Sisters in the Struggle

African American Women in the Civil Rights–Black Power Movement

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Chapter 7

"We Seek to Know ... in Order to
Speak the Truth"
Nurturing the Seeds of Discontent—Septima P. Clark
and Participatory Leadership

Jacqueline A. Rouse

I believe “Social Justice” is not a matter of money but of will, not a problem for the economist but a task for the patriot, requiring leadership and community action rather than investment.  

—Septima P. Clark

In a eulogy presented at the funeral of Septima Poinsette Clark, the Reverend Joseph E. Lowery, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), described the importance of Clark’s work and her relationship to the SCLC. Reverend Lowery asserted that “her courageous and pioneering efforts in the area of citizenship education and interracial cooperation won her SCLC’s highest award, the Drum Major for Justice award.” In a similar vein, the Reverend C. T. Vivian, a former SCLC leader who had worked with Clark and Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., remarked that “she understood that if we could break through the illiteracy, we could break into mainstream America.”

For sixty years, Septima Poinsette Clark dedicated her life to the cause of universal literacy, voter registration, women’s rights, and civil rights. Without formal title or formally recognized leadership, Clark fought on many different fronts at the same time, and successfully
fulfilled many daunting challenges for the modern Civil Rights Movement. In *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954–1963*, Taylor Branch accurately describes Clark as having "one of the most powerful impacts on the whole scene." Fellow worker Andrew Young credited her work in developing the Citizenship Schools program as forming "the base on which the whole civil rights movement was built." The Citizenship program formed the foundation for the highly successful Voter Education Project launched in 1962 by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the NAACP, the Urban League, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Though Clark excelled as a master teacher, her true gift was demonstrated in her success in teaching illiterate rural adults to read and write, and training barely literate southerners to become teachers in the Citizenship Schools. She possessed a special ability to recognize natural leaders among the group. She understood that poor uneducated farmers, midwives, and draymen; and the grandmothers who had nurtured and educated their children and grandchildren by working as washerwomen and domestics. Plain and unpretentious, bright and confident, possessing age-old "mother-wit" or common sense, Septima Clark moved among the unlettered and uncelebrated and became a legend in her time.

"We Seek to Know . . . in Order to Speak the Truth"

Clark was responsible for the development of the Citizenship Schools program, which included adult literacy classes designed to help functional illiterates acquire political literacy and to identify and train grassroots leadership. She provided SCLC and other civil rights organizations with a basic program through which they could achieve the critical goal of building a southern African American electorate, which not only would vote, but also would provide the critical margin for the election of African Americans to political office. But who was this remarkable woman, and where does she fit in the long history of African American leadership in the United States?

Growing Up in Charleston

Septima Poinsette Clark was born on May 3, 1898 in Charleston, South Carolina, the daughter of Peter and Victoria Poinsette. Septima's father, Peter Porcher Poinsette, was born a slave; and her mother, Victoria Warren Anderson Poinsette, the daughter of a native American and a Haitian immigrant, was born in Charleston but spent her early years in Haiti. Raised by her older brothers, cigar dealers in Haiti, Victoria frequently boasted that her Haitian upbringing prepared her to deal with racism in the United States. Victoria's experience as a free person in Haiti, an independent black-controlled country, as well as her social position among the Haitian elite, gave her a strong sense of confidence and determination, and contributed to her willingness to challenge aggressively all forms of racial oppression.

Unlike Victoria, Peter Poinsette believed that his enslaved condition was ordained by God and hence he rejected ideas of rebellion and resistance. Peter was born and raised on the Wando Plantation in North Charleston, South Carolina, owned by Joel Poinsette, a botanist and a former U.S. diplomat to Mexico, who was known for his benevolent treatment of his slaves. Although Peter disagreed with the rebellion and resistance practiced by slaves who sometimes stole or destroyed their master's property, he maintained solidarity with other enslaved Africans and did not betray their goals. During the Civil War, Peter Poinsette worked as a laborer for the Confederate regiment stationed in Charleston. At the end of the war, he emerged as a free
man who was a devout Christian, devoid of any animosity; and willing to work to educate his children. Peter’s recognition of the importance of education developed as a result of his experience as a trusted slave who was responsible for accompanying Joel Poinsette’s children to school each day. It was his responsibility to go with the plantation owner’s children, and remain outside the building until the end of the day, and escort the children back to the plantation. Illiterate for most of his life, Peter Poinsette was adamant about the education of his children, and would administer corporal punishment if they were unwilling to attend school.11

Clark viewed herself as the embodiment of her parents’ experiences. The balanced perspectives of her parents were apparent in Septima’s personality and in her commitments. Like her father, she could be compassionate and generous, and similar to her mother she could be tough, determined, and fearless. Septima also displayed attributes of simplicity and humility, traits reminiscent of her father. These served her well in her work with rural working-class African Americans, a group essential to the success of SCLC and the Voter Education Project. Septima also exhibited her mother’s arrogance, aggressiveness, courage, and determined spirit. Later in life, as she reflected upon her willingness to challenge southern white patterns of dominance, Clark asserted that fear actually escaped her. She was not afraid of the White Citizens Councils, the Ku Klux Klan, the white mobs guarding the southern courthouses, or even the harrowing ride down the narrow mountain roads of Monticello, Tennessee, following her arrest at the Highlander Folk School. In situations such as these, Septima remembered her mother challenging a policeman who had approached their house to apprehend their pet dog, which apparently had injured a neighbor’s child. As the policeman entered the family’s property without notice, Victoria warned the officer “don’t you come in here.” Just in case the officer underestimated her because she was a small woman, Victoria assured him that she was prepared to protect her property. The policeman retreated without accomplishing his objective. This incident, reflecting her mother’s courage, made an indelible impression on the young Septima.12

