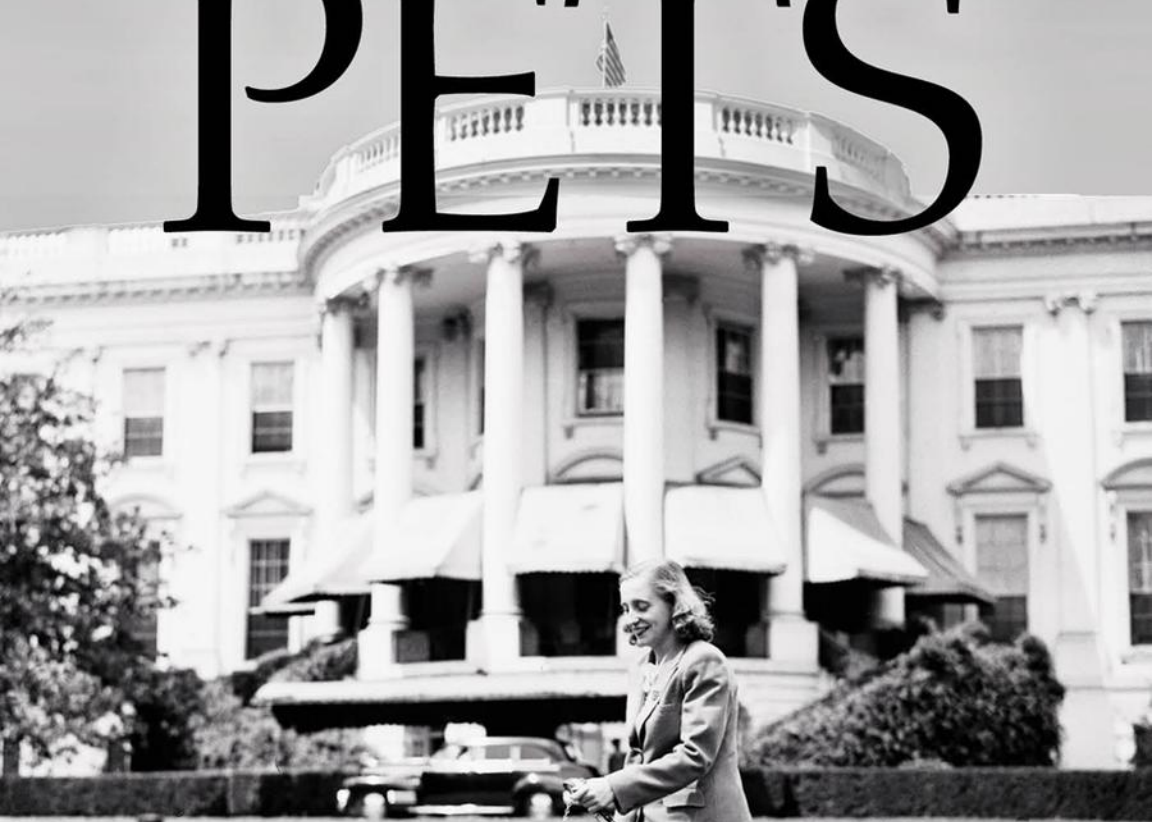


WHITE HOUSE PETS



MARGARET TRUMAN





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THEY ALL
LIVED TOGETHER

WHITE HOUSE PETS

There really is no difference between a White House pet and yours or mine except that those belonging to our chief executive receive more publicity. But that is one of the hazards the president's pets must face - it comes with the office.

Of those taking up residence at the White House or a presidential summer home, some arrive with their distinguished masters or are purchased shortly after the first families are comfortably settled. Others are gifts from friends, well-wishers, or foreign officials.

We will try to tell about a great many of them, from George Washington's horse Nelson, who was at the surrender at Yorktown, to the one-day news item about my father's white puppy that I don't even remember.

In all these stories of president's pets, it is apparent that, though most of the animals may have been ordinary, their masters were not. The office they held is complex beyond comprehension, with responsibilities so overwhelming that even presidents themselves cannot describe them adequately. If animals gave them a moment's relaxation or a short respite from continual burdens, then I think they're worth remembering for that reason if for no other.

