

Quest Club

“Madame Secretary: Frances Perkins”

Written by

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October 3, 2025

Opening Comments:

Good afternoon fellow Questers, and welcome to the 2025-26 presentation season. I am happy to be here today, and even more excited to share with you all the wonderful things that I've learned about Madame Secretary, Frances Perkins. But before I get started, I'd like to begin with an ice breaker question. -- What woman in American History had the worst childbirth experience? Answer, Frances Perkins, because she spent twelve years in labor! (Downey, pg. ix)

My goal for the next twenty or so minutes is to enlighten each of you with the story of Fannie Coralie Perkins, and to paint a picture of how her tenacity, confidence, courage, loyalty, and fearlessness were key characteristics that helped her to change the narrative in her time. I learned a lot while conducting this research, and I hope that you will walk away from this presentation having a better understanding of who she was, and why her work was so significant in American History. So, let's get started with the epilogue found in Kirstin Downey's biography titled "The Woman Behind the New Deal: The Life and Legacy of Frances Perkins".

“On a chilly February night in 1933, a middle-aged woman waited expectantly to meet with her employer at his resident on East 65th Street in New York City. She clutched a scrap of paper with hastily written notes. Finally ushered into his study, the woman brushed aside her nervousness and spoke confidently. They bantered casually for a while as was their style, then she turned serious, her dark, luminous eyes holding his gaze.

He wanted her to take an assignment, but she had decided she wouldn’t accept it unless he allowed her to do it her own way. She held up a piece of paper in her hand, and he motioned for her to continue.

She ticked off the items: a forty-hour workweek, a minimum wage, workers’ compensation, unemployment compensation, a federal law banning child labor, direct federal aid for unemployment relief, Social Security, a revitalized public employment service, and health insurance. She watched his eyes to make sure he was paying attention and understood the implications of each demand. She braced for his response, knowing that he often chose political expediency over idealism and was capable of callousness, even cruelty.

The scope of her list was breathtaking. She was proposing a fundamental and radical restructuring of American society, with an enactment of historic social welfare and labor laws. To succeed, she would have to overcome opposition from the courts, business, labor unions, and conservatives.

‘Nothing like this has ever been done in the United States before,’ she said. ‘You know that, don’t you?’

The man sat across from her in his wheelchair amid the clutter of boxes and rumpled rugs. Soon, he would head to Washington, D.C., to be sworn in as the thirty-second president of the United States. He would inherit the worst economic crisis in the nation's history. An era of rampant speculation had come to an end. The stock market had collapsed, rendering investments valueless. Banks were shutting down, stripping people of their lifetime savings. About a third of the workers were unemployed; wages were falling' hundreds of thousands were homeless. Real estate prices had plummeted, and millions of homeowners faced foreclosure.

His choice of labor secretary would be one of his most important early decisions. His nominee must understand economic and employment issues, but be equally effective as a coalition builder.

. No one was more qualified for the job. She knew as much about labor law and administration as anyone in the country. He'd known her for more than twenty-years, the last four in Albany where she had worked at his side. He trusted her and knew she would never betray him.

But placing a woman in the labor secretary's job would expose him to criticism and ridicule. Her list of proposals would stir heated opposition, even amongst his loyal supporters. The eight-hour day was a standard plank of the Socialist Party; unemployment insurance seemed laughably improbable; direct aid to the unemployed would threaten his campaign pledge of a balanced budget.

He said he would back her.

It was a job she had prepared for all her life. She had changed her name, her appearance, even her age to make herself a more effective labor advocate. She had

studied how men think so she could better succeed in a man's world. She had spent decades building crucial alliances. Still, she told the president-elect that she needed time to make her decision.

The next day she visited her husband, a patient in a sanitarium. He was having a good day, and he understood when she told him about the job offer. His first impulse was to fret for himself, asking her how the new job might affect him. When she assured him that he could remain where he was and that her weekend visits would continue, he gave his permission.

That night in bed, the woman cried in deep, wailing sobs that frightened her teenage daughter. She knew the job would change her life forever. She would open herself to constant media scrutiny, harsh judgement from her peers, and public criticism for doing a job a woman had never done before. Yet she knew she must accept the offer. As her grandmother had told her, whenever a door opened for you, you have no choice but to walk through it.

The next day she called Franklin Roosevelt and accepted the offer. Frances Perkins would become the nation's first female secretary of labor." (Prologue -- The Woman Behind The New Deal, by Kristin Downey)

Who Was Frances Perkins?

