

FRANCES PERKINS

b. April 10, 1880

d. May 14, 1965

U.S. CABINET MEMBER

“Feminism means revolution and I am a revolutionist.”

She established the blueprint for the Social Security Act—considered her greatest accomplishment.

Frances Perkins was the first woman appointed to the U.S. cabinet, serving as U.S. secretary of labor under Franklin D. Roosevelt from 1933 to 1945—longer than anyone else who held the post.

As the principal architect of FDR’s New Deal, Perkins helped write and lobby for legislation in response to the Great Depression. Her myriad achievements include establishing pensions, unemployment and workers’ compensation, a minimum wage and overtime, the 40-hour workweek, child labor laws, new jobs through public works programs, and the blueprint for the Social Security Act—considered her greatest accomplishment.

During Hitler’s rise to power, Perkins facilitated the entry of tens of thousands of immigrants to the United States, two thirds of whom were European Jews fleeing the Nazis.

Perkins studied economics at The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania and earned a master’s degree from Columbia University. She dedicated her life’s work to reforming labor laws, after witnessing the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City—one of the deadliest industrial disasters in U.S. history.

Perkins married Paul C. Wilson in 1913. She had a long, romantic relationship with Mary Harriman Rumsey, founder of The Junior League. The women, both friends of Eleanor Roosevelt, lived together in Washington, D.C., until Rumsey’s death.

In 1945 President Harry Truman appointed Perkins to the U.S. Civil Service Commission, where she served until 1952. She wrote a best-selling biography of FDR, “The Roosevelt I Knew,” published in 1946. She taught and lectured until the end of her life.

In 1980 the U.S. Department of Labor named its headquarters building after her. In 2009 the Frances Perkins Center was established in Maine (her family home) to preserve and promote her work. Her undergraduate alma mater, Mount Holyoke College, offers a scholarship in her memory.



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