

This Day in History... May 20, 1899

Birth of Frances E. Willis

American diplomat Frances E. Willis was born on May 20, 1899, in Metropolis, Illinois. She was a pioneer in her field – the first woman to become a career foreign service officer, the first US ambassador to Switzerland, and the first female career ambassador, among other notable firsts.

Willis attended Stanford University, earning a degree in history in 1920. In 1923, she became the first person to receive a Ph.D. in political science at Stanford. Willis went on to teach history at Goucher College for a year before transferring to Vassar College where she was an assistant professor of political science from 1924 to 1927.

In 1927, Willis, realized she “didn’t want to just teach political science, [she] wanted to be a part of it.” Therefore, she left her teaching position and became the third woman in US history to enter the Foreign Service. As she later recalled, “the more I taught, the more I realized how little I actually knew about Government. I decided to find out firsthand what it was like.”



Willis was America's first ambassador to Switzerland.

back to the US.

Willis spent most of World War II as first secretary and consul of the US embassy in Madrid. She was then sent to the US State Department to serve as an assistant to the secretary and assistant head of the division of European affairs. She then went to London in 1947 as first secretary of the embassy. In 1951, she went to Finland where she served as counselor of legation and deputy chief of mission. She was the first woman to serve in this position.

In 1953, President Dwight D. Eisenhower made Willis the first US ambassador to Switzerland. Prior to that, the highest-ranking American diplomat to Switzerland was a minister. Willis is also considered the first woman to become an ambassador by climbing the career ladder. Other women had been ambassadors before her, but they were usual appointed for political reasons, as opposed to their professional qualifications. In 1955, she was the only woman to attend the Big Four Summit Conference in Geneva. That same year she was also the first appointed career minister.

Eisenhower named Willis ambassador to Norway from 1957 to 1961. John F. Kennedy made her ambassador to Sri Lanka (known as Ceylon at the time) from 1961 until her retirement in 1964. In 1962, she became the first woman to achieve the rank of career ambassador. After retirement, Willis served as a delegate to the 20th UN General Assembly's Third Commission on Human Rights and Social Development. She was also head of the US delegation to the 15th session of the Kennedy Round of Tariffs in Geneva and chairman of the University of Redlands Johnston College Board of Overseers and Long Range Planning Committee. Willis died in California on July 23, 1983.

Willis earned several awards during her lifetime, including Woman of the Year from the Los Angeles Times and the Eminent Achievement Award from the American Woman's Association. Additionally, in 1973 the Foreign Service Association gave her the Foreign Service Cup for her “outstanding contribution to the conduct of foreign relations of the United States.”



Willis stamp from the 2006 American Diplomats issue



President Eisenhower appointed Willis to two of her three ambassador posts.

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