

Ella J. Baker

Ella Baker was a Civil Rights activist and instrumental in founding the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). She was born in Norfolk, Virginia on December 13, 1903. She grew up hearing stories from her grandmother about slave revolts and how her grandmother had been whipped for refusing to marry a man chosen for her by the slave owner.

She went to Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina and challenged school policies she thought to be unfair or demeaning. She graduated from Shaw University in 1927 as a valedictorian, and then moved to New York City. She then joined a variety of political causes after seeing the suffering in Harlem during the Great Depression. She wanted to do something to help people.

She joined the Young Negroes Cooperative League in 1930, and was elected to be its first national director a year later. Its purpose was to develop black economic power through collective planning. She also was involved with several women's organizations. She became an employee of the Works Progress Administration, which offered literacy and consumer education to workers and educated herself about radical politics.

In 1940 she got involved with the National Association for Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). She worked as a field secretary and then served as director of branches from 1943-1946. She helped expand the reach of the NAACP throughout the south and created the grassroots network that provided a base for the Civil Rights Movement in the following decades. In 1946, she resigned from the staff, but stayed as a volunteer and was the first woman to head the New York branch. She led them in a fight to desegregate New York City public schools.

In 1957, Ella Baker moved to Atlanta to organize Martin Luther King's new organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). She also ran a voter registration campaign called the Crusade for Citizenship. She only stayed with the SCLC for two years. She didn't agree with its "one great leader" approach for social change. Instead she worked to empower thousands of ordinary people to speak out. She said, "I have always thought what is needed is the development of people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership in others."

Miss Baker left the SCLC after the Greensboro sit-ins. She wanted to help the new student activists and organized a meeting at Shaw University for the student leaders of the sit-ins. It was here, in April 1960, after three decades of civil rights activism already behind her, that SNCC was organized. She continued to play a part in SNCC, but mostly as a quiet leader who listened and encouraged the young activists. In 1964 she returned to New York and fought for human rights until her death on December 13, 1986. She was a great-unsung hero of the Civil Rights Movement, never wanting to be in the spotlight, but working behind the scenes to amplify the voice of the young and the poor.