-le-Château came to see me to discuss the existing conflicts between the municipality and the Servant regarding the public garden and the religious monument that was built there. The municipality has shown itself eager to put an end to the difficulties that have arisen and has informed me of the following proposed arrangements, which I ask you to communicate to the Servant, urging him to accept them: 1) freedom of access to the square, which will simply be closed with a latch; 2) use of water from the cistern, but only in the event of a fire; 3) removal of the furniture from the chalet to avoid the municipality having to pay taxes, the building in this case being used to store the flowers from the public garden."

On November 17, 1895, in his response to the Prefect, Béranger Saunière informed him of his agreement with the first two provisions. However, he rejected the third, explaining the reasons.



Mr. Prefect,

Circumstances beyond my control prevented me from responding earlier to your honored letter of the 9th of this month, forwarded on the 12th by the Sub-Prefecture, and received on the 13th.

On October 7th, Mr. Prefect, when sending you my complaint, I had the honor of telling you that, wishing to be conciliatory towards the commune of Rennes-le-Château, I made two concessions: the first, to allow it to draw the necessary water, but only in case of fire. I still maintain this first concession. The second, to keep the gates of the square open from sunrise to sunset, not only on Sundays and public holidays, in accordance with the first deliberation of February 15, 1891, but also every day of the week. I maintain this second concession. But what I cannot accept in any way is that during the night, the gates be closed with the latch only. Who would prevent, Mr. Prefect, I ask you, the wrongdoers from going to cause some damage either to the flowerbed or to the greenhouse?

³ https://www.rennes-le-chateau-doc.fr/Villes%20Villages/ville%20rennes%20le%20chateau/Registre%20conseil%20municipal/images/Cloture_place_publicue_15_02_1891.pdf

Those who need water, who would prevent them from going to get some since it can easily be drawn through the exterior openings of the cistern, without having to use the pump? In accordance with the deliberation of February 15, 1891 which states that all doors must be provided with keys, one of which must be deposited in the hands of the civil authorities, since the installation of the doors, the Mayor has had one of these keys. If during the night, someone is obliged to go to the cemetery, let them go and get the key from their home (the Mayor).

As for the 3rd proposition which requires the removal of the furniture from the chalet, to avoid the municipality having to pay the taxes, here is my answer: I have never refused and I never refuse to pay the said taxes, however heavy they may be. When the controller came, I asked this gentleman to put these taxes on my account, the municipality absolutely refused for fear that I would later have a title of ownership. I therefore always agree, Mr. Prefect, to pay these taxes, even the arrears if there are any. Finally, I ask myself, in closing, what this can do to the municipality; what harm can I cause by placing in the greenhouse next to my flower pots, a few books and my work desk?

demande, les malfaiteurs d'aller commettre quelques dégâts soit au portier, soit à la clore? Ceux qui auraient besoin d'eau, que les empêche-t-ils d'aller au puits, puisqu'on peut facilement en puiser par les ouvertures extérieures de la citerne, sans avoir à se servir de la pompe? Conformément à la délibération du 15 février 1891 qui dit que toutes les portes doivent être pourvues d'une clef dont une dépositée entre les mains des autorités civiles, depuis la pose des portes, Monsieur le Maire possède une de ces clefs. Si pendant la nuit, quelqu'un est obligé d'aller au cimetière, qu'il aille prendre la clef chez lui (M^r le Maire).

Quant à la 3^{ème} proposition qui demande l'enlèvement des meubles du chalet, pour éviter à la commune le paiement des impôts, voici ma réponse: Je ne me suis jamais refusé et je ne me refuse jamais à payer les dites impôts, si lourds soient-ils. Lorsque le contrôleur est venu, j'ai prié ce Monsieur de vouloir mettre ces impôts sur mon compte, la commune s'y est absolument refusée dans la crainte que j'eusse ainsi plus tard, un titre de propriété. Je consens donc, toujours Monsieur le Préfet, à solder ces impôts, même l'arriéré, s'il en existe.

Je me demande enfin, en terminant, ce que cela peut bien faire à la commune; quel tort je lui cause en plaçant dans la serre à côté de mes pots de fleurs, quelques livres et mon bureau de travail? Je ne vois pas du tout le préjudice que je lui porte, puisque sans parler de l'insuffisance du local dans mon presbytère le plus lamentable de toute la contrée, je consens

encore une fois à en solder les impôts? Si Monsieur le Préfet veut bien le donner la peine de le réfléchir, il ne lui sera pas difficile de s'apercevoir qu'il n'est qu'une pure tracasserie, pas autre chose.

Je prie agréer, Monsieur le Préfet avec tous mes regrets, de ne pouvoir accepter encore cette dernière proposition, le témoignage de mes sentiments les plus humbles et les plus respectueux.

BSaunière Ptre

Rennes-le-Château le 17 nov. 1895.

