

## Harold Ickes

Harold Ickes was the administrator of the Public Works Administration (PWA) from 1933 to 1939 and Secretary of the Interior from 1933 to 1946. He was a major force driving the New Deal, impeccably honest, and intolerant of civil and human rights abuses. He was also a fiery and irascible leader. In recognition of his personality, he titled his memoirs, *The Autobiography of a Curmudgeon*.



Ickes grew up in poverty, had an inattentive father, and was somewhat introverted. When Harold was sixteen, his mother died, and he moved to Chicago to live with their aunt and uncle. With the strong support of a teacher, Agnes Rogers, he earned good grades, became class president, improved his public speaking, and eventually enrolled at the University of Chicago. Unfortunately, college was not a pleasant experience. Though he earned his bachelor's degree in 1897, the cost of tuition and financial strain during those years left a lasting scar. He would later suggest, "...that the price I paid for my education was too high and that, if I had to do it over again, I would not undertake it".

After college, Ickes began working as a newspaper reporter, ending up at the *Chicago Tribune*. It was during these years, 1898-1902, that he developed an intense interest in politics. Ickes then earned a law degree from the University of Chicago Law School. He found legal work uninteresting, however, and "practiced infrequently." In 1912 he began pursuing a political career. Over the next two decades, he would promote and work with a wide variety of political parties: Republicans, Bull Moosers, independent Republicans, LaFollette-progressives and New Deal Democrats.

As administrator of the PWA, Ickes oversaw the funding of thousands of large infrastructure projects all across America, including bridges, dams, airports, hospitals and highways. He was an enthusiastic advocate for public works, heralding the many direct and indirect benefits they yielded to employment, economic recovery and regional development. As Secretary of the Interior, he was also responsible for many government agencies critical to the New Deal, including the Bureau of Reclamation, National Park Service, Office of Indian Affairs, and Division of Territories.



Ickes was a firm defender of the disadvantaged, victimized and racialized. As Secretary of the Interior he helped eliminate a whites-only hiring system for support staff in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)

**The CCC employed millions of unmarried men on projects in rural areas owned primarily by federal, state and local governments.**

and worked to improve conditions on American Indian reservations. During World War II, he proposed that Jewish refugees escaping the Nazis be given safe haven in the Virgin Islands or Alaska, and when Japanese Americans were sent to internment camps, he described the policy as “both stupid and cruel” and wrote to President Roosevelt that the camps were turning “thousands of well-meaning and loyal Japanese into angry prisoners.”

President Harry Truman eulogized Ickes: *“A unique figure in American public life...Forthright and fearless, loyal always to the public interest...He was withal a true patriot and a many-sided citizen whose passing leaves a void in our national life not easily filled.”* Today, Americans still utilize thousands of infrastructure projects constructed under the supervision of Harold Ickes.



**Ickes sits with singer Marian Anderson, who performed a concert on April 9, 1939 at the Lincoln Memorial. Anderson had previously been denied a booking at Constitution Hall because of her race.**

- **[Letter from Louise E. Jefferson](#) to Secretary Harold Ickes Regarding Marian Anderson's Concert**
- *“What constitutes an American? Not color nor race nor religion...Not his social status nor his bank account...An American is one who loves justice and believes in the dignity of man. An American is one who will fight for his freedom and that of his neighbor. An American is one who will sacrifice property, ease and security in order that he and his children may retain the rights of free men. Americans have always known how to fight for their rights and their way of life.....We Americans know that freedom, like peace, is indivisible.”*
- *“This is what the "New Deal" means to me, an era of acute social consciousness and realization of mutual responsibility, a time of reciprocal helpfulness, of greater understanding and willingness to work together for the good of all.”* - **Speech to the Associated General Contractors of America, 1936**