



Fannie Lou Hamer: A Biographical Sketch

By Maegan Parker Brooks, PhD

“I question America. Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hook because our lives be threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?”

With this critical question, delivered at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, Fannie Lou Hamer became revered across the nation. Malcolm X referred to her as the “country’s number one freedom fighting woman” and rumor has it Martin Luther King, Jr—though he loved her dearly—feared being upstaged by Hamer’s soul-stirring speeches. Over her lifetime (1917-1977), Fannie Lou Hamer traveled from the Delta of Mississippi to the Atlantic City Boardwalk, from Washington, D.C. to Washington State, from Madison, Wisconsin to Conakry, Guinea—always proclaiming the social gospel that all human beings are created equal and that all people are entitled to basic rights of food, shelter, dignity, and a voice in the government to which they belong.



FIGURE 1: Fannie Lou Hamer addresses the 1964 Democratic National Convention.

Fannie Lou Hamer held strong convictions, but she was no idealist. Born the twentieth child of James Lee and Lou Ella Townsend, Fannie Lou and her large family struggled to survive as sharecroppers on plantations controlled by Whites. As an outgrowth of slavery, the sharecropping system was largely designed to keep Black people indebted to White landowners. This economic control held social and political implications as well.



FIGURE 2: The sharecropping system replaced slavery as a means of securing cheap labor, as well as social and political control for White people. The sharecropping system replaced slavery as a means of securing cheap labor, as well as social and political control for White people.

The Townsend encouraged their children to get an education so they might imagine a life beyond sharecropping’s constant toil. Fannie Lou began picking cotton at the age of six, but for four months of the year—when her labor wasn’t needed in the fields—she attended a one-room plantation school house. Fannie Lou loved school; from her teacher, Professor Thornton Layne, she learned to read,

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write, and proudly recite poetry written by Black artists. Unfortunately, Fannie Lou was forced to drop out of school in the sixth grade to help her aging parents in the fields.

As a teenager, she continued her education informally—listening carefully to stories her mother shared and songs Lou Ella would sing that emphasized race pride and that encouraged her children to see that God was on the side of the oppressed. Her father reinforced these messages from the pulpit, serving as a preacher at the Strangers Home Baptist Church. In this Black-controlled space, Fannie Lou developed a strong voice—often performing what would become her signature civil rights anthem, “This Little Light of Mine.”

After her father died from a stroke in 1939, Fannie Lou and her mother moved to the W.D. Marlow plantation, where they met Perry “Pap” Hamer. Fannie Lou fell in love with this strong and kind man; the two were married in 1944. Marlow soon promoted Fannie Lou Hamer from sharecropper to the position of timekeeper on the plantation. In this highly respected position, she weighed and recorded her fellow sharecroppers’ harvest.

The Hamers shared a love of young people and eventually adopted two daughters from their community: Dorothy Jean and Vergie Ree. Throughout the 1950s, the couple worked tirelessly to provide for their girls and to care for Lou Ella Townsend, who lost her eyesight and was confined to a wheelchair.

Fannie Lou suffered from severe menstrual cramping and sought medical treatment in the early 1960s. The White doctor she visited informed her that she had a uterine tumor, which would require a simple procedure to remove. She later learned that during the procedure, the doctor gave her a hysterectomy—without her knowledge or consent. Fannie Lou was devastated to know she would never be able to bear children. By the time of her mother’s death in 1961, Hamer had grown so sick of the system of exploitation she endured that she began looking for a chance to “really lash out and say what she had to say about what was happening in the state of Mississippi.”

That chance came in the form of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), who visited William’s Chapel in August 1962. James Forman and James Bevel informed the parishioners that they had a right to vote and the civil rights activists encouraged the congregation to formally register. Fannie Lou Hamer was among the first eighteen people SNCC brought to Indianola to take the registration test. By the time she made it home to Ruleville from the nearby county seat, the plantation owner had already learned of her civic assertion—Marlow fired her that evening and evicted her from his plantation. Being fired from the plantation where she fell in love with Pap, raised her young children, buried her mother, and worked as a timekeeper for eighteen years was a heart-wrenching experience for Mrs. Hamer. This pain of this experience prompted her to realize that she had nothing left to lose. After being fired from the plantation, she began working full time for the civil rights movement.



FIGURE 3: Fannie Lou Hamer and Perry “Pap” Hamer

At the age of 44, Fannie Lou Hamer became SNCC's oldest fieldworker. She traveled across the South encouraging other Black people to register and vote. To train for this work, she attended voter registration workshops. In June of 1963, on the return trip from one such workshop, Mrs. Hamer and several other civil rights activists were arrested and brought to the Winona jailhouse. The group was charged with resisting arrest and disorderly conduct. They were locked in cells, beaten, and tortured by prisoners, prison guards, and state highway patrolmen. SNCC workers tried desperately to bail them out. Days into their captivity, Andrew Young and Dorothy Cotton, of the Southern Christian Leadership Council, finally secured their release. Steps out of the prison door, Mrs. Hamer learned that the NAACP Field Secretary, Medgar Evers, had been shot and killed on the front lawn of his Jackson home.

Mrs. Hamer cast White Supremacist retaliation in Biblical terms—understanding herself and the activists with whom she worked as “walking through the valley of shadow of death”—her faith sustained her and, “fearing no evil,” the retaliation she endured drove her activism. Hamer helped train Freedom Summer volunteers, she ran for political office, and she was selected as a delegate to the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City. There she delivered her damning Credentials Committee testimony; the live television coverage of which was interrupted by President Lyndon B. Johnson. That evening, however, her testimony was replayed in full and



FIGURE 4: Fannie Lou Hamer singing and speaking on the Atlantic City Boardwalk during the 1964 Democratic National Convention.

carried into the homes of all Americans by the three major television networks. This testimony introduced the nation to Fannie Lou Hamer and the Democratic Party was flooded with telegrams of support for seating the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) delegates in the place of the all-White segregated delegation officially sent from the state. Although the MFDP's challenge to be seated was unsuccessful, organizations across the country reached out to Mrs. Hamer and invited her to speak at their churches, universities, and community centers.

Before embarking on what would become a decade of speaking tours, Mrs. Hamer enjoyed a rare and unforgettable moment of respite. Famed performer and ardent civil rights supporter, Harry Belafonte, provided a trip to West Africa for the embattled SNCC activists. Returning to the home of her ancestors was a moving experience that stayed with Hamer for the remainder of her life. Experiencing the Black-led state of Guinea, witnessing the beauty of the African people, and recognizing the similarities between her family and the families with whom she interacted helped reverse a lifetime of White Supremacist ideology, which justified the exploitation of Black people and the separation of the Anglo-Saxon and African “races” based upon erroneous Social Darwinist principles.

When Hamer returned from Africa, she spearheaded another national challenge—this time she, Annie Devine, and Victoria Gray, as representatives of the MFDP, went straight to the United States Congress and demanded to be seated in place of the representatives sent from

their respective districts. Through thousands of affidavits documenting voter discrimination, intimidation, and outright prohibition, the MFDP demonstrated that Black people had been illegally barred from participating in the election process; therefore, the representatives sent from their districts were illegally elected—not at all “representative” of the people they ostensibly served. Although the Congressional Representatives from Mississippi were ultimately allowed to serve their terms, the MFDP’s demonstration prompted a nine-month investigation into civil rights abuses in Mississippi. When the motion to unseat the representatives was called to a vote, Hamer, Devine, and Gray became the first three Black women to ever be seated on the floor of the US House of Representatives. Further still, the MFDP’s 1965 Congressional Challenge contributed to the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

After the 1964 DNC Challenge and the 1965 Congressional Challenge, Hamer became increasingly virulent in her critique of the Democratic Party’s hypocrisy. She nevertheless represented Mississippi as part of the integrated “Loyalist” delegation sent from the state to the 1968 DNC. Inside the convention, Mrs. Hamer received a standing ovation from the delegates when she took her hard-earned seat as an officially recognized delegate. Outside the convention, police clashed violently with antiwar demonstrators. An early critic of the Vietnam War, Hamer was disgusted by how the protestors were treated by the state.

In 1971, Mrs. Hamer spoke at the founding of the National Women’s Political Caucus. Widely recognized as an inspirational female leader, Hamer was frequently asked to speak at gatherings of second wave feminists. She used these occasions to preach a Black Feminist message—emphasizing the multiple facets of her intersectional identity as an impoverished pro-life Black woman from the rural South—and warning her audiences against using the banner of “sisterhood” to paper over significant differences in women’s lived experiences.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Mrs. Hamer was a driving force behind several poverty programs in the state of Mississippi. The Mississippi programs were part of the national War on Poverty. In her more cynical moments, Hamer would quip: “that’s exactly what it is—a war against poor people.” She felt its attacks acutely. In 1967, the Hamers lost their older daughter, Dorothy Jean, to complications related to malnutrition. Dorothy left behind two young daughters—Jacqueline and Lenora. Becoming the primary caregivers for an infant and a toddler, while also



FIGURE 5: Fannie Lou Hamer’s trip to Africa belied the White Supremacist ideology of Black inferiority and reinforced messages of Black pride her mother and father taught her as a child.



FIGURE 6: Victoria Gray, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Annie Devine challenge the United States Congress, becoming the first three Black women ever to be seated on the floor of the House of Representatives.

caring for teen-aged Vergie, the Hamers continued to struggle financially. Fannie Lou Hamer had learned about the Office of Economic Opportunity while visiting northern cities on speaking tours in the mid-1960s. That knowledge, combined with the mentorship of Drew-native Dr. L.C. Dorsey, who helped found the North Bolivar County Cooperative, lay the foundation for Mrs. Hamer's own Freedom Farm.



FIGURE 7: Along Freedom Farm road, outside of Drew, Mississippi

Hamer bought Freedom Farm's the first forty acres outright—donations she received from northern organizations like Madison's Measure for Measure and Walks for Hunger, which took place in cities from Milwaukee to Cambridge covered the cost. To meet the growing needs of her community, consisting largely of sharecropping families displaced by farm mechanization, Hamer continued to solicit donations, apply for grants, and pour the honoraria she received from speaking engagements into the farm. Freedom Farm grew from the initial forty acres Hamer purchased to nearly 700 acres; this land yielded

cash crops like cotton and soybeans, as well as crops such as corn, potatoes, and rice—grown to feed its cooperative members. For protein, Freedom Farm developed a Pig Bank program sponsored by the National Council of Negro Women. Mrs. Hamer also helped nearly 200 families in and around Ruleville secure decent housing through federal loan programs; and she even furnished a garment factory with sewing machines donated from northern activists whom she met on her national speaking tours.

By the mid 1970s, Mrs. Hamer's health began to deteriorate rapidly. She suffered from anxiety, breast cancer, hypertension, and diabetes—compounded by a demanding travel schedule and an unyielding desire to care for her children, her beloved husband, and those in her Delta community. On March 14, 1977, at the age of 59, Mrs. Hamer died of heart failure. Insistent that she not be buried on a plantation, Charles McLaurin, the civil rights torch-bearer and dear friend of Mrs. Hamer, worked with the City of Ruleville to bury her on Freedom Farm's first forty acres. Her gravestone aptly engraved: "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired."

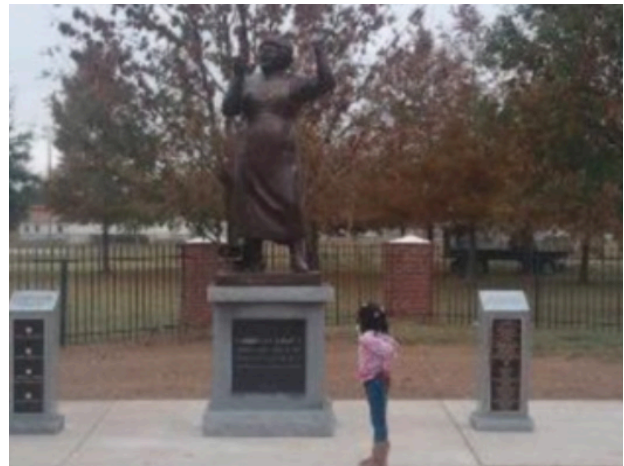


FIGURE 8: A young girl looks up to Mrs. Hamer at the 2012 Statue Unveiling

In the fifty years since Mrs. Hamer's passing, she has not been forgotten. Her gravestone is now surrounded by a memorial garden, a bronze statue, and a recreation center. On her birthday each year, family, friends, fellow activists, and long-time admirers from across the globe gather to honor her. The state of Mississippi issued a commemorative postage stamp, featuring



FIGURE 9: A Black Lives Matter Protestor, donning a “Fight Like Fannie Lou” t-shirt demand to be heard during a Bernie Sanders’ campaign appearance in the summer of 2015

her image merged with Medgar Evers’. The Mississippi Civil Rights Museum includes tributes to Ruleville’s first lady throughout; the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis and the National Museum of African American History both recognize her fearless activism. Contemporary Black Lives Matter activists carry her spirit forward donning “Fight Like Fannie Lou” t-shirts and she even has her own Twitter page, wherein @FannieLouHamer declares she’s “sick and tired” of contemporary politicians and exploitive political practices.

A new documentary, *Fannie Lou Hamer’s America*, told entirely through rare recordings of Mrs. Hamer’s speeches, songs, and interviews is forthcoming. With that film, the Find Your Voice K-12 curriculum, developed in partnership with renowned educators from the Mississippi Delta, and the Find Your Voice: The Online Resource for Fannie Lou Hamer Studies, we hope to keep the complexity of Mrs. Hamer’s message alive and inspiring for generations to come.