Frances was born Fannie Coralie Perkins, on April 10, 1880, to Frederick and Susan Perkins. Prior to Fannie's birth, the family turned to dairy farming for its sustenance. Her father, Frederick, was educated as a member of the upper class, while her mother, Susan, was admired locally for her skills at animal husbandry. But Frederick wanted a better life for himself and his

family, and off to Boston they moved, where his brother Augustus had established a law practice. Boston is where Frances was born, and Frederick found a job as a retail clerk at a department store. By 1882, Frederick was again dissatisfied with his employment prospects and decided to move the family, once again, but this time to Worcester, Massachusetts, which was approximately forty miles from Boston. Worcester was known as being a location where a “newcomer” could afford to launch a business of his own, and it was there that he and his partner, George Butler, opened a stationery and office supply store. In 1884, Frederick and Susan had their second child, Ethel.

Fannie grew up middle-class in Worcester. The family lived in boardinghouses before they finally settled into a comfortable frame house in an upper-middle-class neighborhood. They were staunch Congregationalists, and faithful churchgoers.

Fannie knew very early in age that she would never be able to rely on physical attractiveness to create opportunities for her future. That message was delivered strong and clear by her mother as they were out shopping for hats one day. In the 1890’s, fashionable hats were slim and narrow, decorated with colorful ribbons and most often topped with flowers and feathers in order to add inches to a woman’s height.

As they were shopping, her mother pointed to a dimple three-cornered tricorn style hat, very similar to the ones worn by revolutionary war soldiers. “You should always wear a hat something like this,” her mother said. “You have a very broad face, and it’s broader between the two cheekbones than it is up at the top. Your head is narrower above the temples than it is at the cheek bones. Also, it lops off very suddenly into your chin. The result is you always need to have as much width in your hat as you have width in your cheek bones. Never let yourself get a

hat that is narrower than your cheekbones, because it makes you look ridiculous.” (Downey, pg. 6)

These words left an everlasting impact on Fannie, and the hat would come to symbolize the plain, sturdy, and dependable woman that became Frances Perkins. She always felt strangely out of step with the women of her time, and came to realize that rather than beauty, she had to find other qualities and skills to help set her apart to help her achieve her goals.

Fannie was considered an exceptional child. She was seen as being unusually verbal and articulate and had much more in common with her father than other members of her immediate family. Fannie’s tightest family bond was with her paternal grandmother, Cynthia, who often cited endless aphorisms about how individuals should behave when they are facing adversity. Fannie spent numerous summers with her grandmother, Cynthia Otis Perkins, who was the center of the family. Later in life Frances explained, “I am extraordinarily the product of my grandmother” as she felt that it was her grandmother’s wisdom that guided her throughout life. As a teenager, Fannie was distanced from both her mother and her sister. Fannie saw her sister as a “moody girl” who was uninterested in academic pursuits. As for her mother, she saw a woman who was basically “plain-spoken”, but peppery to the point of abrasiveness. Susan, her mother, really didn’t understand the extraordinary child that she had in Fannie.

Her father, on the other hand, paid particular attention to his precocious daughter. “He taught the child to read Greek when she was eight and he began to prepare her for college.” (Downey, pg. 9). Please note that during this time, only 3 percent of women went on to higher education, but he made sure that she received the best education by sending her to Worcester Classical High School, along with other affluent children, most of which were boys. She had what was considered an “unusual” childhood, and her parents were conflicted with the way they

chose to raise her. “They were very proud of her intelligence, but ambivalent about what the future might hold for an educated woman” (pg. 9).

Fannie took an early interest in the plight of the poor and unfortunate. She was able to feel the pain of others and lamented their suffering. She saw firsthand how her mother frequently attended to the needs of their poor neighbors and encouraged her daughter to also befriend them. However it is noted that even though Fannie’s parents were quick to provide assistance to the poor, they also felt themselves superior to them. Even still, Fannie wondered quite often on the reasons why some people were poor and others were not. It was when she read the book entitled *HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES*, that her eyes were opened to a “new world”. In this book the author wrote about the one hundred thousand people in New York’s lower east side who are living in homes not fit for human habitation, and thousands of children were abandoned with no homes at all, surviving from street scraps. In addition to this, the increased influx of immigrants which began in the 1880’s was at an all-time high. By 1907, the number had risen to 1.3 million, and the natives were beginning to feel some resentment towards these newcomers. Fannie also took notice. She saw these individuals being abused by the native born, and she saw it as unjust that the very people who benefited from their labor would also despise them. As she grew in her sense of social justice, the treatment of immigrants drew her attention at the same levels as when she noticed the toils of the poor.

