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First Ladies: Bess Truman

Lead: She didn't like politics and thought of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue as the "Great White Jail, but she loved Harry Truman and if he wanted to live there, she would be his partner in life and service.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Harry Truman first met Elizabeth Virginia Wallace at the Sunday School of the Presbyterian Church in Independence, Missouri. He was six, she was five. Until his death in 1972 at eighty-nine she never was far from his thoughts. Pursuing

Bess was not easy. He was from a family of dirt farmers, she from one of the wealthiest in town. It took a long time and a lot of work on his part for Madge Wallace to warm to Harry and for the balance of her life Mother Wallace was a member of the Truman household, part of the price he paid to win Bess.

They were married in June 1914 after Major Truman returned from European service in World War I. From the beginning their marriage was a full partnership. She kept the books in his first venture, a clothing store that failed in the post-war depression and reluctantly supported him as he was recruited into the Kansas City Democratic machine of

Tom Pendergast. He served as county judge, U.S. Senator and Vice-president before being catapulted into the White House at the death of FDR.

In the White House Bess Truman went through the motions, but clearly wished she was elsewhere. She did her duty, campaigned with the President, advised him quietly as his most valuable counselor, punched holes in his pretension if he ever got too full of himself, watched his back when his critics tried to trip him up, entertained when necessary, but did not play the Washington social game. When the time came to leave Washington, she was more than willing to go and they settled into a quiet Independence retirement. Bess

outlived her husband and all other First Ladies, dying quietly in 1982 at the age of ninety-seven.

**At the University of Richmond,
this is Dan Roberts.**

Resources

Boller, Paul F., Jr. *Presidential Wives*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Steinberg, Alfred. *The Man from Missouri: The Life and Times of Harry S. Truman*. New York: 1962.

Truman, Margaret. *Bess Truman*. New York, 1986.

<http://www.trumanlibrary.org/bwt-bio.htm>

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