

Saint Bernards as Rescue Dogs

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The history of the diligent and dependable Saint Bernard dog as a rescue animal is as storied and as noble as the breed itself. Even so, the details of how the breed came to be and who is responsible for its name are little known. The Saint Bernard's story is one of both myth and legend. This exhibit will tell those tales on the way to exploring the surprising history of this incredible dog. The story begins in Switzerland where the dogs were introduced to the world as partners in aiding travelers in need.



Switzerland: 1989, for the bi-millennium of the Great Saint Bernard Pass.



Albania: 1966, depicting a Saint Bernard rescuing an injured traveler.



Argentina: 1999, cask-wearing rescuer from Dog Breeds minisheet.

Myth: Busted

An 1820 painting by Edwin Landseer of a Saint Bernard with cask is thought to have initiated the myth that the dogs wore flasks of brandy to aid victims. No documentation proves that Great Saint Bernard Hospice dogs carried casks. Still some stamps continue the myth.



Germany FDC: 1970, features a Saint Bernard in a mountain rescue scenario. Stamps celebrate Freiwillige Hilfsdienste (Voluntary Service) of emergency workers.

Origin of the Saint Bernard Dog

St. Bernard of Menthon (born 1020), for whom the rescue dogs were named, was a Catholic priest in the Swiss Alps. Hearing travelers' stories of injury, theft and blizzard peril, he founded a hostel—the Great St. Bernard Hospice—in 1050 near a mountain pass that now bears his name. After St. Bernard's death in 1081, monks continued his work at the hospice, breeding and training dogs to assist their ministry to travelers. The early version of this breed, genetically tied to the English Mastiff, were rough, muscular and shorter in stature than today's fluffy-furred Saint Bernards.



Left: Hospice monks and Saint Bernard dogs help an avalanche victim; Above: Grand Saint Bernard Hospice fancy cancel.