

5-2016

# "Our Brother's Keepers": Ethel Grimball and the Wadmalaw Island Citizenship School

Alexandra Elizabeth Bethlenfalvy  
Clemson University, abethle@g.clemson.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all\\_theses](https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses)

---

## Recommended Citation

Bethlenfalvy, Alexandra Elizabeth, "'Our Brother's Keepers': Ethel Grimball and the Wadmalaw Island Citizenship School" (2016). *All Theses*. 2359.

[https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all\\_theses/2359](https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses/2359)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses by an authorized administrator of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact [kokeefe@clemson.edu](mailto:kokeefe@clemson.edu).

“OUR BROTHER’S KEEPERS”: ETHEL GRIMBALL AND THE  
WADMALAW ISLAND CITIZENSHIP SCHOOL

---

A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
History

---

by  
Alexandra Elizabeth Bethlenfalvy  
May 2016

---

Accepted by:  
Dr. Vernon Burton, Committee Chair  
Dr. Mary Barr  
Dr. Abel Bartley  
Dr. Garry Bertholf

## ABSTRACT

This study evaluates the roles that African American women played in positions of political power through their work with the Citizenship Schools of South Carolina. The women of this local education movement are often overlooked because most historiography focuses on the male contributors, and just recently has a biography been written about the school's founder, Septima Clark. There are additional women involved in the Citizenship School programs who helped teach African Americans to read and write in order to pass voter registration tests. These women should be discussed as part of Civil Rights Movement scholarship. Additionally, the Citizenship Schools were fundamental to voter registration campaigns on the national level in the 1960s, such as the Voter Education Project (VEP) started by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Within this narrative, this project illuminates the correlation between increased voter registration turnout on the national level and the Citizenship School programs that originated in the Sea Islands of South Carolina at the local level.

A detailed narrative is certainly valuable for the purpose of this study to show the influence that African American women had in grassroots efforts of political mobilization. Because narratives on Septima Clark already exist, this project focuses on one other instrumental woman, Ethel Grimball. She was the daughter of Johns Island hero, Esau Jenkins, who was the founder of the Progressive Club and co-founder of the Citizenship Schools. Grimball was the first teacher at the second Citizenship School that opened in 1958 on Wadmalaw Island. By providing an in-depth case study of Grimball's life experiences and her influence within the Sea Island community, this project situates

African American women within the context of Citizenship School teachers using education as a vehicle for social change in the modern Civil Rights Movement.

Furthermore, this type of in-depth study can certainly be applied to the other Citizenship School teachers before and after the 1961 SCLC take-over. There exists an evident trend of women increasing their own political involvement and taking on the role of teacher to help others in their communities. This project can therefore be expanded within the Citizenship School narrative by providing additional case studies on schools in North Charleston, Edisto Island, and Hilton Head Island, among many others. The Citizenship Schools were foundational to the success of the Civil Rights Movement in politically mobilizing African Americans at the local level, as *Our Brother's Keepers*, demonstrates. The history of the Citizenship Schools helps fill the historiographical gap that is African American women's political history. This study can be considered a cultural, social, political, and even intellectual history by placing African American women within these lacunae of scholarship by way of the Citizenship School narrative.

## DEDICATION

For my hero, my Mother.

In memory of Septima Clark, Ethel Grimball,  
and the unsung women of the Civil Rights Movement.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am eternally grateful for the patience, help, and support of my Thesis Committee members: Dr. Mary Barr; Dr. Abel Bartley; and Dr. Garry Bertholf. I would especially like to thank my Committee Chair, advisor, and mentor, Dr. Vernon Burton for his resolute dedication to this study and my interest in the Citizenship Schools.

This project started during my studies at McGill University under Dr. Leonard Moore, to whom I am evermore indebted for encouraging and inspiring me to pursue a career as an academic in the field of Civil Rights Movement history.

