

“The Lady in the Hat”

Frances Perkins: The Woman Who Led America Out of The Great Depression
Miniseries pitch by Jan Wilson

Frances Perkins faced the outrage and chauvinist oppression of an entire nation in 1933 when she became the first female cabinet member in US history. But despite dealing with constant opposition from her own colleagues and powerful industrialists Frances created Roosevelt's New Deal policies that brought America out of the Great Depression, all while dealing with an out of control bipolar husband, a bipolar daughter and a secret love affair with another female social reformer.

So if you appreciate having a minimum wage, maximum 40 hour work weeks, overtime pay, social security and unemployment benefits, and not having to do hard labor as a child you have Frances Perkins to thank.



Frances Perkins
Secretary of Labor, 1933-45

Miniseries structure:

This miniseries would cover Frances's story from early life in Maine to New York and ultimately Washington, DC and the White House. **There has never been a more appropriate time to tell this story; today's hot button issues of gender equality, mental illness, gay rights, and politics are all center stage in Frances' amazing life story.** The Trump administration's threats to gut Medicare, welfare and social security – three of Frances's crowning achievements! -- shows modern audiences how crucial these programs are even today. This story will remind everyone of how important these policies are for all Americans and the struggle it took to get them implemented by a woman in a man's world. Frances Perkins is truly an inspiration.

The Story of Frances Perkins and How She Saved America

Frances Perkins would have been famous simply by being the first woman cabinet member in U.S. history in 1933, but her legacy stems from so much more. She was responsible for the U.S. adoption of social security, unemployment insurance, a 40 hour work week, a federal minimum wage with time and a half overtime pay, and the abolition of child labor. Frances' policies were the foundation of Roosevelt's New Deal which ushered America out of The Great Depression.

In the 1930s America was struggling to recover from the Great Depression and citizens looked to the men who led their country for help. And standing right beside their leader, Franklin D. Roosevelt, was Frances Perkins.

With her regal bearing, classic dark suits and ever-present elegant hats coupled with her upper-crust Mid-Atlantic accent and deadpan humor one could be forgiven for assuming that Frances was an upper-class lady of leisure. But this no-nonsense middle-aged woman from Boston turned out to be the champion for every single working class man and woman in the U.S. after the Great Depression.

In her youth her mother instructed her to always wear a wide brimmed hat in order to disguise the narrow upper part of her head. She was rarely seen without a hat and as she inched her way in to the male-dominated field of politics many unwise men would dismiss her as “the lady in the hat.”

In the late 1800s there was a huge influx of immigrants in America and Frances saw them being abused by the native born, and she could not fathom that the people who would benefit from the immigrants' labor would despise them. When she asked her parents why nice people could be poor her middle-class parents gave the standard answer of the day that alcohol or laziness was the cause. Young Frances did not believe this to be true. From the start Frances broke the mold of the demure, stay-at-home woman. Frances' conservative Massachusetts family was shocked when while attending Mount Holyoke College she was mentored by suffragists and progressive reformers. After college she went to Chicago to undertake a dangerous mission of investigating phony employment agencies that lured immigrant girls into prostitution.

Though not yet allowed to vote, she received her master's degree in 1910 in political science from Columbia University. She may have led a happy and secure life teaching college or doing volunteer work if not for witnessing a chilling event that would change the course of her life forever. At age 31 Frances was in Greenwich Village in Manhattan having tea with friends and witnessed the tragic and infamous 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire.



Triangle Shirtwaist
Factory Fire



Frances watched in horror as 47 women and teenaged workers jumped nine stories to their deaths to escape the fire consuming the factory. Ultimately 146 garment workers burnt or jumped to their death due to lack of fire escapes, improper safety precautions and locked gates trapping workers inside. Frances had a new all-consuming passion now: workers' rights and safety.

"I promise to use what brains I have to meet problems with intelligence and courage."

Frances quickly climbed the political ladder by advocating workers' rights and holding many influential positions allowing her to become the bridge of compromise between industrialists, workers and unions.

In 1928 the newly elected governor of New York, Franklin D. Roosevelt, asked Frances Perkins to become the state's Industrial Commissioner. Frances had oversight responsibilities for the entire labor department. Soon she became the most prominent state labor official in the nation as she and Roosevelt searched for new ways to deal with rising unemployment. But in 1929 The Great Depression hit and decimated the country's economy and workforce.

Boldly, Frances challenged President Hoover's placating prediction in 1930 that employment was on the rise and recovery from the depression was in sight. Furious at what she considered a heartless deception, Frances called a press conference and announced that Hoover was wrong.

Frances' confrontation with the White House made front-page news throughout the country. Not only was someone contradicting the President, but a woman! As the Hoover administration continued to make reassuring statements about the economy, Frances countered with statistical evidence of growing unemployment. *"It is cruel and irresponsible to issue misleading statements of improvement in unemployment at a time when the unemployed are reaching the end of their resources,"* she said. After openly criticizing the White House she assumed she'd never be welcome there. How wrong she was.

