

First Ladies of America



Bess Truman knew from the start that First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt would be a tough act to follow. After 12 years of bonding with Americans in a role that she literally redefined for future first ladies, Mrs. Roosevelt was still very much in the hearts and minds of the public when she left the White House upon her husband's death.

Born Elizabeth Virginia Wallace, Mrs. Truman grew up in Independence, where she was the oldest of four children. She attended the local grammar and high school, becoming a classmate of future president Harry Truman in the fifth grade. A talented athlete, Mrs. Truman played shot-put and excelled at tennis. When she was 18, however, life took a tragic turn. Her father committed suicide.

Rather than leave home for college after her father's death, Mrs. Truman commuted to Barstow Finishing School in Kansas City. She married Harry Truman in 1919 and worked for a time as a manager, accountant and sales clerk at the Kansas City haberdashery that her husband owned a half-interest in. However, Harry Truman's political star was rising and his service as a district county judge was prelude to a career as a U.S. senator, vice president and then president.

Assuming the role of first lady when she was 60 years old, Mrs. Truman resisted attention and kept a low profile. She canceled her very first press conference (scheduled for her by outgoing first lady Eleanor Roosevelt), and she never scheduled another.

Mrs. Truman stuck to the traditional duties of White House hostess, sponsoring causes and charities,

including continuing Mrs. Roosevelt's fundraising efforts for the March of Dimes.

Privately, however, Mrs. Truman had more political influence than most Americans realized. Years after his presidency ended, Truman admitted he never made an important decision without first seeking feedback from his wife, whom he affectionately referred to as "the Boss."

Despite her reluctance as a political wife, Mrs. Truman loved her country and believed in her duty as an American. When World War II concluded, she implemented food rationing in the White House, setting an example for the country to reduce consumption in order to send desperately needed food to Europe's devastated communities.

She also helped save the White House from destruction when severe structural problems forced her family to relocate to the Lee-Blair House. Some suggested the executive mansion be torn down and rebuilt, but Mrs. Truman pushed for the building's original walls to be retained for historical purposes.

After President Truman left office, his wife was relieved to return to her roots in Independence.

As first lady, Mrs. Truman was always somewhat of a mystery to the public, but by the time she died in 1982, those who knew her personally had started to open up about her. It was only then that the American public came to know her real strength, sensitivity and sense of humor.

**Harry S.
Truman
Administration,
1945-1953**

Elizabeth Wallace "Bess" Truman

Born: Feb. 13, 1885, in Independence, Missouri

Education: Independence High School, Miss Barslow's Finishing School, Kansas City

Marriage: 1919 to Harry S. Truman

Children: Mary Margaret, born in 1924

Died: Oct. 12, 1982, in Independence

