



# SHAPING A NATION

FRANCES PERKINS' ENDURING IDEAS

Written by Heather Hansen  
Portrait by Frances Murphy

In the first 100 days of the Joe Biden-Kamala Harris administration, as the COVID-19 pandemic continued to rage, parallels were drawn between the progressive agendas of Biden and former president Franklin Delano Roosevelt; between the effects of the Great Depression and that of the coronavirus; and between the efforts to mitigate suffering with help from the government. In the past year, hundreds of millions of people have received both immediate financial stimulus and ongoing unemployment benefits, and a New Deal-style public works program (“Build Back Better”) is on tap, along with a “Civilian Climate Corps” to match the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s. The current administration knew what would spark recovery by looking back at programs envisioned and instituted by Frances Perkins, class of 1902.

## Taking the Lead

On her first day as the U.S. Secretary of Labor, in early March 1933, Frances Perkins had to look in a phone book to find her new office. On that momentous day, as the first woman appointed to a presidential cabinet, she’d received no logistical guidance from either the outgoing, or incoming, administrations. “From that point on it was up to me to find the modus operandi. I had to invent and I had to adjust,” she recalled years later. “I had to take the lead, and did.”

Perkins had been sworn into office only the night before, hand upon President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s (FDR) old Dutch bible, in a rushed ceremony alongside the rest of the new cabinet officers. FDR had promised that she could have two weeks after the inauguration to finish up her work in New York, but the national economic crisis was intensifying and now he wanted her on the job immediately.

The country was deep in the Great

Depression following the 1929 stock market crash, and, just as FDR took office, unemployment reached a peak of 25%. Panic was building as droves of Americans withdrew assets — or attempted to — from banks. “We were in a terrible situation. Banks were closing. The economic life of the country was almost at a standstill,” Perkins wrote in “The Roosevelt I Knew.”

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## Cleaning House

On that first day as labor secretary, Perkins found her new headquarters in a rundown, converted apartment building on G Street in Washington, D.C. The offices were dingy and in disarray, with overflowing ashtrays and crum-pled papers littering the floor. “They often talk about a new broom coming in and cleaning house when a new administration comes in. We literally ... had to sweep, clean and get rid of cockroaches before we could do much of any important work. It was very extraordinary — most extraordinary,” she said in an interview decades later.

Perkins was eager to get to the business of easing poverty and shoring up the national economy — and ridding the labor department of corruption and indifference. (The Department of Labor had been established 20 years earlier, but its main responsibilities involved immigration and naturalization, which some of its agents had exploited for personal gain.) But when she arrived at her office, the former labor secretary and his staff were still installed at their desks, with no moving boxes in sight. With boldness cloaked in her characteristic, unassailable courtesy, Perkins suggested she have her predecessor's boxes packed and forwarded to his home while he was at lunch. She told him that, after lunch, the official car should bring him home — and return to the headquarters without him, which it did.

As FDR's labor secretary, Perkins built policies that improved the lives of millions of ordinary working people then and now. She was the chief crafter of many of the New Deal's crowning achievements. Those policies included Social Security, a public works program, a minimum wage, unemployment insurance, the 40-hour work week, and child labor laws.

Ultimately, the New Deal brought safety and stability — and dignity and hope — as it recast the role of government to match human need. Working class people may have been dealt a bad hand, but government could reshuffle the deck and offer them some new cards — a new deal. Perkins called the program, “An attitude that found voice in expressions like ‘the people are what matter to government,’ and ‘a government should aim to give all the people under its jurisdiction the best possible life.’”

Those policies, conscious of human frailty, were new on the national stage. But Perkins and FDR, as governor, had already experimented with many of them in New York state, where they had been successful and popular. “The extent to which this legislation in New York marked a change in American political attitudes and policies toward social responsibility can scarcely be overrated. ... If it could be done there, it could be done anywhere,” she later wrote.

Despite the national recovery she fostered, the first female cabinet secretary endured much contempt.

Throughout her tenure, the press ridiculed her maiden name use and matronly look, calling her “Ma Perkins,” unaware that she'd cultivated her style to appear more like a mother — and less like a wife. Perkins studied the men around her and even kept an envelope stuffed full of jotted insights. “They could take justice at the hands of a woman who reminded them of their mothers,” she concluded.