I also wish to thank the individuals who graciously allowed me to interview them for this project: Jacqueline Grimball; and Nikita Grimball.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE .....	i
ABSTRACT .....	ii
DEDICATION .....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	v
LIST OF TABLES .....	vii
CHAPTER	
I.    INTRODUCTION .....	1
II.   FROM CIVIL WAR TO CIVIL RIGHTS: A HISTORY OF THE SOUTH CAROLINA SEA ISLANDS .....	18
III.  THE FIRST CITIZENSHIP SCHOOL ON JOHNS ISLAND .....	35
IV.  SHEDDING THE CLOAK OF INVISIBILITY: THE LIFE AND WORK OF ETHEL GRIMBALL .....	55
V.   THE TRANSITIONAL PERIOD: CITIZENSHIP SCHOOLS UNDER THE SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE (SCLC) .....	75
VI.  CONCLUSION .....	91
REFERENCES .....	96

## LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
1.1	Top Five Slaveholding States in 1860 .....	20
4.1	Results of Highlander's Training 1965.....	75

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The first of many Citizenship Schools was established on Johns Island, South Carolina in 1957. The schools multiplied, challenging racial injustices in the South and were a catalyst for the national freedom struggle of the 1950s-60s. The school's workshops have received significant scholarly attention because of their unique pedagogies that sought to eradicate illiteracy and increase voter registration turnout through adult education. Conceived by Septima Clark in 1954 during her time at Myles Horton's Highlander Folk School, the schools helped define and expand African American political activity in the mid-twentieth century. Education was fundamental to the success of the Civil Rights Movement and this was manifested in Citizenship School programs that created a new hopeful climate for African Americans throughout the South. Rural communities located in the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia were initial sites for the first set of Citizenship Schools established between 1957 and 1961. They battled white supremacy and politically mobilized illiterate African Americans in the South.

The Citizenship School programs were a series of grassroots initiatives that matched the vision of leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., instead of drawing national attention, these schools worked at the local level. The national movement promoting racial equality needed grassroots activists who would help dismantle Jim Crow from the bottom-up. Septima Clark, Myles Horton, Esau Jenkins, Bernice

Robinson, and Ethel Grimball were among the activists who helped lead the Citizenship Schools in the fight toward racial equality.

Septima Clark was a Charleston native who taught on rural Johns Island, South Carolina when she was 18. As a young adult, she developed an understanding of and compassion for the Sea Island culture and its people. At the age of 56, Clark returned to the Sea Islands in 1954, when she first conceived the plans for the Citizenship School program. She envisioned a school on Johns Island that would educate the illiterate, promote voter registration, and be sheltered from white repression. That same year, Clark approached a friend of hers, Esau Jenkins, whom she had known for nearly 40 years. He was active in the Johns Island community; he transported residents to and from Charleston and founded the Progressive Club, an all male organization that provided resources for African Americans living in the Sea Islands. Jenkins was eager to help Clark turn her vision into a reality. Their first stop was the Highlander Folk School in the mountains of Tennessee in the summer of 1954.

Myles Horton, a white Tennessee native, originally founded Highlander to help workers attain rights and form unions. In 1953, when racial issues drew national attention, he turned his focus toward race relations and helping African Americans. He held integrated workshops that helped train people to become leaders in their communities—women and young college students especially. Clark and Jenkins knew of Highlander and traveled to Tennessee in 1954 to attend a workshop on the United Nations. There, Clark, Jenkins, and Horton discussed plans to develop a program that would help African Americans pass literacy tests so that they could register to vote.

Deemed “Citizenship School” because it helped African Americans become “first class citizens,” as Clark described, the first school opened on Johns Island in 1957. Bernice Robinson, who was Septima Clark’s cousin, was the first teacher at the Johns Island Citizenship School. And although she was an untrained teacher, she possessed the qualities Clark, Jenkins, and Horton sought in a leader. Within a few months, hundreds Sea Islanders passed literacy tests to register to vote. The Johns Island Citizenship School evermore enticed the residents on Wadmalaw Island who wanted the same political empowerment for their community. And in 1958, the second Citizenship School opened on Wadmalaw.

