

Testimony for LD 440
An Act to Conserve the Frances Perkins Homestead National Historic Landmark
Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
130th Maine Legislature
Wednesday, March 3, 2021
Michael Chaney, Executive Director
Frances Perkins Center

Senator Daughtry, Representative Brennan and other distinguished members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Michael Chaney, resident of Alna and Executive Director of the Frances Perkins Center in Newcastle. I am pleased to have this opportunity to testify in support of bill LD 440, *An Act to Conserve the Frances Perkins Homestead National Historic Landmark*.

One year ago, January, with financial support from hundreds of private donors-the majority Maine residents- the Frances Perkins Center purchased the Frances Perkins Homestead National Historic Landmark to preserve and protect this historically significant asset, making it available for public access in perpetuity.

The Perkins family homestead is an important Maine landmark, not only for helping to document how this place inspired the nationally significant leader of Frances Perkins, but also to tell the story of how generations of a single family's made a living in Midcoast Maine starting in the mid-1750's before Maine was even granted statehood in 1820, through to 2020 when the property transitioned from Frances Perkins' sole heir to our nonprofit organization. Our plan is to ensure that future generations of Americans — all beneficiaries of the innovations Perkins pioneered — will be able, through place-based education programs, to discover and learn about Frances Perkins' lifetime of achievements stemming from her conviction that “The people are what matter to government, and a government should aim to give all people under its jurisdiction the best possible life,” and how early residents of Maine were able to make a living in this part of the world.

The Homestead's significance is also evident by its history of receiving state and national recognition as a significant historic property spanning the past 44 years:

1. Registered as a National Historic Landmark (2014)
2. Registered as the Brick House Historic District (2009) on the National Register of Historic Places -- recognizing areas of significance (industrial and agricultural history, archaeology, architecture).
3. 53-acres put into conservation and continuous management by Coastal Rivers Conservation Trust of Damariscotta and Midcoast Maine (1990's)
4. The architectural significance of the house is reinforced by its inclusion in the Historic American Building Survey (HABS) in 1960, and
5. Selected as a representative example of its style in Maine Forms of American Architecture (1976)

With our transition as owners of the Frances Perkins Homestead last year, the Frances Perkins Center became eligible to apply to the National Park Service for a **Save America's Treasures grant** to help us move forward with preservation efforts for this historic property. Last August, we received a \$500,000 grant in response to the application, another credential demonstrating the true significance of the Maine property to the nation as a whole. The grant requires matching funds to which a state appropriation will better help us meet while also providing state support and partnership to our conservation efforts to ready the Homestead for public access.

The Perkins Family Homestead is a 57-acre saltwater farm located on the banks of the Damariscotta River in Newcastle, Maine. It is the ancestral home and lifelong summer residence of Frances Perkins, U.S. Secretary of Labor 1933-45, the nation's first female cabinet secretary and one of its most effective public servants. Settled by the Perkins family in the mid-18th century, the Homestead comprises a well-preserved 1837 Brick House and connected barns that sit on 57 acres within a protected landscape of fields and forest bounded by 2.8 miles of picturesque stone walls, pastures and woodland, the remains of 18th and 19th century home sites, and remnants of wharves, clay pits, and kilns connected with the family's early 19th century brick-making business. The farmhouse contains a prodigious number of artifacts maintained by generations of the Perkins family and includes photographs, documents, furniture, and other memorabilia. Ownership of Perkins' Homestead, memorabilia, and well-preserved cultural landscape enables us to teach how this place shaped not only Perkins as someone dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans but also offers a place where the social and economic history of New England can be interpreted.

Following projected two years of repair, renovation, and site work, the Center will expand Homestead tour offerings at the site and will adapt its facilities for lectures, workshops, courses, history tours, regional school programs, internships for undergraduates, and graduate study opportunities. Included will be classrooms, meeting spaces, a library, facilities for archival work, and exhibition spaces.

The Frances Perkins Center raised \$2M to cover the cost of acquisition and associated property transition fees. An appropriation from the Maine State legislature will help us with necessary renovations, making it possible for us to open the property for public access as well meet the matching funds requirement of the Save America's Treasures grant. To date, we have raised nearly \$1.1M of the \$1.5M needed to complete repairs to the historic structure and to complete site work for safe entry, parking, and accessibility to the buildings. Among the funds raised is the \$500,000 Save America's Treasures grant from the National Park Service that grant requires an \$824,000 match from the Frances Perkins Center. Again, the state appropriation would be very helpful in completing the match requirement.

The public's response to Center programs and activities during its first decade, founded in 2009, has been outstanding. The number of visitors, over 1,000 annually pre-COVID, and academic partnerships have grown, and financial annual support is increasing. The Center serves Mainers across ages and populations through its public school and senior college education courses, Homestead tours, a travelling exhibit, permanent exhibition space in Damariscotta, public outreach programs, and college internship opportunities. Our expansion into virtual programming arising out of COVID in-person restrictions has increased participation numbers significantly. An annual Garden Party that hosted 125 participants was presented virtually to a live audience of about 600 participants. With our expanded reach there is expressed increased interest in visiting the Homestead and open and ready for public, in-person, access – adding a nationally significant destination place to the state's tourism offerings.

In summary, state appropriations as presented in bill LD 440 will

1. Leverage the Save America's Treasures National Park Service \$500,000 grant
2. Partner with local and national alliances already established with the Homestead
3. Make available for public access a state landmark
4. Provide a place-based education and outdoor history center for future generations of Americans