Upon graduating from high school, Fannie enrolled at Mount Holyok, a college for women that was close to home. The school was founded as an educational institution to prepare young women to be missionaries or teachers. Tuition and board were approximately \$250 per year, and the women also were required to perform fifty minutes of housework on a daily basis in order to defray some of their expenses. She majored in chemistry and physics but was most

impressed by her American economic history course. She was not an outstanding student, but her social skills set her apart. She had overcome the extreme shyness of her childhood, and her popularity made her a natural leader.

In 1901, a new president arrived at the college by the name of Mary Woolley. Ms. Woolley was one of the first women to graduate from Brown University, was a biblical history scholar and a previous administrator at Wellesley College. She had high expectations for Mount Holyok, as she desired to make it one of the most notable colleges of its time. Woolley was different. She wasn't married and had not felt as if her life had suffered at all because of it. Woolley's life showed the young women that marriage was a possibility for the future, but not a requirement for a satisfying life.

Another woman that was a great influence in the life of Fannie was Florence Kelly, who served as the executive secretary of the National Consumers League. She was a guest lecturer at the college, while also on a national lecture tour to introduce a new organization that she was forming. This organization would be dedicated to abolishing child labor and eliminating tenement work and sweatshops. Kelly was remarkably different from any other women Fannie had met. She was fiery, energetic, infused with idealism, but also pragmatic. She was also one of the most politically radical people that Fannie had ever met. Kelley became Fannie's mentor, friend and guide.

Fannie graduated college in 1902, and unlike most girls who returned home to find work, Fannie was very different, she wasn't the same girl that left her parents' home four years earlier. She was more strong-willed and had a sense of mission. She desired to help the poor and therefore decided not to return home, but instead to travel to New York City, against her parents'

wishes, to seek a career in social work. Her parents saw New York City as a “den of iniquity” and pleaded with her to abandon those plans, but she declined.

When she arrived, her first stop was at the offices of the Charity Organization Society, demanding a meeting with the Society’s director, Edward Devine. When offered an opportunity to meet with other staff members, she refused to meet with them and insisted on meeting with Mr. Devine. After much persistence, Mr. Devine agreed to meet with Fannie. He asked what she wanted to do, and she replied that she “wanted to see the poor, give them help, and untangle their problems.” He found that response to be a very interesting, and asked as a follow-up question which was, -- what would you do if you were sent out to a family who had applied for help, and you came into the tenement to find the father drunk in bed, the children with soar throats and sick, no food in the house. The mother looked disheveled and disorderly, the dishes were piled high, and the mother had just been beaten by the drunk father? She smiled and said, “I’d send for the police at once and have the man arrested, of course”. But that was not the answer he was hoping for. He explained that the best way to rehabilitate the family would be to get the parents back to work, sober them up, and teach them to help themselves. Simply put, he told Fannie, who was twenty-one years old, that she was too young, unworldly, and inexperienced with the work. He went on to say that she lacked judgement and life experience to effectively assist those in need. He provided her with a list of books to read and sent her on her way with an armload of social work newsletters. Disappointed in her first attempt to be a social worker, Fannie returned home. Her parents discouraged her from pursuing graduate school, but to instead begin looking for a suitor and get married. She decided, however, to take several teaching jobs and do some volunteer mission work with her sister. But she desperately missed college. In 1904, two years after graduating, she heard about a opening teaching at a women’s college in Chicago. She

inquired by mail and then took the job site unseen. Fannie was desperate to get out of Worcester, and away from her family, citing that “a prophet has no honor in his own country.”

Immediately upon arrival in Chicago, a major change took place. Fannie changed her name, her faith, and her political persuasion. Sometime before 1904, she officially changed her name to Frances Perkins. There is no clear record as to why she changed her name, some cited that she may have felt that her given name lacked dignity, and carried an unfortunate association with a woman’s posterior. It also was an easy name to ridicule, and she often endured just that when others wanted to belittle or patronize her. She also may have recognized that by having a gender-neutral name, she would have greater employment advantages.

