Tom Pendergast relocated to Kansas City in1894, Missouri joining his brother James who at the time was the owner of the American house a hotel and saloon. James would be very successful and as more wealth came in, he would employee more family. Tom would improve his situation from doing odd jobs to being the bookkeeper for his older brother. James established himself in the West bottoms of Kansas City which boarders of Kansas state line separated by the Missouri River. The west bottoms lacked sanitation and maintained roadways for travel. These establishments were crucial to the West bottoms since the area was railyards, warehouses, immigrants, blacks, packing houses, and white workers who labored in the area. Establishments such as this were important to the area as they catered to men who worked very long hours. They also served as banks for these workers in areas that did not care to tend to the business of these blue-collar workers. James would become very well-known and could extend his businesses outside of the West bottoms and establish himself in the North End of the city where there was another neighborhood of the working-class increasing his name in the town.[[1]](#footnote-1)

With James gaining the following he was elected to the city council and taught his younger brother Tom the innerworkings of the cities political systems and the meaning and advantage of controlling blocks of voters. James would retire in 1910 and pass away the following year after his health made a traumatic turn downward. James was very interested in the city’s beautification movement working in partner with William Rockhill Nelson and other Republican leaders. One of the outcomes was opening the cities union Station in 1914. James served nine terms as alderman on the city council and after his retirement he named his brother Tom as his successor.[[2]](#footnote-2) James called for his brother Tom as the last person he spoke to before his death and made Tom the heir to the political machine that James created.[[3]](#footnote-3)

After James death Tom would serve on the city council until 1916 when his focus changed and his scope broadened with the want to consolidate the faction of the Democratic Party in Jackson County, Missouri. Once the city charter was passed in 1925 the city manager would be selected by a smaller council which Tom was easily able to gain control of the governing body.[[4]](#footnote-4) Tom created a political machine that was very effective in controlling the city as whole. During the time of Great Depression he was able to finance aid operations and worked to create jobs for poor and the working-class in Kansas City who were struggling. Tom also was known for fixing elections to keep his allies in power which in return he would receive government contracts. One of Tom’s most notable loyalists was Harry S. Truman, who received help from Tom to win a county government position in 1922.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Now known as Boss Tom, he would make money from liquor and concrete which he was running T.J. Pendergast Liquor company until Prohibition. Pendergast would often be heard talking about how much money he could make if sold bootleg alcohol, then he would state that he followed the law. But the police in the area would ignore the Volstead Act due to his political influence and not a single felony conviction was ever filed in Kansas City against Pendergast. Instead, he would focus his efforts and connections on negotiating his Ready-Mix Concrete Company contracts. Winning millions of dollars’ worth of contracts pouring City Hall, the Jackson Country Courthouse, Municipal Auditorium, and the headquarters for the Kansas City police department. He would also be awarded a contract to pave the bed of Brush Creek. With Tom gaining so much movement he had his eyes set on a new contract from the six million dollar all municipal road fund. These funds were distributed by the county court and Tom needed to make an ally, so he backed and nominated a new friend for judgeship. This was a sticky place since he needed them to be trusted and could perform their duties for the rural parts of the county. The county was fed up with the judge previously in place by Pendergast. He came across the perfect candidate for this position the previous postmaster who was a store owner and would become the future President of the United States Harry Truman.[[6]](#footnote-6)

1. Kimberly Harper, Stephanie Kukuljan, and John W. McKerley, “Thomas J. Pendergast,” SHSMO Historic Missourians, accessed September 10, 2025, https://historicmissourians.shsmo.org/thomas-pendergast/. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Nancy J. Hulston, “James Francis Pendergast,” James Francis Pendergast | The Pendergast Years, accessed September 10, 2025, https://pendergastkc.org/articles/james-francis-pendergast. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. New World Encyclopedia contributors, "Thomas Pendergast," New World Encyclopedia, https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/p/index.php?title=Thomas\_Pendergast&oldid=1110949 (accessed September 10, 2025) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. New World Encyclopedia contributors, "Thomas Pendergast," New World Encyclopedia, https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/p/index.php?title=Thomas\_Pendergast&oldid=1110949 (accessed September 10, 2025) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Admin, Clio and Anabeth C Laaker on behalf of Kansas City Public Library. "Bullet Hole in the 3rd Floor South Window." Clio: Your Guide to History. May 9, 2022. Accessed September 10, 2025 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Emily Becker, “When Kansas City’s Councilman Was Also the Local Concrete Crime Boss,” Mental Floss, October 5, 2015, accessed September 10, 2025, https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/68756/when-kansas-citys-councilman-was-also-local-concrete-crime-boss. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)