

FRANCES KELLOR

b. October 20, 1873

d. January 4, 1952

SOCIAL ACTIVIST

“No effective program can be made until we set our own house in order.”

Frances Kellor was an American social reformer dedicated to women’s issues and immigrants.

Frances Alice Kellor was an American social reformer dedicated to women’s rights and immigration issues. She spent her life advocating for workers and the naturalization of immigrants.

Kellor served as both secretary and treasurer of the New York State Immigration Commission and chief investigator for the state Bureau of Industries and Immigration. She also served as managing director of the North American Civic League for Immigrants and oversaw the American Association of Foreign Language Newspapers. Kellor cofounded the National Urban League.

Kellor grew up in Michigan, raised by a single mother. She earned money hunting with a slingshot and a rifle. After lack of money forced her to drop out of high school, she worked at a local newspaper. A few years later, two wealthy sisters invited Kellor to live with them and paid for her education.

In 1897, 23 years before women won the right to vote, Kellor became one of the first women to graduate from Cornell Law School. She later studied at the University of Chicago and the New York School of Philanthropy. For a time she lived at Hull House, the famous settlement house in Chicago, where she became interested in many of the issues that shaped her lifetime of advocacy.

A lifelong progressive and proponent of education, Kellor believed social change could be accomplished if more women and immigrants had the same opportunities as American-born white men. She studied the cause and effect of imprisonment rates of poor black women in the South and the economic conditions that led to crime. She founded the National League for the Protection of Colored Women, and she worked to eradicate poverty, to end prostitution and to provide education in urban areas. She went undercover to expose poor management decisions that endangered workers’ rights and safety.

During World War I, Kellor directed the National Americanization Committee (NAC), a group advocating English language education for immigrants. She believed that better communication skills would help them avoid workplace accidents and grow professionally. She also worked to get suffrage into the national party platforms.

Kellor never married. She enjoyed a long relationship with Mary Dreier, a fellow progressive in New York City. Together they created the Inter-Municipal Committee on Household Research, a group dedicated to protecting domestic laborers, and the Bureau of Industries and Immigration, which served as an arbiter between employers and workers throughout the country. The women shared a home in New York for 47 years, until Kellor’s death in 1952.



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