FOUNDING MEMORIAL

SC

SEPTIMA POINSETTE CLARK

1898 — 1987

A Charleston-born teacher who taught hundreds of thousands of Black Americans to read so they could vote — and built the schools the civil rights movement was built on.

Septima Poinsette Clark was born in 1898 in Charleston, South Carolina, the daughter of a former slave and a laundress who refused to let her daughter bow to anyone. Her mother taught her two things in the same breath: how to read, and that reading was a freedom no one could take from her once it was hers.

She became a schoolteacher at eighteen, on Johns Island, in a one-room school where she was paid less than half the salary of white teachers in the

same county. She would teach for forty years inside that pay gap. She would also, by the end of her life, teach hundreds of thousands of Black adults to read — and to pass the literacy tests that southern states had built specifically to keep them from voting.

In 1956 the South Carolina legislature passed a law forbidding state employees from belonging to the NAACP. She refused to renounce her membership. She lost her job and her pension. She was fifty-eight years old.

She moved to the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee and built what she called Citizenship Schools — small, unofficial classes held in beauty parlors, church basements, and kitchens, where Black sharecroppers, maids, and farmers learned to read the state constitution well enough to register to vote. The schools were copied across the South. By 1964, more than 800 of them were running. Andrew Young, who came up through them, called her Queen Mother.

She joined the Southern Christian Leadership Conference at Martin Luther King's invitation and ran the citizenship education program out of Atlanta. She frequently disagreed with the men around King about what mattered most. She believed quietly, throughout, that the movement would not last unless Black women — the Septima Clarks of every county — were the ones who organized it.

Her stewardship ran on small things. She kept lists of names. She wrote letters to former students for decades after they had passed through her classes. She remembered birthdays and the names of grandchildren. She refused to let the work be measured in headlines.

In 1976 the State of South Carolina, the same state that had fired her twenty years earlier, restored her teacher's pension. In 1979 she was awarded the Living Legacy Award by President Carter. She accepted both with the same dry

observation: that the recognition mattered less than the second-grader who could now read a ballot.

She died in 1987, in Charleston, in the city she had been born in, eighty-nine years old. She had outlived most of the men whose names the movement is now told through. The textbooks that should have been written about her are still being written.

Septima Poinsette Clark did not march on Selma. She did not give the speeches. She made readers out of people who had been told their whole lives that they could not be.

Submitted with honor.

PERMANENCE PROOF

This memorial is pinned to the InterPlanetary File System (IPFS) by our own node so that a copy survives independent of any single web host. Anyone with the content identifiers below can fetch a verifiable snapshot from any public IPFS gateway — now and decades from now.

Memorial snapshot CID:
Qmdypm1dbyBFAfeJr9RYZQsHwEWwNPWzWdV7rX92Q4ws8w

Pinned: 2026-05-06

Hosting peer ID:
12D3KooWGz8mRyrUR1fJ5JHw4avivfN8dwRGVs5XAoZRg36Lyycp

To verify independently, paste either CID into any public IPFS gateway (dweb.link, ipfs.io, cf-ipfs.com) — or run your own IPFS node and request the CID directly.

TAKE THIS MEMORIAL WITH YOU

DOWNLOAD PDF DOWNLOAD JSON-LD

Submitted by Submitted with honor by the Honored Ancestors editorial team..

SUBMIT A STORY MORE FEATURED STORIES

permanent, public archive that descendants will trust for fifty generations.

𝕏 @honancestors · □ @honoredancestors1 · □ @honoredancestors1 · □ Honored Ancestors · □ Honored Ancestors