

Chapter Twenty-Three: Septima Clark_Charleston, South Carolina, 1898

****Chapter Twenty-Three: Septima Clark | Charleston, South Carolina, 1898, The Small and the Mighty****

Septima Poinsette Clark was born to a formerly enslaved father and a laundress in Charleston, South Carolina. Her mother, Victoria, refused to let her children take domestic jobs, which left them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Aiming for a better life, Septima pursued a career in teaching, a pathway to the Black middle class. The name "Poinsette" links to her grandfather, Joel Poinsett, a secretary of war known for overseeing the Indian Removal Act and who introduced the poinsettia to the U.S.

In Charleston during the early 20th century, Black teachers faced severe barriers. They were banned from teaching in public schools, forcing Septima to accept a position in a poor rural school. The educational divide was stark; schools for Black children received minimal funding compared to those for white children. Often, classrooms were overcrowded, with teachers managing up to 100 students in dismal conditions.

Septima began her teaching career on Johns Island, where the community had developed a unique Gullah culture from their history as rice farmers during slavery. She observed severe poverty, with mothers working while their babies were left unattended in fields. She began teaching in inadequate facilities, earning significantly less than her white counterparts with access to proper resources.

Despite hardships, Septima remained committed to education and activism. After the NAACP intervened, she became one of the first Black teachers in Charleston. However, her personal life was challenging; she experienced the tragic loss of her infant daughter and later discovered her husband's infidelity. This led to her becoming a single mother, relying on her faith and determination to strive for better educational opportunities for her son and community.

Throughout her life, Septima viewed education as a path to liberation and self-sufficiency, helping many to learn essential skills that combat systemic disenfranchisement. She developed culturally relevant educational materials and took action against literacy tests that discriminated against Black voters. Her activism led to the establishment of the Citizenship School, which provided literacy and civic education to empower marginalized communities, ultimately increasing Black voter registration by 300% in regions served by the schools.

Despite facing police harassment for her civil rights work, Septima embodied resilience, believing that even among chaos, hope for change existed. Her legacy highlights education as a tool for transformation, asserting that with perseverance, even those viewed as enemies could change their hearts.