But in such a high-profile position Perkins' “disguise” couldn't deflect some of her most vociferous critics. During one of her most extraordinary humanitarian acts — trying to find loopholes in restrictive immigration policies in order to admit more Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany — she was vilified by fellow lawmakers. Despite animosity from the U.S. Department of State — the assistant secretary called her “almost an element of danger” — Perkins devised ways to admit an estimated 20,000-30,000 refugees from 1933 through 1940. “She fought a lonely fight,” according to historian Bat-Ami Zucker, who spoke in April at an event hosted by the Frances Perkins Center. “She never forsook her humanitarian credo ... despite a constant barrage of criticism,” says Zucker.

## Shaping an Icon

In the 1750s, Perkins' ancestors settled in Newcastle, Maine, along the Damariscotta River. They were thrifty and determined, farming and running a brickmaking operation. “She came from a family that was steeped in land-based labor and knew what it was to work hard, and to not have a big safety net,” says **Susan Devine Bateson '76**, vice chair and treasurer of the Frances Perkins Center Board of Directors, and a former Mount Holyoke College trustee.

The Perkins family lived for generations on the Damariscotta River, and a lifetime of summers spent there had a profound impact on Frances. As a child, she canoed and swam in the river and walked in the orchard, meadows and woods, naming rocks as she went. She heard family stories of patriotism and tolerance in both the colonial fight for independence and the Civil War. She spent a lot of time with her grandmother's cousin, Union General Oliver Otis Howard (one of the founders of Howard University).

But it was her grandmother Cynthia who had the

most lasting impact. As a girl, Frances would lie on the living room floor and her grandmother would pile books on her chest and have her speak loudly, in an effort to strengthen her voice.

“That tells me that her grandmother saw something in her granddaughter and knew that she would need to be heard,” says Tomlin Coggeshall, Perkins’ grandson. Indeed, Perkins grew to have a rich, clear voice that commanded attention.

The homestead remained a constant throughout Perkins’ sometimes turbulent life. “She came every summer from Washington during her time under FDR and restored herself from what was obviously a pretty grueling job,” says Bateson. Coggeshall, who stayed often at the Brick House, as the family home was known, says, “It definitely has always been a good place for a heart to rest.” The 57-acre site is now a National Historic Landmark owned and run by the nonprofit Frances Perkins Center. The Center bought the homestead in 2020 and has plans to add an education center to celebrate, and emulate, Perkins’ legacy.

Perkins was a complex person who defied categorization, says Sarah Peskin (Smith ’71), board chair of the Frances Perkins Center. She loved a stiff drink but was a terrible cook (in a letter to her class soon after graduation from Mount Holyoke, Perkins wrote that she’d “nearly killed my poor father with my cooking”). “I think it’s very easy for people to say she did such and such because she was a woman, she did such and such because she was a liberal, she did such and such because she was a devoted Episcopalian but, really, she doesn’t fall into any of those neat categories,” says Peskin. Ultimately, Perkins was persuasive, persistent and independent, and empathetic, relatable and humane. “She was really interested in people and listened to them, and remembered them,” Peskin says.

Perkins had a modest, middle-class upbringing. She was born Fannie Coralie Perkins in 1880 in a boarding house in Boston and grew up mainly in Worcester, Massachusetts. Her family were devout Congregationalists who believed, as most people did then, that poverty resulted from “demon rum” and a poor work ethic. Regardless, Perkins said, “From a child on I was always very sensitive to the sufferings of



Photo courtesy of Frances Perkins Center Collection

Frances Perkins Homestead National Historic Landmark, c. 1890.

people from poverty. ... I suffered a kind of vicarious physical agony from the concept that there could be children without clothes and without food.”

During her Mount Holyoke years Perkins discovered that she could do something about suffering. On campus she was known as “Perk,” participated in plays and served as senior class president. She majored in physics and chemistry, giving her analytical training that greatly benefited her later.

The classes on American political economy that she took with instructor Annah May Soule left her with lasting impressions. It was in these classes that she had her first taste of economics — and the plight of the working class. “[Soule] had a brilliant idea of having a class of perfectly innocent girls — that is, innocent of the industrial process — go and look at some factories that were not too far distant from the college. We went to look at paper mills, textile mills and so forth. I was astonished and fascinated by what I saw,” Perkins said. In some places the students witnessed horrific working conditions. “I think [Soule] also opened the door to the idea that there were some people much poorer than other people; that not everybody had comfort and security,” said Perkins.

