

Septima P. Clark - Overview

Regarded as the “Queen of the Civil Rights Movement,” Septima Poinsette Clark worked hard to create a bridge between education and civil rights activism. She took on the role of a community teacher, and not only offered the opportunity of education for many African Americans, but also was a natural fighter for human rights and a leader for those who had been ignored. Septima P. Clark built the framework to incorporating activism in one’s life and created a legacy that would be continued in the works of other social activists.

Who was she?

- The daughter of a former slave and laundry woman, Septima P. Clark was born in 1898, Charleston, South Carolina. Both of her parents had encouraged her to obtain an education and allowed her to attend public school. Clark later was able to attend the Avery Normal Institute after working hard to earn money to go to the private school for African Americans.
- After attending school, Clark aspired to become a teacher, but because Charleston did not hire African American teachers to teach in their public schools, instead became an instructor at a Black school on Johns Island. Clark taught for more than 30 years throughout South Carolina.
- In 1920, Septima married her husband, Nerie Clark. Five years later, he died of kidney failure, after which Clark moved to Columbia, South Carolina where she would continue teaching.
- During the summer, Clark would further her education. In 1937, she studied under W.E.B. Du Bois at Atlanta University before being able to earn her BA from Benedict College (Columbia) in 1943 and her MA from Virginia’s Hampton Institute in 1946.

- Along with working with the YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association), Clark joined her local chapter of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People).
- During her time in the NAACP, Septima P. Clark participated in a lawsuit that fought for equal pay between black and white teachers in South Carolina. In 1956, South Carolina passed a law that prohibited city and state employees from affiliating in civil rights organizations. Despite teaching for 40 years, Clark's employment contract was not renewed after she refused to resign from the NAACP.
- At the time of her firing, Clark had been conducting workshops during her summer vacations at the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle Tennessee, where she later became director. Here, Clark created a grassroots education center that focused on social justice. Before participating in the Montgomery bus boycott, Rosa Parks was known to have attended one of these workshops in 1955.
- When she began directing the Highlander's Citizenship School program, Clark ensured that it would be a program that helped regular people learn how to teach others in their communities basic literacy and math skills. As more and more people acquired this basic education, more of them would be able to register to vote.
- In 1961, when the state of Tennessee forced Highlander to close, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference created the Citizenship Education program modeled after Clark's workshops. Clark then joined the organization as its director of education and teaching and under her guidance, more than 800 citizenship schools were able to be made.
- Clark later retired from SCLC in 1970 and worked on conducting workshops for the American Field Service. In 1975, she was elected to

the School Board of Charleston. The following year, South Carolina's governor reinstated her teacher's pension after Clark had been unjustly terminated. She was given a Living Legacy Award by Jimmy Carter in 1979 and received the Order of the Palmetto, the highest civilian honor one could earn in South Carolina, in 1982.

For Further Reading

<https://aaregistry.org/story/septima-p-clark-south-carolina-educator-and-civil-rights-activist/>

<https://snccdigital.org/people/septima-clark/>

<https://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/avery/averyitescivilrights/educationandcivilrights>

https://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/septima_clark/radicalism-of-septima-p-clark

<https://www.nps.gov/people/septimapoinsetteclark.htm>

Sources Used

http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/septima_clark/oral-histories-septima-clark

<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/clark-septima-poinsette>

<https://www.biography.com/activist/septima-poinsette-clark>

http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/septima_clark/local-and-national-leader