

STATEMENT OF SARAH PESKIN, BOARD CHAIR, FRANCES PERKINS CENTER

**LD440: AN ACT TO CONSERVE THE FRANCES PERKINS HOMESTEAD
NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK**

March 3, 2021

Good afternoon. I'm pleased to be speaking to you from my home in Walpole, Maine, across the Damariscotta River from the Frances Perkins Homestead. When I retired here in 2009 after a 30-year career with the U.S. Department of the Interior and the National Park Service, I was aware of her significance, but had no idea that the place she loved so dearly and considered home was so close by.

When I was approached by friends to lend a hand to their efforts to save what they referred to as "The Brick House" I pictured a huge decaying mansion, and I politely declined. They persisted, and asked me to at least come take a look at the place and to come to a meeting of the board then getting organized to recognize Frances Perkins and her legacy of service to the American people.

Turning off the River Road in Newcastle and approaching this modest but well-tended farmstead in a style termed "big house, little house, back house, barn" by architectural historians, I was transported into the world where Frances Perkins found respite from her grueling duties as our nation's first woman cabinet secretary. The house was filled with her furnishings and memorabilia and surrounded by the fields and woods she knew well. It was built in 1837 from bricks fired on site, from clay dug from the shores of the Damariscotta River by her family's brickworks, one of many that once formed part of the region's agricultural economy.

I was impressed that this small group of friends had done their homework and was getting help from the Maine State Historic Preservation Office, and that a National Register nomination was being prepared by Christi Chapman-Mitchell. When I eventually succumbed to their requests to join this new and ambitious organization, it was clear to me that this property had the potential for being designated as a National Historic Landmark – the highest honor given to privately-owned historic places in the United States – the top 3% of all National Register listings. Building on Christi's research, I prepared the extensive additional documentation and underwent the peer review required for the Secretary of the Interior to make this designation in 2014.

It has also been my privilege to work with my board colleagues – several of whom are with us today – and our executive director Michael Chaney – to develop preservation plans and strategies to acquire this 57-acre property and to make it safe and welcoming to the public. These plans have been used to bring in substantial private funding from individuals and foundations and allowed us to acquire the property and its associated collections from the last surviving member of the Perkins family.

As a National Landmark, we became eligible for a Save America's Treasures grant, which I'm pleased to say we were awarded, based largely on our proven record of following best preservation practices for research, documentation, and treatment of nationally significant places. Of course this recognition comes with it a responsibility for the Frances Perkins Center to match

the federal dollars, which we are well on our way to getting done. Mr. Chaney can expand on the status of our fund raising.

This project has become a labor of love for many of us, and is continuing to attract the attention of visitors who come here to learn about an iconic American as they enjoy our interactive tours of the house and landscape Frances Perkins knew well. Tours will resume when current preservation construction is complete.

I am proud that this project has a great deal of local support from neighbors, the town of Newcastle, Lincoln County residents, Coastal Rivers Conservation Trust, and other statewide organizations. Obtaining support from the State of Maine would be appropriate and welcome and would demonstrate a true partnership through which we might celebrate the legacy of Frances Perkins – a woman widely acknowledged as the mother of the modern American social safety net.