

# FRANCES PERKINS

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## BASIC BIOGRAPHY

Frances Perkins (1880–1965) was born in Boston and graduated from Mount Holyoke College. After graduation, Perkins accepted a teaching job in Lake Forest, Illinois. While in Chicago, Perkins worked at Chicago Commons and Hull House, two of the oldest settlement houses in the country. Working with the poor and unemployed convinced Perkins that she had found her vocation. In 1907, Perkins accepted a position with the Philadelphia Research and Protective Association where she worked to protect newly arriving immigrant girls, as well as black women from the South, from entering prostitution. She enrolled at Columbia University in 1909 as a Master's Degree candidate in sociology and economics. In 1910, she worked directly with reformer Florence Kelley, who founded the National Consumers League, focusing on sanitary conditions of bakeries, child-labor laws, and fire protection in factories. Later she worked in New York government positions for Al Smith, the first woman to be appointed to an administrative position in New York, and for Franklin D. Roosevelt as New York's state industrialist commissioner. In 1932, as the newly elected president, Roosevelt asked Perkins to serve in his cabinet as Secretary of Labor, making her the first woman to serve in a presidential cabinet. Perkins was a forceful advocate in New Deal legislation, promoting public works programs, Social Security, and the Fair Labor Standards Act. Later, Perkins served on the United States Civil Service Commission. She finished out her career writing and teaching at Cornell University.

## KEY EVENTS

Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire (1911), New Deal, Social Security Act (1935), Fair Labor Standards Act (1938)

## KEY PEOPLE

Franklin D. Roosevelt, Eleanor Roosevelt, Al Smith, Florence Kelley

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Great Depression left 15 million Americans unemployed. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal legislation addressed relief, recovery, and reform to put the American people back to work and to ensure that an economic depression with this magnitude would not happen again. The Social Security Act, passed on August 14, 1945, established a system of old-age benefits, workers' compensation, unemployment insurance, maternal and child health-services, and direct aid to the poor and disabled. The Social Security Act became a landmark of the New Deal and remains active today.



Harris & Ewing, Frances Perkins, c. 1938-1939, Library of Congress (LC-DIG-hec-27059), <https://www.loc.gov/item/2016876015/>

## DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

- Make one copy of the document for each student.
- Before handing out the document, explain that Frances Perkins was the “woman behind the New Deal,” who was instrumental in the passage of the 1935 Social Security Act.
- Distribute or project the excerpts from the radio address Frances Perkins delivered to the American public, introducing Social Security.
- Ask students to read the radio address and answer the questions following each excerpt.

## LEARNING ACTIVITY

- Ask students to connect Perkins' words describing Social Security to the poster images by writing the words of the speech in the space provided next to the posters.
- Direct student to imagine that they are listening to Perkins' radio address on Social Security in 1935. Compose a letter to Perkins, depicting their feelings for new Social Security program.

*Teacher Tip: Offer students varying roles to help understand varying perspectives on this issue (i.e., young worker, factory owner, new immigrant, etc.)*



Harris & Ewing, Mme. Secretary, Washington, D.C., December 11, 1936, Library of Congress (LC-DIG-hec-21834), <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2016870965/>

## FUN FACT

When Baron von Trapp, a heroic Austrian navy captain and father to the von Trapp family singers, refused to join the naval forces of the Third Reich, the family found themselves in danger. While entering the United States at Ellis Island in 1939, the immigration authorities detained the family. Gertrude Ely, a von Trapp family friend, sent a letter to her friend Frances Perkins on behalf of the family. In three short days, Perkins signed the pertinent documents to release the family for safe passage. The family's story is depicted in the musical, *The Sound of Music*. Learn more at: <https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2015/07/18/frances-perkins-aided-the-von-trapp-family-singers/>.

## LOCAL CONNECTION

You can visit the Frances Perkins Center and the Frances Perkins Homestead National Landmark in Damariscotta, Maine. To learn more, go to <http://francesperkinscenter.org/>.

