

The Indomitable Col. Frank Knox, Once New Hampshire's "Adopted" Favorite Son



Born in Boston, William Franklin "Frank" Knox (1874-1944) was a colorful publisher and political personality. In 1912 he moved to New Hampshire from Michigan, where he had been active in politics and publishing, to found the *Manchester Leader*, an evening paper, with partner John Meuhling and the financial help of then-Governor Robert P. Bass. Knox and Bass were part of the growing Progressives Movement and supporters of Teddy Roosevelt's campaign that year for another term in the White House, this time under the "Bull Moose" ticket.

Knox was close to Roosevelt since the days he was a buck private in Roosevelt's "Rough Riders" during the 1898 Spanish American War, fighting with the future president in the battles of Las Guasimas, and San Juan Hill. The "Rough Riders" was actually commanded by New Hampshire native, Colonel, later General Leonard Wood. Roosevelt was second in command. Ironically, years later, Knox editorials in his Manchester papers would boost Wood's candidacy for president in the 1920 New Hampshire First-in-the-Nation Presidential Primary, which Wood won handily.

In World War I Knox saw service in France as a Major in an Army munitions division. After the war he was commissioned a colonel in the U.S. Army Reserve, holding the commission on the inactive list until his death.

In 1913, Knox purchased the rival *Manchester Morning Union*, and with it became the owner of became New Hampshire's only state-wide newspaper.

In 1927 Knox was appointed general manager of the Hearst newspaper chain, but left Hearst in 1930 to buy controlling interest in the *Chicago Daily News*, maintaining ownership of his New Hampshire papers, with residences in both New Hampshire and Chicago.

Knox ran for Governor of New Hampshire in the Republican Primary of 1924, losing to John Gilbert Winant of Concord, an English teacher at St. Paul's School, who had made a name for himself in the NH House and state Senate. Winant was the first three term governor in modern times before joining the New Deal as FDR's first head of the Social Security Administration, and later U.S. Ambassador to England during World War II, while nevertheless all the while remaining a Republican.

Knox sought the nomination for President at the 1936 Republican Convention, with the unanimous support of the New Hampshire delegation, chaired by Governor Styles Bridges. As the youngest governor in the nation, winning as a Republican in the Democratic sweep four years earlier, Bridges himself was eyeing the nomination with strong support from national young Republicans.

Kansas Governor Alf Landon easily won the nomination, however, thus Knox left the convention early while a push was underway to place him second place on the ticket, which he declined, considering it a long-shot. While driving home with his wife, he was therefore surprised by a radio news report that he indeed had been nominated as vice president. Knox would often say he was “the most reluctant candidate there ever was.”

The Landon-Knox ticket lost in one of history’s memorable landslides, twinning only two states, Maine and Vermont.

By the spring of 1940, Roosevelt saw the need for a coalition war cabinet as the war in Europe escalated. Among several other Republicans joining the administration, Knox was named Secretary of the Navy because of his strong support of the European Allies and Roosevelt’s Lend Lease program. Knox took office on July 11, 1940, sworn in by Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter in the Oval Office.

Answering criticism of this unlikely alliance with FDR, Knox observed, "I fought the President with every resource at my command. But now I've squared my politics with my conscience and I'm proud to serve under such a great man, at that," adding, "it's a good thing to have a couple of fellows around here who *aren't* New Dealers!"

Following the December 7, 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Knox visited the base two days later, resulting in a secret report he hand-delivered to President, indicating the admirals in Hawaii were never informed of intelligence held in Washington that “a surprise move” by the Japanese was imminent. With the U.S. fleet decimated, Knox was later criticized with others for calling for the internment of Japanese U.S. citizens as a result of the attack.

Following a series of heart attacks, beginning after attending the funeral in Manchester of his former newspaper partner and friend, John Meuhling, Knox died in Washington, D.C. on April 28, 1944, and buried with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery.

His widow, Annie Reid Knox, eventually sold what became the *Manchester Union Leader*, now the *New Hampshire Union Leader*, to William Loeb in 1946. The desk used by Knox in his Manchester newspaper office was long used by Union Leader Publisher Joseph W. McQuaid. — *Dean Dexter*



“Under Secretary Knox's administration the United States Navy grew in less than four years from third place to by far the most powerful aggregation of fighting ships and trained men in history. There were less than 190,000 officers and men in the Navy and Marine Corps when Colonel Knox became Secretary. Including 180,000 men and women of the Coast Guard, which was placed under Navy jurisdiction 1 November 1941, there were more than 3,155,000 persons in the Naval establishment at the time of his death. Although the so-called "two-ocean Navy" bill was enacted by Congress just a month before the Secretary took office, all of its provision were executed under his administration, besides the periodic, successive increases Congress authorized in response to the Secretary's recommendations to meet the demands of global warfare.” — Knox Profile, US Naval History and Heritage Command