

IMPORTANT NORTH CAROLINA WOMEN

ELLA BAKER (1907–1986)

LEARNING OUTCOME:

Students can:

- ♦ *Describe the characteristics that made Ella Baker a successful activist in the Civil Rights Movement.*
- ♦ *Identify the major civil rights organizations that Ella Baker helped to create and build.*



Ella Baker

Ella Baker, who grew up in Littleton, North Carolina, was a life-long pioneer in the Civil Rights Movement. She was a key founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which was headed by Martin Luther King, Jr. She was also one of the founders of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Over her lifetime she held positions in many other civil rights groups and “never officially retired from public life.”¹

Baker had a talent for organization and management, as well as an ability to develop grassroots groups. Moreover, her fundraising skills made her a major figure in the Civil Rights Movement. Although she did not become as famous as some of her colleagues, she was one of the most important leaders in the Civil Rights Movement. Indeed, an article about her calls her “a leader behind the scenes.”²

Ella Baker was born in Virginia but spent most of her youth in North Carolina. She graduated from Shaw University in 1927 and was valedictorian of her class (the **valedictorian** is the student who receives the highest grades). After graduation, she moved to the Harlem neighborhood in New York City, where she began working to promote civil rights.

In 1931, Baker became the executive director of the Young Negroes Cooperative League, a group that developed “consumer co-operatives” with the goal of bringing about “a revolution of black economic and political power.”³ Consumer cooperatives helped families pool their money to buy food and other products. By buying in large quantities, they could obtain lower prices.

Baker’s emphasis on consumer education led her to teach at an adult education program sponsored by the New York Public Library. She also joined the U.S. government’s Works Progress Administration (WPA). From 1941 to 1946, she worked with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Later, she worked with other civil rights organizations. While she was with the NAACP, she helped strengthen some weak NAACP branches in North Carolina as well as elsewhere in the South.

Baker had the idea that black churches could take an active role in the Civil Rights Movement. She and other civil rights leaders persuaded Martin



Raleigh Theological Institute building at Shaw University

Luther King, Jr., to hold a meeting in Atlanta. In 1958, King became the president of the SCLC, and Baker became its "interim executive secretary." According to Britta W. Nelson, "the male leadership of the SCLC was not willing to name a woman to be the official executive secretary."⁴

Baker organized the SCLC's successful "Citizenship Crusade," designed to encourage voter registration in the South.

In 1960, after the Greensboro sit-ins and other civil rights demonstrations stirred students' interest in racial justice, Baker held a meeting to organize students at Shaw University. The result was the creation of the SNCC, which became an important student activist group. Baker provided support and guidance to the leaders of the SNCC over a long period of time, although she did not hold an official position in the organization.

Baker left SCLC because of conflicts over leadership, but she never stopped making contributions to promote civil rights. She worked for organizations ranging from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (in 1964) to the Episcopal Church. Baker died in New York City in 1986.

READING REVIEW QUESTIONS:

Using information from the reading, describe three characteristics that made Ella Baker a successful activist in the Civil Rights Movement.

Identify the major civil rights organizations with which Ella Baker worked.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, "Biographical Sketch" for the Ella Baker Papers, n.d., <https://www.nypl.org/sites/default/files/archivalcollections/pdf/scmmg630.pdf>.
- 2 Britta W. Nelson, "Ella Baker – Leader Behind the Scenes," Focus 21, no. 8 (August 1993), <https://opus.bibliothek.uni-augsburg.de/opus4/frontdoor/deliver/index/docId/40431/file/AUGUST+1993.PDF>.
- 3 Schomburg Center, "Biographical Sketch."
- 4 Nelson, "Ella Baker."