

A Moment in Time: "President" Harry S. Truman and the Madonna of the Trail

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A Moment in Time: "President" Harry S. Truman and the Madonna of the Trail

by Richard Weingroff / FHWA News 2022-2023



On April 19, 1929, the final Madonna of the Trail monument was dedicated in a tree-lined setting in Bethesda, Maryland. About 5,000 people attended the ceremony. Harry S. Truman, president of the National Old

If you've ever been in Bethesda, Maryland, you may have seen a statue called the Madonna of the Trail on the sidewalk along Wisconsin Avenue between the former U.S. Post Office building and the Hyatt Regency Hotel near the Bethesda Metro Station. If so, you may have wondered why the pioneer mother is, seemingly, so far from home in this urbanized setting.

And yet, unknown to passersby, her determined expression metaphorically reflects the tribulations she has been through over the years since she landed in Bethesda. For, at a moment in time on April 19, 1929, "president" Harry S. Truman took part in the dedication of the monument as he had in the dedication of many of the 11 other Madonna of the Trail monuments in States the National Old Trails Road passed through.

The National Old Trails Road

In the early days of the 20th century, the motor vehicle made surface transportation outside cities possible, if not probable. Before the Federal Government or many the States had aid programs for roads, good roads promoters established associations that identified interstate roads, gave them colorful names, and then promoted improvement of the road and its use by motorists. The Lincoln Highway (New York City to San Francisco) was the most famous

Trails Road Association, was one of the featured speakers. [From the Collection of Montgomery History] of the named trails, but in the 1910s and 1920s, motorists were familiar with the Atlantic Highway, the National Park-to-Park Highway, the Jefferson Highway, the Old Spanish Trail, the Yellowstone Trail, and several hundred more named trails of varying length.

The National Old Trails Road, established in April 1912, was one of the earliest named trails, even preceding the Lincoln Highway. The National Old Trails Road Association was based on an idea by Elizabeth Gentry of the Missouri Daughters of the American Revolution (D.A.R.) to link old trails into a national highway. It stretched from Baltimore and Washington to Los Angeles, and included famous old trails such as the Cumberland Road, the Santa Fe Trail, and other lesser known old trails dating to the 19th century.

The first president of the National Old Trails Road association was Judge J. M. Lowe of Kansas City, Missouri, whose advocacy for the road would continue for the rest of his life. He attended road conventions, road openings, and State hearings. He testified before the United States Congress on several occasions, prepared bills that were introduced at the State and national levels, and promoted improvement of the road at the State, county, and road district levels.

On July 11, 1916, President Woodrow Wilson signed the Federal Aid Road Act that established the Federal-aid highway program to help the States improve their roads on a 50-50 State-Federal matching basis. Before the program could get rolling, World War I intervened and roadwork suffered as resources were diverted to the war effort. Even so, Judge Lowe worked tirelessly to seek improvement of the National Old Trails Road despite the many obstacles the war imposed.

After the war, as Congress considered how to improve the Federal-aid highway program, Judge Lowe testified on April 15, 1920, before the Senate Committee on Post Offices and Post Roads. After a lengthy statement in support of a National Highway Commission that would build interstate roads, instead of the Federal-aid highway program, he offered the following comment to make clear he did not personally benefit from his advocacy: "If you will pardon me, I will say I have no selfish interest – no material interest in this question. I do not even own an automobile, and would not know what the dickens to do with it if I had one."

The Federal Highway Act of 1921, signed by President Warren G. Harding on November 9, 1921, strengthened the Federal-aid highway program by restricting eligibility to up to 7 percent of the public roads in each State. Up to three-sevenths of each State's 7-percent system was to be primary or interstate highways, with each State able to spend up to 60 percent of its Federal-aid apportionment on these roads. The remaining roads within the 7-percent system were classed as secondary or inter-county roads. The Secretary of Agriculture was to give preference to projects that would expedite "completion of an adequate and connected system of highways interstate in character." This Act launched what people at the time considered the Golden Age of highway construction with funds helping to establish an "interstate system," as it was informally called, of two-lane paved interstate highways that criss-crossed the country in the 1930s.