Of equal importance to Septima’s development of her personality and her ability to serve as a professional bridge leader was her inheritance of her father’s caring nature—his concern for people in varied stations of life. Peter Poinsette taught her that the measure of her worth as an individual would come from her service to the least of mankind. Slavery had taught Peter Poinsette tolerance for the weaknesses of others. Christianity had taught him that in one’s weakness, God is made great. Thus, Septima learned that three things were important—a strong belief in God, an education, and a willingness to serve those who were less fortunate. She credited her father for providing her with the skills to become a significant and influential worker among the indigenous people of Johns Island and in the civil rights campaigns in the South.13

In 1916, following her graduation from the Avery Institute, a private school in Charleston sponsored by the American Missionary Association, Clark passed the state examination for teachers and received a license allowing her to teach in rural public schools. Although African Americans taught in segregated black schools throughout South Carolina, they were not allowed to teach in the public schools of Charleston. Beginning her teaching career on Johns Island in 1916, Clark was confronted with the most abject living conditions she had ever seen, and witnessed first hand the impact that poverty, racism, and intra-group gender discrimination could have on the lives of black people. Clark quickly learned that education on the Island was determined by the agricultural contract between the black sharecroppers and the landowners. The children of sharecropping families could only attend school during the months of December, January, and February, known as the “lay by” season. Clark observed that the inability of the masses of blacks to read and write condemned them to a lifetime of sharecropping and poverty in a system akin to antebellum slavery. As more and more young people expressed a desire to attend school and flee the impoverished life they knew, Clark’s classes expanded. Not limiting her work to teaching, Clark nursed the sick, sewed clothing for the children, and gave of her time helping people in need. In this manner, a bond of trust was established between Clark and the local community. Soon the adult residents began to come to her home at night to learn the basics of reading and how to write their names.14

Launching a Career of Political Activism

Clark spent three years on Johns Island. During that time she crusaded for the equalization of teachers’ salaries and was active in the
movement to have African American teachers employed to teach in the public schools in Charleston and to be public school principals. In 1919, Clark returned to Charleston to teach sixth grade at the Avery Institute, the private school for African Americans from which she had graduated. One night, while attending an NAACP meeting, she met Edwin Harleston, a prominent black artist and civil rights activist, and Thomas E. Miller, former Reconstruction congressman from South Carolina and former president of South Carolina State College. Harleston and Miller had organized the Charleston branch of the NAACP, and at the first meeting discussed its role in securing civil and political rights for African Americans. Clark joined the NAACP in protesting the arrest of a local black delivery boy, who was accused of stealing a watch from a white female customer. The woman later found the jewelry in a garment she had sent to the laundry. Local blacks asked the woman to retract her story to secure the release and clear the name of the young boy. The woman’s compliance was viewed as a victory for the NAACP and helped to unite and solidify the Charleston branch.

Following the success of its first protest, the NAACP took up the issue of black teachers in the city’s public school system. School board members declared that the black community did not wish to have black teachers, and that this was an initiative sponsored by the “mulattoes.” Clark, assisted by Avery Institute students, went door-to-door, collecting signatures to refute the board’s charges. Clark joined with Harleston and Miller in their drive to collect 20,000 signatures, from all social classes and occupations, to demonstrate that the black community supported the right of black teachers to teach in Charleston’s public schools. The statute was passed in 1920, and in 1921, Charleston hired its first black teachers. Clark was employed to teach at a local elementary school.

Clark had been introduced to political activism and soon sought to improve the plight of black children throughout Charleston. Having gained a reputation as an advocate for equal rights, she began work with Charleston’s Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA). The city maintained a segregated black YWCA, which included recreational facilities for young females, but no similar institution existed for black boys. To address this issue, Clark and sympathetic white YWCA workers met with Mayor Wehman to discuss the need for additional recreational facilities for African Americans in the city. Although he was willing to receive the white women, the mayor turned his back when Clark began to speak. Undaunted, Clark made her point about the lack of structured recreation for the city’s young black males. Shortly thereafter, municipal facilities were made available for black male youngsters. Remembering this incident some years later, she told a friend, “I know that there is educational value in action.” This experience tested Clark’s leadership, endurance, creativity, and commitment.

In 1920, Septima Poinsett married Nerie Clark, a sailor. Sadly, Nerie Clark died of kidney failure in December 1925. Two children were born of this union, but only one survived. Following her husband’s death, Clark taught for a year in the mountains of western North Carolina, near her husband’s family, before returning to Johns Island to teach for three years. In 1929, in search of better economic and employment opportunities, Septima Clark moved to Columbia, South Carolina, where she resided until 1947. During the summers in the 1930s and 1940s, Clark enrolled in courses at Columbia University in New York City and at Atlanta University, where she studied with W. E. B. Du Bois. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Benedict College in 1942 and a Master of Arts degree from Hampton Institute in 1945. Du Bois’s lectures on the debilitating effects of racism and segregation made the connection between protest and education and reinforced for Clark the importance of dedicating her life to campaigns for social justice.

