

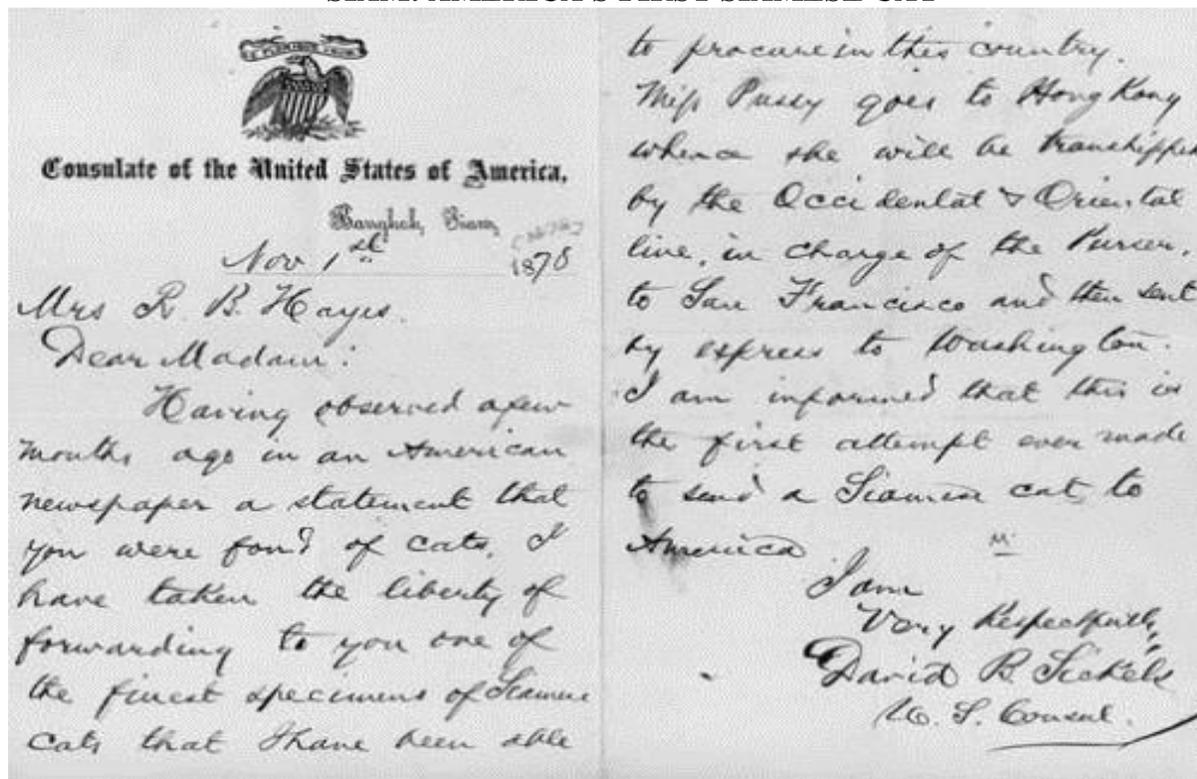


Paper Trail

Selected Manuscripts from the Collections
of the Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center

FEBRUARY 2004

SIAM: AMERICA'S FIRST SIAMESE CAT



David B. Sickels' letter to Lucy Webb Hayes November 1, 1878

Twelve-year-old Fanny Hayes watched excitedly as the White House staff opened the Wells Fargo crate for her mother. It had been more than two months since David B. Sickels, a United States diplomat at the consulate in Bangkok, had written to First Lady Lucy Hayes. Sickels explained that when he discovered that Mrs. Hayes was fond of cats, he decided to send her one as a gift. He wrote, "I have taken the liberty of forwarding you one of the finest specimens of Siamese cats that I have been able to procure in this country". I am informed that it is the first attempt ever made to send a Siamese cat to America."

According to legend, Siamese cats were regal pets owned by Siam (now Thailand) royalty. They lived within the palace walls and served as guardians of Buddhist temples. As early as the 16th

century, images of Siamese cats, distinguished by their unique coloration, appeared in Thai manuscripts.

Affectionately called Siam, the "mahogany-colored" feline adjusted rapidly to life at the White House. President Hayes remarked that the family's menagerie - two dogs, a goat, a mockingbird, and the Siamese cat - "give a Robinson Crusoe touch to our mode of life." The good-natured Siam soon became a favorite of little Fanny and the staff. Allowed to roam the White House as she pleased, Siam enjoyed making grand entrances whenever the First Lady entertained guests.

In the autumn of 1879, while the Hayes family was at Spiegel Grove, Siam became seriously ill. The staff tried fish, chicken, duck, cream, and even oysters, hoping that Siam would respond. When her condition worsened, the staff sent for the president's personal physician. Dr. J. H. Baxter prescribed beef tea and milk every three hours, but Siam did not improve. A pet lover himself, Dr. Baxter took Siam to his home. There, Fanny's playmate, Nellie McCrary, daughter of Hayes' Secretary of War, visited the beloved pet. The next day Nellie wrote to Fanny, bluntly reporting Dr.

Baxter's grim prognosis that, "he thinks she will die and I do to[o]."

Siam survived another five days. Everyone was saddened when news of Siam's death reached the White House. Her gentle and appreciative ways had endeared her to the entire staff. It was left to the president's steward Billy Crump, to write the First Lady about Siam's passing. Crump then delivered the lifeless body to the Secretary of Agriculture, giving personal instructions to preserve her. Despite searches of the Department of Agriculture's museum and the Smithsonian Institution, Siam has never been located.