

ABOUT FRANCES PERKINS



[April 10, 1880 – May 14, 1965]

Fannie Perkins and her family had a storied past, landing in the United States from Scotland in the 1680s with founding Pilgrims. Her ancestors were so successful in the Brick business by the early 19th century that parts of Maine are named after her forbearers (Perkins Point near Newcastle in SE Maine). In April of 1880, Fannie Coralie Perkins was born in Boston, but she grew up 40 miles to the west in an upper middle-class neighborhood in Worcester as a shopkeeper's daughter. Fannie was unusually verbal and articulate, and learned to read Greek when she was eight years-old. She attended the Worcester Classical High School and then for college went to Mount Holyoke. This was exceptional, for at the end of the 19th century only about 3 percent of women went on to higher education.

One of Fannie's distant cousins was General Oliver Otis Howard who visited the summer Fannie was fifteen. Howard had lost his right arm in the Civil War, and Fannie became his scribe – which she herself found tedious at the time but that she would later “vividly remember.” Howard had founded Howard University in Washington, D.C. and became chief of the Freedmen's Bureau, where he faced a great deal of criticism due to his efforts on behalf of African Americans.

Following completion of graduate school at Columbia University, Perkins held various positions in the New York State government. There she gained the respect from political leaders, although not without facing obstacles. One in particular, illustrated Perkins' independence as well as the mindset of the early 20th century, was her decision when she was married to not to take her husband's name. Politicians, and others, saw this as a sign of her being “a radical.” By 1929, the newly elected New York governor, Franklin Roosevelt, appointed Perkins as an industrial commissioner supervising an agency with 1,800 employees.

In 1933, now President Roosevelt asked Perkins to join his cabinet. FDR nominated Perkins as Secretary of Labor. Perkins went on to hold the position for twelve years, longer than any other Secretary of Labor. She became the first woman to hold a cabinet position in the United States.

As Secretary of Labor, Perkins was largely responsible for the adoption of social security, unemployment insurance, the federal minimum wage, as well as federal laws regulating child labor.

The liturgical calendar of the Episcopal Church honors Perkins with a feast day on May 13. While she grew up as a Congregationalist, Perkins joined the Episcopal church in 1905 and when she did, officially changed her name from Fannie to Frances.

CITATION

Downey, Kristin. *The Woman Behind the New Deal*. New York, Doubleday, 2009.