



Our Heritage, Our Legacy

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**Testimony of Greg Paxton, Executive Director, Maine Preservation
In support of L.D. 440**

An Act to Conserve the Frances Perkins Homestead National Historic Landmark

Senator Daughtry, Representative Brennan and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, I'm Greg Paxton, Executive Director of Maine Preservation.

Maine Preservation is a statewide non-partisan, nonprofit membership organization that as our mission, promotes and preserves historic places, buildings, downtowns and neighborhoods, strengthening the cultural and economic vitality of Maine communities.

We help Mainers preserve the historic properties that form the backbone of communities throughout the state, last year consulting on 150 projects. We help employ the historic rehabilitation tax credits which have brought the state \$600 million dollars invested in 130 privately financed projects across Maine that have rehabilitated 23 abandoned schools and 15 mills, creating new businesses and 2,200 apartments, 1,400 of which are affordable housing. And we are the state's nonprofit leader in helping bring new life to deteriorated but well-built historic buildings that need contemporary use.

Set back from the Damariscotta River in Newcastle is an 1837 two-story Greek Revival saltwater farmstead. This brick house and connected barn sit among 57 acres of sprawling fields, wooded groves and stone walls on property that has been home to the Perkins family for 270 years. Frances Perkins, who summered there from 1880-1965, devoted her life to public service, most famously as the U.S. Secretary of Labor from 1933-1945, the nation's first female cabinet member. She is credited as the architect of key provisions of the New Deal, including Social Security, the minimum wage, standardizing the 40-hour work week, banning child labor, and developing the nation's unemployment insurance and worker compensation systems. Throughout her life she both lived and found respite at her family's farm.

The national significance of the property is documented by its being recorded in the Historic American Building Survey in 1960 and its designation as a National Historic Landmark in 2014, the highest designation of a historic property that is not a National Park. The property was acquired in January 2020 by the nonprofit Frances Perkins Center.

Typically, we do not recommend establishing new nonprofit museums, because they are difficult to finance and establish, raise ongoing operating funding and attract sufficient

interest to keep open. The proposal to complete the Frances Perkins Homestead is a noteworthy exception. To support these efforts, Maine Preservation listed the Frances Perkins Homestead on our 2018 Most Endangered Historic Places list to help bring attention and publicity to the fundraising of the center.

The Frances Perkins Center has a distinguished Board of Directors including Mainers and nationally prominent representatives. It was established more than 10 years ago and has three staff members. The Center has demonstrated that it is an institution that has the ability, outreach and capacity to carry out its ambitious program. And like Margaret Chase Smith, Edmund Muskie and other distinguished Mainers, Frances Perkins is a nationally prominent figure that all of us should be proud of and seek to honor here in Maine. WE all share our heritage and that is why historic preservation regularly receives bipartisan support. We believe the Center has done the appropriate studies, planning, and outreach to accomplish its goals.

The Center is preserving the Perkins Family Homestead for public use through the restoration of the Homestead and surrounding property, and by conducting educational programming related to Perkins. While the principal structures of the homestead have survived nobly over 180 years, substantial updates are required.

The national significance of the site is further documented by the Center receiving a \$500,000 Save America's Treasurer's grant. This grant is restricted to only nationally important sites, and they also gave the Perkins Center the maximum grant allowed, which has to be matched. Unlike New Hampshire, Vermont, New York and many other states, Maine does not have a grant program for historic properties, which we sorely need. Thus this project has to come to you individually to seek State help in matching these federal funds.

We at Maine Preservation have been administering \$430,000 in grant programs over the past two years, but given the great demand, have had to turn away more worthy projects than we have funded.

The use of the Frances Perkins Homestead as a historic site open to the visiting public with place-based educational activities will generate tourism, publicity and additional cultural interest in keeping with the character and charm of the nearby centers of Newcastle and Damariscotta, bringing economic benefit to Lincoln County.

Maine Preservation strongly supports LD 440 to appropriate \$100,000 to the Maine Historic Preservation Commission to aid the restoration of the Homestead.

Thank you for your careful consideration.