

## Ella Baker (1903-1986)

Ella J. Baker was born in Norfolk, Virginia. She was the granddaughter of slaves and decided to start her career as an activist early. Baker challenged many school policies that she thought to be demeaning when she attended Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. In 1927, she graduated from Shaw as class valedictorian and then moved to New

York City where she continued her activist career.

While in New York, Baker responded to a lot of suffering in Harlem by joining a variety of political causes. In 1930, she joined the Young Negroes Cooperative League and was elected to be its first national director a year later. The league aimed to develop blacks' economic power through collective planning. Ella did not stop there, though. For five decades she worked as a community organizer and she is known for her participation in and founding of many organizations.

Ella J. Baker began her affiliation with the NAACP in 1940. She created the grassroots network that provided a base for the Civil Rights Movement. She fought to move the NAACP's interest away from legal battles and more toward community-based activism. She was the first woman to head the New York branch and she led its fight to desegregate New York City public schools.

In 1956, Ella Baker helped establish In Friendship, an organization dedicated to raising money to support the struggle in the South. From there, she moved to Atlanta, Georgia, where she organized Martin Luther King Jr.'s newly formed Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and ran the Crusade for Citizenship, a voter registration campaign.

In 1960, Baker took a job at the Young Woman's Christian Association (YMCA). She invited sit-in leaders to attend a conference in April and from that conference, the SNCC was born. Among SNCC's achievements was its role in founding the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). Baker was a key player in the party's attempt to replace the all-white delegation from Mississippi at the 1964 Democratic Party convention.

Baker returned to New York in 1964 and fought for human rights until her death. An unsung hero of Civil Rights Movement, Baker inspired a range of political organizations including the Black Panthers, Students for a Democratic Society, and feminist groups.

Not since her death has a leader emerged in the modern 20<sup>th</sup> century Freedom Movement that was more committed to strengthening the ties that bind social and political action. Ella Baker was truly a remarkable woman in our nation's history.