George Washington, our first president, was also the first to receive gift pets. Admirers sent him some fine hunting dogs; from the king of Spain came a champion jack that he kept at Mount Vernon for many years. It should be remembered, of course, that Washington never lived in the White House, which was not completed until 1800.

A pet need not live within the confines of the White House in order to be officially considered a pet. There are eighteen acres of grounds around the White House, and there are plenty of squirrels living among the trees. I shall tell a story about a wild rabbit - though I never saw one there myself.

In good weather, my family liked to eat on the South Portico. We took almost all our meals there during the late spring and summer months. It was pleasant, airy, and allowed my father a brief hour of relaxation in the sunshine. Sometimes we noticed a group of squirrels chasing around close to the porch. Our

table was a marvelous glass-topped rectangular one, with a ring attached to the legs, where a bowl of fresh flowers could be placed that could be seen through the table top. It gave a very pretty effect. One day we caught Dad crumbling soda crackers by his chair where, he thought, his actions were hidden by the flower bowl under the glass top. No wonder we had so many squirrel visitors. Mother allowed as how she'd prefer no more wild visitors under the table at lunch. Who wants to be bitten by a squirrel? Dad agreed but then fed them at the edge of the porch after lunch. The Trumans are stubborn that way.

As President Theodore Roosevelt and others have pointed out, birds also find the White House an attractive place. Sometimes these wild creatures can present a baffling problem to the White House staff. During World War I, for example, attendants and guards were startled to hear a loud, distinct tapping one night. Its point of origin was unknown. This was a time of rumors, of spies under every bed, with plots, counterplots, and scare stories manufactured as fast as the imagination could conceive them. The tapping noise was finally tracked down when an attendant went up on the roof to get some air and happened to look in the right direction at the right time. It was a woodpecker hammering away at the copper gutters and downspouts. When the woodpecker was gone, so was the tapping.

Two of the most unusual cases of odd animals staying at the White House occurred during the administrations of John Quincy Adams and Andrew Johnson. Mr. Adams was quite an intellectual. From listening to him one would never guess his farm background, for he spoke mostly about science, literature, and history. State dinners given by Mr. Adams were on the dull side. Some of the most interesting guests were reduced to simple pleasantries. Such excitement as there was came from visiting dignitaries.

General Lafayette had been touring the United States from July 1824 to August 1825 and spent his last two months of his trip in the White House. Among the many gifts he had received was a live alligator, which he kept in the East Room. Frequently visitors who wandered in came tearing out again - fast.

Mrs. John Quincy Adams also kept unusual "pets" - silkworms

who feasted on mulberry leaves and repaid their hostess by spinning the silk for the first lady's dresses. I find that hard to believe, but it's supposed to be true.

As for Andrew Johnson, one summer evening with the air of a conspirator he showed his favorite secretary, one Mr. Moore, a bushel basket of flour, which came from one of the mills he owned at Greenville, Tenn. He explained that the night before he had found a few mice playing, and in a fit of generosity he had left a handful of flour for the scurrying little beasts.

"I am now filling the basket for them tonight," the president said. The next day, Moore asked the president about his tiny friends.

"The little fellows gave me their confidence," the president answered. "I gave them their basket and poured some water [into a bowl] on the hearth for them."

For the average family, the word pet means dogs, cats, canaries, parakeets, hamsters, and in cases where a stable permits, horses or ponies. Generally, the same holds true for our first family, except that their lofty position leaves them exposed to gifts that no family in its right mind would contemplate for even an instant. Would the typical suburbanite accept an elephant as a present? Or a zebra? A pair of frisky, sharp-toothed lion cubs? A vicious bobcat? A baby hippo?

Well, at various times, several of our presidents, including Martin Van Buren, Theodore Roosevelt, and Calvin Coolidge, have been notified that a friend, a foreign potentate, or government official was giving such a beast to the White House as a token of esteem. Presidents, being politicians, usually make a show of appreciation at the thoughtfulness of the donor. Then they ship the animals to the nearest zoo, which in the case of Washington, D.C., happens to be the Washington Zoo on Connecticut Avenue.

Another problem that must be faced by White House tenants is accommodations. Many homes boast a good-sized doghouse in the backyard; apartment dwellers allow their pets a corner of some room or even the freedom to roam as they wish. That is often the case in the White House.