

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • ACTIVIST

# Strong People Don't Need Strong Leaders

*Ella Baker and the Founding of SNCC*

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*Contribution Track • ERA VI • Littleton & Raleigh, North Carolina*

## Who She Is

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Ella Josephine Baker was born December 13, 1903, in Norfolk, Virginia, but by age eight her family had relocated to Littleton, North Carolina, to be near her mother's people. She spent more than four decades inside the civil rights movement's machinery — the NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference — and became one of its sharpest internal critics, distrusting exactly the kind of top-down, charismatic-leader model most people associate with that era. Her most consequential act was convening a single student meeting in 1960 and then deliberately staying out of its way.

## Littleton

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Baker grew up rooted in Littleton's Roanoke Chapel Baptist Church, founded in 1872 by her grandfather, Rev. Mitchell Ross. The formative figure in her childhood was her maternal grandmother, Josephine Elizabeth "Bet" Ross, born enslaved on a Halifax County plantation in 1847. Bet had been forced into punishing field labor as punishment for refusing a marriage her owner tried to impose on her — and, by her own account passed down to her granddaughter, kept dancing at plantation gatherings anyway, an act of will she refused to surrender. Baker later said her grandmother's stories, of the brutality and of the refusal both, shaped everything that came after.

## Shaw University

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Baker left Littleton in 1918 to enter Shaw University in Raleigh — then operating as both secondary school and college — and graduated in 1927 as class valedictorian. Shaw, a historically Black institution founded in 1865, would become central to her story twice: once as her own education, and again, 33 years later, as the site of the meeting that defined her legacy.

## NAACP Field Secretary

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In 1938 Baker joined the NAACP as a field secretary, traveling the South investigating racial violence and building local chapters from the ground up. By 1942 she was national Director of Branches — the highest position a woman had held in the organization to that point. The job put her inside hundreds of Southern Black communities, watching what organizing actually looked like at the local level, long before most of the country was paying attention.

## SCLC and a Different Idea of Leadership

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In 1957 Baker moved to Atlanta to help launch the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, serving as its acting executive director and running its voter-registration work. She chafed against what she saw as SCLC's concentration of authority in Martin Luther King Jr. and its preacher-centered, top-down structure. Her own philosophy ran the opposite direction — that the movement's durability had to come from ordinary people organizing themselves, not from a single figure the whole structure depended on.

*"Strong people don't need strong leaders."* — Ella Baker

*"What is needed is the development of people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership among other people."* — Ella Baker

## Estey Hall, April 1960

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In the wake of the Greensboro sit-ins, Baker convened a student conference at her own alma mater that Easter weekend, funding it in part by persuading King to contribute \$800 — while insisting the gathering be youth-led rather than an SCLC recruitment drive. It met in Estey Hall, built in 1874 as the first building in the United States constructed for the higher education of Black women, now a National Register of Historic Places site. A joint call under Baker's and King's names had gone out to 56 colleges and 58 Southern communities; 126 student delegates showed up, including Diane Nash, John Lewis, Marion Barry, Bernard Lafayette, and James Bevel from the Nashville delegation. Baker's own instruction to the students was explicit: "Adult Freedom Fighters will be present for counsel and guidance, but the meeting will be youth centered." She pushed them to form their own independent organization rather than become SCLC's youth wing. Out of that meeting came the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee — the organization that would carry out much of the movement's most radical grassroots organizing for the rest of the decade. In 1964 she went on to help found the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. She died in New York City on December 13, 1986 — her 83rd birthday.

### NC Local Lens

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Baker's documented North Carolina ties run through Halifax County and Wake County, not Cumberland County — no Fayetteville connection is documented, and none is claimed here. Her childhood home stood on East End Avenue in Littleton; North Carolina Highway Historical Marker E-120, erected in 2012 at the intersection of East South Main Street (US-158) and Kirkland Street, reads: "Civil rights leader. She organized the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, April 1960, at Shaw University. Her childhood home ¼ mi. E." The marker was damaged in 2019 and rededicated April 8, 2022. Shaw University in Raleigh is both her undergraduate alma mater and the literal site of SNCC's founding in Estey Hall.

### Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

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**"More Than a Hamburger":** widely attributed to Baker as a piece from the 1960 conference era, but exact wording and delivery date were not independently confirmed against a primary source in this pass.

**Grandmother's birth year (1847):** sourced only from a secondary account — cross-check against a primary genealogical or census record before treating it as settled.

**No Cumberland/Fayetteville connection:** confirmed absent in this research pass. Her NC ties are Halifax County (Littleton) and Wake County (Raleigh) only.

## Citations

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*Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.*

1. SNCC Digital Gateway, "Ella Baker," Duke University Center for Documentary Studies, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://snccdigital.org/people/ella-baker/>.
2. SNCC Digital Gateway, "Founding of SNCC," Duke University Center for Documentary Studies, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://snccdigital.org/events/founding-of-sncc/>.
3. Charity Kirk, "Baker, Ella," NCpedia, North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/baker-ella>.
4. David Cecelski, "The Town Where Ella Baker Grew Up," David Cecelski (blog), July 4, 2025, <https://davidcecelski.com/2025/07/04/the-town-where-ella-baker-grew-up/>.
5. North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, "Ella Baker and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee," NCDNCR Blog, December 13, 2016, <https://www.dncr.nc.gov/blog/2016/12/13/ella-baker-and-student-nonviolent-coordinating-committee>.
6. The Historical Marker Database, "Ella Baker Historical Marker (E-120)," accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=222004>.

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