In Columbia, Clark taught in the elementary department at Booker T. Washington High School. This was the most prominent public school for African Americans in South Carolina. Also employed at Booker T. Washington were several noted civil rights activists, including Modjeska Simkins, a mathematics teacher; and J. Andrew Simmons, the principal of Booker T. Washington. Clark, Simkins, and Simmons collaborated with South Carolina NAACP attorney Harold Bohivare and NAACP counsel Thurgood Marshall in the development of a lawsuit to obtain the equalization of teachers’ salaries. In South Carolina, as in most southern states, black teachers’ salaries were about half that of whites. Arguing that teachers with equal qualifications should receive equal pay, the NAACP, represented by Thurgood Marshall, took Viola Duvall’s class action suit on behalf of Charleston’s black teachers to federal court, and in 1945, Federal District Judge J. Waties Waring ruled
that there could be no difference in the salary scales for black and white teachers.** Reflecting upon this experience, Clark declared that:

My participating in [the] fight to force equalization of white and Negro teachers' salaries on the basis of equal certification, of course, is what might be described by some, no doubt, as my first "radical job." I would call it my first effort in social action challenging the status quo, the first time I had worked against people directing a system for which I was working.

In actuality, Clark had worked against the system, indirectly challenging the white authorities on many earlier occasions.** Clark was very pleased with her teaching in Columbia, her affiliation with the local branch of the NAACP, and her acceptance and fellowship within Columbia’s black community. In 1947, she returned to Charleston to care for her ailing mother, where she was again employed as a teacher in the public school system. She renewed her affiliation with the YWCA, which was a hotbed for civil rights activism, and supported a number of political causes. Work with the YWCA also brought Clark into closer relationship with Judge and Mrs. J. Waites Waring. Judge Waring, a ninth-generation white Charlestonian, had become a voice of social justice for black Charleston. In 1947, he ruled the all-white Democratic primary unconstitutional in South Carolina, and subsequently blacks began to vote in local, state, and national elections. This action alienated Waring from white Charlestonians. He became further estranged when he divorced his southern wife to marry an outspoken northern liberal. Snubbed by most white Charlestonians, the Warings developed social and political relations with black activists. Following a keynote speech made by Mrs. Waring and a YWCA function, in which she lambasted white Charlestonians and called for an end to discrimination and full desegregation of public facilities, Clark and other black activists friendly with the Warings were snubbed by some blacks and placed under surveillance by the white authorities.**

*Septima Clark and the Highlander Folk School*

Colleagues at the YWCA introduced Clark to the work of the Highlander Folk School. Located fifty miles northeast of Chattanooga, Tennessee, the school was known as a retreat and planning center for community activists. Labeled by white southerners as a “Communist school,” Highlander training programs during the 1930s and 1940s focused on the need for labor unions, especially in the textile industries. Advocating equality of the races, Highlander flagrantly violated segregation laws and customs, and provided integrated housing and other accommodations. Highlander sponsored workshops which concentrated on the elimination of racial stereotypes, the breaking down of social barriers, and the development of leaders. The school was attended by many black and white activists, including Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. During the summer of 1954, following the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Clark attended the Highlander School’s summer workshop.**

At Highlander, Clark met many whites and blacks working for an end to legal racial segregation. Workshop sessions addressed how the Supreme Court’s decision could be implemented. She returned to Charleston to organize the black public school teachers. She invited Myles and Zilpha Horton, Highlander’s organizers and founders, to Charleston to share their views on interracial work. Charleston’s black teachers were experiencing difficulty securing bank loans to continue their graduate programs in education. So they established a credit union. The Hortons demonstrated how the teachers’ collective work could secure group solidarity, while laying the foundation for a credit union.**

In the summer of 1955, Clark carried several carloads of black Charlestonians to Highlander. Most were amazed to learn of whites who were truly interested in the plight of African Americans. They were even more dumbfounded to discover that blacks and whites actually ate, slept, and worked together at Highlander. Some of the participants from Charleston were uncertain about the full extent of the integration practiced at the school, and chose to eat from the baskets of fried chicken they brought with them, just in case. Clark, frustrated by their stance, was assured by Horton: “Give them a few days, after the food runs out and they will [come] down [to the dining hall].” By the middle of their first week, the participants had joined the others. However, such racial harmony amazed even those participants who came with organizing experience. For example, one particular session included NAACP officer Rosa Parks and the well-known white activist, Virginia Durr, from Montgomery, Alabama. Durr was a frequent visitor to...
Highlander and a member of the school’s board of directors. It was at Durr’s insistence and because of her support that Rosa Parks attended the 1955 workshop.25 Rosa Parks developed a friendship with Clark and Parks began to discuss her work as the advisor to the NAACP’s Youth Council in Montgomery. Parks was reluctant to talk openly about her work, fearing that someone from her hometown would learn of her attendance at Highlander. However, Clark succeeded in getting Parks to share with the workshop participants information about the Women’s Political Council, a group of black women in Montgomery whose political activism from the late 1940s and later during the Montgomery bus boycott formed the backbone for the civil rights campaigns in that city. The Women’s Political Council stressed the need to work with youth to encourage them to seek elective office, learn about politics, and prepare for leadership. Rosa Parks’s shyness and fears of possible reactions from whites in Montgomery convinced Clark to accompany Parks to Atlanta, where she took the bus back to Montgomery. Virginia Durr had done the same thing for Parks’s trip to Highlander. Then in December 1955, Clark was totally stunned when she read a newspaper account about Parks’s refusal to give up her seat on a public bus to a white person and her subsequent arrest. Clark stated that no one would have guessed that within a few short weeks, why Rosa Parks would make such a dramatic statement. Clark often credited Parks with being the catalyst for her own determination to assist her people in acquiring full freedom.26

