

# Ella Baker: The Mother of The Civil Rights Movement

Anna Poggi, Keira Evans,

Rhianna Mason

Senior Division

Group Exhibit

Exhibit: 495 Words

Process Paper: 422 Words

## Process Paper

1) How did you choose your topic and how does it relate to the annual theme?

We chose our topic because we wanted to recognize a pioneer who does not receive the recognition they deserve, and this came in the form of Ella Baker. She was a pioneer her entire life, fighting for human rights, alongside Martin Luther King Jr. She faced boundaries in race and as a woman, and was still able to achieve significant change. Her efforts helped to ensure the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965. She was the first leader of civil rights to emphasize working with the younger generation, which highlights her as a frontier.

2) How did you conduct your research?

Our research was largely conducted using online sources, such as Britannica, History.com, and Loc.gov. We spent time in libraries researching the overall topic of civil rights, as well as reading her speeches and interviews.

3) How did you create your project?

We created our project using a poster board, construction paper, and other decorative materials. The black backdrop is actually vinyl meant for a cricut cutting machine. The newspaper background is all newspaper articles from the 1950s that have to deal with the civil rights movement. All of the pictures and writing are mounted on cardstock and the display is made of cardboard and paint.

4) What is your historical argument?

Ella Baker is a pioneer who does not receive the recognition she deserves, especially after her work in the civil rights movement and strides towards equality. She demonstrates a frontier in history because of the drastic increase in human rights during her lifetime. Before her, black people were segregated, facing racism and discrimination regularly. During her lifetime, she fought for black people to be seen as equals and encouraged the leaders of the future. Towards the end of her lifetime, the civil rights acts were passed that outlawed discrimination on the basis of race.

5) In what ways is your topic significant in history?

Her significance in history cannot be understated. It was her leadership and unwavering determination that moved the country forward and helped gain equal rights for black Americans. Without her, Rosa Parks might not have been inspired to sit in the white section of the bus and fight against racism. Her campaigns and workshops inspired the younger generations to continue the movement past her lifetime. It was her leadership that helped the passage of the civil rights acts and elevated the rights of many.

### Historical Argument:

Ella Baker was an influential leader whose impacts on the civil rights movement and on the country as a whole are underappreciated. Her work in educating and preparing young people in the fight for equal rights is left largely unnoticed, despite her and the movement's overall success in making race-based discrimination illegal and bettering the lives of minorities.

## Annotated Bibliography

### Primary Sources:

Baker, Ella. Oral History Interview by author. April 19, 1977.

[https://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/G-0008/excerpts/excerpt\\_8579.html](https://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/G-0008/excerpts/excerpt_8579.html).

The interview was used to better understand what Ella was really like. It is more personal than simply reading about her experiences. It was used to better understand her Personality and convey how she felt about her actions and the movement as it was happening.

Baker, Ella. Oral History Interview by author. September 4, 1974.

[https://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/G-0007/excerpts/excerpt\\_8078.html](https://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/G-0007/excerpts/excerpt_8078.html).

We used this source in order to gain a better understanding of Ella's experiences. It is easier to understand how she dealt with doubt from others as a woman in a position of leadership during that time directly rather than just reading about her life.

Triple Library. *Primary Sources: People - American Women: Baker, Ella*. Christopher Newport University, March 8, 2023.

<https://cnu.libguides.com/notableamericanwomen/ellabaker>.

This is a guide full of online primary sources that allows us to better get to know Ella Baker. It gives us insight into what she was really like.

Baker, Ella. "Making the Struggle Every Day." Speech, October 22, 1974. Video file, 2:20. World History Archive. WordPress.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t96fnyLMihA>

Watching Ella Baker speak first hand provided a more in depth understanding of how Ella approached the Civil Rights movement. We can now understand not only Ella's effect on the movement, but the emotions and commitments that were driving her actions.

Baker, Ella. "Address at SNCC Conference - Dec 1963." Archives of Women's Political Communication. Iowa State University, Iowa.

<https://abolitionnotes.org/ella-baker/sncc1963>

This speech written by Ella provided us a better understanding of her work with the SNCC. It is one thing to learn from others what Ella's role was in this group but reading her words and imagining them spoken in front of people and respected by those people is unique. She was a woman who could command and inspire a room. This speech helped us better convey that idea of strength across our project.

Baker, Ella. "Address at the Hattiesburg Freedom Day Rally - 21 January 1964." The U.S. Oratory Project. Voices of Democracy.

