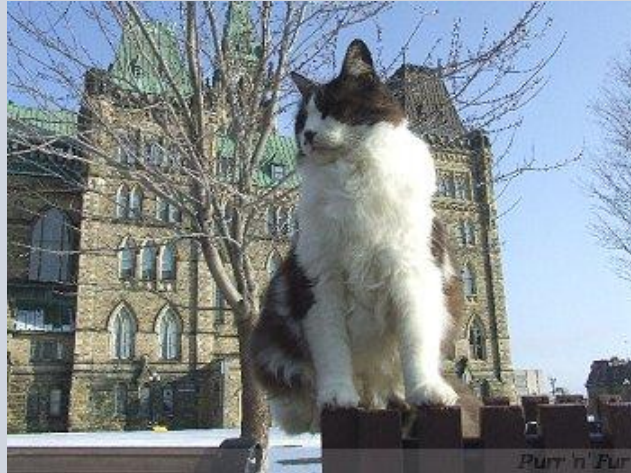


Featured Felines: Miscellany 2 (2010+)

(page checked July 2026)

The Cats of Parliament Hill

Ottawa,
Canada



Cats were around on Parliament Hill, Ottawa, Canada for a long time, maybe going even as far back as Victorian times, when military buildings at the time gave it its former name of Barracks Hill. Certainly there were cats to keep the later Parliament buildings free of rodents until 1955, when it was decided to use professional services with traps, sprays and chemicals instead. That didn't mean the felines disappeared, though; they continued to be fed in various locations around the site by groundskeepers and maintenance employees. But it seemed their long-term future was uncertain.

A formal colony begins



That all changed during the 1970s when a local resident, Irène Desormeaux, decided to do something about the strays, managing to persuade Parliament to allow her to set up arrangements for their regular feeding and to have some simple shelters built for them for protection against the worst of Canadian winter weather. That was the start of the more established colony that existed for around 40 years. When Irène died in 1987 her role was taken over by volunteer René Chartrand (*left*), a pensioner and retired house painter, who loyally fed the cats for many years, using donations and his own money when necessary. No funds were received from the government and, in the days before the internet, fund-raising was very difficult. Other volunteers joined René to help out as time went by, notably Brian Caines, who lived nearby.

In late 1997 Chartrand and a friend built splendid and more permanent shelters for the cats. These each had four cubbyholes or 'condos' for them to come and go, multiple floors, a boardwalk in front and a veranda. The roofs, a favourite sunning spot in good weather, were modelled in the same French-influenced style as the main Parliament buildings opposite. For his tireless work with and devotion to the cats over a long period, René was presented with the Humane Society of Canada's [Heroes for Animals award](#) (*Aug. 2003 – archived copy*). By 2003, when he was well into his 80s, a team of regular volunteers was formed to continue his work and ensure that the cats would always be cared for. There were usually 8 or 10 volunteers.





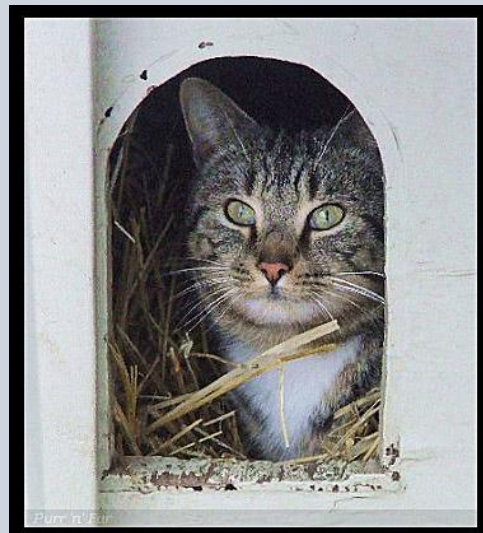
The Parliament cats more recently

René retired, but the residents continued to come and go as they pleased in their own domain and had become something of a tourist attraction; they were generally friendly. The colony was maintained at around 10 or 12 animals; all were spayed or neutered, and they received free inoculations and veterinary care from the nearby Alta Vista Animal Hospital. Donations from tourists and others paid for their upkeep, although the Purina pet-food company also made donations of food. What was provided for the cats also benefited numerous raccoons, squirrels, groundhogs and pigeons, which took advantage of the hand-outs!