During the latter part of 1955, Myles Horton asked Clark to direct a Highlander workshop for black middle-class residents, mainly from Chattanooga and Nashville, Tennessee. These participants had been recruited through churches, social groups, and the YWCA; and their expenses had been paid by Highlander. Although they were literate and their higher economic status partially shielded them from some of the everyday abuses experienced by poor blacks, they still endured the blatant discrimination imposed by legal segregation—they could not vote and were either excluded or discriminated against in housing and public accommodations. Clark experienced little success with this group. Unlike the middle-class black teachers in Charleston and other parts of the South who worked regularly with poor children and adults, she was unable to get these wealthier residents to work with the poor blacks in their community. Clark stated:

I don’t know whether they were afraid to try to teach others, or if they had some highfalutin idea that poor people were so far beneath them that they wouldn’t fool with them. Many middle-class blacks were extremely hostile and prejudiced one to the other. That’s the way they were. And so going to Highlander with them, we had a hard time. We got them to see what conditions they were living under, but we couldn’t get them to do any of the work in their community to help others to change. Couldn’t get them to do that. That’s the one big reason why, when we started the Citizenship Schools, I felt it would be best not to try to use middle-class blacks as teachers. It would be better to use people from the community in which they lived who could just read well aloud and write legibly, rather than trying to use the others. That’s why we got Bernice Robinson to run the first school that we set up on Johns Island in 1957. She was the first teacher we had for the whole South and after we had a success with Bernice in that school, then we could get others.27

The white South’s violent response to the Brown v. Board of Education decision, particularly the escalation of militant activities among the White Citizen Councils and the Ku Klux Klan, led to physical and economic reprisals against politically active blacks. Blacks in Charleston realized that their civil rights would only be protected by their ability to exercise the franchise. Southern Democrats allowed some blacks to vote in the general elections if they possessed receipts indicating payment of their poll taxes. With the elimination of the white primary in 1944, white public officials continued to use literacy tests to restrict black voting. The literacy qualification meant that residents must be able to read and interpret a portion of the state’s constitution to the registrar’s satisfaction, to be added to the voting rolls. However, many registrars required black applicants to pass lengthy examinations, and to correctly answer absurd and unrelated questions, such as “How many bubbles are there in a bar of soap?” Clark related a story about a black professor from Tuskegee Institute who read perfectly the Alabama state constitution. The registrar, not to be outdone, then asked the professor to read a document written in Chinese. Incensed, the professor departed.28

Esau Jenkins, one of Septima Clark’s former students on Johns Island, had an old school bus he used to carry workers from the island to downtown Charleston. One rider, Annie Wine, told Jenkins that she would register to vote if he would teach her how to pass the literacy
test. Jenkins then used the forty-minute round trip ride to establish a classroom on wheels. Workers were taught basic information about local and national governments, but mainly they were taught to memorize the section of the state constitution that voters were required to read. Indeed, Mrs. Wine memorized the section so well that as the person in line before her misread the constitution, she openly corrected the reader. To which the registrar replied, “No coaching, please.” When Wine’s turn came, she merely had to show her property tax receipt in order to receive her certification. Jenkins knew that it would be only a matter of time before the white officials would catch on to this plan. Blacks needed to know how to read and write. In fact Bernice Robinson recalled that, as the number of blacks registering increased, “the whites realized what was happening and started switching the sections you had to read, but they didn’t catch on until the late fifties, and by that time we were really teaching people how to read, not just memorize.”

During the summer of 1956, Clark invited her cousin Bernice Robinson, a beautician, and Esau Jenkins to accompany her to Highlander. The workshop centered on discussions of world citizenship using the United Nations as a theme. Participants were asked to develop plans for implementing the summer’s work in their respective communities. Jenkins stated that he was not familiar with the United Nations, but his people needed to know how to read and write and he wished Highlander could help him establish a school on Johns Island for that purpose. Sensing the urgency and the desperation in his voice, for the next two weeks the workshop concentrated on creating a workable plan for Jenkins.

Septima Clark and the Launching of the Citizenship Schools

The year 1956 ushered in two significant events for Clark—the beginning of the Citizenship School on Johns Island, which laid the foundation for mass organizing in the modern Civil Rights Movement; and the termination of Clark’s employment with the public school system of Charleston. As part of the southern response to the Brown decision, in an attempt to control the political activism of African Americans, a number of southern state legislatures passed laws designating the NAACP a subversive organization, suggesting that the association was linked to the Communist Party. State officials declared that African Americans were pawns in the Communists’ plan to take over the United States. In South Carolina, all public employees were required to state whether or not they were members of the NAACP, and to acknowledge all other organizational affiliations. Membership in the NAACP was grounds for termination of employment by the state. In response to this intimidation, Clark organized a letter-writing campaign directed to the 726 black teachers. Clark recalled,

“I said to myself, “The KKK is an organization, and the White Citizens’ Council is an organization, and they can belong to those. Why can’t I belong to the NAACP?” Then I thought, “If we just admit it, surely they can’t throw us out of all of us. There are too many of us. I got in touch with all [the black teachers], but only forty-two would admit to being members—eleven met to plan to see the superintendent, and when the day came to go see him, eleven showed up, and it was the hour to go, and only five of us went. All forty-two who admitted being members were dismissed, and I’ve never been able to teach in South Carolina since.”