In June 1905, Frances rejected her family’s faith, leaving the Congregationalist Church and joining the Episcopalian church, because she sought a more structured religion with a more formal ceremony. According to authors, the Episcopalian church helped her remain serene and centered at times of stress. The church’s teachings also gave her substantive guidance about the right path to take when confronted with decisions, and the hopeful message of Christianity helped her retain her optimism. Her religious commitment was real, but her switch to Episcopalian also gave her a ready social stepladder.

Did she ever find love? The answer is yes. As with any young person out in the world trying to “find themselves”, Frances had a few encounters with gentlemen that seemed to be heading into long term relationships, but all of them ended up going nowhere. However, in 1910 Frances met Paul Caldwell Wilson, who was from a wealthy merchant family. They began as friends and frequent correspondents, before starting a romantic relationship. He and Frances ran in similar political and social circles, and after they married in 1913, she opted to keep her surname, which was extremely rare and controversial for the time, and she ultimately found

herself in court to defend her decision. It was important to her that she preserved her own identity and had already made a name for herself. She also did not want to affect the career of her husband. Things started off very well for them in the beginning, but in around 1915, things took a negative turn in their marriage as she discovered that her husband was having an affair and had planned on leaving him. However, she discovered that she was with child, and therefore opted to remain in the marriage. Her first pregnancy resulted in a miscarriage. Her second pregnancy resulted in a stillbirth. She gave birth to her daughter Susanna in 1916. Her marriage to Paul had seen some improvements, but unfortunately shortly after the birth of Susanna, Paul began to show symptoms of mental illness, which ultimately resulted in his inability to secure employment or help with household responsibilities. He was in and out of sanitariums, and Frances ultimately became solely responsible for taking care of their family.

Frances' Early Careers in Social Work

It was when Frances was introduced to the Hull House, that she felt as if she finally “found the work in which she sought”. Hull house was the nations leading settlement house, located in what was known as “the ghetto”, and described this way because of the areas overpopulation as well as the fact that the neighborhoods strewn with garbage. Settlement houses “were actually boardinghouses where people lived and ate communally as a large extended family dedicated to civic improvement.” Many social workers and community activists lived there in exchange for working with needy families. This particular house provided job training, health services, childcare, a library and a savings bank, and it didn’t take long for Francis to move from being a drop-in guest worker to a regular visitor and an occasional resident. She was unable to move there full-time because of her obligations as a science teacher

at Ferry Hall, which was an affluent women's college in Lake Forest Chicago. She considered her work at Hull House life-changing. She saw situations firsthand that she had only read about in books, and came to realize how difficult it was to unravel these social problems. She also knew that her family did not care for the work she was doing at Hull House, but one thing was clear – Social Work was her calling. She therefore began looking for a paid position in Social Work.

Philadelphia was her next stop, where she took on a position of general secretary for a group known as the Philadelphia Research and Protective Association. Frances had to raise money to pay her own salary and her research costs, yet she was determined. She often pawned her watch at a local pawn shop in order to make ends meet, only to repurchase it when she received her next paycheck. However, in spite of it all, Frances approached each challenge with gusto. Her research uncovered evidence that not only European immigrant women were being exploited, “but young black women from the rural south were being transported to the city for prostitution”. As a result, she and an African-American graduate from Cornell University built a list of reputable boardinghouses with the hopes of steering these young women away from less desirable places.

She also investigated employment agencies to determine if they were legitimate. She even went so far as applying for jobs and tried them out. She visited more than 165 “fleabag” lodging houses where women were housed, and in which she met many of the lowest-paid prostitutes. It was there that she uncovered widespread overcrowding, and poor sanitation. As a result, she set out and successfully closed four houses by testifying before city public safety officials about what she had witnessed. She often laughed when imagining how her family, ignorant of this seamy side of her life, would react if they knew what she was doing. This work

did not come without its risks. Disrupting the lives of pimps and other criminals had its consequences, and Frances had to face this as well. One evening she was accosted by two men whose business had been disrupted, but Frances fought them off with her umbrella, while shouting out their names. Startled by her actions, they turned and ran. She later prodded officials into shutting down the men's illicit establishments.