All the felines on the Hill were named and known to the volunteers, who between them visited, fed and spent time with the cats several times a day, even through the severest weather. Generally new animals were taken on only when a current resident died or, as sometimes happened, inexplicably disappeared, leaving a vacancy. There was no guarantee that the established cats would accept a newcomer into the colony, or vice versa. In cases where a problem arose the newcomer may have been adopted by a volunteer, or else taken to the Humane Society for rehoming.

A list of most of the residents (and the volunteers) is at The Cats of Parliament Hill Blog pages, the work of Klaus J. Gerken, a volunteer since 2003 who set about documenting the colony's activities from 2005. Also there are comprehensive entries and many photos dating from 2005 until late 2011, when a Facebook page was begun — updates and photos were then posted there instead, with only limited additions thereafter to the blog (*see links below*). Klaus and his fellow volunteers are acknowledged as the source of photos on this page.



The team of volunteers on the Hill in the spring of 2010

Front row (left to right): Klaus, Suzanne, Lia, Brian, Sally
 Back row (left to right): Cheryl, Leyla, Lara, Abigail, Daniel
 (with thanks to Brian Caines and Klaus Gerken)



2013: end of an era

The spaying and neutering programme in place over some years at the sanctuary, adoption of some of the feline residents by volunteer caregivers, and the policy of taking new arrivals at the Hill to the local humane society for care and subsequent homing, all led to the population of the colony gradually reducing, and by the end of 2012 only four cats remained. The caregivers themselves made the difficult decision to close the sanctuary, for several reasons: the age of these cats, their deteriorating health, and concern that they shouldn't be exposed any longer to the usually harsh Ottawa winters. These last four cats would also be adopted by the volunteers.

Three were captured, leaving tabby-and-white **Bugsy** as the sole resident — he'd been on the Hill for about five years and Brian Caines was taking him in, but Bugsy managed to evade attempts to catch him for another day or two. However, he was finally caught, and the sanctuary officially closed on 4 January 2013. The site was handed back to the federal authorities, and almost straight away the department for public works arranged its total clearance. As they had become so well-known, and the sanctuary had attracted so many visitors and tourists over the years, there had been many calls for the distinctive 'cat condo' structures to be preserved, or perhaps moved and put to good use elsewhere, but in fact, despite being maintained as well as possible by the volunteers, they had been slowly rotting for years and were in poor shape by the time of the closure.

A sign in English and French was placed on the railings in front of the former sanctuary, briefly noting what used to be there, and including contact details for the humane society if any 'new' strays or abandoned cats turned up on the Hill, although instances of this over recent years had become rare.

The last four cats, Bugsy included, all settled into their new homes and were reported to be well and happy. The Facebook page carried on with several thousand followers: caregivers passed on news and pictures of their adopted charges from time to time, while Klaus continued to post wonderful images of the sanctuary's past residents from a huge personal collection taken over the years while he was a

volunteer carer (Klaus has also created a separate Facebook public group as a place to archive all images, where they're now available in a series of albums in chronological order — an exceptionally comprehensive record, not only of the cats and the sanctuary, but also of their part of the Hill over a number of years and through all seasons: see both Facebook links *below*.) By early 2013 when the sanctuary closed, René Chartrand, the devoted 'catman' until he stepped away from the task in late 2008, was in his 90s and living in a care home for veterans.



Late 2014

With sadness it was learned from Brian Caines that René, 'The Cat Man of Parliament Hill', had died aged 92 on 7 December 2014. Obituaries appeared in the press, and CBC Radio also broadcast an item about him. Many tributes were paid and memories shared at the Facebook pages.

Reflections

The closure in 2013 was indeed the end of an era. Many people were dismayed and upset over the decision to close the sanctuary; some mistakenly believed the government authorities were responsible and blamed them for it. It had become so well-known via press and the internet, to the extent of being included in Ottawa tourist guides, that many visitors to the city would probably continue for a while to make their way to the Hill, expecting to see the cats, and would be disappointed. The volunteers, however, pointed out that their decision was not made lightly, and they did feel it was in the best interests of the last few cats remaining to remove them to safer, warmer and more comfortable surroundings to see out the rest of their days.