The firing in 1956 of Clark and other black teachers in Charleston who admitted to being members of the NAACP was representative of the struggle occurring in a number of cities throughout the South. At the end of the 1955–56 school year, many black teachers who had voted, were members of the NAACP, or who openly acknowledged support for school integration, faced dismissal from their teaching positions. For example, in Greenville, Mississippi, White Citizens Council members demanded that local school boards dismiss black teachers whose names appeared on the voting rolls. In Georgia, the state board of education adopted a resolution that forbade teachers from joining the NAACP, and that threatened the revocation of the teaching licenses of those who refused to quit the organization. In Missouri and Oklahoma, black teachers who lost their positions due to desegregation plans filed breach of contract suits against school officials.

The firing of Clark and other African American teachers was part of a larger effort to repress all efforts to integrate public schools in South Carolina and throughout the South, and to undermine the efforts of the NAACP and other civil rights organizations seeking an end to the southern system of segregation and discrimination. Although most persons, including Clark, acknowledged that her termination was related to her membership in the NAACP, they understood that many whites in Charleston wanted to silence and destroy
Clark and her leadership. Clark’s firing was a symbolic act, and was about much more than a black woman who happened to be vocal about her NAACP membership. Though membership violated the South Carolina statute, membership in the NAACP did not automatically produce activism. Clark had established a highly visible, militant public persona in Charleston and at Highlander, and such overt militancy had to be cut off at its economic roots. Following her dismissal, Clark accepted a full-time position at Highlander as the Director of Workshops. Clark was required to organize and conduct the workshops held primarily in the summer, recruit participants, and raise funds to support the Highlander program.

During the fall of 1956, Clark collaborated with Esau Jenkins and Myles Horton in the development of the first black Citizenship School, which opened under the auspices of the Highlander Folk School in January 1957 on Johns Island. The school became the prototype for others that were opened on the South Carolina Sea Islands and later throughout the South. Although the initial purpose of the schools was to enable blacks to meet the literacy requirements for voting in South Carolina, the primary goal was education for empowerment. Clark fervently believed that there was a relationship between “Literacy and Liberation.” She developed what Brazilian educator Paulo Freire later referred to as a “pedagogy of the oppressed,” that utilized material culture and the daily experiences of individuals who were functional illiterates, to teach reading and writing skills, and to generate an understanding of the relationship of education to freedom and the acquisition of one’s civil rights.\(^{35}\)

The first citizenship school, held in rooms in the back of a local cooperative operated by black farmers to sell their produce, had no textbooks or other formal reading materials, only the things adults wished to read. Windows were covered so that whites and/or their spies would not know what was going on. Clark, remembering the problems she encountered earlier working with middle-class blacks at Highlander, asked her cousin Bernice Robinson to serve as the school’s first teacher. Bernice Robinson, a beautician, protested that she did not have the education. But Clark and Jenkins told her that she understands the people, who can communicate with the people, and someone who has been to Highlander who knows Highlander’s philosophy, so there’s nobody to do it but you. Either you do it or we don’t have the school.

Robinson, who was familiar with the Charleston area because of her work with the NAACP, accepted the challenge.\(^{36}\)

Scheduling classes around the agricultural calendar of the islanders, the citizenship school was conducted during the “lay by” months of December, January, and February. On the first night, Robinson arrived ready to use basic materials borrowed from elementary school teachers. She quickly realized that her plan must be altered. Robinson announced to the students that she was not a teacher, and that her job was primarily to facilitate the learning process. In turn, the students informed her of their desire to understand and master basic information, useful for daily living. Robinson utilized items from the day-to-day lives of the students, who expressed a need to master the fundamentals of writing a money order, filling out a department store catalog order form, signing their names to official documents, and being able to read well enough to register to vote. Robinson began by asking the students to recite their activities for the day. These became stories for the students to write about and to read aloud. They used bank checks, money orders, and catalog forms as practice writing materials; newspaper advertisements from local grocery stores for arithmetic. Men were asked to determine how many gallons of gas were required to drive from the island into Charleston. Farmers had to work out the mathematical calculations necessary for putting up a fence.\(^{37}\)

Some of the adult students were members of churches and lodges where they were required to make oral presentations. Conscious of their impediments, students asked Robinson to assist them with public speaking. The young people laughed at the adults as they tried to read aloud, mispronouncing words. Robinson then decided to have the young and old prepare for classroom debates by using contemporary materials. Following much coaching on language skills and presentation, many of the students performed very well.\(^{38}\) At the end of the first session of the Citizenship School, all fourteen of the original students received certificates. Clark recalled that “They could read and write their own names, and they could do arithmetic.”
The numbers of black registered voters on Johns Island increased, and word of the school’s success spread rapidly. This triggered an excitement and an interest in attending the Citizenship School among the residents on the other islands. By 1958 classes were established on Wadmalaw Island, Edisto Island, and in North Charleston. Bernice Robinson’s responsibilities grew as new schools were developed on other islands. She recruited and drove the teachers to Highlander’s summer workshops, opened new schools, and supervised existing ones. Classrooms varied from kitchens, to beauty parlors, to neighboring yards under trees. Whites soon realized that there had been a groundswell of activity among the black islanders. Newspaper stories noted this activism, in an attempt to intimidate blacks into abandoning their political involvement. Clark feared that blacks would revert to the earlier position of fear and complacency, but as she traveled around the islands, she found they were determined to continue to register and vote. 

