

Museum Guide in English

Grandview Hall – Entrance Lobby

Welcome to the Harry S. Truman Library and Museum. The exhibit starts behind the ticket desk on the left. You'll find the restrooms on the left before the exhibit begins.

The permanent exhibit, "Harry S. Truman: An Ordinary Man, His Extraordinary Journey," tells the incredible story of this Midwestern farm boy who never went to college, his remarkable rise and enduring character.

President Truman's decisions set the course of American foreign and domestic policy for generations. They continue to shape American life today. The areas covered in the permanent exhibit include foreign policy, national defense, the presidency, domestic policy, civil rights, and the role of government.

Introductory Film

Senator Harry S. Truman was chosen as President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's new Vice-Presidential running mate in the 1944 election. After winning that election, Harry S. Truman assumed the Vice Presidency in January 1945. World War II was still in progress but was coming to an end. He served as Vice President for only 82 days before President Roosevelt died. Many Americans were not familiar with Harry S. Truman and didn't know whether he could handle the job. What in Truman's past prepared him for the presidency?

Plow to Politics

This gallery highlights Truman's early life, education and his first jobs.

The curved wall displays the ancestors of both Harry Truman and his wife, Bess Wallace.

Discover some of Truman's interests as a boy, including his love of reading, playing the piano, and his courtship of Bess Wallace. You will also see some of Truman's early occupations, including as a bank worker, a national guardsman, and a farmer. He also joined the Masons, a secretive fraternal organization.

In the center of the gallery is a large tower showcasing Harry Truman's letters to his girlfriend, Bess Wallace. Harry tells of his troubles on the farm, his ambitions for the future and his wish for Bess to marry him. Notice we only have Harry's letters on display because Bess destroyed hers. The story goes that as Harry came down the stairs, he saw Bess burning her letters. Harry said, "Stop, think of history!" Bess replied, "I am!" and continued to throw her letters into the fire!

Explore the interactive wall which shows the variety of influences on Truman's life as a child and young man: reading, piano, poor eyesight, and his first car are all displayed here.

World War I

When World War I came, Truman was so determined to rejoin the military that he memorized the eye chart in order to pass his physical. An artillery officer who served in France, this area shows artifacts such as Truman's World War I uniform, ID card, and tack box. Put yourself in Truman's place to successfully fire the French 75 mm gun. The 7-minute video tells the story of Truman's experiences in World War I as Captain of Battery D.

World War I gave Truman the confidence to lead, and he established long-lasting friendships with his fellow soldiers. He was the only President to serve in combat in World War I. Truman's experience in World War I was life changing for him, influencing his future career choices and decisions he would make as president.

Look for the photograph of Bess Wallace on display next to Harry's uniform. In 1917, Bess Wallace gave a copy of this photograph to Harry

as he went off to war. The attached card read: "I'm depending on this to take you to France and back all safe and sound."

Pre-Presidential Career, 1919-1945

When Truman returned from France at the end of World War I, he married Bess Wallace on June 28, 1919. He also opened his new business with his friend Eddie Jacobson, Truman & Jacobson's haberdashery (a men's clothing store). Explore the drawers in the haberdashery display to find out more about the store. Unfortunately, the recession that followed the war caused this business to go bankrupt.

In 1924, Harry and Bess' only child was born. The timeline and artifacts on display cover Margaret Truman's life from 1924 to 1944.

The exhibit then explores Truman's career in politics, first as Jackson County Judge (an elected administrative role), then as U.S. Senator for Missouri. Explore the interactive map to discover how Senator Truman's oversight committee saved the country money by exposing wasteful spending during World War II.

Senator Harry Truman became President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Vice President on January 20, 1945. World War II was in its last stages when on April 12, 1945, President Franklin D. Roosevelt died. Vice President Truman had only served in that role for 82 days. Sorrowfully taking the oath of office, Truman abruptly became the 33rd President of the United States.

The First Four Months

President Truman's first four months in office were marked by important developments in World War II, atomic technology, and international diplomacy. This timeline progressing from April to August 1945 shows a series of panels bearing video newsreels, key documents, and artifacts highlighting this dramatic string of events.

Events include announcements of the end of the war against Germany, the signing of the United Nations Charter, the Potsdam Conference, firebombing Japan, the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan, and the end of the war in the Pacific. Also displayed in this area are a pen set given to Truman by General Dwight Eisenhower and a pen given to Truman by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

At the end of the timeline, the round room features two key artifacts. In the center of the room is the green safety plug from the atomic bomb that was dropped on Nagasaki. The green plug was removed from the bomb and replaced with a red activating plug before it was released.