It was also at Mount Holyoke that Perkins was introduced to Florence Kelley, a social reformer with the National Consumers League (NCL) who came to campus to speak. Perkins learned that one could make a career of reforming the scenes she had seen, and a “great passion for social justice” stirred in her. “I had to do something about unnecessary poverty, unnecessary hazards to life, safety and so on. It was sort of up to me,” Perkins said later. Kelley was an inspiration, and later colleague and confidante, whose counsel Perkins sought on many occasions.

## Putting Up a Bold Front

Even before the Great Depression, Perkins had seen hardship in her decades of social work and public service. In her 20s, she taught at a girls’ school outside Chicago while also volunteering at Hull House, the famous Jane Addams social settlement. There she chased workers’ overdue wages and went on rounds with the district nurse, washing dishes, bathing children and trying to sober up men. Of that time, she said, “I was just on the verge of becoming acquainted

with the world as it truly is.” The period marked a coming of age in other ways, as well. During that time, Perkins legally changed her name to “Frances” and became an Episcopalian, a faith that guided her the rest of her life.

She moved to Philadelphia to investigate exploited immigrants and the cramped “lodging house” and sham “employment services” that entrapped young women — landing from Europe and the American South — often forcing them into prostitution. She met dozens of desperate girls living in basements on bread and bananas, the most filling food they could afford. The conditions appalled Perkins, but the people earned her respect. “The lower classes don’t sit around and pity themselves. They were up and going and trying to get somewhere,” she said.

In Philadelphia one experience left a lasting impression. In 1907, within her first few months there, she was walking home late one night when she realized she was being followed by some men she was trying to put out of business. “It had been raining and I had an umbrella with me. I went around the corner, walking very rapidly. They increased their pace to catch up with me and I turned suddenly and they ran right into my umbrella. It was a sudden turn and I then screamed,” said Perkins. Windows opened, heads popped out and the men ran. “It ... gave me the feeling that if you put up a bold front, people will turn and run,” said Perkins.

During her investigations Perkins had developed a simple formula: get the facts, consult your intuition, then recommend a remedy. That boldness and persistence endeared her to police and city officials who closed down many criminal employment agencies and passed an ordinance to license lodging houses.

## Building a Platform

Perkins continued her education at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School, where she took classes in economics. At the urging of an instructor, she moved to New York. During that time she began to connect the dots from poverty to industry and the distribution of wealth.

As part of a fellowship at Columbia University,

where she earned a master's degree in economics and sociology in 1910, she lived and worked in the Hell's Kitchen area of Manhattan. She studied truancy and malnutrition in public school children and, while visiting some of the city's worst tenements, learned that children often missed school to go to work. Later she moved to Greenwich Village, where her inner circle swelled with influential intellectuals, artists and writers. Each new experience was like another Damariscotta brick laid to build a platform from which Perkins could clearly see the world and what needed to be done.

After Columbia, Perkins joined the NCL, looking into wages, hours and working conditions for women. "They worked interminable hours, literally from daylight to midnight. It was a very serious thing. They were very harassed and very unhappy," she said. During those years, while in her late 20s and early 30s, Perkins went to Albany, lobbying for bills backed by the NCL — limiting women's hours and increasing the age at which children could be employed. This was all before women were allowed to vote, so Perkins

also spent her free time standing on wooden crates speaking on street corners for women's suffrage.

During those years, Perkins also testified about safety in the workplace and workers' compensation, about what she'd seen in sweatshops and unsafe factories — women who had been scalped or had limbs mangled by machinery. Her mission was essentially the same as it had been in earlier work — improve the lives of working people — but her toolbox was expanding. Perkins said she began to understand that "the most important things that we do for labor are the mass protections that come out of law, out of legislation."

Then came the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. It was late March 1911, and Perkins had been having tea with friends on Washington Square when they heard fire engines and shouting nearby. She hustled over to see flames licking out of the 9th- and 10th-story windows. People were perched precariously on window ledges and, said Perkins, "It was just about that time that they began to jump. It was the most horrible sight." The 146 victims were mainly young,

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## HONORING PERKINS AND MHC

BY SUSAN DEVINE BATESON '76

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**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Perkins family brickmaking remnants on Damariscotta River shore; Homestead sitting room; Frances Perkins Homestead today; Frances Perkins and Balto, 1935.



