

History of Library Cats

Felines have been mascots and workers at libraries throughout the ages.

By Allie B. Kagamaster

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Dewey Readmore Books bronze, photo courtesy Heather Johnson Beary. Throughout the ages, library cats have upheld literary works, inspired reading and literacy programs, boosted librarian morale and befriended patrons. Experts trace the origins of library cats to ancient times, when Herodotus reported the existence of libraries in Egyptian temples. While many felines prowled the fields of early Egypt protecting crops, others underwent special training to stop rodents and serpents from infesting houses and temples, where preserved papyrus has since been unearthed.

In the Middle Ages, records indicate that monks deployed domesticated mousers to their medieval monasteries to prevent rats from eating costly manuscripts.

Libris, cat in residence at Willet Memorial Library at Wesleyan College, photo courtesy Sybil McNeil. According to Maria Haltunen, assistant to the director of the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia, Empress Elisabeth published a special order in 1745 about transporting cats aplenty to the court: "Find in Kazan the best and biggest cats, capable of catching mice and send them by cart with sufficient food immediately." Today, in the basement of the museum and library, dozens of rescued strays sleep in baskets and feed on fresh porridge prepared by staff. They patrol the yards and serve as reminders of their royal roots.

In the 1800s the British government paid libraries to house cats who kept rodents from chewing through books. And Russia's army of feline librarians proliferated before and after World War II.

STONE CATS

Many library cats have been immortalized in stone.

The New York Public Library's sculpted lions, who have been greeting patrons since 1911, symbolize felines as guardians over literary works. They were sculpted by Edward Potter and were originally dubbed Leo Astor and Leo Lenox for library founders John Jacob Astor and James Lenox. During the Great Depression, New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia renamed the duo to encourage survival during tough times. Patience and Fortitude don specially fitted construction hats through restorations and sport festive wreaths during holidays.

Sculptor and cat aficionado Heather Johnson Beary rendered a bronze likeness of Dewey Readmore Books for Spencer, Iowa's library and replicated the beloved cat into miniature statues for fans and collectors.

During the 1980s, librarian Phyllis Lahti was inspired by Reggie, the cat-in-residence of Bryant Public Library in Sauk, Minn., to establish the Library Cat Society. The group, now defunct, was intended to "advocate the establishment of cats in libraries and recognize the need to respect and care for library cats." Lahti and others spoke up for felines in filmmaker Gary Roma's 1998 documentary, "Puss in Books: Adventures of the Library Cat."

A pair of Scottish Folds made news while serving Nevada's Douglas County Public Library in the 1980s. They were named Baker & Taylor, in honor of the world's largest distributor of book and entertainment products to libraries. Spokeswoman Amy Baldwin says, "We love our cats and we know our library customers cherish Baker and Taylor."

Librarians say they are thrilled to have cats on board. Director Sybil McNeil at Wesleyan College's Lucy Willet Library in Macon, Ga., says Libris, the library's former feral cat, has a great life. "He'll sleep on a book cart and hops on board the elevator to ride with us."

On his Web site, Ironfrog.com, Roma keeps track of library cats officially recorded throughout the world. Factoring in five virtual e-cats, four stuffed mascots and one ghost kitty who haunts a reference library, so far some 700 have made the list.

Allie Bullock Kagamaster is a freelance writer based in Southern California who lives with Oliver, part Maine Coon, and



Edmund, a tabby who fetches.