



The Noland House at 216 North Delaware



The Noland Cousins – Matchmakers

Harry Truman's older cousins, Nellie and Ethel Noland, knew that Harry had had a crush on Bess Wallace since he was six years old. Romantically, it appeared that for Harry, it would be Bess or no one. By the time he was 26 in 1910, it looked as if it would be no one. Harry had never revealed to Bess how he felt about her. His Noland cousins who lived across the street from Bess, decided to step in and help.

"The prettiest girl I'd ever seen"

Harry Truman and his family had moved to Independence in 1890 when Harry was six years old. He later wrote, "We were Baptists, but the Presbyterian preacher was so nice my folks let me go to Sunday School with him. Lucky thing they did, too, because that's where I first met Bess. I was six, and she was five. She had long golden hair, and I thought she was the prettiest girl I'd ever seen."

Nellie Noland was several years older than Harry and Bess and helped them with their Latin lessons. Her sister Ethel recalled, "I don't know whether they got much Latin read or not because there was a lot of fun going on. . . ." The Noland girls were well aware of Harry's affection for Bess. He had vowed to them that he would marry Bess Wallace someday but he was too shy to tell Bess how he felt about her.

A Borrowed Cake Plate

After high school, both Harry and Bess moved to their maternal grandparents' homes. For Harry, that meant moving 20 miles away, south of Independence to his grandmother's farm in Grandview, Missouri. For Bess, that meant moving to her grandfather's house at 219 North Delaware Street – across the street from Harry's Noland cousins—into the house now called the Truman home.

In the early 20th century, the 20-mile trip from the Grandview farm to Independence took two hours. Harry would have to catch a train to Kansas City and then a streetcar to Independence. Even though the trip wasn't easy, most weekends he would visit his cousins on Delaware Street. No doubt he also tried to catch a glimpse of his secret sweetheart across the street as well.

Then, one summer evening in 1910, the Nolands provided Harry with his big chance. Bess's mother had sent a butter cake across the street to the Nolands. The cake was gone and Ethel remarked that

it was time someone got around to returning the plate. According to the family, Harry grabbed the plate "with something approaching the speed of light," and was out the door, heading for the Wallaces'. He was so anxious to get across the street, that everyone prayed he wouldn't drop the plate. Two hours later, he returned, face aglow, and announced, "Well, I saw her!" The courtship was on.

Even then, it was no whirlwind romance. A world war and financial difficulties delayed Harry and Bess's marriage for another nine years. During this time, the Noland house provided Harry with a base for the courtship. He would take the train from Grandview on Saturday morning, stop by the Nolands' to clean up, and trot across the street to see his sweetie. On Saturday night he would sleep in the Nolands' front parlor so he could visit with Bess again on Sunday without having to make another long round trip from the farm in Grandview. The Noland house was Harry's link between Grandview and Independence.



Left to right: Nellie Noland, Harry Truman, Ethel Noland, 1904. Credit: Truman Library

“Three old ladies and the dice”

Thirty years later, in a letter to his cousin Ethel, Harry, now President, reminisced about the role she and her sister had played in facilitating his courtship of Bess. He also mused about the whims of fate and luck in the course of human lives. “You can never tell what the three old ladies [the Fates from Greek mythology] and the dice will do to you,” he wrote and speculated about the path his life may have taken without Bess. It’s possible that Harry and Bess might not have renewed their

childhood friendship if his cousins had not lived across the street from Bess. The chain of events—spurred by that borrowed cake plate—led Harry Truman to a courtship with Bess Wallace, to family man, politician, and 33rd President of the United States. Because of its role in facilitating the courtship of Harry Truman and Bess Wallace, as well as other associations with Harry Truman, the Noland house became part of Harry S Truman National Historic Site in 1991.



President Truman on the steps of the Noland house, 1946. Credit: Truman Library.