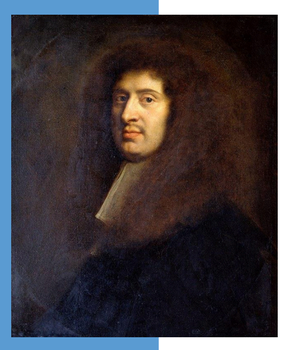
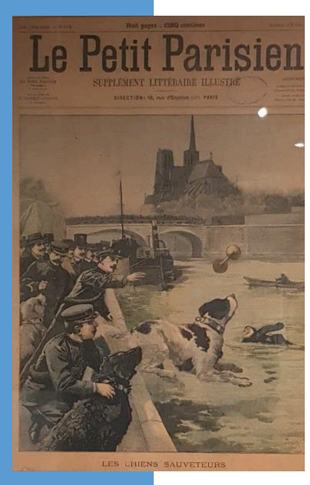
# Museum of Paris' Police Headquarters

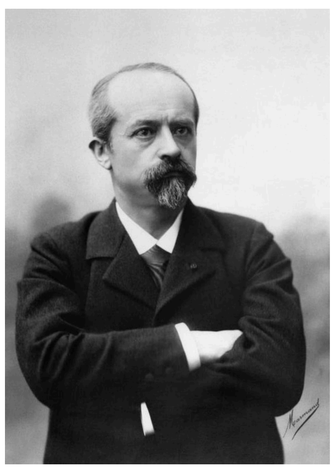
The museum of Paris' police headquarters was born to French prefect Lepine's determination to trace back the history of Paris' Police. Moreover, the goal was to bring the establishment closer to the Parisian population. In modern times, The city of Paris was far more different from today's one, as it was darker and disreputable: indeed, it was a place where thieves, cripples and crooks gathered. Security was ensured thanks to military patrols, run by a prevost himself designated by the King. However, this was not sufficient: private milicia and religious enforcement were set up. The city was not secure at the time; especially at night. In 1666, the killing of criminal lieutenant Jacques Tardieu was a turning point. The population's security has to be assured. In 1667, Nicolas de la Reynie was elected as new general lieutenant. His motto "Clarity, tidiness, security" starts with the dismantlement of the Cour des Miracles, the arrival of city lightings and the improvement of clean up operations. At the end of the 18th century, catacombs opened to facilitate the lack of room in graveyards and keep away epidemics. In 1789, Bailly was designated as new chief of Police. Yet, the status of mayor is cut to avoid tensions.

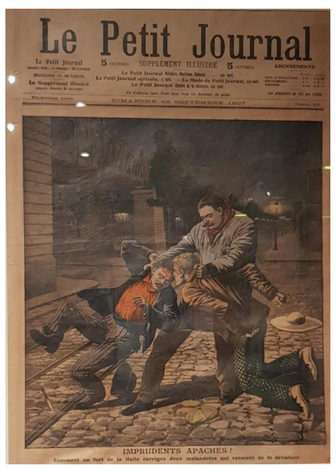


The police headquarters were founded by Bonaparte in July 1800. The very first prefect of Paris, Mr. Dubois, faced many dramatic events such as the explosion of a bomb orchestrated by Monarchists. This caused the death of a hundred pedestrians in St Nicaise street, not so far from the first consul's coach heading to the opera! Another terrible event was the blaze at the Austrian embassy during Bonapart and Marie-Louise's wedding in 1810 that led to the birth of Paris' firefighters. Then, the police seeked to be more and more efficient. Vidocq, a former outlaw, knew a lot about criminality therefore became head of security; he was at the origins of the very first bureau of detectives. By the way, he is the one who inspired Balzac for the character of Vautrin.

In 1871, after the Paris Commune, the police headquarters located on the Île de la Cité was set on fire. In order to temporarily relocate police services, the authorities chose an unusual site: the former barracks of the Republican Guard on Rue de la Cité, which stood on the grounds of an old poultry market (hence the nickname "chickens" for police officers!). At the end of the 19th century, the police began to innovate and organize itself in response to a wave of new criminal activity, particularly involving the Apaches—gangs of young people who attacked others with knives and terrorized Paris. The police prefect at the time, Louis Lépine, a native of Lyon, took bold measures: he created the bicycle brigade (whose officers were nicknamed the Hirondelles—"Swallows"—after the brand of their bicycles), as well as the canine unit and the river police. To improve road safety, Lépine equipped peace officers with light batons and whistles on wheels to help ease the already chaotic flow of traffic in Paris. This "street prefect" also introduced one-way streets, traffic roundabouts, and pedestrian crossings. Even more forward-thinking, he required drivers of motor vehicles to obtain a certificate of competence—the forerunner of today's driver's license.