France's financial struggles didn't get any better, and she decided to interview women who earned half as much as she did at \$6 per week, doing factory work. They lived meager lives and relied heavily on cash gifts from dinners with men to make their ends meet. Frances and other social investigators realized that such reliance is only a short step from prostitution. She also learned that women were almost always paid less than men, were given the less desirable jobs, and because of their gender, were barred from union participation. It became crystal clear to Frances that she needed to continue her education in order to dispute these economic and labor issues more effectively. In 1908, Frances was given an opportunity for a fellowship at Columbia University, returning to New York, but this time with a job in hand and with recommendations to the people who had previously rejected her.

The Events that Changed Her Life

Several years have now passed, and Frances was serving as the head of the New York office of the National Consumers League. In this role, she continued to advocate for better working hours and conditions for the less fortunate. In 1911, Frances witnessed a horrific event known as the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. This factory employed hundreds of workers, mostly women. The owner regularly kept all the doors and stairwells locked in order to prevent the employees from taking breaks. What was even more unfortunate was that the majority of the

company's fire escapes were not working. When the building caught fire, several tried to escape but were unsuccessful. Just one year prior, Perkins had championed the fight of these same employees for a 54-hour work week and other benefits. But on that tragic day, one hundred and forty-six workers died. Frances, devastated by this, ended up leaving this position, blaming tax legislation for the loss. And at the recommendation of Theodore Roosevelt, she then became the executive secretary for the Committee on Safety of the City of New York, to improve fire safety. Keeping the horror of the Triangle Fire alive was indeed a challenge. She gave speeches where she told the story of a girl who had been released from the hospital after two years of treatment. Stories of two women whose daughters had died in the fire, and how these mothers, suffered from mental collapses and became public charges. And another of a man who escaped by climbing down cables, but injured his back, leaving his family to survive only by his wife's meager wages. In this new role, Frances was instrumental in getting the New York legislature to pass a "54-hour" bill that capped the number of hours women and children could work. She was also able establish the city's first bureau of fire prevention, which created a new kind of government entity – the New York State Factory Investigating Commission. The Commission was "empowered to investigate questionable working conditions around the state, and to recommend legislative remedies". Frances' priorities had not changed much since her days at the National Consumer's League: poor conditions in cellar bakeries, long hours and poor wages for women, child labor, and workplace fire hazards. The Factory Investigation Commission had the same four primary areas of focus, and Perkins' research was the backbone of its investigation.

Fast forward to 1919, when Frances, then thirty-eight years old, managed to find time to help a friend, Al Smith, who ran for and won the seat as the Governor of New York. It was just a few weeks into Mr. Smith's term in office that rumors began about how she might benefit from

his election. It was a colleague that informed her that she would be appointed to be a member of the Industrial Commission. Frances laughed, because in her mind there was “no way that a woman would be named by the governor to hold one of the most coveted jobs of providing oversight of factory conditions. Females still could not vote in national elections, and hiring a woman for any top-flight job was risky”. She heard nothing else about this for at least two weeks and did her best to forget about it. At the forefront of her mind was her need to attend to her ailing husband and their two-year old child. However, she also knew that the idea wasn’t too far-fetched. She had built a strong working relationship with Al, and she knew that she had impressed him with the work that she had done up to this point.

That day came. Al Smith asked Frances to join the commission. He desperately wanted her help. He told her that “it was in terrible condition, and nobody knew better, how to make it more effective.” Frances, however, was very reluctant. She was afraid of making mistakes that might ruin both her and the work that she was doing. Social work and politics were two very different things, and Frances wasn’t sure she wanted to make that type of transition. Downey writes that Frances knew that it would “be a lonely world, separated from female companionship, surrounded by the cigar-chomping, tobacco spitting opportunists in Albany, men she knew would criticize her. She swallowed hard and accepted the position.” (pg. 77)

The New York Times predicted that there would be some backlash with this appointment, and it didn’t take long for the critics to speak. Members of the State Federation of Labor voiced opposition to her nomination, but later publicly denied ever opposing her. Another New York businessmen’s organization protested her appointment stating that she was “too radical”. And others just outright opposed stating that such a highly paid post would not only make her the top-paid woman in government, but probably in the United States. Please note that the position came

with an \$8,000 annual salary, which is equivalent to approximately \$145,000 in 2024. But France's friends rallied around her. They organized a letter-writing campaign which flooded the governor's office. Smith stuck by his candidate, and on February 18, 1919, after thirteen Republicans joined the Democratic minority to support her, she was confirmed in the Senate on a 34 to 16 vote. Ironically, Frances was neither Democrat or Republican, she considered herself more of an independent and hadn't felt the need to change anything because she still didn't have the right to vote. Yet Smith still urged her to become a democrat, and she ultimately registered as such, understanding that a party affiliation would give her a sense for having a "political family".