<https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/ella-baker-freedom-day-rally-speech-text/>

Ella was more than just an extension of the civil rights movement. In fact, this speech helped us better understand that she was never working for “an organization” she she put it. This fight was always about the people, and for us to understand that is to understand the true importance of Ella’s character.

Baker, Ella. “The Voice that Says Life is more Sacred than Property Must be Heard.” Speech, April 24, 1968. Video file, 33:34. Youtube.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9d\\_RulHh6\\_g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9d_RulHh6_g)

Hearing someone who knew Ella speak of her with such awe and respect and then hearing her response truly demonstrated to us what an important member of the movement she was. It made it even more baffling for us that she has been forgotten in the history of the Civil Rights movement, so we worked to convey that in our project.

Baker, Ella. Oral interview. April 19, 1977.

[https://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/playback.html?base\\_file=G-0008&duration=03:09:41](https://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/playback.html?base_file=G-0008&duration=03:09:41)

Listening to an interview which skimmed over Ellas adolescence helps a viewer understand her background and how she was brought up to be such an inspiring leader. Learning not just about Ella, but about her family and what they did allowed us to understand how Ella became the person we recognize her as today.

Baker, Ella. “The Black Women in the Civil Rights Struggle.” Speech, December 31, 1969. Transcript. Iowa State University.

<https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2019/08/09/the-black-woman-in-the-civil-rights-struggle-1969/>

Within this speech, Ella Baker forced to question such a society that would allow a certain group of people to be segregated against based on their skin color. Furthermore, she does not make this a battle of just race, rather she combined it with a battle of gender by uniting many women to join the movement. This speech was a hugely helpful source that represented how she challenged both gender and race barriers.

Baker, Ella. “My Life in the Movement.” Speech, September, 1974. Audio file, 1:01:37. Youtube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aHmXeFVvk4c>

This famous speech exemplifies the struggles and challenges that Ella Baker faced in her life as a black woman. She also explains the hardships, yet accomplishments she obtained from being within the Civil Rights Movement. This speech was extremely helpful for the research based section of our project since Ella herself explained the obstacles she overcame.

Baker, Ella. Memorandum. Memo to SCLC Leadership, Leadership Conference. July 2, 1959.

[https://www.crmvet.org/lets/5907\\_sclc\\_baker-memo.pdf](https://www.crmvet.org/lets/5907_sclc_baker-memo.pdf)

This letter was useful to tell us the certain things that Ella Baker did to impact the Civil Rights Movement. Furthermore, this specific letter highlights the benefits of Ella Baker's visit to South Carolina to attend the State Leadership Meeting of the Palmetto State Voters League.

Civil Rights Movement Archive Documents. *Primary Sources*: Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) Documents. 1954-1968.

<https://www.crmvet.org/docs/orgsdocs.htm#docssclc>

This site provided us with a plethora of documents detailing the work of the SCLC at the time of the Civil Rights Movement. Ella Worked closely with this group and some of her first hand work is on display here. We were able to use this information to better understand what she did for the movement.

Civil Rights Movement Archive Documents. *Primary Sources*: Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Documents. 1960-1969.

<https://www.crmvet.org/docs/orgsdocs.htm#docssncc>

We were able to use this recourse, just like the one above, to view Ella's work with the SNCC through her own eyes. Ella had a large hand in the formation and functioning of the SNCC and viewing her work firsthand gave us a better understanding of her work ethic and character.

Baker, Ella. Oral Interview. June 19, 1968.

<https://www.crmvet.org/nars/baker68.htm>

This interview gave us a more in depth understanding of Ellas feelings regarding bringing children into the movement. We were also provided a more in depth look into how she grew up and how that shaped who she became.

### Secondary Sources:

Afro American Newspapers. *Portrait of NAACP Rep Ella Baker*. Getty Images, September 18, 1941.

<https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/portrait-of-american-civil-rights-activist-ella-baker-the-news-photo/557322103?et=U2SD7Ya3TxtZPxxKWnTU3A&referrer=https://www.libguides.com>

This source was used to enhance the presentation through images. Seeing them makes the instances we are describing feel more real and truly understand what the time period looked like.

Ancestry. *Civil Rights in Newspapers*. Newspapers.com, 2023.

<https://www.newspapers.com/topics/civil-rights/>.

These images acted as the backdrop for the poster board. It allowed us to see the Civil Rights movement from different perspectives.

DeLong, William. *How Ella Baker Became The Mother Of The Civil Rights Movement*. All That is Interesting, December 2, 2021.

