

History of the Truman Neighborhood

“I tried never to forget who I was and where I’d come from and where I was going back to.”—Harry S Truman

Harry S Truman’s Midwestern, small-town values came from both family and community influences. His roots were strong, guiding him as President of the most powerful nation in the free world; then pulling him back to Independence, and the quaint little neighborhood that he called home. His neighborhood walks and friendliness are legendary. The neighborhood houses, streets, sidewalks, and setting all continue to tell the story of “the man from Independence”.

The 1972 designation of the Harry S Truman National Historic Landmark District was the first recognition to honor the national significance of Truman’s neighborhood. His community was described as “...the physical nucleus of both his personal and his long and influential political life.” It was the protection of this legacy that was sought by the City of Independence in 1974 when it established a Truman Heritage District; with the stated purpose to preserve the neighborhood as a turn-of-the-century Midwestern residential community of spacious, free-standing homes and residentially related institutions, that are situated in open yards, and that retain the character of their historic landscaping. Although the integrity of the Heritage District has suffered in the past, at the hand of political pressures and

inconsistent public policy, the intent of the Historic District designation still remains the same; that is to preserve the historic character of the neighborhood.



The evolution of the Truman neighborhood as a residential suburb, situated just to the west of Old Town Independence began in 1847 with the platting of the first subdivision. J.F. Moore’s Addition to Independence included 18 lots bound between Tanyard Road (now Truman Road) on the North, Union on the West, Lexington Avenue on the South, and Lots 38 & 39 of Old Town Independence (current location of the First Presbyterian Church and Palmer Jr. High School) on the East. In 1852 J.F. McCauley’s Addition was platted north of Tanyard between Hickman Street (now Waldo Avenue) on the West and Farmer on the East. It was at this time that Delaware Street was drawn to the map and began to evolve as the centerpiece of the Truman Neighborhood.

Truman Home
219 N. Delaware, c. 1887

History of the Truman Neighborhood (cont.)

Due to troubled times leading up to and following the Civil War, growth during the 1850's and 1860's was slow. During the era of reconstruction (c. 1865-1880) the Truman Neighborhood finally began to experience widespread growth. Neighborhood churches were erected along Delaware and Rock (now Maple) Streets, adding to the suburban flavor of the neighborhood; and notable residences, including the Gates-Wallace house (now known as the Truman Home), were constructed by those who were able to rebuild their fortunes.

Between 1880 and 1890 Independence experienced a building boom that resulted in the platting of eleven major subdivisions within the area that is now referred to as the Truman neighborhood. The finest of Victorian mansions were constructed for some of the most wealthy and influential families in all of Independence; and earlier estates like the Truman Home were remodeled to stay in keeping with the styles of the time. As in other progressive cities across the country, architectural styles including Queen Anne, Italianate, and Second Empire became the trend throughout the neighborhood; and where new construction was not feasible or budgets were limited, property owners often embellished smaller vernacular homes with ornamental detailing borrowed from the stylish homes of their neighbors. The suburban quality of the area continued to flourish during this period with the construction of two more neighborhood churches. Both Victorian in design, the First Presbyterian Church (100 N. Pleasant Street) was built in 1888 and the First Baptist Church (500 W. Truman Road, then Blue Avenue) in 1894.

Following the turn-of-the-century Independence's prosperity began to spread to a larger segment of the population resulting in the construction of more working class houses. Within the Truman Neighborhood previously undeveloped additions boasted with new American Foursquare and Colonial Revival homes, larger lots were being subdivided, and stately homes were demolished to make way for the construction of smaller, more practical houses. By 1915 the Craftsman Style Bungalow was gaining in popularity, a trend that would continue throughout the 1930's; and once again homeowners borrowed from their neighbors, this time modifying their Victorian houses with craftsman Style porches, modern siding and new windows and doors. The city's increasing population brought new demands for multiple unit housing that offered all the modern amenities, the convenience of a location near town, and easy access to public transportation. To meet these new demands, many of the larger homes in the neighborhood were converted to rooming houses, and by 1930 three modern apartment buildings had been built along Maple Avenue and Van Horn Road (now Truman Road).



*First Presbyterian
Church 100 N. Pleasant,
c. 1888*

History of the Truman Neighborhood (cont.)



The introduction of institutional buildings to the neighborhood began in 1901 with the construction of Central High School at the northwest corner of Maple Avenue and Pleasant Street. Central was replaced by Chrisman High School (located on West Maple near Union) in 1918 and became the Junior High; and in 1919 a public library was built directly to the north on the corner of Pleasant and Van Horn Road. In 1926 two nineteenth century homesteads were demolished to make way for the construction of a number of filling/service stations at the southeast corner of the neighborhood, clinching the transition of this once suburban setting to a more urban appearance. Slowly but surely, the City's commercial growth had finally reached the eastern edge of the Truman neighborhood.

*Wm. Chrisman Senior High School
719 W. Maple, c. 1926*

The final years of the Truman legacy had perhaps the greatest influence on the development of the neighborhood. The construction of Truman's Presidential Library on the northern edge and City Urban Renewal Projects, including the demolition of over 200 city-lots of historic African-American housing (location of the McCoy Park) and the creation of the curvilinear "Bess Truman Parkway", have dramatically changed the historic character of the region. Although many historic resources were sacrificed in the process, it should be acknowledged that these changes have since gained historic significance in their own right because of their connection to the final years of Truman's legacy, and are now considered to be contributing elements within the Truman Heritage District.



*Harry S Truman Presidential Library
U.S. 24 Hwy & Delaware, c. 1957*