As her first day on the job approached, she felt a sense of nervousness but decided to go in boldly, and even bought a new dress. She called the head of the commission, John Mitchell, because no one told her when to start work, where to go, and how to go about getting sworn in. He was confused himself, so she told him that she would be there at 9 a.m., and he agreed. When she arrived, he was clearly unprepared for her confirmation and was very uneasy about working with a woman. After searching feverously for a bible to use at the confirmation, which Frances insisted upon, she was sworn in and promptly escorted to the office that she would occupy. She sat down at an empty desk with nothing to do. None of the other commissioners came to greet her, but that didn't deter her, because in true "Frances fashion" she took command of the situation. She started with the staff members that she knew because of her previous work, and asked them a lot of questions, primarily about their jobs. "She learned that the commission did little work, kept no regular calendar, and studiously avoided issues that might produce political heat. . . . she quickly learned who was competent and who was not." (pg. 80) As far as the other commissioners were concerned, she introduced herself to all of them, and most of them

accepted her, but Mitchell himself still harbored ill feelings about her. They were still holding a grudge with her because of a report that she had written in a previous role, accusing the commissioners of moral responsibility for the deaths of workers at a Brooklyn candy factory. She had even circulated a petition demanding that sitting commissioners be replaced and signed her name at the very top of the list. However, to make peace, she apologized, and after weeks of visiting his office almost every day for advice, and deferring to him before taking action, he eventually warmed up to her by listening to her comments and ultimately allowing her to assume more control of the commission's work. Six months into her position, fellow Commissioner James Lynch called Perkin's contributions "invaluable", and also stated, "I am convinced that more women ought to be placed in high positions through the state departments."

Frances: Secretary of Labor (1933-1945)

I opened my presentation with an excerpt from Kirsten Downey's book, "The Woman Behind the New Deal", and it gave insight into Frances Perkins becoming the first woman to serve as the Secretary of labor, a role in which she served in from 1933-1945. "When Franklin D. Roosevelt became president, he and Frances had known each other for twenty-three years, and had been close political allies for almost a decade." (pg. 303) Their bond was very unusual for that time, Because not many men in that era could accept a woman as their equal, but Roosevelt was different, Frances recognized this in him, and because of it, he won her loyalty. Loyalty even during times of difficulty. FDR served three terms as president, and during those three terms Frances tried numerous times to resign from her position. Each time President Roosevelt declined her request.

When Roosevelt started his third term, Frances, again, planned to leave the position. She no longer felt as if her work was of high importance because the country became more focused on war. She believed that her “role of running interference between Roosevelt and the people he had offended, including his wife, had grown tiresome. Ultimately, she sensed that she had accomplished as much as she could. She had grown weary of wielding power.” “The more authority you have”, she said, “the more impossible situations you are going to come up against, and the more your conscience is going to be boiling all the time and keeping you awake at night.” So, Frances again asked for his permission to step down, but Roosevelt wouldn’t say yes, and he wouldn’t say no. He instead asked for some time to think about it. Frances waited and waited, . . . for weeks. Hearing nothing, she solicited assistance from Eleanor, the president’s wife. Eleanor was also hesitant, but it was because she didn’t feel that she would have a chance to speak with him, stating that she rarely has time to speak with him about anything “serious”. However, Frances insisted, and Eleanor ultimately conceded. A week or so later, the answer came in a note from Eleanor. It said, “I have talked with him about it and the answer is no, absolutely no”. She later learned that President Roosevelt felt that in light of everything happening at the time, he couldn’t risk more scrutiny because of her leaving. He was absolutely unwilling to make any changes. He told Frances . . .”I didn’t see how I was going to do it. It’s personal . . . I know who you are, what you’ll do, what you won’t do. You know me. You see lots of things that most people don’t see. You keep me guarded against a lot of things that no new man here would protect me from.” It was then that Frances decided that she would “drop dead in her traces” before she abandoned him, particularly in the face of war. (pg. 311)

People in Washington continued to be mystified by the relationship between Roosevelt and Frances, as their relationship was a troubling anomaly. No other woman, European or

American, before Frances had ever played such a high-profile role in public life, unless within a hereditary aristocracy or because of a sexual liaison. There were some, however, that felt as if they knew the ‘real truth’. In their eyes, The New Deal, which was a significant outcome during Roosevelt’s three terms, was indeed a Frances Perkins creation.