Against the wall is an origami crane. The crane was created with clear cellophane. It was folded by Sadako Sasaki, a victim of radiation exposure from the Hiroshima bombing. Before her death, she folded more than 1000 cranes and wished for peace. Look at the crane and see how tiny it is. It is surrounded by larger paper cranes folded by students in the Greater Kansas City area to complement the original crane.

The Post-WWII World

The end of World War II did not slow the pace of the challenges that President Truman faced. Much of Europe and Asia lay in ruins, ravaged by starvation and economic collapse. The large globe in the center of the room highlights many of the problems that continued both in the United States and across the globe after the war stopped.

The video playing in the rubble theater around the corner tells the story of the world tensions leading to the Cold War. The Soviet Union suffered catastrophic losses in World War II. After the war, it seized control of Eastern Europe to bolster its industries and to create a buffer against future attacks. Truman aggressively sought to counter Soviet expansionism. This — and preventing a third world war — became his top foreign policy objective. Truman pushed for foreign aid for Greece and Turkey to resist communism with the Truman Doctrine in 1947, and economic aid to other European countries with the Marshall Plan in 1948.

When the Soviet Union tried to block access to Berlin in June 1948, the United States and the United Kingdom, along with pilots and planes from five other countries, worked together in a massive effort to supply the city with food, coal, and raw materials. The Soviets finally lifted the blockade 11 months later. Look for the airplane fuselage to find the interactive about the Berlin Airlift. Use the plane puck on the screen to see what was involved in supplying the people of West Berlin.

Recognition of Israel

In the spring of 1948, Palestine became embroiled in American domestic politics. Jewish votes were important to President Truman in the coming election. Key advisers, especially Clark Clifford, pushed him to support a Jewish state in Palestine to win those votes. Jewish leaders, including future Israeli president Chaim Weizmann, petitioned President Truman to act in favor of a Jewish state.

As May 15th approached, pressure on President Truman increased. He was urged to recognize the new Jewish state that was certain to be proclaimed when partition occurred. Others counseled against recognition, arguing it would antagonize Arab states and jeopardize American access to oil.

President Truman's regard for Secretary of State George C. Marshall was tremendous. Secretary Marshall's opposition to recognition of a new Jewish state in Palestine troubled President Truman and resulted in the sharpest disagreement the two ever had.

On May 14th Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion read the proclamation of nationhood. Striking the speaker's table for emphasis, he announced, "The name of our state shall be Israel."

The American statement recognizing the new State of Israel is on display here, and it bears President Truman's last-minute handwritten changes. American recognition came shortly after midnight in Palestine, just 11 minutes after the new nation was proclaimed. In the document on display you can see Truman added the time in Washington, D.C.

Truman and Civil Rights

Harry Truman's background did not suggest he could become a champion of civil rights. Growing up in a segregated environment, he did not believe in social equality between races. His early letters included racial slurs. As a senator, he promoted segregated public housing. Yet he also spoke of "brotherhood of all men before the law." As a veteran himself, President Truman was infuriated by brutal lynchings and abuse of veterans of color. He authorized a civil rights committee and called for anti-lynching laws and an end to poll taxes. In a groundbreaking set of executive orders, he used his presidential power to desegregate the military and the civilian government workforce in 1948.

Presidential Campaign

The next part of this gallery focuses on Harry Truman's surprising win in the 1948 presidential election. Starting in June—prior to his nomination—Harry Truman began campaigning around the country by train. His message was simple: Attack the "do-nothing Congress," and explain to average Americans why the policies of the Democrats benefited them.

The pollsters, newspapers, and his Republican rival, Thomas Dewey, did not believe Harry Truman would win the election. The iconic "Dewey Defeats Truman" newspaper is on display, printed and released by the *Chicago Tribune* before the outcome of the election was determined, based on the assumption that Truman could not win.

With his victory, President Truman was vindicated, and he entered his new term in office with confidence, optimism, and renewed popularity. He carried with him Democratic majorities in Congress and hoped to push his initiatives through the legislative process.

The President's Second Term

When he took the oath of office for his second term, Harry Truman had an ambitious agenda. He hoped to enact a broad program of domestic reforms including national health insurance, public housing, civil rights legislation, and federal aid to education. The large "Fair Deal" display features many of the main elements of the program with moving panels indicating their legislative fate, showing most were not enacted during his Presidency.

