

## PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

### SEPTIMA CLARK

activist, teacher, organizer

*“The air has finally gotten to the place that we can breathe it together.”*

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#### Background Information

Born on May 3, 1899; Died on December 15, 1987  
Septima Clark came from a Haitian mother and a formerly enslaved father with no real education. Clark’s parents always stressed education as a tool, which greatly impacted her future. Clark received her teaching license in 1916, her bachelor’s degree in 1942, and her master’s degree in 1945 from Hampton University.<sup>1</sup>

#### Clark’s Resistance

Clark worked as a teacher off the coast of South Carolina in Johns Island. Although she lived in Charleston, the law prohibited Black teachers from teaching in Charleston. Clark started her activist career by successfully advocating for a law to end legal segregation against Black teachers. From 1920 on, Clark worked with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) on equal pay and rights for Black workers. In 1965, South Carolina passed a law forbidding state workers to be involved in Civil Rights Associations. She chose to lose her teaching job rather than leave the NAACP, and she went to work at the Highlander Folk School.<sup>2</sup>

Clark’s work focused on helping Black adults pass literacy tests to vote, and she used historical writings on the history and culture of the Black community to promote pride and confidence in her students. She was the director of Highlander’s Citizenship School Program, which helped students replicate her teachings and pedagogy across the country. She also worked with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to expand freedom schools. Freedom schools were specifically designed for the education and empowerment of Black youth in the wake of school closures in the South. These closures were a direct response to the *Brown v Board of Education* court case that ruled segregated schools were unequal. Schools closed before they would allow integration to take place.

#### Achievements

Clark was integral in ensuring the education of thousands of Black youth throughout the nation. She used education as a tool for freedom. She stood up against government influences that threatened her job and her morals. Clark received the Living Legacy award in 1979. A number of schools and parks are named in her honor.

<sup>1</sup> Biography.com. (2019, April 15). Septima Poinsette Clark. Retrieved November 12, 2019, from <https://www.biography.com/activist/septima-poinsette-clark>.

<sup>2</sup> SNCC. (n.d.). Septima Clark. Retrieved November 12, 2019, from <https://snccdigital.org/people/septima-clark/>.