The program was not what Judge Lowe wanted, but the 12 States that the National Old Trails Road passed through used the increased new funds to improve the road at a faster pace than ever.

The End of the Trails

By the mid-1920s, Federal and State highway officials concluded that the named trails had outlived their usefulness. Allowing private individuals to identify and promote the main interstate roads was impractical, and unnecessary given the funding now available to the States for road improvement. Working together, the American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHO) and the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads conceived and implemented the U.S. Numbered Highway System, along with uniform signing. Like other leaders of named trail associations, Judge Lowe tried to secure a single number for the National Old Trails Road, but given that the point was to eliminate the names, neither he nor any of the others, not even the powerful Lincoln Highway Association, was successful.

In the plan that AASHO approved on November 11, 1926, all the long-distance named trails were split among several U.S. numbered routes. The value of the National Old Trails Road was reflected in the fact that much of its route east of the Mississippi River, basically the old Cumberland Road, was included in transcontinental U.S. 40 (Atlantic City, New Jersey, to San Francisco), while the section between Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Los Angeles, was included in U.S. 66 (Chicago to Los Angeles), which would become the most iconic of the U.S. numbered highways.

By then, however, 82-year old Judge Lowe had passed away on April 16, 1926, in Kansas City.

Enter Harry S. Truman



Harry S. Truman, in this photograph from August 1926, became president of the National Old Trails Road Association on July 23, 1926.

Photo from Kansas City Star, courtesy Harry S. Truman Library

Given the very active Federal-aid highway program and the successful introduction of the U.S. Numbered Highway System, the National Old Trails Road Association had to decide whether to suspend or end its activities or replace their inspirational leader and continue to promote its road. At its annual convention in Kansas City on July 23, 1926, the association decided to continue its work. And for its second president, it selected a young out-of-office politician named Harry S. Truman of Independence, Missouri.

In 1922, Truman, a Democrat, had run for election as the Eastern Judge of Jackson County, essentially a county manager for the eastern part of the county, on a platform based largely on improving the county's roads. He won, but despite an excellent record, lost his reelection bid in 1924 by 877 votes – the only election he ever lost. Aged 40, out of work, broke, and in debt from a failed haberdashery business, Truman planned to run again in 2 years, but in the meantime, he needed to make a living to support his wife Bess and their young daughter Margaret. He took a job selling memberships in the Kansas City Automobile Club where he proved highly successful.

Now, in 1926, he had an additional position as president of the National Old Trails Road Association. In addition, he won election later that year to be the Presiding Judge of Jackson County, the leader of the judges. However, when telephone calls and telegrams poured into his home in Independence to congratulate him on his victory, Truman was not there. He was traveling the National Old Trails Road, meeting with the association's State officials, promoting improvement of the road, and securing its finances. At one point, he wrote to Bess, "This is almost like campaigning for President except that the people are making promises to me instead of the other way around."

The Madonna of the Trail

In 1912, D.A.R. established a National Old Trails Road Committee, with Elizabeth Gentry as the first National Chairman. The committee encouraged State associations to explore their own old trails, but its main focus was on securing Federal legislation designating the National Old Trails Road as the National Highway. It also promoted posting D.A.R./National Old Trails Road signs in the 12 States it passed through.

In 1924, Arline Triggs Moss of St. Louis became the fourth National Chairman of the committee. She studied the committee's work and found that it had set goals it could not achieve. The legislation had been introduced in Congress multiple times without receiving a vote. The States had not been receptive to posting D.A.R.'s signs.