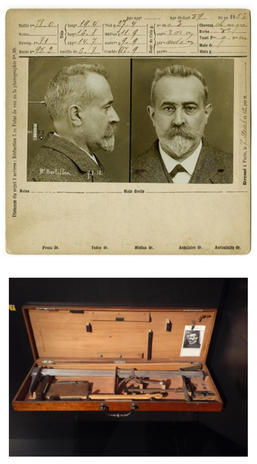

Louis Lépine also laid the foundation for what would become modern forensic policing by establishing the judicial identity service, tasked with collecting and analyzing evidence. This proved invaluable for investigators, including those in the chief's brigade, which would later become the criminal investigation division—particularly useful in confronting the Bonnot Gang, which was active at the time. Finally, to help artisans compete with the influx of German-made toys and trinkets being sold informally on the sidewalks of Paris, the Prefect launched an annual exhibition in 1901 to allow craftsmen to showcase their creations to the public. Judged by a panel of experts, the best items were awarded prizes: thus, the Lépine Competition was born.

The museum traces the history of the police throughout the 20th century, including a focus on the famous Brigades du Tigre (Tiger Brigades) established by Célestin Hennion. These were the first motorized police units, created to confront armed criminals equipped with pistols and cars. The museum also explores the role of the police during the German occupation and its involvement in the Vel' d'Hiv Roundup. These events are presented through a wealth of archival documents, newspapers, objects, portraits, and eyewitness testimonies.

"'22 here come the cops': The police sergeants had 11 buttons on their uniforms and always walked the streets in pairs… so 22 buttons! The police are coming!"

But the key figure in the museum is Alphonse Bertillon, a descendant of a family of scientists—his grandfather coined the term demography, his father founded the School of Anthropology in 1859, and his brother served as director of statistics for the city of Paris. Recognized as one of the founders of forensic science, Bertillon developed innovative techniques and methods that spread widely across the world. In 1879, while working as a clerk at the police prefecture and tasked with recording the physical descriptions of suspects, he sought to eliminate potential errors in identification. Faced with ineffective existing techniques, he devised a rigorous system: judicial anthropometry, later known as Bertillonage.

In the France of the Third Republic, branding criminals to prevent recidivism had been outlawed by the law of August 31, 1832. As a result, rational anthropometric identification became the fundamental tool for law enforcement. Bertillon's system was based on measuring specific parts of the body—head, arms, legs—on the premise that the human skeleton reaches a relatively fixed form around age 20, and that skeletal dimensions vary significantly from one individual to another. His method relied on systematic classification. To strengthen the reliability of his approach, Bertillon added the portrait parlé (a detailed verbal description, precursor to the modern facial composite), the recording of distinctive physical marks (such as right-hand fingerprints) to ensure judicial certainty, and the use of judicial photography ("mug shots" taken from the front and side). He also required that crime scenes be photographed. Though initially controversial, his method gained legitimacy after it led to the successful arrest of the anarchist Ravachol in 1892. It was officially institutionalized with the creation of the Judicial Identity Service in 1893.



Little by little, anthropometry was replaced by dactyloscopy (fingerprinting), introduced by the eugenicist Francis Galton, which proved to be far more reliable and, in fact, infallible. More troublingly, Bertillon demonstrated extreme antisemitism during the Dreyfus Affair. Despite not being a handwriting expert, he asserted with certainty that Dreyfus was the author of the bordereau (the incriminating document), even though other specialists—such as Gobert of the Bank of France—had noted "numerous and significant dissimilarities." On the third day of Dreyfus's first trial, Bertillon spent three hours presenting his theory, which was based on the idea of autoforgery (self-forgery), laden with technical detail. No one understood it. According to Bertillon, Dreyfus had supposedly faked his own handwriting in order to cover his tracks—yet since Bertillon ultimately attributed the document to Dreyfus, the prosecution was satisfied. Later called to testify at Émile Zola's trial, Bertillon made such a confused and incoherent presentation that he became a public laughingstock and was forced to step down under the jeers of the audience.