



Truman and the Secret Service



Protecting the President

On November 1, 1950, a deadly gun battle erupted in Washington D.C. as two Puerto Rican nationals opened fire in front of the Blair House, the temporary home of President Truman. Secret Service agents guarding the president returned fire. When the smoke cleared, the Secret Service had done its job, the president was safe and the world was re-awakened to the dangers of the Presidency and the role of the United States Secret Service.

Secret Service Arrive



Although the Secret Service assumed responsibility for protecting President Truman in 1945, in the aftermath of the assassination attempt, much attention was drawn to the fact that the Secret Service nor any other law enforcement agency was legally empowered to protect the president. On July 16, 1951, Truman himself signed the bill authorizing the Secret Service to protect the president, his immediate family, the vice-president, and the president-elect.

The task of watching Truman would not be easy. As president, Truman kept immensely busy and faced many controversial decisions. The Secret Service took proper steps to insure security not just in Washington D.C. but whenever the president came to visit his Independence home.

The Secret Service made two major changes to the Independence property. The first was the building of a 10' x 10' two-room guardhouse in the backyard on the west side of the garage.

The other major change was the addition of the fence in 1949 to distance the public from directly accessing the yard, home, as well as the president and first family.



The addition of a heavy fence in 1949 kept the public from directly accessing the yard, home, as well as the first family. *Truman Library*

You're On Your Own

When Truman left office on January 20, 1953, the Secret Service detail officially ended. At this time former presidents did not have Secret Service protection. At home in Independence, the old security booth in the backyard was removed, but the iron fence remained as many tourists continued to visit.

Truman was not completely alone. He did have a part-time local policeman, Mike Westwood, as a bodyguard. A few minor incidents occurred at the home, including an escaped mental patient who tried to climb the fence. Another time a man carrying a concealed pistol persistently rang the bell at the front gate until the local police were called.

Secret Service Returns

Protection for former presidents changed with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The new president, Lyndon B. Johnson, signed a law which extended Secret Service protection to former presidents. The Trumans were not completely thrilled with the return. They looked upon the protection as an infringement on their privacy.

When the Secret Service arrived in 1965, the Trumans did not wish to have them on their

property. Instead, their command post was established at the Truman Library, about one mile north of the house. The agents placed surveillance cameras around the property which were monitored remotely at the library.

In time the Trumans became more accustomed to having the Secret Service around. In 1970, the Secret Service came even closer to the Trumans when they moved across the street at 224 N. Delaware Street.

Over time the Secret Service agents stationed here found the assignment to be easy yet tedious. One of the agents, Robert Lockwood, remembers, “Frankly speaking, I’d have to call it boring. Since I’ve been here, maybe 12 or 13 {agents} have earned their master’s degrees.”

At times the agents did have to respond to alarms. Surveillance cameras one time picked up images of guns in the bushes. With weapons drawn they inspected these guns and found them to be toys owned by the visiting grandsons. When they were met by one of the grandsons holding his toy gun the agents playfully “surrendered.”

After Harry Truman died in 1972, the Secret Service remained for ten more years until Bess Truman passed away in 1982. They looked after the aging First Lady and helped with many tasks around the

house. Such tasks included raising and lowering the flag, replacing burned out fuses, cutting the grass, and driving Bess to the market.



This brick home on the corner of Truman Road and 224 N. Delaware was nicknamed “Tranquility Base” due to the relative ease of the assignment. *NPS Photo*

Mutual Respect

Truman grew to admire his Secret Service agents, and the feeling was mutual. “He would treat us almost like sons,” remembered Rex Scouten, an agent who served on Truman’s detail. “He talked nearly the whole time.” “He never came on as being superior,” recalled Floyd Boring, another Truman agent.

One Christmas when he was back home in Independence, Truman was aghast to learn that several agents assigned to him were standing outside in the snow. Truman invited them to the back porch to dry off. As their daughter Margaret Truman recalls: “They got along with them very well and knew all of them by name. They were kind of like family.”



Truman walks with reporters and Secret Service agents past what is now the Truman Memorial Building in Independence. *Truman Library*