

INTRODUCTION

Throughout White House history, presidents and first families have kept a variety of animals as pets. While most presidential pets were traditional animals found in American households, a few White House families have kept unusual pets. Some pets simply provided companionship to the president and their family. Others gained fame for their role in shaping the president's public image and promoting important issues in the United States. Explore the many remarkable—and amusing—stories of pets at the White House.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

One of the first animals to live at the White House was President Thomas Jefferson's favorite pet—a mockingbird named Dick. Jefferson often allowed Dick to roam freely in his office. The bird would sit on Jefferson's desk and sing. He would even perch on the president's shoulder and take food from Jefferson's lips.

Image 1, to the right, is a modern painting of Thomas Jefferson's office. If you look closely, you can see Dick roaming freely in the upper right corner. Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, and Zebulon Pike sent a variety of animals to the White House from the Lewis and



Image 1. Painting of President Thomas Jefferson's office. If you look closely, you can see Jefferson's mockingbird, Dick, flying around in the upper right corner.

Clark expedition. For example, Lewis, Clark, and Pike sent Jefferson grizzly bear cubs, which were placed in an enclosure on the White House Grounds before being sent to a museum in Philadelphia.

President Abraham Lincoln had two pet goats named Nanny and Nanko. Nanny and Nanko were granted freedom to roam the White House. This led to much excitement as Lincoln's youngest son, Tad, on at least one occasion, hitched the goats to a chair and rode around the State Floor. Nanny and Nanko were so treasured that President Lincoln included updates on the goats' wellbeing in a letter to Mrs. Lincoln while she was traveling with Tad. View **Image 2** in the chart below to see the letter

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written by President Abraham Lincoln to First Lady Mary Lincoln in 1864. Lincoln writes: “Tell Tad the goats and father are very well—especially the goats.”



Image 3. President Benjamin Harrison's son, Benjamin Harrison McKee—nicknamed “Baby McGee” by the press—holding the reigns of “His Whiskers” (Ca. 1890). Also pictured from left to right are his uncle, Russell Harrison, son of the president, Russell's daughter Marthena Harrison, the dog Jack, and sister Mary Lodge McKee.

President Benjamin Harrison and his extended family lived at the White House with several animals including a rambunctious goat named “His Whiskers.” One day, while pulling the president’s grandchildren around in a cart, His Whiskers took off through the White House gates. President Harrison chased after them and brought them back to safety. Refer to **Image 3**, to the left, to see a photograph of President Harrison’s son with His Whiskers. This photograph became one of the most famous White House images of the 1800s.

President Theodore Roosevelt and his large, young family cared for a collection of animals at the White House. They had dogs, cats, guinea pigs, kangaroo rats, horses, a macaw (also known as a parrot), a snake, and more. **Image 4** in the chart pictures President Roosevelt’s son, Jr., posing with his blue macaw, Eli Yale. **Image 5** depicts President Roosevelt’s younger son, Quentin, riding the family pony, Algonquin. The Roosevelt family and their pets received ample public attention as they often appeared in periodicals and newspapers of the day.

Some first pets were received as gifts from well-wishers, friends, and foreign officials, becoming minor celebrities and ambassadors. First Lady Lucy Hayes’s well-publicized love of animals inspired David B. Sickels, the U.S. Ambassador in Siam (now Thailand), to send her a kitten as a gift. Fittingly named “Siam,” the cat became First Daughter Fanny Hayes’s pet and was the first Siamese cat sent to the United States. President Calvin Coolidge and First Lady Grace Coolidge kept several non-traditional

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pets at the White House including geese, donkeys, and a bobcat. Other more exotic animals were gifted to the Coolidges by foreign dignitaries such as lions, a wallaby, and a pygmy hippo. View **Image 6** in the chart, however, to see First Lady Grace Coolidge's most renowned pet—Rebecca the raccoon. Rebecca was initially given to the Coolidges as a contribution to their Thanksgiving meal, but she was kept as a pet instead.



