

House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
Testimony of Congressman Ike Skelton (D-MO)

Hearing on H.R. 3265, the Harry S. Truman Birthplace Study Act

Tuesday, October 30, 2007
10:00 a.m.
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Bishop, and Members of the Subcommittee. Let me thank you and my dear friend and House classmate, Natural Resources Committee Chairman Nick Rahall, for scheduling a hearing today on H.R. 3265, the Harry S. Truman Birthplace Study Act.

Let me also thank and welcome to Washington Mr. Jeff Barber, an architect with the University of Missouri Extension's Southwest Office in Springfield, Missouri, who has traveled a great distance today to share his testimony with you.

On July 31st of this year, I introduced H.R. 3265, a bill that would direct the Secretary of the Interior to study whether it is feasible to include the Harry S. Truman Birthplace State Historic Site in Lamar, Missouri, as part of the National Park System. I was honored to do this on behalf of the people of Lamar, a community located in southwestern Missouri that has done much groundwork for the inclusion of the State Historic Site in our federal system. I was also proud to introduce this bill to further honor the 33rd President of the United States and Missouri's favorite son, Harry S. Truman.

In passing, I should mention that the Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy birthplaces are national historic sites.

On May 8, 1884, Harry Truman was born in a downstairs bedroom of a small frame house in Lamar, Missouri. The Truman birthplace, which the family occupied until Harry was 11 months old, was built between 1880 and 1882. In 1959, the United Auto Workers donated the home to the state of Missouri, after buying it some years earlier to preserve its rich cultural significance. Since its addition to the Missouri State Parks System, much work has been done to maintain the dignity and historical relevance of the residence, and many Americans make their way through the site each year.

When the Mayor of Lamar, Keith Divine, wrote to me earlier this year asking me to introduce legislation to begin the process of including President Truman's birthplace in our National Park System, I was honored to oblige. In my view and in the view of the local community, doing so would add perhaps the most critical piece of Harry Truman's life, the place of his birth, to the current group of national historic sites that honor the legacy of our 33rd President. And, doing so would foster economic development in Lamar and in Barton County.

As a matter of record, let me share with you briefly my personal connection with President Truman and with the legislation creating the original Harry S. Truman National Historic Site, which some of Chairman Rahall's staff and my friends representing the National Park Service may recall.

I came to personally know President Truman through my father, Ike Skelton, Sr., who developed a friendship with him some 78 years ago at the dedication of the Pioneer Mother Statue – the Madonna of the Trail – located in my hometown of Lexington, Missouri. At that time, Harry Truman was a county commissioner in neighboring Jackson County and my father was a well known lawyer and Democrat. Through the years, I developed my own friendship with this genuinely nice person we call the "Man from Independence."

He was a son of rural Missouri whose handshake was firm, whose honesty and personal integrity were never questioned, and whose devotion to his beloved wife, Bess, to his daughter Margaret Truman Daniel, and to his friends was enduring. He led our country through some difficult periods and made courageous, principled decisions during his presidency.

In the past, Congress has honored President Truman by designating sites in Missouri important to his life as part of America's National Park System. In 1982 and 1983, I worked with the late Senator Tom Eagleton and former Senator Jack Danforth to pass legislation designating the home of Harry and Bess Truman in Independence, Missouri, as the Harry S. Truman National Historic Site. The site, which consisted at that time of President and Mrs. Truman's home at 219 N. Delaware Street, was willed to the Archivist of the United States when Mrs. Truman passed away in October 1982.

Because the National Park Service, rather than the Archivist, has the federal responsibility of administering national historic sites, the property and its historic contents became stuck in limbo, with only minimal protection and threatened by possible vandalism, theft, or fire. At that time, there was an urgent need to protect this important property, so I requested the Secretary of the Interior to exercise his authority to designate and administer President Truman's home as a national historic site. The Department refused, and I quickly introduced legislation to establish the site. My bill passed the House on December 13, 1982, but the Senate failed to act on it before the end of the session.

Fortunately, the Interior Secretary came to his senses and signed a secretarial order designating the home as a national historic site. In 1983, however, I wrote legislation to codify the Secretary's directive. In May 1983, Congress unanimously approved and President Ronald Reagan signed into law my bill that created the Harry S. Truman National Historic Site in Independence.

Since that time, Congress has authorized the National Park Service to add other historically significant Truman family sites to the federal property – in 1989, additional family homes near 219 Delaware Street and in 1993, the Truman Farm Home near Grandview, Missouri.

So, here we are on October 30, 2007, hearing testimony on my legislation to direct the Interior Secretary to study whether it is feasible to include another important historic site – President Truman’s birthplace – to our National Park System.

As someone who cherishes the life and legacy of Harry Truman, I am hopeful this bill will become law and that the National Park Service’s study will proceed quickly and will yield favorable results.

Over the years, Lamar, the State of Missouri, and the University of Missouri Extension have put into place a development plan for the Harry S. Truman Birthplace State Historic Site. If approved, I am confident the federal study will look favorably upon the community’s work and will take into consideration the positive economic impact for the Lamar and Barton County area, which has experienced considerable economic hardship in recent months because a major employer, O’Sullivan Industries, closed its doors.

My guest from Missouri and your next witness, Jeff Barber of the University of Missouri Extension, can speak to the development plan and how the community hopes to prosper if the State Site is added to our National Park System.

I ask the Subcommittee approve my bill, H.R. 3265.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.