Ethel Grimball, who was the daughter of Esau Jenkins and is the focus of this study, was the first teacher at the Wadmalaw Island Citizenship School that opened in 1958. She was a trained, college-educated teacher whose environment of employment had always been in education. Eager to help increase political activity among Sea Island blacks, Grimball was eager to help empower her students through the Citizenship Schools. The schools were not typical institutions. Classes were held at night, for roughly two hours from one to three nights a week and the student body ranged from young adults to senior citizens. Although the initial goal was to teach students how to read and write, Grimball also helped them pay taxes, sign cheques, and purchase property. Within a few months, Wadmalaw Island residents were registering to vote at high numbers.

Citizenship School expansion continued into other Sea Islands in South Carolina and Georgia. However, in 1961 the programs were transferred to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) under Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. due to financial issues

that Highlander faced and accusations that it was a communist institution. Septima Clark, Andrew Young, and Dorothy Cotton led the schools under the SCLC, where programs were manipulated to fit the needs of different communities. The SCLC renamed the Citizenship Schools, the Citizenship Education Program (CEP); it was fundamental to Dr. King's Voter Registration initiatives taking place throughout the South between 1960-68. Thousands of African Americans were registering to vote as these mass political mobilization efforts were underway. The CEP helped students pass literacy tests and trained community leaders to teach others in hopes that the process would continue to grow and expand.

This study begins with an overview of Sea Island history to contextualize the Citizenship Schools in rural South Carolina Low Country. African Americans predominantly inhabited the islands whose rural surroundings barricaded the residents from urban influences. Although Charleston and Johns Island were a few miles apart in distance, they exhibited significant cultural differences. As will be discussed in this project, the Union freed the slaves in Beaufort, south of Johns Island, in 1861. Thus, African Americans in the Sea Islands experienced autonomy, first hand, and placed a high value on education. There existed a fervent desire among Sea Islanders in the 1950s to engage in politics and receive an education that they been deprived of since Reconstruction. This deprivation is evident in oppressive legislative tactics upheld by whites following Reconstruction to prevent blacks from acquiring complete autonomy.

We must consider the legislation that granted African Americans freedom and how white Democrats manipulated the juridical system to repress blacks. The Fourteenth

Amendment, adopted in 1868, granted citizenship, to an extent, and the Fifteenth Amendment of 1870, granted black men the right to vote. As a result, African American political involvement and mobilization was amplified during Reconstruction. The two amendments read as follows:

“Amendment 14, Section 1: All persons born or naturalized in the United States...are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of the citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty or property without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.”

“Amendment 15, Section 1: The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color or previous condition of servitude.” Section 2: The Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.”<sup>1</sup>

There were fourteen African-American politicians in the United-States House of Representatives, and over two thousand others served in the government at the federal, state, and local levels during this period, between 1865 and 1877.<sup>2</sup> Substantial African American political activism was short lived. Toward the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, white Democrats implemented state constitutions that prevented blacks from having political rights. To bypass the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, white Democrats used a series of tactics to prevent African Americans from voting or gaining education.

White supremacist tactics prevented African Americans from political engagement for nearly one hundred years – until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The

---

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Constitution, Amendments 14 and 15.

<sup>2</sup> Gary May, *Bending Toward Justice: The Voting Rights Act and the Transformation of American Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), xi.

grandfather clause was one such device; often, others included poll taxes and literacy tests.<sup>3</sup> African Americans were expected to abide by imposed regulations and qualifications, whereas white men were exempted. Local registrars held the power throughout the South; they decided whether or not an applicant could vote.<sup>4</sup> Local officials limited black citizenship by rejecting most African-American registrants. Such juridical scrutiny embedded itself in urban and rural communities in the South and it reversed most social, political, economic and educational progress among African Americans.

South Carolina's juridical system was a very unique one and it was one of the harshest. Vernon Burton suggests, "South Carolina had a less-democratic form of government than any state in the Union...[it] was the hotbed of nullification...when the Civil War ended in *victory* for *most* South Carolinians, the fear of black insurgency continued to dictate South Carolina politics."<sup>5</sup> This fear certainly dictated state legislation after Reconstruction. The Registration and Eight-Box Law was passed in 1882 which led to significant re-districting so that "in a state that was 60 percent black, Republicans could seriously contest only one of seven seats," according to Burton.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the law included literacy regulations; ballots for each office were placed in separate boxes and votes placed in the wrong box did not count, thus, you had to read the label. Many

---

<sup>3</sup> Sandra B. Oldendorf, "The South Carolina Sea Island Citizenship Schools, 1957-1961," in *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers & Torchbearers 1941-1961*, ed. Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 170.