Looking at it from a slightly different perspective, the closure was the outcome of a success story. Adoptions, coupled with spaying and neutering, steadily reduced occupancy to a point where the sanctuary was no longer needed on the Hill, and although it was understandably very sad to see it go, that was surely a worthy achievement and a good thing.

Irène Desormeaux, René Chartrand and all the dedicated volunteers who followed them cared deeply about the welfare of the cats on the Hill, and through nearly four decades willingly gave their time each and every day, through all weathers, to ensure they were always fed, sheltered and healthy. The many hundreds of images which can now be seen at Facebook are testament to how well they accomplished this aim.

The Cats of Parliament Hill, and the cast of characters involved so closely with them, won't be forgotten any time soon – and nor should they be.

Links and further reading

- Facebook page: [The Cats of Parliament Hill](#) (*still there, many photos. Last used May 2022*)
- Facebook group with all archived images: [The Cats of Parliament Hill Memorial Page](#) (*still there but last used Nov. 2022*)
- [The Cats of Parliament Hill Blog](#) maintained by Klaus J Gerken until the first Facebook page was created. (*archived cooy. The preamble is there, but the blog archives seem not to be accessible from here, April 2024*)
- Wikipedia: [Canadian Parliamentary Cats](#)
- Jan 2000, UK *Daily Telegraph*: [Ottawa: Canada's Catman](#) (*archived copy*) about René and his care of the sanctuary cats.
- 2007, YouTube clip: [Cats](#) with René.
- Dec 2008, YouTube clip: [The Cat Sanctuary On Parliament Hill](#).
- Sep 2010, Oven-Baked Tradition: [The Cats on Parliament Hill in Ottawa](#) (*archived copy*) - a page from the pet food producers who contributed food for the colony; there was a further blog update in [Feb 2011](#) (*archived copy*) - both include photos.
- Nov 2011, NCPR (North Country Public Radio): [Prowling around Canada's Parliament Hill](#) - with link to audio clip
- Apr 2012, YouTube clip: [The Cats of Parliament Hill](#) - volunteer Brian Caines talks about the sanctuary.
- Dec 2012, *Canadian Geographic*: [Breakfast on the Hill](#) - with a slideshow (*archived copy but no slides*)
- Dec 2012, CTV News: [Ranks continue to dwindle for decades-old cat sanctuary on Parliament Hill](#).
- Jan 2013, CBC News: [Parliament Hill cat sanctuary shutting down for good](#). (*archived copy*)
- Jan 2013, CTV News: [Cats on the Hill heading to new homes](#)
- Jan 2013, *National Post*: [Parliament Hill's cat sanctuary 'disbands' after imore than fifty years](#) (*unfortunately a news link, no longer valid and not archived, Sept. 2022*) with an excellent photo of René with **Fluffy**, who was dubbed 'King of the Hill'. He's pictured in the heading of this article in a 'kingly' pose.

In the words of one carer in a Facebook post, Fluffy was a 'popular and sociable male feline resident of the Parliament Hill Cat Sanctuary [who] has been photographed literally thousands of times by visitors, volunteer caregivers and professional photographers as well as being filmed on video by fans and television crews. He was featured in *Discover the Hill* brochures, newspapers, magazines, on the internet ...'. On retirement from the Hill Fluffy was adopted by a friend of the sanctuary, and in June 2014 was reported to be doing quite well for a man of 17½. Kidney trouble meant he was being kept as comfortable as possible with excellent

veterinary care, but he still enjoyed 'strolling around the garden and snoozing in the sun.'

Sadly, **Brownie** – another long-time resident adopted by one of the carers, and probably the best-known character apart from Fluffy – died in July 2013. His two companions in the household, also from the colony, passed away within the following year: **Blackie** in January 2014 at the grand old age of about 22 or 23, and **Bébé** the following May, aged 17. All are much missed.

