

# WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH

## A Civics In Real Life Series

### FEMALE FIRSTS

### FRANCIS PERKINS



To date, no woman has held the title of President of the United States although [65 women](#) have directly influenced or shaped presidential decisions by holding cabinet or cabinet level positions. Twelve presidents have appointed women to cabinet or cabinet level positions since the first woman was appointed by [President Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) in 1933. That “female first” belongs to [Frances Perkins](#). Born in 1880, Perkins grew up living in Massachusetts and Maine in a strict conservative family. Although Perkins would later develop her own values, which in many ways differed from her family, her childhood still played a large role in shaping her future. Developing a passion for social reform while in college, Perkins spent the years after graduation in America’s largest cities attempting to turn her passion into a career. On March 25, 1911, Perkins would bear witness to the horrific [Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire](#), which she would later claim was “the day the New Deal was born.” In the aftermath of the fire, on the recommendation of former president [Theodore Roosevelt](#) (a distant cousin of Franklin Roosevelt), Perkins was named executive secretary of the Committee on Safety which successfully pushed for groundbreaking laws to regulate the workplace. In 1918, New York Governor Al Smith appointed Perkins to the New York State Industrial Commission. She was the first woman to be appointed to an administrative position in the New York state government and, with an annual salary of \$8000, the highest paid woman ever to hold public office in the United States at that time. After Smith, newly elected New York governor Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed Perkins as the state’s Industrial Commissioner and together they fought rising unemployment as the [Great Depression](#) began. When Roosevelt was elected president in 1932, he chose Perkins as his Secretary of Labor, putting her ideas to a national test. As [secretary](#), Perkins advocated a 40-hour work week; a minimum wage; unemployment compensation; worker’s compensation; abolition of child labor; direct federal aid to the states for unemployment relief; Social Security; a revitalized federal employment service; and universal health insurance. As the first woman in the nation to serve in a presidential cabinet, she would achieve all but one of these policy goals. Serving throughout Roosevelt’s presidency, Perkins’ ideas and work can be seen in almost every element of the [New Deal](#), each of which continue impacting our lives today. In addition to leading the nation through the most serious economic crisis in U.S. history, she also served a vital role navigating [labor issues](#) during WWII. Perkins was reappointed to a different cabinet level position under Roosevelt’s successor, President Harry S Truman. Serving in that role until 1953, Perkins would retire to a teaching career at Cornell University. Her status as a “female first” made way for the nation’s second female cabinet member, [Oveta Culp Hobby](#), in 1953. As of today, 12 women serve in President Joe Biden’s cabinet.

### Civics Challenge: Search & Learn

Number of cabinet posts that have been filled by women:	
Cabinet position women have held the most:	
Cabinet position women have held the least:	

To complete the table and learn more: [Rutgers University - Women Appointed to Presidential Cabinets](#)



Lou Frey  
Institute