<sup>4</sup> May, xii.

<sup>5</sup> Vernon Burton, "'The Black Squint of the Law': Racism in South Carolina," in *The Meaning of South Carolina History: Essays in Honor of George C. Rogers, Jr.* ed. David R. Chesnutt and Clyde N. Wilson (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 166.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

illiterate blacks had difficulty and supervisors often moved the boxes to add confusion.<sup>7</sup> In 1890, Ben Tillman, who was South Carolina's governor at the time, enacted a law whereby blacks could no longer hold positions as local officials, even in predominantly African American communities. In the 1895 state constitution, African Americans were permanently disfranchised. Burton emphasizes the racist legislation that "adopted disqualifying provisions" for felonies that whites believed blacks would commit, these were known as the "black squint of the law."<sup>8</sup> Although African Americans challenged these discriminatory legislative acts, little improved until 1944 when *Smith v. Allwright* overturned the white primary.<sup>9</sup>

Disfranchisement and Jim Crow, prevalent throughout the South, were especially toxic in the Sea Islands where whites wanted to maintain authority over the blacks. Few African-American schools existed in the Sea Islands after Reconstruction until the mid-twentieth century; the first African-American high school was not established on Johns Island, SC until 1947. Educated individuals were scarce because they had to work on farms to earn a living. Bernice Robinson, the first teacher at the Johns Island Citizenship School, explained that the situation for Sea Island children was "pretty rough" because parents would "come and knock on the building," interrupting school classes whenever their children were needed in the fields.<sup>10</sup> Septima Clark was sent to Johns Island in 1916

---

<sup>7</sup> Charles L. Zelden, *The Battle for the Black Ballot: Smith v. Allwright and the Defeat of the Texas All-White Primary* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 16.

<sup>8</sup> Burton, "The Black Squint of the Law": Racism in South Carolina," 170.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 171-172.

<sup>10</sup> "Transcript of oral interview of Robinson by Sue Thrasher and Eliot Wiggington, November 9, 1980," Box 1, Folder 5, Bernice Robinson Papers, Avery Research Center, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC (hereafter, Avery Records).

to teach at the local elementary and middle school. While living there, she empathized with the people about the lack of education. They desperately wanted to read, write, and find better jobs, but there was no opportunity for schooling. It would take Clark nearly forty years to develop a program that would help African-American Islanders become more educated and empowered.

Following the Great Depression and both world wars, momentum was building at the grassroots in the 1950s.<sup>11</sup> Septima Clark and her constituents established the first Citizenship School on Johns Island in 1957. The school was made up of adult students, eager to acquire fundamental skills of reading and writing. Many, including Septima Clark, were inspired by the success of the Johns Island Citizenship School. By 1958, Wadmalaw Island residents requested that the same program be developed for their community with Ethel Grimball. Both schools were effective; literacy rates and registered voters among African Americans were at the highest they had ever been.<sup>12</sup> Following the success of the first few schools, the Citizenship School program extended throughout the Deep South. The schools were not replicated, instead the classes varied based on resources, available spaces, financial levels of support, community involvement, interested students, and leaders willing to teach. Nonetheless, the schools shared the same

---

<sup>11</sup> For detailed first-hand accounts of Sea Island life from Reconstruction through the Civil Rights Movement, see, Patricia Jones-Jackson, *When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions on the Sea Islands* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987); Mamie Garvin Fields and Karen Fields, *Lemon Swamp and Other Places: A Carolina Memoir* (New York: The Free Press, 1983); Guy and Candie Carawan, *Ain't you got a Right to the Tree of Life? The People of Johns Island, South Carolina – Their Faces, Their Words and Their Songs* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1966).

