

Harry S Truman

Harry S Truman
National Historic Site
Missouri

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Harry and Bess Truman in Independence, 1953.



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"A Most Uncommon Common Man"

Any visitor to Independence, Missouri, not long ago might have glimpsed a familiar figure walking through town in the early morning. To the local residents, the old gentleman was just a neighbor they greeted by name—Harry Truman. The out-of-towner might have wondered what interest this ordinary pursuit held for a man once at the hub of American political life. Truman explained in 1953: "I've been taking my morning walks around the city and passing places that bring back wonderful recollections. What a pleasure to be back here at home."

Harry Truman was born May 8, 1884, in Lamar, Missouri, but claimed Independence as his home town. The Trumans moved here from a farm when he was six. That year Harry began Sunday school at the "nearest Protestant church, which happened to be

"Captain Harry" of the 129th Field Artillery was well respected—and well liked—by his men, who watched him fight bravely during the infamous trench warfare in France. Like most soldiers he longed for home. He wrote Bess, "the Statue of Liberty is going to have to turn around if she ever sees me again after I land in the U.S.A." In May 1919 he received his discharge papers; on June 28 he and Bess were married at Trinity Episcopal Church. With army pal Eddie Jacobson he opened a men's clothing store in Kansas City, an apt vocation for Truman, a natty dresser. Business thrived until the postwar depression closed the shop. By 1922 he was ready for new work.

It so happened that "Boss" Tom Pendergast, who ran Jackson County politics at the time, was looking

Truman became Franklin D. Roosevelt's running mate in 1944. His Vice-Presidency lasted until Roosevelt's death on April 12, 1945. That night, shortly after 7 p.m., Harry Truman took the Presidential oath of office.

The new Chief Executive faced momentous tasks. First he carried on the drive to end World War II. He then turned his attention to rebuilding war-torn Europe and halting Communist expansion by instituting the Truman Doctrine, followed by the Marshall Plan, and later NATO. In 1948 he defeated Republican Thomas E. Dewey in a stunning upset, opening his second term with the Fair Deal domestic plan reminiscent of FDR's years. A succession of crises—the Korean War in particular—kept Truman away from Missouri even more than during



Harry S. Truman Library

"By the time I was thirteen or fourteen years old," Truman once claimed, "I had read all the books in the Independence Public Library."

the First Presbyterian." There he met 5-year-old Bess Wallace, daughter of a prominent local family. All his school years Harry admired the "beautiful young lady with the blue eyes and golden hair," a popular town belle and accomplished tennis player.

Fresh out of high school in 1901, lacking money for college, Truman worked briefly at bookkeeping jobs, then at Kansas City banks. In 1906 his family summoned him to their Grandview, Missouri, farm where he stayed for 11 more years. Harry and his childhood sweetheart crossed paths once again when, on a 1910 visit to his aunt in Independence, he volunteered to return a cake plate to a neighbor, Mrs. Madge Wallace. When Bess greeted him at the door, a nine-year courtship began. Aiming to strike it rich, Truman embarked upon a series of promising business ventures. In a May 1917 letter to Bess he summed up the results of an oil drilling operation which, like the other schemes, brought no windfall: "I seem to have a grand and admirable ability for calling tails when heads come up." By August 33-year-old Harry Truman was an officer in the U.S. Army.



UPI/Bettmann Archive

At home for the 1940 Missouri Democratic primary, the close-knit family of Senator Truman revels in congratulatory telegrams.

for a candidate for administrative judge. Pendergast's nephew, Jim, knew Harry Truman from army days and remembered Truman's interest in politics. Aware of his friend's fine reputation among Independence citizens, young Pendergast asked him to run in the Democratic primary. Truman accepted—and was elected. Overseeing the county budget as well as a bond issue financing an extensive network of paved roads, Judge Truman impressed voters enough to win a U.S. Senate seat.

Harry, Bess, and daughter Margaret moved to Washington in January 1935, but all three remained Missourians at heart. Bess Truman much preferred her hometown bridge club to the Washington cocktail circuit. Most every year, she and Margaret returned to Independence when Congress adjourned. Senator Truman accompanied them when he could take time out from a career that was becoming increasingly significant. Democratic party leaders saw Truman as an honest, hardworking legislator who, after re-election in 1940, chaired a committee to investigate defense spending, which saved the government an estimated \$15 million.



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"Dad was never without a book in his hand," recalled Margaret many years after her father was captured in just such a pose.

his Senate years. He missed his family terribly when they were back home, and called the White House the "Great White Jail."

President Truman chose not to seek a third term. "I have had all of Washington I want," he wrote before he left office. "I prefer my life in Missouri and I prefer to live the way I do." Back in Independence the ex-President devoted some time to writing his memoirs, then took on another project—a library to house his official and personal papers. "Every piece of paper a president signs," Truman declared, "every piece of paper he touches even has to be saved." So keen was his interest in the library that he even helped design its museum exhibits and train its volunteer guides. And, until poor health restricted his activity, he continued his famous walks. On December 26, 1972, Harry Truman died at age 88. Generations of Americans will inherit the legacy of this Missouri farmer turned businessman turned politician. He was—in the words of one historian—"a most uncommon common man."

