

PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

Septima Clark

organizer, activist, teacher

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"I believe unconditionally in the ability of people to respond when they are told the truth. We need to be taught to study rather than believe, to inquire rather than to affirm."



COURTESY OF The Charleston Chronicle

Background

Born: May 3, 1898; Died: December 15, 1987

Septima Clark was born in Charleston, South Carolina. Her father was born into slavery, and her mother was a laundrywoman. She had seven other siblings. Both of her parents wanted her to get a good education.

As a teenager, Clark worked hard and saved up money to attend the Avery Normal Institute, a private school for African Americans. At the school, she was trained to be a teacher. Charleston's public schools did not hire African American school teachers, so she went to teach on Johns Island in 1916. During summer breaks, Clark studied to earn a bachelor's degree from Benedict College, and a master's degree from Virginia Hampton Institute.¹

Clark's Resistance

Clark went back to Charleston to teach at the Avery Institute in 1919. During this time, she joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). She fought to get Charleston's public schools to hire Black teachers. Later on, she moved to Columbia, SC. As a member of the local NAACP chapter there, she fought to get equal pay for Black and White teachers. It worked, and Black teachers' salaries increased.

Clark later worked at Tennessee's Highlander Folk School as a director of the Citizenship School program. Citizenship schools helped teach people how to help others in their community learn reading and math skills. This meant that more people were able to register to vote because they had the skills to pass hard literacy tests. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) took over the Citizenship School program, and Clark became the director of education and teaching. More than 800 citizenship schools were created during her role in the SCLC.²

Achievements

In 1979, President Jimmy Carter gave Clark the Living Legacy Award. In 1982, Clark received South Carolina's highest civilian honor, called the Order of the Palmetto.

¹ Clark, Septima Poinsette. (2018, June 27). Retrieved from <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/clark-septima-poinsette>

² Septima Poinsette Clark. (2019, April 15). Retrieved from <https://www.biography.com/activist/septima-poinsette-clark>