Photos courtesy of Frances Perkins Center Collection (4)



**ABOVE:** Inspecting Golden Gate Bridge under construction, San Francisco, 1935.

## HOMESTEAD FAST FACTS

- Located in Newcastle, Maine
- Includes 57 acres along the Damariscotta River
- Settled in the 1750s by Frances Perkins' ancestors
- Family home, aka The Brick House, built in 1837
- Designated a National Historic Landmark in 2014
- Purchased in 2020 by the Frances Perkins Center
- Forthcoming public education center will focus on preserving Perkins' memory and honoring her legacy

The Frances Perkins Homestead is the “place of the heart” of **Frances Perkins, class of 1902**. A National Historic Landmark, it ranks among our nation’s most significant places. The Frances Perkins Center purchased the Newcastle, Maine, homestead from Perkins’ grandson and sole heir in January 2020 and has commenced work to preserve, renovate and endow this nationally significant property in perpetuity, and to prepare the facility to host tours and educational programs to honor and share the legacy of Frances Perkins. When completed, we will also open the homestead’s important historic landscape for public access.

The Center’s **Frances Perkins Homestead Campaign: Seeking the Public Good** has raised 56% of the funds needed to fund this work. As vice chair and treasurer of the Frances Perkins Center Board of Directors, I am deeply committed to celebrating Perkins at her homestead as one of Mount Holyoke’s sterling examples of living a life

of purposeful engagement in the world — and a testament to the power of public service and commitment to principles.

In fact, with my husband Steve Fuller, I have pledged to match donations and pledges from Mount Holyoke alums to name the homestead’s Education Center “In Honor of Mount Holyoke College Alums.” This Education Center, which will be on the homestead property, is integral to the plans of the Frances Perkins Center for engaging and serving the public.

To learn more about this opportunity to celebrate one of Mount Holyoke’s most esteemed alums and how you can help, please contact me at *bateson.susan@gmail.com*. You also can go directly to the special Invitation to Honor Frances and MHC donation page at *alumnae.mtholyoke.edu/perkins*. Thank you!

immigrant women who had been making spring blouses when a tossed cigarette ignited fabric strewn on the floor. Their only path of escape — a door to a staircase — had been locked by their bosses.

Perkins said later that the New Deal, which wouldn't come to fruition for decades, was born on that day. People from all walks of life were outraged over the Shirtwaist deaths, and she learned that public outcry could drive major change. Perkins chose that moment to cross over from social work to public service, where improvement could be mandated. "The basic purpose in all these things was a moral purpose, really. It was also political because it had to be done by political means. You had to do it by law in order to apply it to everybody," she said.

Already a recognized expert in workplace health and safety, Perkins soon joined the newly formed Committee on Safety (on the recommendation of former President Theodore Roosevelt, who had played a role in sparking her spirit of social justice). That led to the formation, and Perkins' work on, the state Factory Investigating Commission, a powerful

entity that looked at myriad health and safety issues at thousands of workplaces — from bakeries and meatpacking plants to the chemical industry and clothing manufacturers — and successfully passed many laws promoting health and safety.

In 1913, after the commission finished its work, Perkins married Paul Wilson. She did not change her name. Their daughter, Susanna, was born in 1916. Two previous pregnancies resulted in a miscarriage and stillbirth, experiences that led to Perkins volunteering with the Maternity Center Association on improving access to health care for expectant and new mothers. When her husband began to wrestle with bipolar disorder — which continued until his death in 1952 — and after he lost his family inheritance in a criminal scheme, Perkins found herself in need of a job.

In 1919, New York Governor Al Smith appointed Perkins to serve on the high-profile New York State Industrial Commission, the first woman to hold the position. When FDR was elected governor of New York in 1928, he promoted Perkins to state industrial



Photos courtesy of Frances Perkins Center Collection

President Franklin D. Roosevelt meets with his war cabinet, Washington, D.C., December 19, 1941.

**LEFT:** Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins at her desk. 1941. **RIGHT:** Frances Perkins greets President Roosevelt upon his return to the White House from the 1943 Tehran Conference.



Frances Perkins at her desk: Harris & Ewing, photographers (1905-1945), Library of Congress; Photos courtesy of Frances Perkins Center Collection

commissioner, again as the first woman to earn that position. At that time, New York was a great industrial entity, and she oversaw the state's Department of Labor with thousands of employees. Perkins and FDR developed a friendship between equals based on wit, good will, intelligence and hard work. That powerful alliance would ultimately put the nation back on track.