Instead, his second term was dominated by events overseas that altered America's foreign policy and domestic life in fundamental ways.

The Red Scare

The Soviet Union successfully tested an atomic bomb in 1949, the U.S. uncovered spies in its own atomic weapons program, and Communist forces were prevailing in China. All these pressures combined to provoke anti-communist hysteria. Senator Joseph McCarthy made widespread accusations against communists, accusing them of infiltrating the American government and other sectors of society, like Hollywood. While his accusations were largely baseless, McCarthy succeeded in ruining the careers of many innocent people.

Korean War

World War II ended Japan's 35-year occupation of Korea. Divided at the 38th parallel to facilitate surrender, the Korean peninsula was later occupied by the Soviet Union in the North and the U.S. in the South. In 1948, the Soviets hand-picked Kim Il-sung to lead North Korea. Anti-communist authoritarian Syngman Rhee was elected in the South. Kim's North invaded Rhee's South in 1950 to unify Korea under totalitarian Communist rule. In its first military action, United Nations forces entered the war to aid South Korea and repel the invasion. The Korean War claimed an estimated 2.5 million lives and became Truman's "Supreme Test."

The featured artifact and letter in this area relate to the death of PFC George C. Banning, who was killed in action in Korea on May 11, 1953. This Purple Heart medal was mailed to former President Truman by the deceased soldier's father, William Banning. A handwritten letter accompanied the medal, telling Mr. Truman, "Our major regret at this time is that your daughter was not there to receive the same treatment as our son received in Korea." Mr. Truman kept the medal and letter in a locked drawer in his desk at the Truman Library. Museum staff found them when processing the contents of his office after his death.

Assassination Attempt

On November 1, 1950, two armed Puerto Rican nationalists attempted to gain entry to Blair House, where the President was staying. The president was resting upstairs when he heard the gunshots outside and ran to the window. The Secret Service told him to get back. White House police and Secret Service agents returned fire. Both an assassin and a police officer were killed during the shootout, but President Truman was unharmed.

Return to Independence, Missouri

This large space with the glass doors and walls was the original entrance to the Truman Library when Mr. Truman opened it in 1957. With the addition of our new entrance in 2020, we use this space to show how important the city of Independence was to the Trumans.

After Harry Truman left the presidency in January 1953, the Trumans took the train from Washington, DC, back to their hometown of Independence, Missouri. Ten thousand neighbors welcomed them home at the station. As a citizen, Mr. Truman busied himself with what mattered most to him – family, politics, and education. He wrote his memoirs and worked to build this presidential library. Mrs. Truman enjoyed her bridge club and her church, and she volunteered for service organizations. Mr. Truman called Independence, "the center of the world."

Thomas Hart Benton Mural

Independence was founded in 1827 after a treaty with the Osage and Kanza Native American tribes. It was the first western “boomtown.” Travelers on the Santa Fe, California, and Oregon Trails bought livestock, wagons, and other supplies here before heading west.

Thomas Hart Benton’s colorful mural, “Independence and the Opening of the West” depicts the role Independence had as a conduit for settling the American West in the mid-19th century. Benton, a famous American Regionalist painter from Kansas City, completed the work in 1961. The mural depicts the interactions of people and their interests along the trails. The figures depicted include settlers, blacksmiths, fur trappers, Cheyenne and Pawnee Indians, French voyageurs, and livestock traders. The work provokes questions about power and explores the narrative around the expansion of white settlers into the American West.

Use the touch screen display in the center of the room to find out more about each section of the mural.

The Trumans in Washington

For almost eighteen years, from 1935 to 1953, to accommodate Harry Truman’s political career, the Truman family made their home in Washington, D.C., far from their roots in Independence.

Harry Truman worked hard to distinguish himself as a Senator. Bess adjusted to life in their cramped apartment. Margaret tried to fit in at her new private school. For the Trumans, family was always a centering force. Sometimes called “The Three Musketeers,” their bond carried them through the years of senatorial politics, a world war, and the presidency.

On the side of the room marked by red carpet, you will find artifacts related to the family’s life while they lived in the White House. In the corner is one of President Truman’s famous tropical shirts, which he wore on vacation in Key West, Florida.

By 1948 engineers had determined the White House was structurally unsafe for the family. Interior walls were overloaded. Part of the second floor gave way under the weight of Margaret's piano. Plumbing and wiring were unsound.