Instead, she proposed in 1924 to place a monument in each of the 12 States to honor the pioneer mothers who had helped the country move west. D.A.R., at its annual continental congress in Washington, approved the proposal. She and her son developed the design, which St. Louis-based sculptor August Leimbach used to create the Madonna of the Trail monument. The committee knew that D.A.R. could not afford 12 marble statues, and so the monuments were made of a composite material known as "algonite stone." The 10-foot high, 5-ton figure of the pioneer mother and her two children stands on a 6-foot high, 12-ton base. The 5-foot deep foundation included 2 feet above ground, and 3 feet below. Thus, the visible monument is 18 feet tall.

On the front of the base of each was an inscription: **THE MADONNA OF THE TRAIL**. After the D.A.R. insignia came:

**To The
PIONEER MOTHERS
Of the
COVERED WAGON DAYS**

On the back of the base were the words:

THE NATIONAL OLD TRAILS ROAD

These inscriptions were to appear on all 12 monuments. However, on the two sides would be an inscription of 25 or fewer words citing a local historical event unique to each location.

Each monument cost \$1,000, for a total cost to the D.A.R. of \$12,000. In addition, each jurisdiction housing a monument had to raise funds to pay for transportation from St. Louis, suitable site preparation, installation, and a dedication ceremony, as well as maintain it over time.

Association president and Judge Truman was an enthusiastic supporter of the plan. Through his efforts, the National Old Trails Road Association helped with publicity, funding, and the selection of sites in each of the twelve States. He accompanied Moss and State D.A.R. officials as they traveled the road to listen to pitches from local officials and groups seeking the monument for their city and helped choose the best sites based on such factors as history, commitments to funding, and proximity to a local D.A.R. chapter.

In some cases, competition for the monument was strong. Kansas had eight bids. In others, such as Santa Fe, New Mexico, the monument was rejected. Although the city was the obvious location for a monument honoring a road that included the Santa Fe Trail, the arts community did not consider Leimbach's statue to be art or as reflecting the pioneers who founded the city. Albuquerque eagerly adopted the monument.

Moss would say of the 12 monuments: "They are the autograph of a nation, written across the face of a continent."

The Bethesda Dedication

Harry Truman participated in most of the dedication ceremonies, giving a speech about the National Old Trails Road, but in other cases, his work as presiding judge kept him away.

Bethesda, Cumberland, and Frederick had competed for Maryland's monument, but Bethesda prevailed; the committee thought the monument should be as near as possible to the eastern terminus of the National Old Trails Road. Bethesda was a trolley suburb that had seen population growth from 4,800 in 1920 to 12,000 in 1930.

With installation of the first 11 monuments completed, the final dedication took place during D.A.R.'s annual continental congress in Washington with Harry Truman in town for the big event. The congress did not schedule activities for the afternoon of April 19 to allow delegates to attend the ceremony. It was near the road that British General Edward Braddock and a young aide named George Washington traveled on April 14, 1755, on their way to defeat the French at Fort Duquesne, located at the site of future Pittsburgh. While the troops widened a road through the wilderness, General Braddock was killed and, at Washington's instigation, buried in the road to hide his body and prevent its desecration.

On one side of the monument, the inscription reads:



This photograph showing sculptor August Leimbach at work on the Madonna of the Trail statue was widely reprinted in newspapers and magazines during and after dedication of the 12 monuments. Mrs. Arline B. Moss looks on.

**OVER THIS HIGHWAY
MARCHED THE ARMY OF
MAJOR GENERAL
EDWARD BRADDOCK
APRIL 14, 1755
ON ITS WAY TO FORT DUQUESNE**

On the other side, the inscription referred to what became known as Braddock Road:

**THIS, THE FIRST MILITARY ROAD
IN AMERICA
BEGINNING AT ROCK CREEK
AND POTOMAC RIVER,
GEORGETOWN, MARYLAND
LEADING OUR PIONEERS
ACROSS THE CONTINENT
TO THE PACIFIC**

The dedication ceremony began at 4 p.m. before about 5,000 people, including Vice President Charles Curtis of Kansas, with the monument facing the county building at the southwest corner of Montgomery and Wisconsin Avenues in a tree-lined location. One of the many speakers was Judge Truman. "It is exceedingly appropriate," he said, "that the Daughters of the American Revolution should have originated the idea and it is also proper that the National Old Trails Association should have helped them to carry it out." He explained that, "It was the grand old pioneer mother who made the settlement of the original thirteen colonies possible. As the pioneers moved west, she went with them to the Ohio Valley and from there to Louisiana territory and the great west." The National Old Trails Road followed "the history and development of all this country beyond the Alleghenies."

