



Bess Truman



Wife, Mother, and First Lady

Intelligent, well-educated, and having a robust sense of humor, Bess Truman was more than capable of holding her own alongside husband Harry Truman. However, as First Lady some might say Bess set about creating her public image by trying not to have one. She remained out of the spotlight as best as she could, all the while steadfastly supporting her husband, privately being his confidant, and acting as unofficial advisor.

Early Life



Bess had a reputation as a tomboy. She was noted for her athletic ability. Her love of sports continued throughout her life. *Truman Library*

Elizabeth Virginia Wallace, better known as Bess, was born on February 13, 1885, in Independence, Missouri. She was the oldest child of four of David Willock Wallace and Madge Gates Wallace.

Bess grew up in Independence and later graduated from Independence High School in the same class as Harry Truman. She later studied language and literature at the Barstow School, a girl's finishing school in Kansas City.

Bess's father held several public offices, including County Treasurer and Deputy Surveyor of the US Bureau of Customs. Despite his high standing in the local community, mounting debts and bouts of depression may have been the cause of his suicide in 1903 in the family home at 608 N. Delaware.

Perhaps to escape the embarrassment of the tragic suicide, Madge Wallace relocated her family to Denver. Within a year they returned to Independence, and moved into the home of Madge's father, George Porterfield Gates. The Gates' house, located at 219 N. Delaware, continued to be Bess's home for the remainder of her life.

Bess was eighteen when her father passed away. Her mother never overcame this tragic loss. Bess, being the oldest, took on the responsibility of taking care of the family. Her daughter Margaret would later write: "All her life, Bess felt a responsibility for her brothers. It was a feeling that went beyond the ordinary loyalty of an older sister. She was the acknowledged leader of the family."

Harry and Bess



Harry and Bess's courtship lasted nine years. They were finally married on June 28, 1919. Truman wrote, "...[it] was the happiest day of my life, for I had been looking forward to it for a lifetime or so it seemed." *Truman Library*

In 1917, Bess became engaged to Harry Truman whom she had known since childhood. Harry and Bess were married in Independence on June 28, 1919, in the Trinity Episcopal Church. The Trumans moved into the house at 219 N. Delaware. Their only child, Mary Margaret, was later born there on February 17, 1924.

In 1934, Truman was elected United States Senator from Missouri. During the next ten years while Truman served in the Senate, Bess and Margaret stayed in Washington from January through June while Congress was in session, and in Independence during the remainder of the year.

Bess became a member of the Congressional Club and the PEO (Philanthropic Educational Organization) Sisterhood. With the outbreak of World War II, she was active in the H Street United Service Organization and in the Red Cross work of the Senate Wives Club.

After her husband gained national prominence as Chairman of the Senate Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program (better known as the Truman Committee), Bess joined his office staff as a clerk, answering his personal mail and editing committee reports.



Daughter Mary Margaret, or "Margie," was born on February 17, 1924. *Truman Library*

A Reluctant First Lady

Harry Truman became President on April 12, 1945, after serving only eighty-two days as Vice President. Bess Truman never wanted to be First Lady. As her husband later wrote, she was “not especially interested in the formalities and pomp” of the White House. She attended events on occasion, but preferred to stay out of the spotlight.

Bess continued to do her own shopping and drive her own car. She wrote her own Christmas cards, and kept score when she went to baseball games. J.B. West, Chief Usher of the White House, once remarked, “When she spoke, I was aware from her words, from her tone of voice, that there was no distance of class or background between Bess Truman and myself. She seemed like an ordinary person...”

She did attend numerous teas and luncheons given in her honor, sometimes as many as two or three engagements a day. While she discontinued Eleanor Roosevelt’s custom of holding press conferences, she was meticulous in answering the large



First Lady Bess Truman (left) christens an airplane with a bottle of champagne. Daughter Margaret Truman is beside her. May 30, 1945. *Truman Library*

volume of mail she received. Many described her as a “down-to-earth” First Lady who visited her old beauty shop and continued to pay only \$3.00 for her weekly manicure, shampoo and set because she “saw no reason to change.”

Advisor to the President

Bess became an important advisor to her husband. When it was time for the president to hire a new press secretary, Bess recommended their old high school classmate, Charlie Ross. Bess knew Charlie to be loyal, trustworthy and sincere, important values for a presidential press secretary.

Clark Clifford, an advisor to President Truman wrote about Bess: “pillar of strength to her

husband...better insight than her husband into the quality and trustworthiness of people who had gathered around him.”

Bess also exercised enormous political influence during Harry’s second term. For example, each year she would lobby him to provide money to fight cancer and other diseases.

Bess Truman’s Legacy

Bess Truman was once asked by a reporter what she wanted to do when her husband was no longer President. She quickly and honestly replied, “Return to Independence.” At the end of President Truman’s second term, the couple gladly returned to their family home in Independence.

Their retirement years included vacations in Europe and Hawaii, and happy times spent with Margaret and her four young sons. Whenever possible they tried their best to live normal lives—despite their celebrity status.

After Harry Truman’s death on December 26, 1972, Bess continued to live in her home on Delaware Street where she received visits from close friends and relatives as well as from distinguished visitors who came to pay their respects.

“Friends and acquaintances agree that loyalty and sincerity were the mainsprings of Mrs. Truman’s character,” one writer observed. “She seldom thinks of the effect she is creating. She exists principally in her relationships with family and friends. To her, duty is a pleasant, everyday word.”

Bess Truman died at her home on October 18, 1982, at the age of ninety-seven. Her will left her beloved home in Independence to the United States of America to preserve the legacy of her husband and the presidency.

Though famous in her own right as First Lady, her greatest contributions often went unnoticed in the public eye. She was, without question, the most influential and most loyal supporter of Harry Truman.



Bess and Harry enjoy a laugh while in Key West. *Truman Library*