

C U L T U R A L L A N D S C A P E R E P O R T

HARRY S TRUMAN NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE
INDEPENDENCE, MISSOURI

by

Historian Ron Cockrell

and

Landscape Architect Keith Krueger

National Park Service
Midwest Regional Office
Planning and Resource Preservation

Omaha

Recommended:

Norman J. Reigle, Jr.
Superintendent, Harry S Truman NHS

July 17, 1989

Concurred:

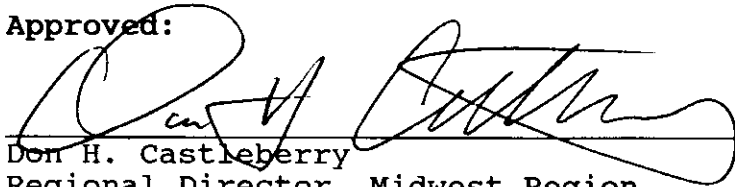


David N. Given
Associate Regional Director
Planning and Resource Preservation, Midwest Region

11/6/89

Date

Approved:



Don H. Castleberry
Regional Director, Midwest Region

11/6/89

Date

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Introduction

Two Nineteen North Delaware Street, home of Harry S Truman, thirty-third President of the United States, remained in the ownership of the same extended family from 1867 to 1982. Historically, various names have been used for the imposing two-and-a-half-story presidential home: the Gates house or mansion, the Gates/Wallace house, the Gates/Wallace/Truman house, and the Truman home.

During the Truman presidency, Americans called it the "Summer White House" in recognition of President Truman's family's (Bess and Margaret Truman, and Madge Gates Wallace) preference to spend most of the summer at home in Independence. Harry Truman, confined to the White House during the post-World War II period, often referred fondly to his home by its address, a practice which has been copied by most chroniclers of Truman-related history.

Following the presidential years (1945-1953), Harry S Truman eschewed many efforts to commemorate his presidency. It was not until 1971 that he finally agreed to a national historic landmark designation for his home and immediate neighborhood. On February 23, 1972, 219 North Delaware Street became the focal point of the Harry S Truman Historic District National Historic Landmark, declared by the Secretary of the Interior and entered in the National Register of Historic Places.

After President Truman's death on December 26, 1972, the Independence City Council agreed to the formation of a seven-member "Heritage Commission" in 1973 to formulate local preservation legislation for the Federally-recognized district. In 1974, with Bess Truman's support, the city council established the Harry S Truman Heritage District. The city ordinance, which has been amended by two boundary changes in 1979 and 1984, includes restrictions ranging from construction or demolition of structures to tree and shrub plantings and removals.

Bess Wallace Truman died on October 18, 1982. Under the terms of her will, the property and its contents were bequeathed to the Federal Government. On December 8, 1982, the Secretary of the Interior declared, under authority of the Historic Sites Act of 1935, the "Harry S Truman National Historic Site." (While automatically entered as such as a separate entity in the National Register, actual documentation was accepted on May 31, 1985.)

The National Park Service took possession of the property on December 12, 1982. Five months later, Congressional authorization

came when President Ronald W. Reagan signed Public Law 98-32 on May 23, 1983. The legislation's mandate is to "preserve and interpret for the inspiration and benefit of present and future generations the former home of Harry S Truman, thirty-third President of the United States." The National Park Service operates the property as a historic house museum and interprets it to the public with guided tours.

One of the greatest obstacles to an effective interpretive program at the Truman home was the lack of any comprehensive history of the Trumans which focused on the Independence, Missouri, aspect of their lives. This was in large part because of the Trumans' deep sense of privacy and a desire to keep their home lives separate from their public lives.

One of this report's authors, Historian Ron Cockrell, undertook a sizeable task when charged in 1983 with compiling two primary historical studies: Historic Structures Report: History and Significance (1984) and The Trumans of Independence: Historic Resource Study (1985). These reports, along with associated oral history interviews, form the foundation of the Harry S Truman National Historic Site's interpretive program. So, too, do these studies provide the data base for this Cultural Landscape Report.

In the initial park years, management has maintained the national historic site as close as possible to those conditions found when the National Park Service assumed management of the property on December 8, 1982. This strategy was adopted as an interim policy until the home's historic period and information on historic landscaping practices of the Truman family could be determined.

The principal strength and appeal is that nearly every aspect of 219 North Delaware Street has changed very little throughout the years. Indeed, the visitor is left with the distinct feeling that the Trumans have just stepped out. Preservation of this historic scene is a fundamental mandate for park management.

Preservation of a historic landscape, however, is a difficult task. It is impossible by human standards for natural elements to be "frozen in time." Recognizing the dynamics of a cultural landscape, and armed with data on its evolution and care, a landscape management plan is an important preservation tool. Such a plan is known as a "Cultural Landscape Report."