The pioneer women "were just as brave or braver than their men, because in many cases they went with sad hearts and trembling bodies," having left their families and friends behind, "and endured every hardship that befalls a pioneer." The monument was important to him because, "My grandmothers were pioneer women and that is why I am here."

He talked about the historic trails included in the National Old Trails Road, the history of the National Old Trails Road and its cooperation with D.A.R. In addition, Judge Truman described the development of the National Old Trails Road starting with the formation of the National Old Trails Road Association in 1912 to cooperate with D.A.R. in making the arrangements with the Federal Government and the States for linking the trails into a paved transcontinental highway.

The event was covered in the local newspapers although Judge Truman, little known outside Jackson County, Missouri, was mentioned only briefly. The Washington Post stated that, "Judge Truman also paid tribute to the pioneer mothers and to the persons who have worked for the completion of the project." The Evening Star explained that Judge Truman described the origins of the National Old Trails Road Association "to co-operate with the society in making the arrangements with the Federal Government and the several States for linking the numerous trails and securing pavement."

From the start Bethesda's monument faced east, not west where the pioneers went. To face west, the monument would have to show its back to visitors and passersby.

Adventures of a Statue

A 5-ton monument, dedicated on April 19, 1929, before a crowd of 5,000 people, might be expected to stay put, its adventures over after it arrived from St. Louis. But that was not the case for the Madonna of the Trail in Bethesda. In the 1930s, a U.S. Post Office building was erected during the New Deal, opening in 1938 to the monument's left.



In the 1930s, a U.S. Post Office building opened in 1938 to the monument's left. Beyond the post office was the Hiser Movie Theater at 7414 Wisconsin Avenue, now the site of the Hyatt Regency Hotel. The theater closed on August 23, 1977, and was razed in January 1978 during construction of the . The Post Office moved out in 2012, leaving the building for commercial uses.

Photo from From the Collection of Montgomery History.

mother, her face set with a rugged determination, is leaning forward in nervous anticipation as she and her children prepare for the harrowing task of crossing Wisconsin Avenue at rush hour."

Harry Truman Never Forgot

Judge Truman won election in November 1934 to the United States Senate. He served with distinction (1935-1945), often driving with his family on the National Old Trails Road between Independence and Washington, mostly on U.S. 40. In 1944, Senator Truman became President Franklin D. Roosevelt's surprise running mate in his successful run for a fourth term in the White House. Truman served as Vice President only from January 20, 1945, until the death of President Roosevelt, taking the oath of office on April 12, 1945.

Despite Truman's many accomplishments as a county judge, a Senator, Vice President, and President over the course of a long career, he never forgot his time as president of the National Old Trails Road Association. He remained on the association's letterhead as president into the late 1940s, always speaking of his term in positive tones. In 1941, Senator Truman replied to a letter from a friend involved in highway promotion, saying, "I am just as interested in the National Old Trails as I ever was."

As development began to surround the monument, it had to be moved to accommodate a road widening and construction of the Bethesda Metro Station. A crane lifted the monument, gently, onto a flatbed truck that took it to the police academy in Gaithersburg, Maryland, "for its own safety." State Senator Howard A. Denis said, "I miss it. It's one of the closest things we have to a county treasure." When construction was completed 3 years later in 1986, the monument could not be returned to its original location. The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority had built an elevator shaft at the monument's original location, so it was moved to a location with the Old Post Office Building on its right and a new Hyatt Regency Hotel on its left.