## Great Sea of the Unknown

Shortly after being elected to the presidency in 1932, Roosevelt summoned Perkins to his residence in Manhattan to ask her to serve as his secretary of labor. Anticipating the conversation, she brought with her a "little memorandum" as she called it, cobbled together from scraps of paper on which she'd jotted ideas over the years. It was a list of demands, really, that would reframe the way Americans lived and worked, and she hoped her bold plan would deter him from appointing her. It did not. "I said, 'All right, then that's what we should do. Nothing like this has ever been done in the United States before. You know that, don't you?'" Perkins later recalled. Like the Triangle Shirtwaist

Factory disaster, the Depression offered a chance to be audacious, and she knew that history would not likely give them another opportunity. FDR agreed.

But Perkins still had doubts. She loved her job as industrial commissioner and adored New York; Susanna was a teenager and thriving and her husband's needs were best served there. She would miss her friends, her reading group, her church. In Washington, Perkins would be thrust into the limelight — difficult for a self-described shy, private person. "We New Englanders keep ourselves to ourselves," she told *The New York Times* in February 1933.

When she returned home from Roosevelt's she paced the floors. She sobbed in fits and starts, alarming her daughter, who'd never seen her so upset. "To this day I don't know why I was crying, except that it just seemed as though I didn't want to go. I didn't want to venture out onto this great sea of the unknown. I felt that if I did something that was the least bit outré, or if I made some error of judgment about my political responsibilities, there would be terrible hysteria

against me. ... I suffered with not so much fear that I couldn't do the job on the technical side, but with a kind of dread for all the agony that I knew you would have to go through with it," said Perkins.

There was pressure, both internal and external, to accept the role. "The fact that it was a continuation and an opportunity to extend geographically projects that I knew I had invented and introduced in New York and that had proved successful was what made the post appealing. That attracted my professional pride and skill," she later said. Women she respected also urged her to accept the historic position. "I had been the first woman in the New York state government. I had been the first woman on the board of this and the board of that. So I knew it could be done. ... I had more sense of obligation to do it for the sake of other women than I did for almost any other one thing. It might be that the door would close on them and that weaker women wouldn't have the chance," said Perkins.

The memory of her grandmother Cynthia may have also crossed her mind. When Frances was a girl, her grandmother taught her something important about opportunity. "My grandmother always said, 'If somebody opens a door for you, my dear, if you're quite sure you haven't pulled wires or made arrangements to get that door opened ... walk right in and do the best you can,'" Perkins later recalled. "That stood by me, and I knew that I was going to walk in and do the very best I could."

## Looking to the Future

It was Perkins who, at FDR's side, had the foresight to look beyond the crisis of the day to try to prevent the next one. In a 1935 radio address, she said, "The process of recovery is not a simple one. We cannot be satisfied merely with makeshift arrangements which will tide us over the present emergencies. We must devise plans that will not merely alleviate the ills of today, but will prevent, as far as it is humanly possible to do so, their recurrence in the future."

In addition to FDR's reticence to share the limelight, he often let Perkins stand in the shadow to shield her and her ideas, says Christopher Breiseth, former president and CEO of the Franklin and Eleanor

Roosevelt Institute and current board member of the Frances Perkins Center.

"He did not want her ever to become the issue. There were people who resented her as a woman, and particularly as a woman who clearly had the president's ear, that he did not want to stir jealousy towards her," he says. Breiseth got to know Perkins well in her final years while he was a graduate student at Cornell University, where she taught from 1960 until her death in 1965. At his invitation, Perkins went to live on campus at Telluride House with 30 male students. At that time in her late 70s and early 80s, her repartee remained sharp, and she was a skilled mediator but still tough as nails, says Breiseth.

"If she had been egotistical and called attention to herself, [Perkins] would not have lasted as long as she did," says Peskin. Perkins recalled her strategy for flying under the radar, as described in her first cabinet meeting: "I tried to put no enthusiasm at all into my office, no color, but to speak in a very practical, businesslike, common sense voice. I was trying very hard to do that and not to have a bit of propaganda in it, or any drive or push. I was aware that every man in the room turned and looked at me and looked very hard."

Perkins admitted to having a competitive streak but was adamant that she had never aspired to such an influential position. "The things that I did in the way of social work and social projects, which seem to have been successful, were items I took up because at the moment they moved me very deeply. They seemed right. Nobody else was there to do it [so] I did it," said Perkins.

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