<sup>12</sup> Carl Tjerandsen, *Education for Citizenship: A Foundation's Experience* (Santa Cruz: Emil Schwarzhaupt Foundation, 1980), 153.

goal of achieving literacy in African-American communities by using education as a vehicle to exercise their political rights as citizens.

The Citizenship School program was a unique one that combined self-help with politics. The ability to read and write in the 1950s and 60s led to increased involvement among African Americans in politics. Political mobilization involved ways to circumvent repressive voter registration tactics.<sup>13</sup> Considering that the majority of African Americans in the South were illiterate, the ability to read and write was crucial, especially for political mobilization. Illiteracy burdened African Americans in two distinct ways. First, they were unable to acquire decent jobs because they could not fully engage due to their inability to read and write. Second, it affected their sense of self-worth on a psychological level and “validated a social system which often equated lack of book learning with inferior intellect.”<sup>14</sup> Moreover, there was a specific literacy test for voting that the Citizenship Schools helped rectify.<sup>15</sup>

Leaders helped empower African-American communities, carrying with them the vision of liberation for all – the people and the community.<sup>16</sup> Education would help break the white supremacist chains that bound African Americans. Indeed, liberation was at the forefront of the Citizenship School ethos because it helped create a belief that they could

---

<sup>13</sup> Jacqueline Dowd Hall et al., “‘I train the people to do their own talking’: Septima Clark and Women in the Civil Rights Movement,” *Southern Cultures*, Volume 16, Number 2, (University of North Carolina Press: 2010), 33.

<sup>14</sup> David P. Levine, “Citizenship Schools” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1999), 136.

<sup>15</sup> Septima Pointsette Clark, with LeGette Blythe, *Echo in My Soul* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1962), 70.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Lazar, “Septima Clark Organizing for Positive Freedom,” *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture and Society* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2007), 245.

collectively dismantle Jim Crow from the bottom-up. Clark once said, “Literacy is liberation,” a phrase that was certainly embodied in the Citizenship Schools.<sup>17</sup> The most important aspect about the program was that “individuals gained personality from literacy and the empowered sense of self that accompanied it,” which they would later carry on as activists.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Citizenship Schools acted as a vehicle that helped African Americans gain political autonomy and citizenship.

The story of the Citizenship Schools attracts three different types of historians. The first are those interested in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In 1961, the Citizenship Schools were transferred over to the SCLC due to financial and legal issues. Chapter Four of *Our Brother's Keepers* discusses this event in depth. The Citizenship Schools expanded throughout the Deep South, from Mississippi to Georgia, under Dr. King and the SCLC, with the help of activists Dorothy Cotton and Andrew Young. The Citizenship Schools helped Dr. King's cause in the national movement; they directly linked education to the ballot. His focus on voting rights and regulations among African Americans was at the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement from 1960 onward.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, Dr. King is given credit for conceiving the Freedom Schools of 1964 that arguably helped push

---

<sup>17</sup> Septima P. Clark, “Literacy and Liberation,” *Freedomways*, First Quarter, 1964.

<sup>18</sup> Katherine Mellon Charron, *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 3.

<sup>19</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. helped facilitate a number of voting rights initiatives, specifically the Voter Education Project (VEP) from 1962 to 1968. See, Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-1963* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 482 and 575; Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 295.

legislative action including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.<sup>20</sup>

Scholars who focus on Dr. King and the SCLC emphasize the growth of the Citizenship Schools after 1961 and their direct impact on legislative improvements in racial justice. In light of this, there are two major components missing from this viewpoint. The first is the women of the Citizenship Schools who were instrumental in effecting social change at the grassroots. The second, the pedagogical model fashioned by Septima Clark in which the Citizenship Schools used leaders in the community to train adult students and develop specific programs that catered to the needs of local African Americans. These two components certainly add to the narrative but are often overlooked by historians who attribute the success of the Citizenship Schools to Dr. King and the SCLC.