<https://allthatsinteresting.com/ella-baker>.

We used this article for its images and for information about her life as a whole. It helped us to know what her life was like and better understand what led her to her work and dedication to the civil rights movement.

Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. *Ella Baker*. Britannica, April 26 1999.

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ella-Baker>.

Britannica acted as a reliable source to draw information from not only about Ella Baker, but also about the organizations she was involved in. It helped formulate our thesis. We were able to understand not only Ella Baker's efforts to advance the movement, but also how the people that worked around her projected her influence and work.

Favors, Jelani. *Birthered by HBCU Students, SNCC Offers Important Lessons for Today's Student Activities*. Generocity, April 14, 2020.

<https://generocity.org/philly/2020/04/14/birthered-by-hbcu-students-sncc-offers-important-lessons-for-todays-student-activists/>.

We used this source to know more about the SNCC, which Ella Baker created. It helped us to understand the exact role she played in the civil rights movement. Through this, we were left to further question how she could have been so forgotten when the SNCC was such a powerful movement with a lasting impact.

History.com Editors. *Civil Rights Movement*. History.com, October 27, 2009.

<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement>.

This article provided a broader historical context so we could understand the why of Ella's actions. We were able to see the world as it was before her work and influence to better understand how her actions brought about the world we see around us today.

History.com Editors. *Civil Rights Movement Timeline*. History.com, December 4, 2017.

[https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement-timeline#section\\_1](https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement-timeline#section_1).

This source allowed us to put the civil rights movement into perspective and better understand what exactly happened, and why Ella's work was so necessary to the success of the movement as a whole.

History.com Editors. *The 1950s*. History.com, June 17, 2010.

<https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/1950s#:~:text=The%201950s%20write%20a%20decade,movement%20in%20the%20United%20States>.

The article gave background knowledge. It allowed us to understand what was going on during the Civil Rights Movement that led Ella Baker to do her most important work.

Lei, Eilene. *After Harlem*. Black New York, 2023.

[https://macaulay.cuny.edu/seminars/henken08/articles/a/f/t/After\\_Harlem\\_a59f.html#:~:text=Many%20people%20believe%20that%20the,people%20focusing%20their%20interests%20elsewhere](https://macaulay.cuny.edu/seminars/henken08/articles/a/f/t/After_Harlem_a59f.html#:~:text=Many%20people%20believe%20that%20the,people%20focusing%20their%20interests%20elsewhere).

This source has background information about the struggle of black people around the time Ella was alive. It was helpful in better understanding her own struggle, and how she converted those hardships into the powerful work her life became dedicated to.

Library of Congress. *Race Relations in the 1930s and 1940s*. Congress.gov, 2023.

<https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/great-depression-and-world-war-ii-1929-1945/race-relations-in-1930s-and-1940s/>.

The article acted as a base to establish our knowledge of the time period. We used it to back up the historical context.

Morris, Aldon. *From Civil Rights to Black Lives Matter*. Scientific American, February 3, 2021.

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/from-civil-rights-to-black-lives-matter1/>.

This source was used to connect the civil rights movement to similar issues today. We used it to make our project more present. It is important to note what makes Ella and the civil rights movement relevant today, one of those ways is through the BLM movement.

Ransby, Barbara. *Ella Baker Civil Rights Icon*. Shaw University, 2023.

[https://www.shawu.edu/Ella\\_Baker\\_Civil\\_Rights\\_Icon.aspx](https://www.shawu.edu/Ella_Baker_Civil_Rights_Icon.aspx).

The source was used to provide insight on Baker's accomplishments. It helped to get a



perspective from an outside organization. This way we are not only taking Ella and the people who worked beside her as substance for the success of her work.

Scelfo, Julie. *On MLK Day, Honor the Mother of the Civil Rights Movement, Too*. Time, January 16, 2017. <https://time.com/4633460/mlk-day-ella-baker/>.

The source offered the information in a clear way and focused solely on Baker's impact on the civil rights movement, which was very helpful. We used it to understand her role in the movement directly.

Schmidt, Christopher W. *What Trump-era Protesters Can Learn From the Lunch Counter Sit-Ins of 1960*. USA Today, February 1, 2018.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2018/02/01/what-trump-era-protesters-can-learn-civil-rights-lunch-counter-sit-ins-christopher-schmidt-column/1078856001/>.

