

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 contrast to his family's modest residence. The neighborhood, though, did not interest Harry nearly so much as the young girl who lived at number 219, Bess Wallace. In 1904, after the death of her father, Bess moved with her mother and three younger brothers into her grandparents' Victorian frame house. George Porterfield Gates, Bess' grandfather, bought the property in 1867 and expanded the small farmhouse on the site. By 1885 Gates' flour company had made him wealthy enough to afford a large addition. The result was a two-and-a-half story "mansion," as the family 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' Grandmother Gates and mother, Madge Gates Wallace, the undisputed head of the household. Two of the Wallace brothers built houses on adjoining lots. On a snowy day in February 1924 this extended family welcomed Harry and Bess' daughter Margaret, born upstairs.

The Gates house was little changed until 1945, when Harry Truman took over the Presidency. First came a new coat of white paint with green trim. The city of Independence, proud of its favorite son, donated a flagpole for the front yard. In 1949 the Secret Service tightened security with an iron fence enclosing the yard. Though the President made only rare appearances in his home town, the residence be-

came known as the "Summer White House" and captured national attention during his visits. On the eve of the 1948 election President Truman addressed the country by radio from his living room. It was here that he received word of the North Korean invasion of South Korea in June 1950.

When the Trumans took up their old life in 1953 they purchased the house from Bess' mother's estate, making their ownership official. Over the next few years they added furniture, bookshelves, carpeting, and wallpaper, and made structural repairs. In their "modernized" home the former President and First Lady might entertain world leaders or retreat into the library to read 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 nation the only place she and Harry Truman had ever really called home.

The Truman Home



A portrait of daughter Margaret at age 23 hangs in the foyer. Margaret's acclaim in the fields of music and mystery writing was 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 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 items the Trumans purchased.



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



Clearly belonging to a conscientious dresser, the famous hat and coat hung within easy reach as Harry Truman headed out for the early morning walks for which he became noted around town.



The library, which displays the Trumans' impressive book collection, was a retreat of sorts 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 several times during the Truman occupancy. Harry and Bess ate breakfast and lunch here at their kitchen table.



The house at 219 Delaware started out as the "mansion" of a prominent family and in 1945 became the "Summer White House." It is now a museum that tells the story of the Trumans' life in Independence.

About Your Visit



Harry S. Truman National Historic Site, which includes the Truman Home, is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. For more information write: Superintendent, Harry S. Truman NHS, 223 North Main St., Independence, MO 64050-2804. Phone: 816-254-2720.

Begin your visit at the **Ticket/Information Center** (Truman Road and Main Street). Arrive early in the day to avoid long waits for tours. The center offers an audiovisual program introducing the historic site. Tickets for Truman Home tours are sold here; because of limited space in the home, tickets are issued first-come, first-served. Golden Eagle and Golden Age passes are honored. Foreign-language translations of tour information are available.

Hours are 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily; the center is closed on Thanksgiving Day, December 25, and January 1. The Truman Home is closed on Mondays between Labor Day and Memorial Day.

Parking space at **The Truman Home** is limited; there are public lots nearby. Take care when walking on sidewalks and steps here, especially in bad weather. While inside the home, please follow the rangers' instructions as they lead you from room to room.

The tour route through the home is accessible to persons in wheelchairs.

Besides the home there are several sites in the area that help tell the Truman story. The **Harry S. Truman Library**, completed in 1957, has Truman's papers dating from 1910, as well as exhibits. • Ten thousand people gathered at the **Harry S. Truman Railroad Station** to welcome the Trumans home 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. • 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, the **Harry S. Truman National Historical Landmark District**, is largely unchanged from the time when the ex-President strolled its sidewalks each day. • In Lamar, 122 miles south of Independence, is the **Harry S. Truman Birthplace State Historical Site**.