

PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

SEPTIMA CLARK

activist, teacher, organizer

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

Page | 1



Background Information

Born on May 3, 1989; Died on December 15, 1987

Septima Clark was born to a Haitian mother and 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.¹

Clark’s Resistance

Clark worked as a schoolteacher off of the coast of South Carolina in Johns Island. Although she lived in Charleston, the law prohibited Black teachers from teaching in Charleston. Unhappy with the law, 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 consequently lost her teaching job instead of leaving the NAACP, and went to work at the Highlander Folk School.²

Clark’s work focused on literacy for Black adults to 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 the 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 wake of school closures in the South. These closures were a direct response to the Brown v Board 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. Throughout her career, Clark used education as a tool for freedom. Clark stood up against government influences that threatened her job and her morals. Clark received the Living Legacy award in 1979 and has a number of schools and parks named in her honor.

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

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

Essential Questions

1. It was important for Clark to stay affiliated with the NAACP even though she risked losing her job. Is there something more important to you than a job or money? Why or why not?

2. Clark's activism career started after a law led to unfair treatment. How has the law shaped your life and your fight for social justice?

3. Clark used her career and her passions to enact social change, is there anyone in your life (famous, close to you, or anyone in between) that is doing the same thing?

4. ***"The air has finally gotten to the place that we can breathe it together."***
 - a. Do you agree with her sentiments? Can we all breathe the same air in America? Why or why not?