

## Who was ... Fannie Lou Hamer?

**Fannie Lou Hamer, née Townsend: civil rights and voting rights activist, community organizer**

**Born: 1917 in Montgomery County, MS**

**Died: 1977 in Mound Bayou, MS**

Fannie Lou Hamer was a forceful grassroots organizer for voting and economic rights during the 1960s. During her 1977 funeral, Andrew Young, a leader in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and later US Ambassador to the United Nations, said of her that “none of us would be where we are now if she had not been there then.”



The last of 20 children born to sharecroppers in rural Mississippi, Fannie Lou Townsend began picking cotton at age 6. She attended a one-room school during the winters but dropped out when she was 12 years old to help support her family. She married Perry “Pap” Hamer, a sharecropper, in 1945. Her civil rights activism began in early 1962 after attending a meeting led by James Forman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and James Bevel of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). She continued her civil rights work until shortly before her death at the age of 59.

### 7 things to know about Fannie Lou Hamer

1. She went to school only to the 6<sup>TH</sup> grade. However, in recognition of her civil rights work, she was later awarded a Doctor of Law degree from Shaw University and honorary degrees from Columbia College in Chicago and Howard University.
2. In 1961, during surgery to remove a uterine tumor, she was subjected to a forced hysterectomy, a method of population control that was so common in the South that it was called a [Mississippi appendectomy](#) by Blacks.
3. She experienced voter discrimination directly. She twice failed the [literacy test](#) required to register in Mississippi. She finally registered after passing the test on her third try in January of 1963 but wasn't allowed to vote until she met the requirement to submit two [poll tax](#) receipts.
4. In the summer of 1963, she was severely beaten during a voter registration drive when she and several other Black women were arrested in rural Mississippi. After a month spent recuperating, she went back to her voter registration activities, including the 1963 [Freedom Ballot](#) and 1964 [Freedom Summer](#), during which Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney were killed. But she never fully recovered from her injuries, suffering a blood clot in one eye, permanent kidney damage, and damage to one of her legs.

5. In 1964, she co-founded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) as an alternative to the all-white and segregationist Democratic Party in Mississippi. As part of her efforts to have the MFDP seated at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlanta, she included the story of her beating in powerful [testimony](#) given to the convention's Credentials Committee. President Lyndon Johnson held an impromptu press conference at the same time in an effort to draw attention away from the Credentials Committee session. However, pre-empting her testimony became a common news story over the next several days, which actually increased attention on her testimony.
6. She was a powerful orator who used her knowledge of the Bible, personal experience, and her passionate belief in civil rights to advocate for the cause. And it's remarkable that she routinely delivered her speeches from memory. Her most famous speech might be the "[I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired](#)" speech given during a December 1964 rally in support of the MFDP at the Williams Institutional CME Church, Harlem, New York in which she said
 

"And you can always hear this long sob story: 'You know it takes time.' For three hundred years, we've given them time. And I've been tired so long, now I am sick and tired of being sick and tired, and we want a change."
7. She was an effective grassroots organizer and showed both an intimate understanding of local needs and creativity in developing organizations and programs in response to specific problems. One example was the [Freedom Farm Cooperative](#) (FFC) that started in the late 1960s with 40 acres used to grow vegetables. Part of the FFC was a "pig bank" that provided free pigs for members of the FFC to raise and breed. When the pigs matured, members returned 2 pigs from any litter to the FFC. They could then mate the others or slaughter them for meat.

#### Honors and awards

- 1993: Inducted into the [National Women's Hall of Fame](#).
- 1997: The [Fannie Lou Hamer Institute on Citizenship and Democracy](#) was founded. The Institute still works to "educate, engage, and involve people on issues of racial and social justice, and to facilitate the transfer of knowledge within the Black community." In 2014, the Institute was merged into the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) [Civil Rights Education Center](#) at Jackson State University in Jackson, MS.
- 2014: Incorporation of the [Fannie Lou Hamer Institute of Advocacy & Social Action](#) with the mission to "empower, equip, and uplift Black women and girls."
- 2017: [Fannie Lou Hamer Black Resource Center](#) created at the University of California, Berkeley to provide "a safe space for Black students to come together for services and support within their Black community."

## To learn more about Fannie Lou Hamer

1. [Fannie Lou Hamer](#). American Experience: Women in American History. PBS (print).
2. Keisha Blain (2021). *Until I am Free: Fannie Lou Hamer's Enduring Message to America*. Boston: Beacon Press.
3. Maegan Parker Brooks (2013). *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To Tell It Like It Is*. Margaret Walker Alexander Series in African American Studies. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press.
4. [Fannie Lou Hamer's 1964 Testimony](#). CAB Grand Rising Show. (audio 8:57).
5. Kate Clifford Lawson (2021). *Walk With Me: A Biography of Fannie Lou Hamer*. New York: Oxford University Press.
6. [Fannie Lou Hamer](#) (2017). Mississippi Public Broadcasting, Issue (video 26:46). The video presents a retrospective on the life and legacy of Fannie Lou Hamer.
7. [Fannie Lou Hamer](#) (2018). Biography.

The following videos provide valuable perspectives on the work of Fannie Lou Hamer. However, the videos are from the PBS archive and viewing may require membership in [PBS Passport](#).

8. [Fannie Lou Hamer's America](#) (2022). PBS America Reframed, season 10, episode 1 (video 58:41), PBS. The video tells the story of Fannie Lou Hamer's life and civil rights work using her own words and speeches.
9. [Freedom Summer](#) (2014). PBS American Experience: Freedom Summer, season 26, episode 6 (video 1:52:17). The video describes the efforts of activists, including Fannie Lou Hamer, to eliminate white supremacy across the South.