During her three-year tenure (1957–1960) as Director of Workshops and chief fundraiser for Highlander, Clark traveled throughout the United States speaking to friends, sponsors, and benefactors of the Highlander Folk School, seeking financial support for the school’s program of social reform. The high visibility of the school, and its interracial character, made it a target for Tennessee officials, who argued that the school violated state segregation laws and should be closed down. During the 1950s and 1960s, activities and gatherings that had an interracial composition were frequently characterized as “Communist inspired forums” for the dissemination of “propaganda.” In July 1959, state troopers descended on Highlander as Clark was conducting a workshop. They began searching the institution’s buildings, including the private residence of Myles Horton. Unaware of their presence, the workshop participants continued to view a film, “The Face of the South.” The police officers entered and demanded that the film be cut off. Clark and the participants refused and the equipment was disabled by the troopers. Faced with a threatening confrontation, the group began to sing freedom songs, including “We Shall Overcome,” adding a new verse, “I am not afraid.” Having allegedly found a beer can in Horton’s home, the troopers arrested Clark and several others on trumped up charges of selling liquor in a dry state. Bail, set at $500, was paid by May Justus, a longtime Highlander supporter. The charges against Clark were later dropped, but the newspaper headlines read: “Septima Clark Arrested for Possession of Whiskey.”

Following the raid on Highlander, Myles Horton and Martin Luther King, Jr. met to discuss the possibility of the Citizenship School Program being transferred to SCLC. The idea of moving the program to SCLC was introduced in 1959 by Ella Baker, who was then SCLC’s acting executive secretary. Clark and the Highlander program would remain in Monteagle, Tennessee until 1961. By that time King had come to realize how much SCLC needed Septima Clark and the citizenship training program, to help raise funds and revitalize its defunct Crusade for Citizenship program.

Septima Clark and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference

The SCLC’s founding in 1957 had coincided with the passage of the 1957 Civil Rights Act, which among other things made interference with an individual’s voting rights a federal offense. Then King and SCLC officials decided to concentrate on black voter registration in the South. In February 1958, SCLC launched the “Crusade for Citizenship,” an unsuccessful attempt to increase the number of southern black voters. Like Clark, SCLC leaders recognized that political disfranchisement was an important aspect of southern black oppression and identified the achievement of voting rights as the next goal for collective action. Unfortunately, SCLC’s Crusade for Citizenship program failed to obtain its goal in the late 1950s because of white resistance and its inability to increase the number of eligible residents who could pass the literacy tests used by most southern states. Voting, unlike bus boycotts and mass protests, required that one be able to read and write. The question was how to train the masses of illiterate and semiliterate black people to read and write in a short period of time.

Beginning in late 1959 and continuing through 1960, Clark traveled to Atlanta on weekends for sessions planning with SCLC. On Monday mornings Clark would be driven to a designated town in the South, where she would spend a week or two trying to convince the local black residents to establish Citizenship Schools or help with SCLC’s organized protests and marches. Clark developed a good
working relationship with Ella Baker, SCLC’s Associate Director, who went to Highlander during the summer of 1960 and worked with Clark in training young people to assume leadership roles in the Civil Rights Movement. At Highlander, Baker became convinced that the Citizenship School program was exactly what SCLC needed, but it took Baker two years to convince King to attend Highlander workshops and see what they were doing.43

In 1961, when the Highlander Folk School was finally closed by white state officials and after continuous prodding from Ella Baker and Myles Horton, King recruited Clark to work with SCLC in Atlanta. The Highlander leadership training program had served its purpose, but given the steady advance of the Civil Rights Movement between the years 1954 and 1960, Clark and other leaders recognized the need for a program that stressed both leadership training and citizenship education and provided rural blacks with the basic skills necessary for achieving literacy and ultimately the right to vote. In an article published in Freidomways, entitled “Literacy and Liberation,” Clark reflected on the importance of Highlander, and how she and other school officials had come to the realization that literacy and liberation went hand in hand. “The basic purpose of citizenship schools is discovering and developing local community leaders.” For Clark, leadership was not necessarily synonymous with having a college education or middle-class status. Clark felt that for the Civil Rights Movement to succeed, grassroots leadership had to be developed, and she believed that the Citizenship Schools were essential to achieving that goal.

In 1954 in the South, segregation was the main barrier in the way of the realization of democracy and brotherhood. Highlander was an important place because Negroes and whites met on an equal basis and discussed their problems together. There was a series of workshops on Community Services and Segregation, Registration and Voting, and Community Development. Then it became evident that the South had a great number of functional illiterates who needed additional help to carry out their plans for coping with the problems confronting them.44

Clark’s definition and use of the term literacy was very broad. Although reading, writing, and arithmetic were important, being literate also meant that one understood the meaning of citizenship and how to acquire citizenship rights. As an example of the relationship of literacy to liberation, Clark cited the case of black maids and custodians in the Atlanta public schools asking the Atlanta Board of Education for a raise in pay. Clark recalled that “it was such an audacious step for them to take” that the superintendent of schools wrote an article for the Atlanta Constitution entitled “Maids Ask City Schools for a Raise.” The maids and custodians complained that they had only three days release time during the Christmas season, whereas other employees had two weeks. They also asked for salary increases that would meet the basic living standards. The maids and custodians sent copies of the letter to the mayor and two members of the board of education, and concluded, “Literacy means liberation.”45

The Citizenship School program developed at the Highlander Folk School was funded by grants from the Emil Schwarzman Foundation, the Marshall Field Foundation, and the Ford Foundation, and in 1961 the entire program was moved to SCLC. In Atlanta, Clark focused on citizenship training, voting, and literacy, literally replicating the Highlander program, with Andrew Young and Dorothy Cotton as staff members. A center in Liberty County, Georgia owned by the American Missionary Association became the home for the program. Although Andrew Young was the director of citizenship education, which was merged with the voter registration program, Clark was in charge of the overall project.44