- Government of Canada, Public Works & Government Services: [Closure of the cat sanctuary \(archived copy\)](#) May-Jun 2013: Ottawa artist Gwendolyn Best painted a series of works to celebrate and remember the Cats of Parliament Hill, these being included in an exhibition entitled *Tired Paws and Weary Wings* in May-June 2013: some images can be seen at the [Orange Art Gallery](#)..(archived copy. Slide show is there but very slow to load. Feb. 2024)
- Dec 2014: [Facebook post](#) announcing René's passing.
- Dec 2014, *Ottawa Citizen*: [Obituary: Parliament Hill's 'Catman' tended sanctuary for 21 years](#).
- Dec 2014, CBC News: [René Chartrand, 'cat man of Parliament Hill,' dead at 92](#).
- Dec 2014, NCPR: [Remembering René Chartrand, "catman" of Parliament Hill](#).
- YouTube: [Paul Dewar on René Chartrand](#) - the NDP MP for Ottawa Centre made a statement in the House noting René's contribution to life on Parliament Hill.
- A collection of some of the photos taken of René over the years, put together by [Ben Asselstine at Imgur](#).(archived copy)
- **Coal**, one of the former colony residents, has his own [Facebook](#) page. (still active early 2025)
- Book: *The Other Side of the Hill* (3rd edition, 2012) by Don Nixon, available at [Lulu.com](#). Covers the history and many aspects of life on the Hill, and includes a chapter devoted to the Cats of Parliament Hill (described at Klaus's blog as 'the most in-depth and researched information on the cat sanctuary available'), and a photo of Fluffy adorns the front cover. The author is a retired government engineer who lives close by and for nearly 30 years managed Parliament Hill building projects for the department of public works and government services, then volunteered as a tour guide for several years.

For further photos of the Parliament Hill cats and sanctuary, see [Featuring / Miscellany 2A](#).

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Coal, the last survivor



By mid-2020 just one of the Parliament Hill cats was still alive – **Coal**, aged about 12 and seen here with his carer Danny Taurozzi, one of the volunteers who joined the cat-caring team in 2010. Coal had a fellow survivor, **Spot**, but he was diagnosed with congestive heart problems and, despite a number of hospital visits and the best of care, he [died](#) in March 2020 aged 17, with Coal spending a lot of time by his side in his final days. He did still have another feline house-mate, called **Valerie**, also a senior cat aged 19 in 2020.

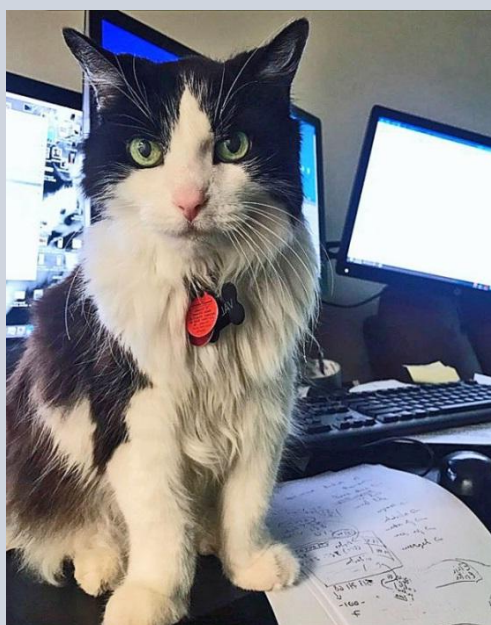
Soon after leaving the Hill in 2013 and taking up his new residence, a new Facebook page (see *link below*) was started, advocating animal-rights issues among other causes. And more recently Coal became a certified therapy cat through the organisation Therapeutic Paws of Canada, and has visited locations such as veterans' homes.

In summer 2020 Coal was hospitalised at the Alta Vista Animal Hospital – which used to provide the veterinary service for the Parliament Hill cats; it turned out he'd ingested a piece of string, which took that time to pass through him! Fortunately no further action was needed; he recovered quickly and was soon back home.

[Ottawa Citizen](#) (Aug. 2020) | [Facebook](#) | [Short history](#) (6 minutes): | [YouTube](#) [(Aug. 2024)]