What was THE NEW DEAL?

The New Deal was a series of economic programs and reforms enacted in the United States between the years of 1933 and 1939 by President Roosevelt in response to The Great Depression. The goal was to provide immediate economic relief and to address the financial issues that caused the crisis. Policies were categorized into three areas: Relief – providing direct aid to the unemployed, poor, and farmers; Recovery – focusing on implementing programs designed to restore the economy to a normal level of operation; and Reform – which focused on long-term changes to prevent a future depression by regulating industry, finance, and agriculture.

Frances was considered the “key architect” of the New Deal. Her significant contributions as chair of the Committee on Economic Security included:

- The Social Security Act (1935) which established a system of old-age pensions, unemployment compensation, and federal support for public health and welfare. This act was seen as the “most important act” of the new deal, because this legislation affected the lives of every man, woman and child in the country.
- Fair Labor Standards Act (1939) which established the first federal minimum wage, mandated overtime pay, set a maximum 40-hour work week, and outlawed child labor.
- Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) which provided manual labor jobs for millions of unemployed young men, focusing on natural resource conservation and development.

- Expansion of labor rights, which protected workers' rights to organize unions and bargain collectively.
- Workplace safety and industrial reform.

There were many who attempted to claim credit for the creation of the Social Security Act, but to those closest to the process, Frances was the one most responsible. By 1936, Frances could report that nearly 1 million people were receiving benefits. Nearly three-quarters of a million were old people, 184,000 were dependent children, and nearly eighteen thousand were blind. In addition to this, all states had enacted unemployment compensation laws. On the day of the presidential bill-signing ceremony, Frances appeared happy but anxious. She had just learned that her husband, who as mentioned earlier, was suffering from mental illness, had escaped his nurses care and was roving alone in New York City. The author states, "Frances had dropped from the economic security plan, the one provision that would have helped her personally: national health insurance, which might have covered her husband. Perhaps the thought occurred to her as she traveled to New York that day." (pg. 245) She found her husband Paul later that evening, unharmed.

In addition to this very important work, Perkins also created the Immigration and Naturalization Service, with the desire to create and implement immigration policies to humanize the treatment of immigrants in the US. Her efforts experienced pushbacks, especially in Congress.

Frances: The Legacy

After FDR's passing, she worked for the Truman administration and held that position until her husband's death in 1952. Her government career ended, but she didn't stop there. She

returned to the classroom as a lecturer at the New York State School of Industrial Labor Relations at Cornell University until her death in 1965. She died from a stroke at the age of eighty-five. “Throughout her career, she recognized that fighting poverty improved the country for everyone. She connected with the right people at the right time, navigating a male-dominated government to leverage policies to help improve the lives of the most in need within our country: laborers, children, and widows.” (Kristen Brengel, 2024) Frances Perkins left an indelible mark on American society as a policy visionary, labor advocate, and trailblazing woman. Her work fundamentally reshaped the American labor system and inspired future generations of women to lead, reform, and serve. Her specific impact on women includes:

- Expanded opportunities, which helped normalize the idea of women in leadership, especially in government roles.
- Policy focus, meaning that her reforms disproportionately benefited women, particularly working-class and immigrant women, who were often low-paid and held unsafe jobs.
- Legacy of inclusion by showing that social justice could be pursued from within the system, influencing generations of women to seek change through public service.

What Does All This Mean to Me?

I must admit that when I first received this topic, I had absolutely no idea who Frances Perkins was, but I am very happy to have received this topic. So, I say, to whomever suggested that she be included in the list, – THANK YOU! I, being a woman, an African American woman, in leadership, found this research to be invigorating, encouraging, and empowering. Frances reaffirmed a lot of things for me, but my top five reminders are:

- First, it is important to speak up for and/or act on behalf of those less fortunate, AND that it is ok to be the loudest voice in the room.
- Second, don't shy away from tough assignments.
- Third, loyalty in your work is critically important if you want to make a true difference.
- Fourth, have the difficult conversations.
- Lastly, do not be intimidated if I am the "only one" in the room, because the work must be done. Frances clearly showed that being the only woman in the room was not a "showstopper".

If you are interested in learning more about Frances Perkins, her life and her legacy, I strongly recommend Kirstin Downey's book. Thank you.