Like Clark, Young was transferred to SCLC with the Highlander Citizenship Program, becoming its director. Dorothy Cotton had worked with Wyatt T. Walker in the Petersburg Improvement Association. When Walker accepted a position with SCLC, Cotton joined him. Cotton’s role was to serve as a cultural emissary for SCLC, who utilized music and folklore as vehicles for generating interest and support among rural blacks. This technique had also been used at Highlander.46

The Citizenship School staff reported to SCLC’s Atlanta office and worked with Wyatt T. Walker in establishing the program and in creating the center in Liberty County, Georgia. They did not bring people in south Georgia to the center during the first month. Instead, the staff traveled throughout Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana recruiting students.46

The SCLC Citizenship Schools were highly successful. Between 1961 and 1970, 897 were established in southern states where there were large concentrations of African Americans. The schools were
held in many places, including private homes, beauty parlors and barber shops, and when necessary, in outdoor venues frequented by ordinary black people. Clark endorsed the statement made by Andrew Young that “the Citizenship Schools were the base on which the whole Civil Rights Movement was built,” and she added that:

It’s true because the Citizenship Schools made people aware of the political situation in their area. We recruited the wise leaders of their communities, like Fannie Lou Hamer in Mississippi. Hosea Williams started out as a Citizenship School Supervisor. The Citizenship School classes formed the grassroots basis of new statewide political organizations in South Carolina, Georgia, and Mississippi. From one end of the South to the other, if you look at the black elected officials and the political leaders, you find people who had their first involvement in the training program of the Citizenship School.67

It was 1962 before the major civil rights groups were ready to do something about voter registration. But we had developed the ideas of the Citizenship Schools between 1957 and 1961. So all the civil rights groups could use our kind of approach, because by then we knew it worked.68

One of the first projects launched by the SCLC Citizenship School program was centered in south Georgia. Clark went to Savannah to canvas and to organize because of the work of activist Hosea Williams. According to Clark, Williams was trying to get people to register to vote but he “didn’t know that he had to teach them to read and write so they could answer the thirty questions that the Georgia [literacy test] had for them to answer.” Following the success of the Savannah Citizenship School, Hosea Williams established schools in eighteen other counties in the southeastern part of Georgia.69

Potential grassroots leaders and teachers in locales throughout the state of Georgia were identified and brought to the SCLC Citizenship School headquarters established in Liberty County. The SCLC underwrote the expenses of all persons who participated in its weeklong training workshops. Utilizing the carefully honed and developed techniques that had proven successful in South Carolina, Septima Clark supervised the workshops which included many persons who could barely read or write, and demonstrated how they could instruct others. Participants were shown the relationship between voter registration, voting, and the achievement of personal and community goals.70

At the end of the Citizenship School’s training workshops, participants returned to their home towns where they received $75 per month to teach others the skills they learned. For many participants, this was more money than they had ever received from employers. Citizenship School teachers frequently became grassroots leaders, who gradually replaced the local clergy as leaders. Many black ministers were more dependent on white people’s approval and were often afraid to openly join or support the Civil Rights Movement. Assessing the position of the local black ministers, Clark said:

Of course I understand those preachers . . . Often they weren’t against the Movement; they were just afraid to join it openly. It’s simply a contradiction; so many preachers supported the Movement that we can say it was based in churches, yet many preachers couldn’t take sides with it because they thought they had too much to lose.71

Black ministers have received the greatest scholarly and public recognition as the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. However, black women through their community activism were often the grassroots leaders. Black women actively organized through their network of missionary and other church-based associations, as well as in the National Association of Colored Women and the National Council of Negro Women. They used these networks to raise money and to disseminate information about meetings, conferences, protests, and marches. Many church women who worked with the Citizenship Schools were also members of the NAACP and various civic associations. Through their extensive networks they were able to perform bridging functions between local and national civil rights organizations.72

In analyzing Clark and the female leadership of her generation, one can identify some of the connections between the activism of early twentieth-century club women with the women of the modern Civil Rights–Black Power Movement, and in many cases recognize their work as “bridge leaders.” Such women came of age during the post-Reconstruction era and inherited a long history of racial consciousness and gender networking, bonding, and organizing.73 Women like Ella Baker, Modjeska Simkins, and Septima Clark had been influenced and molded by older women who worked in cooperative efforts for the passage of antilynching, suffrage, employment, education, housing, and other legislation designed to improve the lot of black women. These women worked in traditional races
protest organizations or affiliated groups in their quest to improve the quality of life for African Americans. Though they sometimes collaborated with white women, as was the case in the antilynching and suffrage campaigns, their primary objective was black social and political advancement.24

Clark and other activist women, such as Ella Baker, Gloria Richardson, and many lesser known figures, demonstrated another definition of leadership based on the experiences and perspectives of female activists. As a result of their presence, work, and acceptance by the masses as leaders, male activism ceased to be the only acceptable model of leadership. Leadership at the grassroots level reflected the ability of individuals—regardless of sex—to influence and organize people for social change. Working at the grassroots level, with the rural and unlettered black masses, Clark communicated the message that the local residents could be entrusted with the power to make decisions that impacted their lives and likewise could train their brothers and sisters in the struggle.

Charismatic, hierarchical leadership came under attack in the 1950s, especially from Septima Clark and Ella Baker, whose work with indigenous communities, leading by example and establishing new models of viable leadership, opened up new opportunities for the growth and development of future leaders. When they began their work with Martin Luther King and SCLC, Clark and Baker recognized that the civil rights campaigns could be hampered by a rigid leadership structure. At the same time, women in positions where they demonstrated important leadership skills often were not given the formal titles, nor the respect, their work deserved. Women in SCLC were denied recognition as leaders, or even as influential facilitators. Clark’s ability to nurture, support, and develop grassroots black leaders who would carry out SCLC’s program at the local level was not given any formal recognition. Essentially, Clark was not viewed as a “leader” because women’s activities did not fit the traditional definition of “leadership.” Clark, Baker, and Cotton’s roles were considered “supportive” of the leadership that was provided by the men.