We used the source to understand the topic better by relating it to more present events. Seeing how the same antagonists of the Civil Rights movement have persisted to this day helped us better articulate why people like Ella are so important to combat those negative perspectives.

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. *Black Lives Matter*. Britannica, February 24, 2023.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Black-Lives-Matter>.

We used the article mainly for its picture, but it also provided us with the information needed for the current event connection.

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. *Civil Rights Act*. Britannica, May 4, 1999.

<https://www.britannica.com/event/Civil-Rights-Act-United-States-1964>.

We used the article to better understand what the end of the civil rights movement looked like, as well as the image. This way we could see how an accumulation of Ella, and other activists' work came together to accomplish the long time dream that so many had wished for.

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. *Jim Crow Law*. Britannica, July 20, 1998.

<https://www.britannica.com/event/Jim-Crow-law>.

We used the source mainly for its background information surrounding the time period and for its image. It helped us to understand what black people were up against, and the risks they were taking when they were working to combat the intricacies of racism.

Ware, Leland. *Civil Rights and the 1960s: A Decade of Unparalleled Progress*. Maryland Law Review, 2013.

<https://digitalcommons.law.umaryland.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3567&context=mlr>.

The source offered context for the accomplishments that came as a result of Ella Baker's hard work. It was useful because it highlighted all the past inequalities black people faced and what policies they overcame.

WordPress. *The SCLC and the Birth of SNCC*. Civil Rights Women Leaders of the Carolinas, 2023.

<https://newwomenofcivilrights.wordpress.com/ella-baker/the-sclc-and-the-birth-of-sncc/>.

This was one of the very few articles that actually credits Ella Baker, so we used it to explain her role in the civil rights movement. It helped us to understand how she was treated during her life among other important activists.

Xing, Jessica. *25 Motivational Ella Baker Quotes to Inspire Activism*. Your Tango, August 27, 2020.

<https://www.yourtango.com/2020336571/motivational-ella-baker-quotes-inspire-activism>

We used this source as a way to enhance our presentation and make the viewer feel more connected to her. It helped us to know how she inspired others and what she was really like.

### **Historical Context:**

Throughout her childhood, the U.S. was infiltrated with racist messages developed by the KKK. Jim Crow laws were present and thriving since the 1860's. Following black participation in WWII, civil rights became on the forefront of most people's minds after President Truman passed the law to desegregate the armed forces. Throughout the following decades, influential figures, such as Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr. and Ella Baker, prompted acts of "nonviolent resistance" that helped shape the civil rights movement.

### **Significance:**

Ella Baker helped shape the leaders of the civil rights movement. She held campaigns and workshops, encouraging black people across the country to fight for their civil liberties. Rosa Parks was an attendee at one of Ella's leadership conferences, and was inspired by what she saw there. Her leadership ultimately spurred the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

### **Accomplishments:**

Ella Baker is not widely known today, yet she was a crucial figure in the civil rights movement; her devotedness and ability to listen inspired others to fight for their rights and gave her the nickname, "Fundhi" as well as Mama Baker. Her involvement in the NAACP, co-creation of SCLC - a non-violent civil rights program fighting for desegregation - and creation of the SNCC, which helped register black votes, are among some of her lifelong accomplishments.

### **Discrimination on Two Fronts:**

Fighting against long standing injustice is nearly impossible when you are looked down upon for both the color of your skin and gender, yet Ella Baker did just that. During her work with Martin Luther King Jr. in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, he questioned her decisions and elected her to a provisional director position due to the hierarchy of the organization and views of women. Critics viewed her as abrasive and controlling; they did not think that women should have been leading. Instead of allowing this to stop her, Baker left the SCLC and went on to form the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. It was the first organization of its time to bring younger people, especially students, into the fight for equality.

### **Racial Barriers:**

During the civil rights movement, black people fought valiantly for equal rights, employing mostly nonviolent tactics, such as sit-ins and marches, to call for equal treatment. Ella was faced with racism and discrimination at every turn. Jim Crow laws and police brutality were especially present in the south, where she lived. She was looked down upon for the color of her skin, seen as a second-class citizen. Ella Baker fought against racist systems that stood much longer than she lived and was successful in achieving her goals of desegregation.

### **Present Connection:**

After black people gained equal rights, many believed that racism and discrimination would end there, but it did not. In the summer of 2020, protests erupted across the country to fight against police brutality and discrimination. The protests rose up after the unnecessary, discriminatory murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, and many others. Black people are still not seen as equals, despite civil rights leaders, such as Ella Baker's, hard work.