*I tried never to forget
who I was and where I'd
come from and where
I was going back to.*



U.S. Information Agency

219 North Delaware Street

"It seems like a hollow week," wrote Harry Truman to Bess Wallace in 1913, "if I don't arrive at 219 Delaware at least one day in it."

When young Harry Truman moved to Independence in 1890 the elegant houses he saw on Delaware Street were a sharp contrast to his family's plain residence. That posh neighborhood did not interest Harry nearly so much as the fair occupant of one house, Elizabeth Virginia Wallace. In 1904, after the death of her father, Bess, her mother, and her three younger brothers moved down the street to her grandparents' Victorian frame house. George Porterfield Gates, Bess's grandfather, bought the property in 1867 and expanded a small farmhouse on the site. By 1885 Gates's flour company had made him wealthy enough to afford an extensive addition. The result was a two-and-a-half story "mansion," as they called it, with gas fixtures and running water.

By the time he and Bess were married in 1919 Harry was well acquainted with 219 North Delaware Street. The Trumans moved into a second floor bedroom. They shared the house with Bess's Grandmother Gates and mother, Madge Gates Wallace, the undisputed head of the household. Two of the Wallace brothers built houses on adjoining lots. To this family tree Harry and Bess added daughter Mary Margaret, born upstairs one snowy day in February 1924.

The Gates house was little changed until 1945, when Harry Truman took over the Presidency. First came a new coat of bright white paint with Kentucky green trim. The city, enormously proud of its favorite son, donated a flagpole for the front yard. In 1949 the Secret Service tightened security with a sturdy iron fence. Each time the President made a rare appearance in his home town, the "Summer White House" captured national attention. On the

eve of the 1948 election he addressed the country by radio from his living room, and it was here that he received word of the invasion of South Korea in June 1950.

When the Trumans took up their old life in 1953 they purchased the house from Bess's mother's estate. It was now theirs alone. Over the next few years they improved their acquisition with additional furniture, bookshelves, carpeting, wallpaper, and structural repairs. In their "modernized" home the former President and First Lady might entertain world leaders or retreat into the library to read their favorite books. After President Truman's death in 1972, his widow kept the house as it was during his lifetime. Ten years later Bess Truman died. In her will she bequeathed to the country a beloved possession: the house where she and Harry Truman had lived.

The Truman Home



An eye-catching portrait of Margaret at age 23 hangs in the foyer. Her successful careers in music and writing were always a great source of pride to the family.



The Trumans especially liked this portrait of Bess, one of several paintings displayed in the music room. They had the artist, Greta Kempton, paint a copy for the White House.



Although 8-year-old Margaret wanted an electric train set for Christmas in 1932, her parents gave her this baby grand piano, which accompanied the family all the way to the White House.



Whether they were neighbors, relatives, or visiting dignitaries, guests were entertained in the living room, furnished with a combination of family heirlooms and more recent Truman purchases.



Bess Truman's mother, Madge Gates Wallace, presided over formal evening meals held at the dinner table. The Trumans continued this family tradition when the house became their own.



Unmistakably the property of a conscientious dresser, the famous hat and coat hang in a spot within easy reach of Truman as he headed out for an early morning walk.



The library, which displays the Trumans' large book collection, was the place where the couple listened to music, talked, and enjoyed what was probably their favorite pastime—reading.



The kitchen, the original wing of the Gates house, underwent renovation at various times during the Truman occupancy. Harry and Bess took breakfast and lunch here at this small kitchen table.



The house on Delaware Street started out as the 19th century "mansion" of a socially prominent family, and became the "Summer White House" in 1945. It is now open to visitors year-round.

About Your Visit



The **Ticket/Information Center** (Truman Road and Main Street) issues tickets for Truman home tours on a first-come, first-served basis. Visitors should arrive early in the day to avoid long waits for tours. The center also has an audio-visual program about the home. Hours are 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily; the center is closed New Year's Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. There are no tours on Mondays between Labor Day and Memorial Day.

Take care when walking on sidewalks and steps at the Truman home, especially in bad weather. When inside the home, please follow the rangers' instructions as they take you from room to room.

Because of limited parking near the home, visitors should use city **shuttle busses** which depart from the ticket center. Besides the home, the route includes most of these sites:

Completed in 1957, the **Harry S. Truman Library** has Truman's official and private documents dating from 1910, as well as exhibits.

Ten thousand people gathered at the **Harry S. Truman Railroad Station** to welcome home the President and First Lady in 1953. Inside is an exhibit

on Truman's 1948 "Whistle-stop" campaign.

Truman began his political career as Administrative Judge in 1922, serving in the **Jackson County Courthouse**. A program about the President's life in the city is shown in the restored Truman Courtroom.

Visitors wishing to delve further into the Trumans' Independence years will want to see these sites near the Truman Home. Harry and Bess met in 1890 at the **First Presbyterian Church**. **Trinity Episcopal Church** provided the setting for their 1919 marriage, as well as Margaret Truman's wedding to Clifton Daniel in 1956. The neighborhood surrounding the home, called the **Harry S. Truman National Historic Landmark District**, is largely unchanged from the time when the ex-President strolled its sidewalks each day. A guide to the district is available at the information center.

Nineteen miles south of Independence in Grandview is the **Harry S. Truman Farm Home**, where Harry lived from 1906 to 1917. In Lamar, 122 miles south of Independence, is the **Harry S. Truman Birthplace State Historical Site**. Both are open to visitors.