The Trumans moved into nearby Blair House, and the challenging renovation project began. Although plagued by budget overages, schedule delays, and supply challenges, the Truman family moved back into the White House in March 1952. Later the President proudly led a tour of the renovated White House in a live television special.

Look up! You can see a cracked original wooden beam from the White House hanging from the ceiling. Explore the touch screen interactive to see historic photographs from the renovation.

The President's Job and U.S. Government

As a lifelong student of history and civics, Truman believed it was essential for Americans to understand how their government works. He was especially committed to educating young people about their rights and responsibilities, a mission he pursued with his Presidential library.

The first three Articles of the Constitution established the three equal branches of government: Legislative, Executive, and Judicial. Because each branch has ways to restrain the others, it is sometimes called a system of "checks and balances."

The Legislative branch is where Congress does its work. The Legislative branch has the power to pass laws and approve funding for government operations. Voters in each state elect members to the House of Representatives every two years. The population of each state determines the number of its Representatives. Voters in each state elect members of the Senate every six years. There are two Senators from each state, regardless of population.

The Judicial branch (the courts) has the power to interpret laws according to the Constitution and prior legal practice. There is a system of courts throughout the United States that goes from city to county to

state to federal levels. The highest court in the land is the Supreme Court.

The Executive Branch, headed by the President of the United States, has the power to introduce legislation, propose a budget, and enact the laws Congress passes. The President appoints a cabinet to serve as heads of government agencies and advisers. The President also nominates Federal Judges, who must be approved by the Senate before they are appointed.

Look at the six jobs of the president, as Truman often explained it.

1 – Chief Executive – making sure the laws are faithfully executed.

2 – Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces – outlining military policy and appointing/firing generals.

3 – Head of Foreign Policy – in charge of U.S. relations with foreign countries, appoints ambassadors, and directs policy.

4 – Political Party Leader – sets the political party's policies.

5 – Head of State – entertains foreign heads of state when they visit the U.S.

6 – Legislative Planner – informs Congress of his priorities and introduces the budget accordingly.

The Oval Office

Outside the Oval Office, find the “The Buck Stops Here” sign, an iconic artifact of the Truman presidency. It means that President Truman made the final decision on all problems, and he alone was responsible for them.

The Truman Library's Oval Office replica is almost identical to the Oval Office in Washington, D.C. It is slightly smaller than the actual Oval Office, but the ceiling height is accurate. The furnishings are based on photographs of President Truman's office taken on August 28, 1950. The items displayed in the office are originals or replicas of items that were in the President's office on that date.

President Truman's Lasting Legacy

President Truman left office with the lowest approval rating of any president to that time. Yet in the decades that followed, scholars revisited his leadership in the context of the challenges he had to address. Historians now tend to rank him among the top six American presidents. Faced with some of the most difficult tests to confront any president, he did much to shape America and the world in the last half of the 20th century and beyond.

President Truman's decisions set the course of American foreign and domestic policy for generations. Explore the display on the wall to see how issues like Global Assistance Programs and National Healthcare still resonate today.

Gravesite

Mr. Truman died on December 26, 1972, at the age of 88. His funeral took place in the Library auditorium and he is buried here in the Library courtyard. Bess Truman lived another decade in their home up the street. She died on October 18, 1982, and was buried next to her husband. Their daughter, Margaret Truman Daniel, and her husband, Clifton Daniel, are also interred in the courtyard.

President Truman's Office

Mr. Truman worked at the Library almost daily from 1957 until 1966. He met visiting dignitaries and journalists. He sent and received thousands of letters. He directed many library activities. He welcomed visitors, met with student groups, and was known to answer the phones from time to time.

Flame of Freedom

The "Eternal Flame of Freedom" was dedicated to the memory of President Truman on March 15, 1991. It was a gift to the Library from

the Tirey J. Ford American Legion Post 21 of Independence, the post to which Truman belonged.

Lower Level

Use the East or West Stairs or elevator near the Oval Office to access temporary exhibits and the vehicle gallery downstairs.

Vehicle Gallery

The farm buggy was likely purchased in 1914 for the Truman family farm in Grandview, Missouri. The 1941 Chryslers, a Coupe and Sedan, were used by Harry and Bess Truman in the years before the presidency. The 1950 Lincoln Cosmopolitan was part of the fleet of limousines provided by Ford Motor Company for use by the President, his staff, and visiting dignitaries.