Image 7. Kennedy's dog, Pushinka, and her puppies: Butterfly, White Tips, Blackie, and Streaker (1963). Butterfly and Streaker were given away to Midwest children when they were two months old. Blackie and White Tips stayed with the family until they were given to friends.

Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev presented First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy with a dog, named Pushinka, as a gesture of goodwill when he visited the United States in 1961. Pushinka, which means “fluffy” in Russian, was not initially welcomed by all Americans, however. Due to the tense relations with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, some citizens were suspicious of Pushinka and believed that the Soviets may have placed a listening device on the dog. But Pushinka quickly won over the skeptics. **Image 7**, to the left, features Pushinka

and her puppies. Born at the White House, the puppies were nicknamed “pupniks.”

Pets have played a significant role in both humanizing and shaping public perceptions of presidents. President Warren G. Harding's photogenic Airedale terrier, “Laddie Boy,” was viewed by many as an extension of Harding's campaign slogan, “Return to Normalcy.” Laddie Boy—seen in **Image 8** in the chart below—had his own cabinet chair, sat in on meetings, and greeted official delegations to the White House. He also “hosted” the 1923 Easter Egg Roll while the Hardings were away.

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Perhaps one of the most famous pets to live in the White House, however, was President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Scottish terrier, Fala. Fala came to the White House in 1940 and served as a constant companion to the president during the difficult days of World War II. In a highly publicized campaign, Fala donated toys to promote scrap rubber collections for the war effort in 1942. **Image 9**, to the right, shows Fala donating his toys. In 1943, Fala also starred in an MGM short-subject film about the World War II home front story from Fala's perspective.



Image 9. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Scottish Terrier, Fala, shown donating his toys. In a highly publicized campaign, Fala donated toys to promote scrap rubber collections for the war effort in 1942.

The studio made a second installment in 1946, after Roosevelt's death, that included Fala's tour of Hyde Park, the Roosevelt family estate, and the future site of his presidential library. See Fala posing for the photographer in **Image 10** in the chart below.

Pets of modern presidents have continued to capture nationwide attention. When George H. W. Bush was elected president in 1988, Millie—a springer spaniel—moved into the White House with the Bushes. As seen in **Image 11**, Millie had six puppies the following year. In 1989, First Lady Barbara Bush appeared on the cover of *Life* magazine with Millie and her puppies. Mrs. Bush later published *Millie's Book*, a bestseller that describes a day in the White House from Millie's perspective and earned almost \$900,000 from book sales. The funds were donated to the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy.

First Lady Hillary Clinton published a book of children's letters written to the Clinton family cat, Socks, and dog, Buddy, to raise money for charity and to encourage young people to write. Refer to **Image 12** below to see First Lady Hillary Clinton posing in the East Garden with Socks and Buddy. In 2002, First Lady Laura Bush selected *All Creatures Great and Small* as that year's holiday theme at the White House. She explained that she chose the theme to honor White House pets that have

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comforted and entertained presidents and their families. The festivities included a display of 25 papier-mâché animal sculptures and the first installation of the “Barney Cam,” a holiday livestream video featuring the Bush’s Scottish terrier—which became an annual tradition. View **Image 13** to see the Bushes’ dog, Barney, under the White House Christmas tree.



Image 14. The Obama family’s dogs, Bo and Sunny, welcome White House visitors in the East Garden Room on July 1, 2015. Visitors to the White House that day were the first following the lifting of a 40-year restriction on cameras and photography in the White House.

More recent pets to occupy the White House include the Obama family’s dogs, Bo and Sunny. **Image 14**, to the left, shows Bo and Sunny welcoming White House visitors in the East Garden Room. As you can see, they are certainly not camera shy! President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden moved into the White House in January 2021, first with their two German Shepherds, Major and Champ, and later welcomed Commander, a German Shepherd puppy, and Willow, a two-year-old grey tabby cat who formerly lived on a farm.

