

# *Purliament Hill: The Capital Cat Colony*

There are certain “must see” attractions on Parliament Hill: the Peace Tower, the Parliamentary Library, statues of prime ministers and other famous people in Canadian History... and the cats. For decades the Parliament Hill Cat Colony drew hundreds of curious onlookers and devoted fans of felines every day. Initially brought to the Hill for pest control, the cats eventually enjoyed a life of relative leisure. These well-fed and well-cared kitties spent their time sunning themselves and capturing the hearts of parliamentarians, staff, and visitors and tourists. In this article, we celebrate the Cat Colony (and Sanctuary) of Parliament Hill. Although no longer in existence, memories of these friendly, furry felines will not soon fade away..

## **Will Stos**

**D**uring a vigorous debate on the floor of the House of Commons or Senate, parliamentarians might verbally fight like cats and dogs. But for almost a hundred years (or more), actual cats enjoyed a peaceful existence just a short distance away from these chambers.

Although there is speculation the cats first arrived on the Hill during the construction of the Rideau Canal, historians have confidently traced the origins of the cat colony to at least 1924 when there was a large infestation of rats and mice after Centre block's construction.

Workers brought in cats to keep the rodent population under control. Although they did their job admirably, they also reproduced quickly. Soon, there were complaints from others working at the Hill about all the cats roaming the halls. By 1955, the use of cats as rodent deterrence ended when workers began using chemicals instead.

Nevertheless, there were still plenty of cats about – and a growing number of people who cared about their well being. Cleaners (char women) fed the cats as they visited the grounds to work in the 1930s; groundskeepers and other staff or visitors who befriended members of the colony also fed them in different locations until 1970 when Irene Desormeaux assumed the role of principal caretaker. By the 1980s, with the help of friend and neighbour, René Chartrand,

she created wooden structures west of Centre Block, near the Sir Alexander Mackenzie stature, to give the animals some shelter from the elements. Larger structures, resembling the early houses of European settlers along the St. Lawrence River, were built in 1997.

After Desmoreaux's death in 1987, Chartrand took over until his retirement in 2008. He passed away in 2014. In media stories noting his death it was noted that Chartrand's job was so important, he was one of very few civilians allowed onto the Hill after the September 11 attacks.

Other volunteers helped these caretakers over the years, and the family of felines also benefitted from sponsorship from a pet food company, and complimentary veterinary care and vaccinations from the Alta Vista Animal Hospital.

By 2000, the colony numbered as many as 30. Some animals still traced their lineage back to the mid-century mousers, but the vast majority appeared to have been left by people unable or unwilling to care for them. A “trap, neuter, release” program was instituted around the turn of the century to try to limit the population, and “drop-offs” were now turned into a local animal shelter.

-Slowly, the size of the colony decreased to just four felines who were finally all adopted out in 2012. The Cat Sanctuary was decommissioned and the structures were demolished to make way for the massive construction and renovation project on the Hill. The Public Works department discussed moving the colony near a parking lot at the foot of the Hill, it was deemed too traffic-heavy to be a safe and suitable generations of cats.

---

*Will Stos is Editor of the Canadian Parliamentary Review.*



Pierre Trudeau, who enjoyed his walks, used to wander by [and] Brian Mulroney always waved from his limousine window,"<sup>1</sup> and MPs and staffers were known to stop by, the cats were perhaps most beloved by other visitors.

Alan MacEachern, a Professor in the Department of History at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario, noted that while living in Ottawa, he and his wife regularly strolled up Parliament Hill to visit the cat sanctuary.

"The cats were a source of great delight to tourists and locals alike, and I think there were three reasons for that delight," he explained. "First, they were cats. Second, there was the sense of how the scene played into the Canadian stereotype: of a people so tolerant, or so passive, that they permitted squatting squatters to take up residence next to the seat of government. And third, there was a sense of how it played against the stereotype: how it was domesticates, rather than conventional wildlife, which were living in the wild, year-round, in one of the coldest national capitals in the world. You couldn't visit the cats without thinking about the wild and the tame, and the thin line between the two."<sup>2</sup>

Although the cats may no longer reside on the Hill, they will live long in their admirers' collective memories. A Facebook group run by former volunteers keeps the tradition alive by sharing photos and stories of a time when dozens of furry felines (and the squirrels, groundhogs, chipmunks, racoons and birds who were often interlopers) kept court on Purliament Hill.

**Notes:**

1. "The Cats of Parliament Hill", in Pierre Burton, *Cats I Have Known and Loved* (2002), Doubleday Canada, ISBN 0385659385, pp. 107-111.
2. <http://niche-canada.org/2014/10/25/a-parliament-of-cats/>



Photos: The Cats of Parliament Hill/Facebook