

“Great Dogs” of American Presidents

The most famous dogs to reside in the White House

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[above picture: Abraham Lincoln's dog Fido]

What do George Washington, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln have in common?

Brilliant minds? Eloquence? Patriotism? Certainly.

But if the axiom “great minds think alike” is true, their like-mindedness centered around something particularly interesting...and furry. They were all dog-lovers.

George Washington's character as a general and as president is well-known, but less publicized is the fact that he was the father of the American Foxhound breed in the United States.

Just before the War of Independence, Washington paid for the safe passage of a pack of young foxhounds from England. In 1785, his friend, the Marquis de Lafayette, sent him three French foxhounds as a gift.

The British hounds and the French hounds were bred, producing the hearty, good-natured American Foxhound. He often mentioned his beloved dogs in his diaries, including one hound who routinely vexed Martha Washington by breaking into their pantry and stealing whole Virginia hams.

“Psychology Today” magazine suggests a link between dog ownership and greatness in a January, 2009, article. Stanley Coren, Ph.D., notes the character of some famous dog lovers, including General Washington. That article contains a vignette which perfectly illustrates Washington's honorable character as both a man and a dog lover:

“During the Battle of Germantown, which was not going well for the Americans, Washington was encamped at Pennibecker's Mill. On October 6, 1777, a little terrier was seen wandering the area between the American and British lines. It turns out that General Howe's little terrier had somehow gotten loose and had become lost on the battlefield. The dog was identified from its collar, and brought to Washington. His officers suggested that he might want to keep the dog as a sort of trophy which might weaken the morale of the British general.

Instead he took the dog into his tent, fed him and had him brushed and cleaned. Then, to

the surprise of everyone, Washington ordered a cease fire. The shooting stopped and soldiers on both sides watched as one of Washington's aides formally returned a little dog to the British commander under a flag of truce."

Other Founding Fathers loved canines as well. John and Abigail Adams had two mixed-breed dogs: "Satan", which was John's dog, and "Juno", Abigail's puppy. In her letters, Abigail famously wrote "If you love me....you must love my dog."

Benjamin Franklin acted as spoiled "grandfather" to his son's Newfoundland, taking him on long walks and bringing him special treats during each visit. Thomas Jefferson loved the affable herding dog, Briards, so much that he not only imported a pregnant female from France, he routinely gave puppies to landowning friends, including James Madison.

Abraham Lincoln's dog, Fido, a lab mix, was well-known to be so spoiled that he ate at the table with the family. The hub-bub of the White House scared Fido terribly, so Lincoln made an incredible sacrifice—he gave Fido to trusted friends in Springfield, Illinois, with strict instructions to care for and love Fido. Subsequently, Lincoln became the owner of the first White House cat, Tabby, to whom Lincoln would give "belly-rubs" for hours at a time.

Among the most famous dogs to reside in the White House, surely, was FDR's Scottie, Fala. In 1944, Republican opponents charged Fala been left behind in the Aleutians and that FDR sent a destroyer back to fetch him at a cost to the taxpayers' of millions of dollars. In a famous retort, the president said that while he did not resent personal attacks, Fala's "Scotch soul was furious" at the alleged waste of money.



FDR's Scottie

Another dog that figured in the political infighting was "Checkers," whose owner, Richard Nixon, said the Cocker Spaniel was the only gift he received and that charges of his taking illegal campaign donations were false. Nixon's reply became famous as the "Checkers Speech."



Among other famous presidential pooches were Dwight Eisenhower's Weimaraner, "Heidi;" Harry Truman's Cocker Spaniel "Feller"; Warren Harding's Airedale "Laddie Boy"; Rutherford Hayes' Cocker Spaniel "Duke"; Gerald Ford's Golden Retriever "Liberty" and Ronald Reagan's Bouvier des Flanders "Lucky."



"Lucky" with Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher

Considering the role they played in the public limelight, behind every one of these pooches, we may be sure, there is a quite a tale.

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