

History of the House Cat

Cats have lived with people for more than five thousand years! In ancient Egypt, people were fascinated with cats. They tamed wild cats from Africa and brought them into their homes. You can see cats in a lot of artwork from ancient Egypt. Cats were even considered to have special powers, and the Egyptians worshipped gods that had the bodies of cats. When Egyptian cat owners lost a pet, they would shave their eyebrows as a sign that they were sad over the loss of their cat.

About three thousand years ago, European and Middle Eastern traders brought cats back with them from their trading journeys. The Greeks and Romans valued cats because they kept rats and mice from bringing diseases into people's living areas. Because of this, cats were considered guardians of homes. In Asia, cats were kept to protect silkworm cocoons from rats and mice. Silkworms created valuable silk that was bought and sold in Asia, and it was an important part of life on that continent.

During the Middle Ages, cats started to lose their popularity. Some people even thought cats were evil. They thought that cats were part of witchcraft, and they would kill cats because they were afraid of them. That all changed when people realized that getting rid of cats caused an increase in rodent populations and the diseases spread by rats and mice. The famous bubonic plague of the 1300's would not have been so serious if there had been more cats in Europe at the time. Cats soon became popular again!

When the Pilgrims came to the New World in the 1600's they brought their cats with them. Most pet cats in the United States today are descendants of the Pilgrims' cats. Cats were very valuable in keeping rats and mice away from food supplies on ships and in the colonies. In the 1800's, when people moved West during the gold rush, they did not bring cats with them – at first. But when wagons loaded with grain became feasts for rodents, cats quickly became welcome travel companions. In fact, people paid up to \$50 for a cat – a small fortune in those days. In 1884, when San Francisco was hit with a rat plague, people paid up to \$100 for a cat.

There are now about 66 million pet cats in America. They are by far the most popular pets. There are more than forty breeds of pet cats. The most popular are Persian, Siamese, Exotic Shorthair and Domestic Shorthair. Most likely, you or someone you know lives with one of these cats.

History of the House Cat Questions (Cont'd)

6. What happened in the Middle Ages because people got rid of cats?

7. The American Colonists
 - a. did not bring cats with them at first.
 - b. brought cats with them to the New World.
 - c. found cats in the New World.
 - d. bought cats for up to \$100.

8. During the Gold Rush in the 1800's, people
 - a. did not bring cats with them at first.
 - b. Realized they needed cats to protect their food supply.
 - c. bought cats for up to \$100.
 - d. All of the above

9. Which pet are more popular than cats?
 - a. dogs
 - b. fish
 - c. birds
 - d. None of these. Cats are the most popular pets.

10. How many pet cats are there in America?
 - a. About 66 million
 - b. About 60 million
 - c. About 16 million
 - d. About 6 million

Name _____



Date _____

History of the House Cat Answers

1. d
2. They shaved their eyebrows.
3. They kept rats and mice from bringing diseases into people's living areas.
4. b
5. c
6. There was an increase in rodent populations and the diseases spread by rats and mice.
7. b
8. d
9. d
10. a