## LEARN MORE

### PRIMARY SOURCES

The New Deal Primary Source Set  
Digital Public Library of America  
<https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/sets/the-new-deal/>

Resources  
The Frances Perkins Center  
<http://francesperkinscenter.org/resources/>

### SECONDARY SOURCES

Bryce Covert, "Frances Perkins: The Force Behind Social Security," August 12, 2010  
The Roosevelt Institute  
<http://rooseveltinstitute.org/frances-perkins-force-behind-social-security/>

Jessica Breitman, "Honoring the Achievements of FDR's Secretary of Labor"  
Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum  
<https://fdrlibrary.org/perkins>



“...No one who is now employed can feel secure while so many of his fellows anxiously seek work. Unemployment compensation, while it has distinct limitations which are not always clearly understood, is particularly valuable for the ordinarily regularly employed industrial worker who is laid off for short periods because of seasonal demands or other minor industrial disturbances. He can, during this period when he has a reasonable expectation of returning to work within a short time, receive compensation for his loss of income for a limited period as a definite, contractual right. His standard of living need not be undermined, he is not forced on relief nor must he accept other work unsuited to his skill and training.

“Unemployment insurance, wherever it has been tried, has demonstrated its value in maintaining purchasing power and stabilizing business conditions. It is very valuable at the onset of a depression, and even in the later stages will serve to carry a part of the burden of providing for the unemployed. For those who have exhausted their rights to unemployment benefits and for those who, in any case, must be excluded from its provisions, we suggest that they be given employment opportunities on public work projects. In these two measures, employment assurance and unemployment compensation, we have a first and second line of defense which together should form a better safeguard than either standing alone...”

1. What group of workers would benefit most from unemployment compensation?
2. When unemployment insurance has been tried, what has it demonstrated?
3. What is the second line of defense in fighting unemployment?

“...I come now to the other major phase of our program. The plan for providing against need and dependency in old age is divided into three separate and distinct parts. We advocate, first, free Federally-aided pensions for those now old and in need; second, a system of compulsory contributory old-age insurance for workers in the lower income brackets, and third, a voluntary system of low-cost annuities purchasable by those who do not come under the compulsory system. For those now young or even middle-aged, a system of compulsory old-age insurance will enable them to build up, with matching contributions from their employers, an annuity from which they can draw as a right upon reaching old age. These workers will be able to care for themselves in their old age, not merely on a subsistence basis, which is all that gratuitous pensions have anywhere provided, but with a modest comfort and security. Such a system will greatly lessen the hazards of old age to the many workers who could not, unaided, provide for themselves and would greatly lessen the enormous burden of caring for the aged of future generations from public funds. The voluntary system of old-age annuities is designed to cover the same income groups as does the compulsory system, but will afford those who for many reasons cannot be included in a compulsory system an opportunity to provide for themselves...”

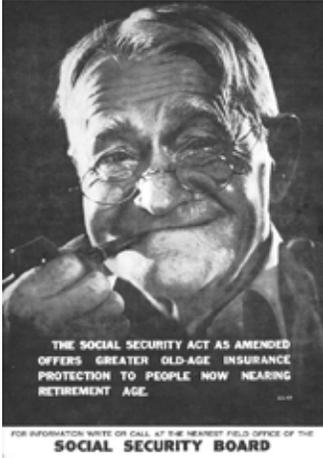
1. What is the major phase of the social insurance program?

2. What are the three parts of the old age pension program?

3. What are social security pensions supposed to lessen?

# POSTER SERIES, MORE SECURITY FOR THE AMERICAN PEOPLE, 1939

## **MORE SECURITY FOR THE AMERICAN FAMILY**



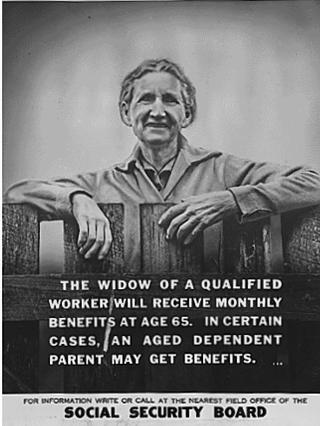
Response One:

## **MORE SECURITY FOR THE AMERICAN FAMILY**



Response Two:

## **MORE SECURITY FOR THE AMERICAN FAMILY**



Response Three: