

Fannie Lou Hamer
(1917-1977)



"All my life I've been sick and tired. Now I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired."

Fannie Lou Hamer was among the most significant participants in the struggle launched in the latter half of the twentieth century to achieve freedom and social justice for African Americans. Born October 6, 1917, in Montgomery County, Mississippi, she was the last of the twenty children of Lou Ella and James Townsend. They were sharecroppers, and since sharecropping generally bound workers to the land (a form of peonage), most sharecroppers were born poor, lived poor, and died poor.

At age six Fannie Lou joined her parents in the cotton fields. By the time she was twelve, she was forced to drop out of school and work full time to help support her family. At age 27 she married another sharecropper named Perry "Pap" Hamer.

In August 1962, Mrs. Hamer attended a meeting of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in her hometown, Ruleville, Mississippi. This is where she made the fateful decision to attempt to register to vote. For this decision she was forced by her landlord to leave the plantation where she worked. In June the following year, she and several SNCC colleagues were brutally beaten in a Winona, Mississippi jail by law enforcement officers. This beating left her blind in her left eye and her kidneys permanently damaged.

Mrs. Hamer's historic presence in Atlantic City at the 1964 national convention of the Democratic Party brought national prominence with her electrifying testimony before the convention's credentials committee. Here, as a representative of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) that was formed in April 1964, she sought to prevent the seating of the all-white Mississippi delegation. While this effort failed, the Democratic Party agreed that in the future no delegation would be seated from a state where anyone was illegally denied the vote. Roughly a year later, the 1965 Voting Rights Act was passed.

After her Atlantic City experience, Mrs. Hamer turned her attention increasingly to building strong institutions for addressing problems at the local level. She took an active role in antipoverty programs, especially Head Start, and in 1969 founded the Freedom Farms Corporation, designed to help poor farming families—black and white—become economically self-sufficient; in 1971 she sought to become a Mississippi state senator as an independent.

The last six years of Mrs. Hamer's life were marked with severe health problems. Still, it was a period during which she received numerous honors and awards. Finally on March 14, 1977, she passed away. Her funeral in Ruleville drew a cross section of national dignitaries who came to sing her praises, pointing out that her legacy will, and should, endure forever, for it is one that serves as a beacon illuminating the pathway to eradicating poverty, suffering, oppression and racial intolerance—alleviating the ills of the world.