

# Black History is American History



**FANNIE LOU HAMER** paved the way for the Civil Rights, Women’s Rights and Disability Rights movements. She led the charge in registering the Black people in Mississippi to vote and co-founded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. In 1964 she coined the phrase “I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired.”

She was born in 1917 to a large Mississippi sharecropping family and was the youngest of 20 children. She dropped out of school to work full time in cotton fields to help provide for her family. She lived with several disabilities. Hamer was sterilized without her knowledge, leaving her unable to bear children; lived with the long-term effects of polio, and a violent beating in 1963 in a Mississippi jailhouse that left her with kidney damage, a blood clot behind one eye, and a permanent limp.

These obstacles did not stop Hamer’s activism. During her lifetime, she organized a strike for Black cotton pickers, worked alongside the National Council of Negro Women to establish farm cooperatives and banks for poor residents to have better food access, advocated for more federal funding for Head Start programs and housing, and helped form the National Women’s Political Caucus to encourage women’s participation in politics.

The most notable part of her career was her work registering African Americans to vote. In 1962, Hamer and 17 others traveled to an Indianola courthouse to register. At the time, citizens were forced to pass literacy tests to vote—a racist effort to disenfranchise Black people—and it took Hamer three tries to finally pass the test and register to vote. Hamer was fired from the plantation she and her husband worked on for decades because of her efforts, but that only redoubled her dedication to fighting for civil rights.

Shortly after forming the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in 1964, Hamer ran for Congress. Although she lost her bid, her run put Mississippi and its systemic racism into the spotlight. Hamer died in 1977 of breast cancer leaving behind a legacy for the activists of today to model. Her efforts to give voice to marginalized groups were foundational to the Civil Rights movement, the women’s rights movement, and the disability rights movement.

Information gathered from: The Center for Learning equality