Clark is remembered by many for her courage and willingness to stand up to any man, black or white. Clark frequently confronted sexism in the black male groups she worked with, but she did not challenge the male’s right to be the central voice for “the race.” She be-

lieved in SCLC, shortcomings and all, and accepted King’s concept of the beloved community, and his total commitment to nonviolent social change.

Septima Poinsette Clark’s contributions to the Civil Rights Movement were many, yet it is impossible to provide a serious evaluation of her work without first understanding her strong commitment to “Literacy and Liberation.” Clark’s development of the Citizenship Schools, which became essential for civil rights mobilization, was the key to SCLC’s successful voter registration campaign in 1961 and 1962 and the programs later launched by the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO).25 Septima Poinsette Clark and her citizenship training crusade was a vital factor in launching the Southern black liberation movement.

NOTES

2. Letters from Septima P. Clark to Elizabeth Waring, May 19 and August 18, 1961, Howard University, Moorland Spingam Research Center, Judge Julius Waites Waring Papers, box 110, folder 263 (hereafter cited as JWWP-MSRC).
8. Septima Clark’s Citizenship Schools program was also adopted by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the National Association of Colored People (NAACP), the Urban League, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).


14. Barton Interview, RSS-SPC, 6–7; McFadden, "Septima P. Clark and the Struggle for Human Rights," 86; Clark, Echo in My Soul, 52.


22. Clark, Echo in My Soul, 95–98; Brown, Ready From Within, 23–34; Hall Interview, SOHP-UNC, 63–69.

23. Barton Interview, RSS-SPC, 16–17; Clark, Echo in My Soul, 119–20; Brown, Ready From Within, 30–31; Wigginton, Refuse to Stand, 240–41.

24. Ibid.


27. Wigginton, Refuse to Stand, 241.


29. Ibid., 46.

30. Wigginton, Refuse to Stand, 190.

31. Sea Island Project, Part D, 26–29, Robert Scott Small Library, College of Charleston, SC.


33. Wigginton, Refuse to Stand, 242; Barton Interview, RSS-SPC, 18–19.

34. Collier-Thomas and Franklin, My Soul Is a Witness, 31.

35. Clark, Echo in My Soul, 141; Wigginton, Refuse to Stand, 249; Sandra Brenneman Oldendorf, "Highlander Folk School and the South Carolina Sea Island Citizenship Schools: Implications for the Social Studies" (Ed.D. diss., University of Kentucky, 1987); 1; Septima Clark, "Literacy and Liberation: Freedomways (First Quarter, 1964), 113–24; Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (New York: Seabury Press, 1970).

36. Clark, Echo in My Soul, 141; Wigginton, 249; Oldendorf, "Highlander Folk School."

37. Wigginton, Refuse to Stand, 251.

38. Ibid., 253.


40. Ibid., 55–63; Wigginton, Refuse to Stand, 264–72.

43. Ibid., 124.
44. A Workshop for Volunteer Teachers in the Citizenship Education Program of SCLC, 1965, RSS-SPC.
45. In the development of the citizenship training program in South Carolina, Zilpha Horton had brought many folk songs to the people of Johns Island and they in turn had taught her their secular and sacred music. Music often stimulated and motivated people to organize and to persevere. Septima Clark, Interview by Eugene Walker, typescript, July 30, 1976, Atlanta, GA, 2-3, Southern Oral History Program, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, RSS-SPC (hereafter cited as Walker Interview, SOHP-UNC).
46. Walker Interview, SOHP-UNC, 4.
47. Ibid.
48. Brown, Ready From Within, 70.
49. Walker Interview, SOHP-UNC, 5-6.
50. Citizenship Program of SCLC, 35-65; RSS-SPC.
51. Brown, Ready From Within, 68.
54. For a closer view of the lives of two such women, see Making a Way Out of No Way, a film on the life and activism of Modjesa M. Simkins of Columbia, South Carolina, produced by Beryl Sanders and the Public Television of South Carolina; and Fundi, a film on the life of Ella Baker, produced and narrated by JoAnn Grant.

Chapter 8

African American Women in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party

Vicki Crawford

Historical accounts of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s have generally focused on the roles and contributions of male leaders and the nationally oriented civil rights organizations that they led. It has been only within the past decade that historians turned to consider the important roles played by female activists in the struggle for social change. This has come about, in large part, as a result of women historians who have attempted to document women’s roles in mobilizing and sustaining the movement.1 The marginalization of black female activists has obscured our understanding of the movement’s leadership and rank-and-file. While male leadership dominated at the national and regional levels of the twentieth-century black freedom struggle, women’s activism was strongest on the local level where black women extended their roles within church communities and secular organizations to organize for political change. This essay seeks to explore the role of African American women in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, one of the most significant grassroots political organizations to evolve in the southern Civil Rights Movement.

The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) was formed in April 1964, as an outgrowth of a statewide effort to remedy the severe social and political repression of African Americans. In 1960, conditions in Mississippi were more oppressive than elsewhere in the South. Although Mississippi had a higher proportion of black people than any other state, structural barriers to black voting systematically disfranchised them. The intensity of white resistance in Mississippi