Jon E. Taylor

Preserving a President's Community

As usual, the former President was up early. He emerged from his house, unlocked the front gate, and walked onto the sidewalk to begin his early morning walk. His typical morning constitutional took him past places that he had seen most of his life. He walked past the First Presbyterian Church on Maple Avenue where he first met his wife at the age of six. Across the street he noted the Memorial Building where he voted in every election since 1924.

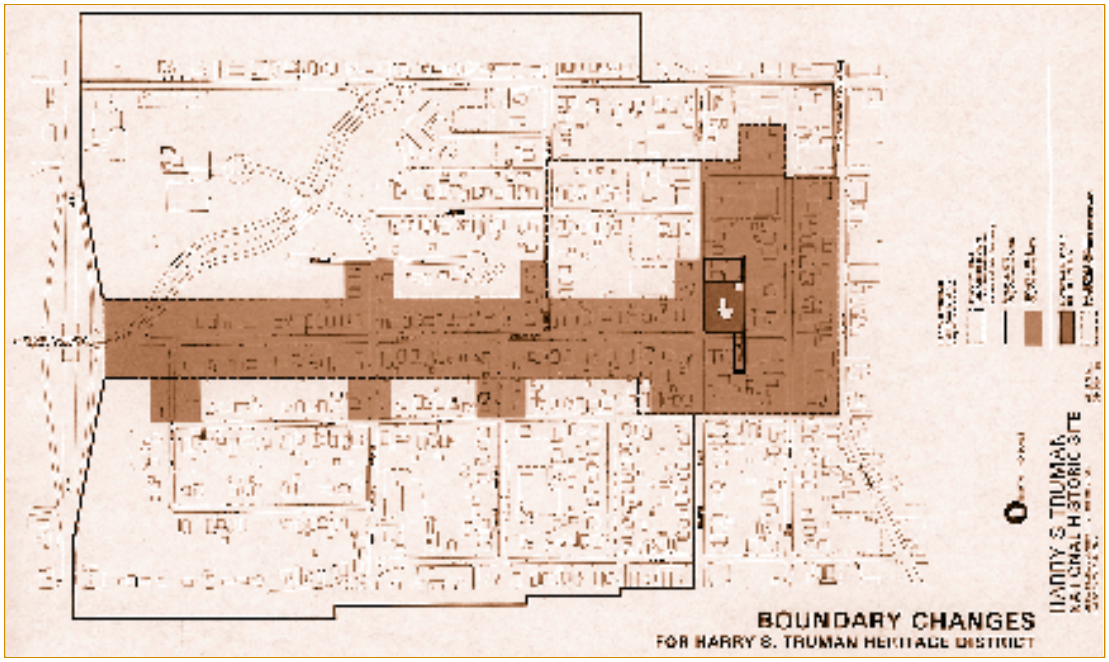
Entering the city's business district he strolled past stores, tipping his hat to any merchants or shoppers he encountered. His jaunt continued past the Jackson County courthouse where he began his political career in 1922 as an administrative judge. Traveling on the south side of the courthouse, perhaps he paused to remember the cold November night in 1948 when he thanked thousands of supporters who had gathered to celebrate his stunning upset victory over Thomas Dewey. Returning home he took Truman Road that brought him past the homes of his neighbors. Taking the last turn on to Delaware Street, Harry S Truman had completed another successful walk.

Tip O'Neill said, "All politics is local." It has been said that, "All preservation is local," too. The Harry S Truman Historic District National Historic Landmark (Truman NHL) is a classic example of a nationally-significant landmark whose protection occurs at the local level.

Of all the NHLs in the country, there is perhaps none more complex than the Truman NHL. Few NHLs contain as many privately-owned buildings and homes as the Truman NHL. Still fewer NHLs contain a national park within their boundaries. Throw into the mix deteriorating century-old buildings, expansion-minded churches, and a lack of preservation education programs for homeowners, and it is easy to see why the National Trust for Historic Preservation named the Truman NHL as one of its 1996 most endangered historic places. This article addresses the challenges and triumphs the National Park Service faces as we attempt to partner with others to preserve this nationally-significant area for all Americans.