A Cultural Landscape Report is vital if the proclivity to "beautify" the grounds of the Truman home is to be avoided. Park managers and interpreters should remember that this property with its somewhat dense and overgrown shrubbery accurately reflects the Trumans' desire for privacy as well as their Midwestern thrift and taste. It is far from a well-manicured showplace. The landscaping is little different from that of other yards in the neighborhood

which mirror common middle-class values. To transform the landscaping of the national historic site into something befitting the high ideal many Americans hold for presidential homes would erase the very character of Harry and Bess Truman reflected in this special Independence landscape.

This particular report will dispense with the unnecessary narrative to prove the existence of a cultural landscape utilizing specific National Park Service criteria. The 0.77-acre Truman property (structures, objects, and landscape) is twice listed in the National Register of Historic Places. As the home of President Harry S Truman, it is of primary national significance and is inherently historic.

In mid-1986, the Midwest Regional Office assigned two professionals from the Office of Planning and Resource Preservation, Historian Ron Cockrell and Landscape Architect Keith Krueger, to complete the Cultural Landscape Report. (Graduate student Pamela Smoot had begun preliminary research in 1985.) Cockrell and Krueger worked with the park staff, principally Facility Management Specialist Mike Healy. The authors also conferred with University of Missouri Extension Agent Ward Upham, a horticultural specialist, who identified and discussed the existing vegetation.

The report underwent preliminary park review in March 1987. Modifications and another onsite meeting took place in February 1988. Analysis and recommendations in this report derive from these discussions. Because the park staff requested more detailed information than was provided in earlier drafts, substantial revisions as well as additional sections were completed. A maintenance guide appears as Part V and an assortment of helpful material appears in the Appendix. The various cultural landscape base maps also provide valuable documentation of existing conditions.

The authors gratefully acknowledge the spring 1989 assistance of Midwest Region Restoration Specialist Charles Masten on the base maps. We are also very pleased with the cover design and layout by Midwest Region Historical Architect Bill Harlow.

The authors produced a final draft document which underwent formal National Park Service review in June 1989. It received high praise from the Washington Office which noted: "As Service professionals have produced only a limited number of Cultural Landscape Reports, the Cockrell-Krueger Report can serve other professionals as a model document in how to address this challenge." Some of the more immediate problem areas identified in this report are scheduled to be performed in late 1989.

The Historic Period

The 1987 General Management Plan states:

A cultural landscape report is being prepared to guide the reestablishment of the lawn and other vegetation as they were when the Trumans were actively maintaining them. No new structures that would be out of context with this period will be allowed on the grounds. This precludes construction of a bus-stop-type inclement-weather shelter in front of the home or on the exterior walks.

This statement on the Truman landscape merits a discussion of the "historic period" or what time frame the grounds should reflect to best tell the Truman story.

Upon first examination, a logical argument could be made that because Harry S Truman achieved paramount historical significance by serving as President of the United States, the Truman home should reflect the period of the Truman presidency--April 12, 1945 to January 20, 1953. There are, however, several problems involved with portraying the presidential period.

Until her death in December 1952, Madge Gates Wallace was the owner of 219 North Delaware Street. Although Harry and Bess Truman began their married life together and raised their daughter in the comfortable, old Gates/Wallace home, it essentially remained just that, the home of Harry Truman's in-laws. This, of course, changed when the Trumans purchased the home from Madge Wallace's estate in July 1953, following President Truman's retirement from public life.

In addition, the home largely remained vacant during the presidential years when the Trumans as well as the ailing Madge Wallace lived in the White House in Washington, D.C. During these long periods of time, care of 219 North Delaware Street remained in the trusted hands of the occupants of the two Wallace bungalows to the immediate east.

The Summer White House nevertheless served as the First Family's residence during brief vacation periods, primarily in the summertime and principal holidays. For President Truman, however, trips to his Independence home were necessarily very infrequent and abbreviated; his official responsibilities during the Cold War period required that he stay close to the nation's capital. For these reasons, the family could not take an active role in maintaining its Independence home and landscape.

A more sound case, however, can be made for establishing a historic scene reflecting the period when Harry and Bess Truman were the joint owners of 219 North Delaware Street. This time frame is roughly 1953 to 1972, the year of Harry Truman's death. (Because the former president's health slowly declined beginning in 1964, perhaps less emphasis should be attributed to the late 1960s and early 1970s when most of Bess Truman's energy was devoted to her husband's care. During that time, the former first lady was naturally more concerned about matters inside rather than outside her home).

The post-presidential period is a credible interpretive period for the landscape because it represents a time when the Trumans undertook their "modernization" or home improvement program. Over a span of several years, they made numerous changes to mold the old family home to complement their own particular tastes. To alter the national historic site's exterior to reflect the Truman presidency--when the family lived in Washington, D.C., for the majority of each year--would largely negate the important imprints of Harry and Bess Truman accomplished during the post-presidential era.

A composite historic scene representing the post-presidential period of 1953 to 1972, therefore, is the goal for landscape reconstruction and preservation at the Harry S Truman National Historic Site.

