

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • ACTIVIST

Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired

Fannie Lou Hamer's Reckoning with Mississippi

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Contribution Track • ERA VI • Sunflower County, Mississippi

Who She Is

Fannie Lou Hamer was born October 6, 1917, in Montgomery County, Mississippi, the youngest of twenty children of sharecroppers James Lee and Lou Ella Townsend. The family soon moved to the Brandon plantation near Ruleville, in Sunflower County, where Fannie Lou began picking cotton at six and left school after sixth grade to work full-time. She did not learn that Black Mississippians had a constitutional right to vote until August 1962, at a mass meeting in her own town, when she was forty-four years old. She spent the rest of her life making sure no one else in the Delta could say the same.

The Plantation and the Courthouse

Hamer worked as plantation timekeeper for landowner B.D. Marlow because she could read and write. In 1961 a white doctor performed a hysterectomy on her without her knowledge or consent during surgery for a uterine tumor — a coerced sterilization common enough in the Jim Crow South that it had its own bitter nickname, the "Mississippi appendectomy." On August 31, 1962, weeks after that August mass meeting, she led a group of seventeen or eighteen fellow sharecroppers to the Indianola courthouse to register to vote. The group failed a literacy test rigged to exclude them. Hamer was fired from the plantation and evicted the same day; nightriders later shot into the home where her family took shelter. She became a field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee shortly after.

The Winona Jailhouse

On June 9, 1963, returning from a voter-education workshop, Hamer and several SNCC and SCLC colleagues stopped at the Winona, Mississippi bus terminal and used the whites-only facilities. Police arrested the group, and inside the jail white officers forced Black male prisoners, under threat, to beat Hamer with blackjacks. She suffered permanent damage to one eye and lasting kidney injury. An all-white jury later acquitted the officers involved. She never fully recovered physically, and she carried the memory into every speech that followed.

"I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired." — Fannie Lou Hamer

Is This America?

In 1964 Hamer helped found the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, an integrated alternative to the state's all-white Democratic Party, and served as its vice-chair. At the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City that August, her nationally broadcast testimony to the Credentials Committee recounted the courthouse, the eviction, the shooting, and the Winona beating in plain, unflinching detail — coverage President Johnson reportedly tried to bury by calling an impromptu press conference of his own. When party leaders offered the MFDP two token, non-voting convention seats as a compromise, Hamer refused it outright.

"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?" — Fannie Lou Hamer

Freedom Farm

In 1969 Hamer founded the Freedom Farm Cooperative in Sunflower County to give poor Black families land, food, and housing outside the plantation system that had shaped her whole life — at its height roughly 640 acres, with a communal "pig bank" and dozens of federally subsidized homes. It closed within a few years for lack of sustained funding, but it stood, while it lasted, as her answer to the question she had spent a decade putting to the country. She died March 14, 1977, in Mound Bayou, Mississippi, at fifty-nine.

NC Local Lens

Fannie Lou Hamer's story never leaves Mississippi. No source consulted for this entry documents any lecture, workshop, organizing trip, or personal visit to North Carolina, let alone Cumberland County or Fayetteville — the June 1963 travel that ended in Winona began at a workshop in Charleston, South Carolina, a different state entirely and one worth noting only so it is never mistaken for a North Carolina connection. She and Ella Baker, who does have a Two Americas entry rooted in Littleton and Raleigh, were both central to SNCC, but shared movement affiliation is not a local connection under this project's standard, and no source documents the two of them meeting in North Carolina or Hamer traveling there in Baker's orbit. This entry carries no NC or Cumberland County claim, stated plainly rather than stretched.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Freedom Farm Cooperative's closing year: sources split between 1974 and 1975 — not reconciled here.

Winona injuries: sources agree on permanent eye and kidney damage but describe specifics inconsistently; do not commit to a precise injury list without a primary source.

"Is this America" exact wording: multiple transcribed versions circulate; this entry uses the most commonly cited full version, but an original broadcast transcript would be the stronger source.

Cause of death: sources cite a combination of breast cancer, heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes without agreeing on a single primary cause.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. "Fannie Lou Hamer (1917–1977)," BlackPast.org, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://blackpast.org/african-american-history/hamer-fannie-lou-1917-1977/>.
2. "Fannie Lou Hamer," SNCC Digital Gateway, Duke University Center for Documentary Studies, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://snccdigital.org/people/fannie-lou-hamer/>.
3. Lisa K. Speer, "Hamer, Fannie Lou," Mississippi Encyclopedia, published July 11, 2017, <https://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/fannie-lou-hamer/>.
4. "Fannie Lou Hamer," American Experience, PBS/WGBH, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/freedomsummer-hamer/>.
5. Keisha N. Blain, "Fannie Lou Hamer's Dauntless Fight for Black Americans' Right to Vote," Smithsonian Magazine, August 20, 2020, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/fannie-lou-hamers-dauntless-fight-for-black-americans-right-vote-180975610/>.
6. "How Fannie Lou Hamer Challenged a Nation," National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/how-fannie-lou-hamer-challenged-nation>.
7. "Remembering 1963: Fannie Lou Hamer Arrested and Beaten in Winona, Mississippi," Equal Justice Initiative, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://eji.org/news/remembering-1963-fannie-lou-hamer-arrested-and-beaten-winona-mississippi/>.

Prepared by the Two Americas research process. Verify all figures against primary sources before publication if stronger originals become available.