During her successful rise up the ranks she married Paul Wilson, an economist, and was forced in court to fight for the right to retain her last name. Fight she did, and she won. But as her career was on the rise it seemed her personal life was forever complicated: Paul suffered from bipolar disorder, as did their daughter. So in addition to juggling her duties in public all day she had to quietly keep her husband and daughter's antics under control. Paul spent much of their married life in and out of mental institutions, yet she stood by him until his death. She not only had to fix the economy of the nation but she was also the family's sole financial supporter in a time when most women were not expected or allowed to work at all.

In 1933 France's friend and colleague Franklin Roosevelt risked public outrage and the scorn of his colleagues by appointing Frances – a woman! - as his Secretary of Labor. At first she turned him down, suggesting someone more experienced from the ranks of organized labor would be a better choice. But FDR insisted she accept the position. Frances accepted, but with the stipulation that she would be allowed to concentrate on these groundbreaking policies:

- a 40-hour work week
- abolition of child labor
- Social Security
- a national minimum wage
- unemployment compensation
- worker's compensation
- direct federal aid to the states for unemployment relief
- a revitalized federal employment service
- universal health insurance



August 14, 1933

FDR accepted her stipulation, and endorsed all of her policies. These were the building blocks of *The New Deal* which brought America back to life after the Depression. In the end Frances achieved all but the last one.

"It is a great satisfaction to see the foundation stone laid in a security structure which aims to protect our people against the major hazards of life."

At age 52 Frances was the first female to ever be appointed to a cabinet position in the United States. This also meant she was the first female ever to enter the presidential line of succession. But paving the way for all future females who ever hoped to be seen as equals to men was a thankless task. Though she earned the respect of most men she worked with it was a lifelong battle.

Frances kept to a very plain and sedate style. No makeup, matronly dark dresses, and tri-cornered hats. She had ulterior motives for adapting this fashion sense. In her years of experience she had kept notes on her male colleagues' behavior and kept them in a folder called "Notes on the Male Mind." She noticed that women in politics tended to be accepted by males only if they reminded the men of their mothers, hence her choice of wardrobe.

At her first cabinet meeting the usually assertive Frances stayed quiet, hung back a bit. She only spoke when FDR finally called on her to do so. *"I tried to have as much of a mask as possible. I wanted to give the impression of being a quiet, orderly woman who didn't buzz-buzz all the time. I knew that a lady interposing an idea into men's conversation is very unwelcome. I just proceeded on the theory that this was a gentleman's conversation on the porch of a golf club perhaps. You didn't butt in with bright ideas."* In college Frances had acted in drama class and now used her acting skills to play the part of the wise mother in order to be accepted by her male colleagues, a ruse she deftly used for the rest of her career.

In addition to dealing with a mentally ill husband and daughter there was another reason that Frances guarded her personal life so fiercely. When caring for her family and trying to save the economy of the entire nation became too much she accepted the assistance of Mary Harriman Rumsey, a fellow wealthy social reformer. Mary knew that Frances was doing what would normally be regarded as a man's career and decided to act as Frances's "wife." Mary and Frances lived together in Mary's large home, and Mary took care of all of the domestic "wifely" duties leaving Frances free to focus on her political career. The exact nature of their relationship was widely gossiped about in DC social circles and the two women remained together until a tragic freak horseback riding accident claimed Mary's life. This propelled Frances into a period of mourning for her lost companion but she continued to work tirelessly with FDR on The New Deal despite her devastating loss.

Though FDR had the courage to appoint Frances to his cabinet despite the uproar from both the public and his colleagues there were also some periods where FDR left her to stand alone. There was a later attempt to impeach her by some members of Congress who didn't want a woman in the White House, much less one that refused to back down when wealthy industrialists threatened the union workers. FDR did not utter one word of support for her at that time. Frances and FDR's lifelong relationship had its ups and downs. But Frances always retained her composure when dealing with both FDR and her bipolar husband and daughter.

"I came to Washington to work for God, FDR, and the millions of forgotten, plain common workingmen."

In 1935 the Social Security Act, drafted by Frances, was passed into law. It was a massive success for all Americans, Frances' crowning achievement as Secretary of Labor, and a cause of great celebration for both FDR and Frances. However, what should have been a joyous day was marred by scurrying off to deal with personal issues - Frances' husband Paul had escaped from the mental institution and she had to rush off to deal with that! Her life was one continual push-and-pull balance of personal duties to her family and the needs of the nation.

The amazing social changes Frances made for America is proof of her love and affection for the working-class, but her Boston upbringing made it difficult for her to mingle freely with them and show personal affection. She had a great deal of strife and heartache keeping her husband and daughter out of the public eye, and this prevented her from capturing the public's heart. The public did not understand her desire to keep Paul out of view in order to shield her family from shame and ridicule.



Frances takes her rightful place – center stage – in a room full of men as FDR signs the Social Security Act in 1935.

The controversy of having a woman lead the nation through its most severe depression and the fact Frances had shockingly kept her maiden name after marriage never fully went away. But it did eventually diminish. She gained the respect of most politicians, industrialists and union leaders once she demonstrated that her sex was irrelevant when it came to aiding in getting all Americans basic decent working conditions and fair pay and helping America recover from The Great Depression. The woman initially dismissed as "the lady in the hat" became the architect and builder of some of the most profound social changes in U.S. history.

"The people are what matter to government, and a government should aim to give all the people under its jurisdiction the best possible life."