The rambles of the 5-ton monument were not over. In December 2004, the monument was removed again after a sinkhole developed that left it listing like the Leaning Tower of Pisa. The problem was a water main break in front of the hotel. When the problem was solved and the ground stabilized, the monument was placed, again, alongside the post office. (In 2012, the post office moved out of the building, leaving it for commercial uses.)

Although the monument had found its final location (as of this date), it was not for lack of interest in moving it. In 2001, officials in Cumberland, Maryland, argued that the monument should be moved to their city, the starting point for the historic Cumberland Road. Instead of sitting in the midst of Bethesda's urban landscape where no one knew why it was there and lacked time to find out, in Cumberland it would symbolize the city's transportation history. The president of the Bethesda Chamber of Commerce, Jack Alexander, objected. "Not in my lifetime. You are welcome to come look at it, but you're not leaving with our Madonna." It stayed in Bethesda.

In 2018, a group of Bethesda residents proposed to move the monument from its relative obscurity to the Farm Women's Co-operative Market on the east side of Wisconsin Avenue. The Bethesda location overcame the proposal, remaining in front of the former post office and hotel.

Mark Walston, in a history of Bethesda for the Bethesda Historical Society, wrote that the Madonna of the Trail "seems as if the



When the Bethesda Metro Station was under construction, the Madonna of the Trail monument was put in storage to make way for the elevator shaft. With construction completed, the monument was

Having served the balance of President Roosevelt's fourth term, President Truman sought election in 1948 to his own full term as President. As part of his campaign to defeat New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey, President Truman embarked on a railroad whistle stop election campaign with Bess and Margaret. When the train passed through cities once linked by the National Old Trails Road, he occasionally recalled those days in his informal remarks from the train's platform. In Albuquerque, for example, he recalled, "I was here once as the President of the National Old Trails Road Association, and we set up a monument to the Pioneer Mother here in Albuquerque. Had a great time on that trip." In Dodge City, Kansas, he recalled, "I used to come over here to Dodge City on road matters for the National Old Trails Association. I was the director of that organization, and I have been through here on numerous occasions on work for that organization." In Richmond, Indiana, he told the crowd this was not his first visit to the city. "I came here once as President of the National Old Trails Road Association and helped the Daughters of the American Revolution to set up a monument in one of your parks to the pioneer mother."

returned, but this time with the old post office building on its right, and a new hotel on its left.

Photo by Richard Weingroff.

Of course, to the surprise of Governor Dewey and everyone but himself, he won the election and served until January 20, 1953, after which he returned by train to Independence.

Settling into the routines of his post-presidency, he decided to go on a road trip in 1953 along the old highway to Washington, then to Philadelphia for a speech, and to New York City where Margaret lived. In an era when former Presidents did not have Secret Service protection, he convinced Bess that with him out of the White House, they could travel incognito. She agreed to the trip only after he promised to avoid speeding. From the start, she kept her eye on the speedometer, at one point asking him how fast they were going. He replied, "Fifty-Five." She asked him, "Do you think I'm losing my eyesight? Slow down."

Almost immediately, people recognized him. For example, as Bess and private citizen Truman drove through Richmond, Indiana, on July 7, a sheriff pulled their car over, not to issue a ticket, as Truman feared, but to ask for a picture with the former President in front of the Madonna of the Trail monument. The Trumans, the Sheriff, and his son, also a police officer, drove to the statue in Glen Miller Park (named after a local businessman, not band leader Glenn Miller) for the picture.

Historians and biographers often mention, briefly, President Truman's stint as president of the National Old Trails Road Association. They usually don't consider it important enough to explore what the association – or he – did. But at a moment in time on April 19, 1929, the future President left behind a 5-ton algonite stone monument to pioneer mothers in Bethesda, Maryland, that stands there today – not far from where he left it.



In its modern setting, the Madonna of the Trail monument, intended to show the strength of pioneer women, fades into the background in modern Bethesda – and seems very out-of-place.

Photo by Richard Weingroff.
