

Frances Perkins

Frances Perkins was the first woman cabinet member, appointed as Secretary of Labor by FDR at the beginning of his administration and only one of two cabinet members who served throughout his administration. Frances graduated from Mount Holyoke in 1902 with a degree in social work. She went on to Columbia for a Master's in political science. Frances later studied economics at the Wharton School. In 1913, she married Paul Caldwell Wilson but decided to continue to use her maiden name. Before she could win the right to remain Perkins, she had to defend that right in court. Her birth name was Fannie Coralie Perkins, however, when she joined the Episcopal Church, she changed her first name to Frances.

She worked in settlement houses, including the famous Hull House in Chicago. She was working in New York City when she was a witness of the devastating and famous fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. That experience led to her life-long concern regarding workplace conditions. She worked in several capacities relating to workplace conditions and the plight of people at the bottom of the economic ladder during Roosevelt's tenure as governor of New York.

FDR appointed her Secretary of Labor at the very beginning of his presidency. He made her chair of the President's Committee on Economic Security. In that role, she was largely responsible for developing much of the New Deal legislation. She helped to write the Wagner-Peyser Act which gave workers the right to organize. She developed the Fair Labor Standards Act which provided for a floor for wages (minimum wage), ceiling for hours (40 hour work week). Frances wrote legislation for child labor laws and unemployment insurance. She developed the Civilian Conservation Corps which gave unemployed people work to do and which completed such projects as the Blue Ridge Parkway. And maybe most importantly, she is considered to be the architect of Social Security.

After her retirement, Perkins wrote a memoir of her time as Secretary of Labor called *The Roosevelt I Knew*. The building that is home for the Department of Labor in Washington, DC is named for Frances Perkins. There was a mural at the Maine Department of Labor (her parents' home state) depicting Frances at work. In 2011, the governor of Maine ordered the mural removed. He claimed that complaints had been received in his office that called the mural "reminiscent of communist North Korea where they use murals to brainwash the masses." The mural was subsequently rescued and placed in the Maine State Museum, hopefully now out of reach of her detractors.

The Episcopal Church Calendar marks May 13 as a feast day in her honor.