

This Day in History... February 28, 1933

First Female Cabinet Member

On February 28, 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed Frances Perkins as head of the Department of Labor, making her the first woman to serve on a presidential cabinet.

Born on April 10, 1880, in Boston, Massachusetts, Perkins attended Mount Holyoke College, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in chemistry and physics in 1902. She went on to earn a master's in political science from Columbia in 1910.



Stamp honors the history of organized labor.

That same year, Perkins became well known throughout New York when she served as head of that state's Consumers League. In that role, she fought for improved working conditions and reasonable hours.

After witnessing a tragic factory fire, Perkins decided to leave her office and become executive secretary for the Committee on Safety in the City of New York. In the coming years, she would hold several other positions within the New York government. This included an appointment to the state's Industrial Commission by Governor Alfred Smith. And in 1929, then-governor Franklin Roosevelt made her the first Industrial Commissioner of the New York State Department of Labor.

As head of the New York Department of Labor, several different political factions in the state respected Perkins. She helped make major reforms such as increased factory investigations, shortened the workweek for women, and fought for minimum wage and unemployment insurance laws. She also worked to end child labor and improve safety for female workers.

Having seen how effectively Perkins had performed in New York, newly elected President Franklin Roosevelt wanted to bring her to Washington, DC, in a similar capacity. On February 28, 1933, he appointed her secretary of the US Department of Labor. She was the first woman to ever be appointed to a cabinet position in the US (this also made her the first woman to enter the presidential line of succession). She was officially sworn in on March 4, 1933, the same day Roosevelt was sworn in as president.



Stamp issued for the CCC's 50th anniversary.

As head of the Labor Department, Perkins worked closely with Roosevelt in the drafting of his New Deal legislation, particularly minimum wage laws. In 1934, she served as chair of the president's Committee on Economic Security (CES). In that role, she helped to create the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and She-She-She Camps, a female version of the CCC. And in 1935, Perkins worked on the Social Security Act.

Perkins served as head of the Labor Department for 12 years, more than anyone else in history. In 1945, President Harry Truman asked her to serve on the US Civil Service Commission, which she did until 1952. Perkins retired from government work after that but continued to work as a teacher in New York. She died on May 14, 1965. The US Department of Labor headquarters was named in her honor in 1980.



Stamp issued on Perkins' 100th birthday.



From the Celebrate the Century: 1930s sheet.

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