Spot

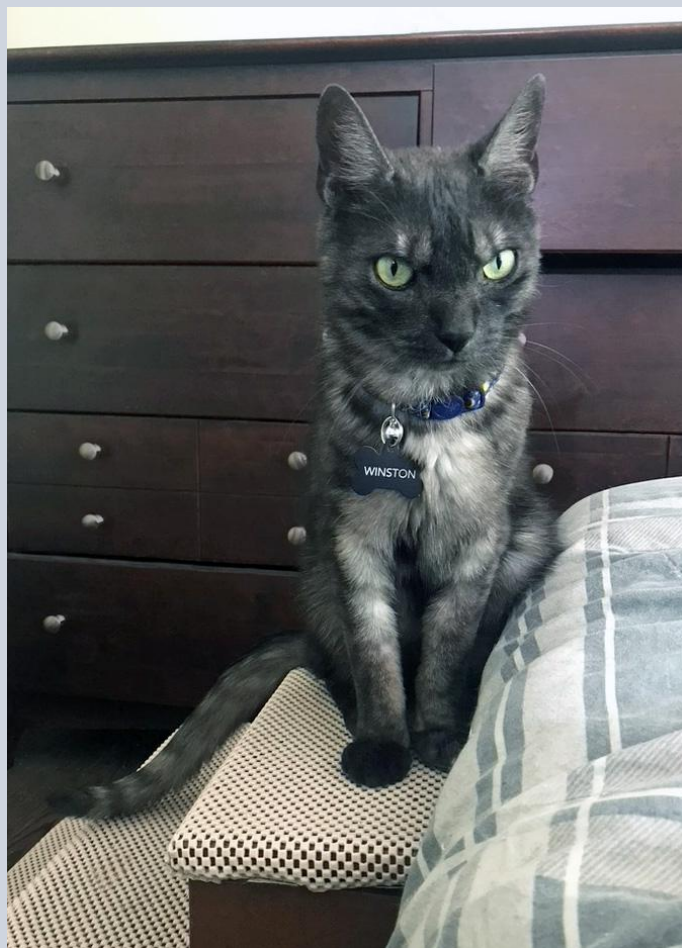


Valerie

Update: Coal was still going in early-2025, having monthly injections to combat osteoarthritis, but Valerie died in July 2022. She had bladder cancer and various other medical issues, and after consultation with her vet it was decided it would be kindest to put her to sleep.

Since September 2022 Coal had a new housemate, Winston (*below*), 8 years old at the time and adopted from the Ontario SPCA.

It was with great sadness that Coal's death was announced in early July 2025; he was thought to be 17. A tribute from Danny Taurozzi is below Winston's photo. There's also a lovely video tribute at [YouTube](#) relating Coal's life and passing and remembering some of the people who helped to care for him.



Coal's passing: *(as told by Danny Taurozzi)* In early July 2025 Coal, always brave and gentle, had begun to lose his appetite more frequently. By the evening of July 7th his condition had worsened noticeably. The next morning he was brought to see the oncologist at Capital City Specialty and Emergency Animal Hospital. After a compassionate and thorough investigation, it became heartbreakingly clear: Coal's condition had become grievous and irremediable, beyond what love, medicine or therapies could ease. It was time to let him go. Surrounded by his devoted human dad, Danny Taurozzi, and his younger adopted feline brother Winston, Coal passed peacefully on July 8th with Veterinary Assistance in Dying (VAiD), a final act of mercy and dignity for a life so deeply cherished. Coal had been diagnosed with salivary gland carcinoma, a rare and aggressive cancer that later metastasised to his lungs. Despite this, he was able to enjoy nearly a year of a good quality of life, thanks to the extraordinary care and unwavering love he received.

Danny said, 'It was a very tough day and I'm a little bit broken. Saying goodbye to Coal was heart-wrenching, but it was the humane thing to do. The tears will flow and the sadness will linger for some time. I will miss you, little buddy. Coal was a sentient feline family member. He was Canada's last surviving Parliament Hill cat, a living thread to a cherished chapter in our country's history. For those who knew him, followed him and loved him, from near and far, Coal was a symbol of compassion, resilience, grace and quiet strength. He was a feline gentleman with a heart of gold. Danny would like to express his most profound and heartfelt thanks to the remarkable professionals who helped to give Coal more time and, most importantly, quality time. So many compassionate people walked alongside him on his journey. *(There follows a list of named people who helped Coal.)* Coal was more than a beloved companion; he was a symbol of enduring love, quiet dignity, and a gentle presence that touched the hearts of countless people. He was a feline gentleman with a heart of gold. He will be deeply missed, but never forgotten. Goodbye, Coal.

A message to donors: Thank you from the bottom of my heart to all the GoFundMe donors. Your generosity made it possible for Coal to receive the very best medical care and to enjoy more time with a good quality of life'. [New York Times](#) | [CBC News](#) (both July 2025)

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