I do not see at all the harm that I am causing him, since without speaking of the insufficiency of premises in my presbytery, the most lamentable in the whole region, I consent

Once again, to settle the taxes? If the Prefect would be willing to take the trouble to think about it, it will not be difficult for him to realize that this is just pure hassle, nothing else.

Please accept, Mr. Prefect, with all my regrets at not being able to accept this last proposal, the testimony of my most humble and respectful feelings.

BSaunière Ptre
Rennes-le-Château on November 17, 1895.

On November 21, 1895, the Prefect wrote the following to the Sub-Prefect: "I had the honor of instructing you to inform the Minister of Rennes-le-Château of the conditions that the municipality of this commune was placing on the solution of the conflict raised concerning the public garden. The Minister is sending me today his response to your communication directly.

He expresses the wish that the garden gates be closed at night and offers to pay the contributions for the pavilion he uses. The Desseccrant's claims seem reasonable to me. I am sending you his response here and ask you to inform the municipality and to work towards a conciliation that can only be beneficial to the interests of the commune.

Once again, Abbé Saunière's claims were approved by the Prefect. At his instigation, the Sub-Prefect, in a letter to the Mayor of Rennes-le-Château dated December 11, 1895, asked him to accept the priest's conditions, which seemed reasonable.

Rennes-le-Château
Ce 11^{bre} 1895

Mons. le Maire,

Par votre lettre du 9-9bre dernier M^{re} le
Préfet de l'Aude faisait connaître à M^{re} le
Déservant de cette commune les conditions
qu'il devait se mettre à la solution
en conflit avec le sujet du jardin
public.

M^{re} le Déservant lui a adressé sa
réponse dans la lettre que j'ai aujour-
d'hui communiqué sous ce pli et que vous voudrez
bien me retourner. - Il désire que les
portes du jardin soient fermées pendant
la nuit et offre de payer les contribu-
tions du pavillon qu'il utilise.

M^{re} le Préfet trouve raisonnable
les prétentions du Déservant.

Je saurais, M^{re} le Maire, communiquer
cette lettre au Conseil Municipal en le priant
d'accepter ces propositions.

Mr. Mayor

In his letter of 9-9bre last, the Prefect of Aude informed the Minister of your commune of the conditions that the Municipal Council was placing on the solution of the conflict raised concerning the public garden.

The Servant sent him his reply in the letter that I am sending you here and that you will be kind enough to return to me. He wishes the garden gates to be closed during the night and offers to pay the contributions for the pavilion that he uses.

The Prefect finds the claims of the Servant reasonable.

I ask you to communicate this letter to the Municipal Council, asking them to accept these proposals.

Forced and constrained to comply with the demands of Abbot Saunière, validated by the Prefect, the Municipal Council nevertheless retains a bitterness manifested by the "empty chair" policy.

Rennes-le-Château on 19th December 1895

Mr. Deputy Prefect

I have the honour to inform you that I summoned the Municipal Council of the commune to inform it of the response of the priest to the deliberation taken on the subject of the public square and that no one attended the meeting.

Please accept, Mr. Deputy Prefect, the assurance of my full devotion.

Mayor

Sauzède

DÉPARTEMENT DE L'AUDE
ARRONDISSEMENT DE LIMOUX
MAIRIE DE RENNES-LE-CHATEAU

Rennes-le-Château, le 19^{bre} 1895

Monsieur le Sous-Prefet.

Il m'a l'honneur
de vous adresser que
j'ai convoqué le Conseil
Municipal de la commune pour
lui faire connaître
sa réponse et que le Conseil
a délibéré sur le sujet
du jardin public
et que personne ne s'est
présenté à la séance.

Je prie de vous
remercier et de vous
saluer.

Monsieur le Maire
Sauf à vous en adresser
une copie.

Monsieur le Maire
Sauf à vous en adresser
une copie.

In his letter of October 7, 1895, Abbot Saunière wrote, "The work that I painstakingly erected cost me more than ten thousand francs." The construction of the building that the administration calls "pavilion" was probably carried out during the years 1893 and 1894. In the inventory of the works and supplies of the blacksmith of Alet, Charles Dénarnaud, drawn up by Abbot Saunière in July 1894, the latter mentions this "pavilion".

Compte des travaux et fournitures de
M^r Charles Dénarnaud
Marchal

1894. Juillet

Porte du Cimetière	214 Kil.	0,90	192	60
une serrure		0,08	7	
deux poignées		0,08	6	
deux toles enroulées		0,08	6	60
deux bordures niquelées		1,75	3	50
deux serrures de bronze		1,75	3	50
deux colts postérieurs			1	60
Porte de la Cour	36 Kilo	0,70	25	40
Pavillon	56 Kilo	0,60	33	60
un cintre porte de la cour	8 Kilo	0,60	4	80
un cintre pour grille	4 Kilo	0,60	2	40



Patrick Mensior