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Ella Baker: Background Information

Ella Baker played a crucial role in the civil rights movement when she encouraged student activists to form an organization independent of established civil rights organization.

Baker was born in Norfolk, Virginia in 1903 and grew up in rural North Carolina. Her grandfather had been a slave, her father was a waiter, and her mother served the community by providing health care for those in need. Baker graduated from Shaw University in 1927 and with the hope of doing graduate studies moved to New York City. She held various jobs and became politically active. During the Great Depression, she was hired by the Works Progress Administration.

In the early 1940s, Baker became a field secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and traveled throughout the country to organize local branches. Much of her work was done in the South, where she developed her philosophy that you had to “start where the people are” if you are going to build an activist community. Baker gave up her position as field secretary in the late 1940s but she continued to be active in the New York City NAACP, serving as its president in 1952.

It was during this time that she realized that “strong people don’t need strong leaders.”

Baker then became involved in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which was leading a voter registration drive in the South. She moved to Atlanta, Georgia, and, because of a void in the organization’s leadership, became the acting director of SCLC. She sought to become SCLC’s executive director (and did the work of that position without the title) but she did not have the support of the men who dominated the SCLC and she had a problematic relationship with Martin Luther King, Jr.

As her relationship with the SCLC deteriorated, Baker became interested in the students who had organized sit-ins at segregated lunch counters and she met with them at the 1960 Youth Leadership Conference sponsored by the SCLC. The SCLC leadership wanted the students to become a chapter of their organization but Baker had other ideas. She encouraged the students to create their own organization and warned them about the dangers of a “leader-centered orientation.” Her speech “More Than a Hamburger” was an expression of her support for their autonomy and hope for their expansion. When they created the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) she mentored them as they debated strategy and goals. She supported their creation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and its effort to gain seats at the 1964 National Democratic Convention.

Until her death in 1986, Baker remained politically active. She was an inspiration to young people, black and white, women and men, in the North and South.