In 1972, the Secretary of the Interior designated the Truman NHL with the approval of the former President. According to the NHL nomination, the Truman neighborhood was "the setting which has been the physical nucleus of both Harry S Truman's personal and his long and influential political life" for 64 of his 88 years. In short, there are few communities in the world where a traveler can see many of the institutions (schools, churches, homes of neighbors) intact that influenced a person who became President of the United States.

Truman was a product of Independence. The schools he attended, the teachers who taught him, and the friendships he developed there influenced him. As his political star rose from County Administrator, to United States Senator, and later as President, his community supported him because he was one of their own.



Map of Harry S Truman National Historic Site and the Harry S Truman Historic District NHL, Courtesy National Park Service.

Today, Truman's neighbors and school teachers are gone, but their legacy remains a part of the approximately 100 structures that comprise the Truman NHL. After the President's death in 1972, the federal government did not own any properties within the NHL boundaries. In 1982, Bess Truman, the President's widow, died, leaving her home at 219 North Delaware to the people of the United States. In 1984, the NPS opened the home for public tours

President Truman returning to 219 North Delaware after a walk through the neighborhood.Photo by Vernon Galloway, courtesy of the Truman Library.

and since that time three additional Truman family-related properties have been added to the site. No other federal acquisitions are planned, leaving over 90 structures within the Truman NHL in mostly private hands.

Shortly after the Truman NHL was created, the City of Independence passed the Truman Heritage District ordinance to protect all of the Landmark and several more blocks outside the NHL boundaries. In 1984, the city reduced the size of the Heritage District to accommodate a church wishing to expand its facilities and parking, leaving parts of the Truman NHL without city ordinance protection. The result of the reduced size of the Heritage District was the church's decision to demolish several properties within the Landmark. Today, the lack of city ordinance protection for portions of the Truman NHL remains along with the potential threat for further demolition.

Threats also exist on the perimeter of the Truman NHL. In 1993 the E. P. Gates house, just outside the Truman NHL boundary, was demolished to make way for a church entrance. E. P. Gates was an uncle of Bess Truman. In March of 1997 another property along Truman road, just outside of the NHL boundary, but only a block away from the Truman home, was demolished because it had been allowed to deteriorate to the point where rehabilitation was not economically feasible.

Today, the constitutionality of churches being subject to local preservation ordinances is being challenged at the highest levels of our judicial system. Even though this is a constitutional issue the debate points to a much larger question that not only faces the Truman NHL but other NHLs like it. The question is: How do we as a nation advocate for the preservation of a neighborhood that is constantly evolving and changing? It is an issue that the NPS cannot easily resolve nor the author will attempt to resolve in this article.

The NPS does not wish to see further losses in the Truman NHL or on its perimeter; however, we realize the complexity of trying to preserve a nationally-significant area that is still growing and evolving. Since the NPS has no intention of acquiring the remaining structures in the Truman NHL we must advocate for preservation and educate individual homeowners about preservation issues.

In 1996, the NPS began to reach out to the homeowners in the Truman NHL. We realized many homeowners were unaware of preservation information and programs available to them. We knew that if the homes in the Truman NHL were to be preserved, the homeowners themselves were the ones who had to become involved. We also knew that we had to cooperate with other agencies who share our mission of historic preservation. Those partners included the State of Missouri Historic Preservation Office; the City of Independenc; and the Truman Preservation Trust, a private non-profit involved in restoration/rehabilitation efforts within the Truman NHL.

In January of 1996, we secured the support of these partners to co-sponsor a preservation conference for the City of Independence that targeted residents of the Truman NHL. A conference for residents of Truman's neighborhood had never been held before. We were breaking new ground and we were not sure what the interest would be.

A tentative conference agenda was outlined that called for a two-day meeting beginning on a Friday morning and lasting through Saturday afternoon. The Harry S Truman NHS secured all panelists and rented the auditorium for the conference. The City of Independence Historic Preservation Manager provided guidance about the topics for the panel discussions and served as a speaker. The State of Missouri Historic Preservation Office also provided speakers as did the Truman Preservation Trust.