White House pets have served many roles—as companions to the president and first family, as a vehicle to promote political agendas, and even as “hosts” for White House events. Most importantly, however, from Dick to Fala to Sunny and Bo, White House pets humanize the president and unify Americans.

IMAGES




Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing

Source	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	A Bird That Whistles: In Jefferson's Cabinet, 1803	Ca. 2008	Peter Waddell	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5039-Fine%20%26%20Decorative%20Arts/Main%20Index/Presidents/Thomas%20Jefferson/9309.tif.info
2	Letter from President Abraham Lincoln to First Lady Mary Lincoln	1864	Abraham Lincoln	National Archives and Records Administration		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Abraham%20Lincoln/1112755.tif.info
3	Baby McKee and "His Whiskers"	Ca. 1890	Frances Benjamin Johnston	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Benjamin%20Harrison/1078.tif.info
4	Teddy Roosevelt, Jr. and Eli Yale	1902	Frances Benjamin Johnston	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Theodore%20Roosevelt/1077.tif.info
5	Quentin Roosevelt on Algonquin	1902	Frances Benjamin Johnston	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Theodore%20Roosevelt/724.tif.info

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6	Mrs. Coolidge with Her Raccoon, Rebecca	Ca. 1923 - 1929	National Photo Company	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Calvin%20Coolidge/1080.tif.info
7	Pushinka and her Puppies on the South Lawn	1963	Cecil Stoughton	John F. Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/John%20F%20Kennedy/8393.tif.info
8	President Harding and Laddie Boy Pose for a Photographer	1922	Herbert E. French	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Warren%20G%20Harding/1689.tif.info
9	Fala Donates Toys to the War Effort	1942	Unknown	Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Franklin%20D%20Roosevelt/8819.tif.info
10	Fala's Second Birthday - Photographing the Photographers	1942	Unknown	Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Franklin%20D%20Roosevelt/8392.tif.info
11	President Bush, Millie, and Puppies on the South Lawn of the White House	1989	Michael Sargent	George Bush Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/George%20H%20W%20Bush/1094.tif.info

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12	Hillary Clinton with Buddy and Socks in the East Garden	1999	Unknown	William J. Clinton Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Bill%20Clinton/8394.tif.info
13	The Bushes' Dog Barney at White House Christmas Tree	2005	Shealah Craighead	George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/George%20W%20Bush/8321.tif.info
14	Bo and Sunny Welcome White House Visitors	2015	Matthew D'Agostino	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital-Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Barack%20Obama/1117277.dng.info#c=%2Ffotoweb%2Farchives%2F5017-Digital-Library%2F%3Fq%3DBo%2520and%2520Sunny%2520Welcome%2520White%2520House%2520Visitors

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- White House Pets Information Page by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Children's Book: *Pets at the White House* by Marge Kennedy.
- Children's Book: *Scamper: The Bunny Who Went to the White House* by Anna Roosevelt Dall and Marjorie Flack.
- Collection: "Animal Ambassadors" by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Video: "First Pets" by the White House Historical Association in partnership with Untold. [Watch here.](#)
- Video: "Fala—The Most Famous Dog in America" by the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library. [Watch here.](#)

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

For all learners:

- Visit WHHA's "Animal Ambassadors" Collection linked [here](#). What is your favorite White House pet? Why? Share your thoughts with a classmate, friend, or family member.

For older learners:

- Politics play an influential role at the White House and sometimes the presidents' pets get involved. Use the contextual essay above or consider conducting further research on Fala, Pushinka, or other White House pets to discuss the relationship between first pets and politics, considering how these pets are perceived by the media and the public.

For younger learners:

- Imagine you are moving to the White House. What pets would you bring with you? What would you and your pets like to do at the White House? Draw or write your response.

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- Some presidents have been convinced by the public or other members of the first family to get pets. Write a persuasive letter to a president asking the White House to add a particular animal.
- Choose a famous pet that has lived at the White House and write a story about their time there.