NPS staff promoted the conference beyond the boundaries of the Truman NHL. Although our focus was always the Truman NHL, we did not want to turn anyone away from learning about historic preservation issues. The cultural resource management staff and members of the interpretive staff from the Harry S Truman NHS went door-to-door passing out over 1,000 leaflets in the historic areas of Independence. We capitalized on every opportunity for free advertising by issuing press releases, writing articles for local publications, and placing brochures in local businesses. On September 14, 1996, the conference entitled, "Preserving a President's Community," began. Fifty people pre-registered for the conference, with approximately 40 listing addresses in the Truman NHL. Staff from the Harry S Truman NHS also attended the conference and, combined with the number of panelists, brought the conference attendance to over 70.

The conference was designed to progress from general information about historic preservation to more specific information about historic

Participants in the 1996 Preservation Conference gather in front of the Choplin home to discuss its rehabilitation.The Truman Preservation Trust was instrumental in saving this structure which is across the street from the Truman home. Photo by Brian Snyder, courtesy Harry S Truman National Historic Site.

homes and how to care for them. The Friday morning panel discussions centered around two issues: "What is Historic Preservation?" and "What is the National Register?" The afternoon sessions began to tailor the conference to specific issues relating to homeowners such as "How to 'Read' Historic Homes," "Funding Restoration Efforts," and the final session, "Where and How to Start the Restoration/Rehabilitation." On Saturday participants divided into small groups to tour historic homes in various stages of rehabilitation. Participants observed first hand some of the information presented during the Friday afternoon panel sessions.

Besides having the goal of preservation education, the conference had several other objectives. We needed to gauge the level of interest and knowledge among the homeowners about historic preservation. Knowing the homeowners' level of interest and knowledge about historic preservation would be crucial in developing future conferences and programs that targeted their needs. By having the conference co-hosted by federal, state, and local agencies involved in historic preservation, we hoped the homeowners could gain a greater understanding of each agency's role in historic preservation and how their programs could benefit each individual homeowner. The conference was also designed to have homeowners interact as much as possible with preservation professionals so they would not hesitate to call upon them in the future.

At the end of the presentations on Friday a survey sheet was passed out to the participants that asked them to rate the usefulness of the panel discussions and to make suggestions for future programs. Overwhelmingly the respondents said they favored more presentations on historic preservation. Everyone who responded said they would attend future conferences. When asked to suggest topics for other conferences, most recommend conferences on specific preservation treatments such as how to work with guttering or how to replace porches. The results were encouraging and the objectives of the conference were met. The Saturday morning walking tours were equally successful, allowing neighbors to share their preservation experiences with one another and to tour each other's work.

Several months have passed since the conference. The threat of demolition remains, yet progress is being made to preserve the neighborhood Harry Truman knew so well. The City of Independence is working on a Comprehensive Preservation Plan with technical and financial assistance from the National Trust that will include the Truman NHL. The city is revising the enabling legislation for the Heritage Commission, which is responsible for creating and expanding local historic districts. This will have a positive impact on the Truman NHL. The Truman Preservation Trust has just completed rehabilitation of a home in the Truman NHL within the viewshed of the Truman home. In September, the NPS will co-host another conference about discovering historic preservation information on the Internet. Again, the target audience will be residents of the Truman NHL.

Preservation is a continual process. Despite these gains there is more to be done. First, the NPS must expand its partners in preservation to include local, state, and national organizations that will support the preservation of the Truman NHL. We cannot preserve this area by ourselves. Second, more preservation education programs that target homeowners in the NHL district must be given consideration for future funding. Programs that target preservation research and preservation professionals are needed; however, when one is talking about preserving the Truman NHL and other NHLs like it, where the majority of the district is under private ownership, the private owners will be responsible for preserving their properties for future generations. Funds should be dispersed to educational programs that reach private homeowners.

Preserving a President's community has been filled with challenges and triumphs. Understanding the preservation needs of private owners of NHLs is crucial to ensure their future preservation. Innovative partnerships and funding sources must be explored if future generations of Americans are to understand these cultural resources. After all, Truman said it best when he wrote, "I've been taking my morning walks around the city and passing places that bring back wonderful recollections."* It is our hope those "recollections" will be preserved for all Americans and the world.

Note

* Robert H. Farrell, ed., *Autobiography of Harry S Truman,* (Boulder, Colorado: Colorado Associated University press, 1980), p. 109.

Jon E. Taylor is a historian with the Harry S Truman National Historic Site, Independence, Missouri.