Highlander Folk School historians are intrigued by the Citizenship School narrative because of Myles Horton's involvement in the organization and mobilization of the programs. They fall into the second grouping of historians interested in the local pedagogical movement. Not surprisingly, in such narratives, Horton is given credit for bringing the Citizenship School design into existence, which was an idea conceived by Septima Clark and Esau Jenkins. These scholars certainly tend to focus on Highlander itself as a grassroots institution that helped spur a movement in the Sea Islands of South Carolina and would extend under Dr. King. Perhaps the Citizenship Schools would have

---

<sup>20</sup> The Freedom Schools of 1964 were rooted in the Citizenship School model of 1957 that spread throughout the Deep South. See, Jonathan Hale, *The Freedom Schools: Student Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Sandra E. Adickes, *The Legacy of a Freedom School* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 15.

experienced certain hardships without Horton and the financial, legal, and political support from Highlander, but historians have to be careful not to categorize him as a white savior. Many Highlander narratives carry a similar undertone that Horton's leadership skills and strategies paved the way for black adult education in the South. This was certainly not the case. The Citizenship Schools were created and carried out by a number of different local leaders, the majority of whom were black; unlike the Freedmen's Bureau Schools in Reconstruction that were organized and taught by whites. The narrative of African Americans helping themselves and not being dependent on whites indeed deserves more attention and is often overlooked by historians that analyze Highlander's legacy.

Scholars of women's history that are particularly interested in unsung African-American leaders, are attracted to the Citizenship School narrative because there are countless black women that played instrumental roles in the programs. Whether teachers, developers, secretaries, or students, hundreds of women were involved in the rise and longevity of the Citizenship Schools. Many historians have digressed from the traditional path of examining patriarchy in the Civil Rights Movement. Instead, they have helped shape the field of black female leaders and are still trying to fill this gender and racial gap in African American history.<sup>21</sup> *Our Brothers Keepers* certainly falls under the category of women's history. Indeed, the women of the Citizenship Schools have been given little credit compared to the men of the movement. While this study is not a vindicationist

---

<sup>21</sup> See, Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance – a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Random House, 2010), 207 and 275; “Gender in the Civil Rights Movement,” *Crosscurrents in African American History*, ed. Peter J. Ling, (1999).

narrative, it does focus on one specific individual, Ethel Grimball, to demonstrate how effective black women were at being political leaders of arguably the same stature as male activists such as Dr. King and Ralph Abernathy. Scholars of women's history tend to analyze the broad roles of black women in the Citizenship Schools, but much of the attention is given to Septima Clark. Very little focus is on the leaders of the schools themselves such as Bernice Robinson, Allene Brewer, Ethel Grimball and many more.

The scope remains quite narrow among most historians; scholars tend to focus on the incipient stages of the Citizenship Schools from 1957 to 1961, or their effectiveness after the SCLC transfer of 1961. David Levine's dissertation in 1995 is the only narrative that contextualizes the Citizenship Schools within Sea Island history and *Our Brother's Keepers* further builds on Levine's work.<sup>22</sup> My study emphasizes the significance of the coastal region in South Carolina given its dense African American population and isolation from urban areas, with rampant white supremacy. Additionally, I situate the Citizenship Schools within the framework of political tactics—mostly ballot-related—used to oppress African Americans from holding autonomy in South Carolina. We can see that there existed a vacancy for a Citizenship School type program in the Sea Islands. African American schools in South Carolina such as the Avery Normal Institute and Penn School tried to battle racial discrimination by educating Sea Islanders from the Civil War onward. But their pedagogies were not explicitly linked to political progress; the Citizenship Schools changed that. As *Our Brother's Keepers* argues, the Citizenship Schools were distinct sites of African American political mobilization.

---

<sup>22</sup>See, Chapter One of "Citizenship Schools." Levine, 26-54.

Scholars and former civil rights activists alike have acknowledged that the Citizenship School programs were essential in the fight for racial equality, but they typically discuss the schools in passing or to supplement a broader argument.<sup>23</sup> Male historians in fact wrote most of these works and they tend to overlook the role of influential female activists like Septima Clark, Ella Baker, Rosa Parks and Fannie Lou Hamer, and many more.<sup>24</sup> More recently, historians have helped fill the void of African American women's history by publishing a substantial amount of scholarship centering on black female community organizers. It was not until the 21<sup>st</sup> century when a surge of historians, white and black, helped expose the stories of African-American female leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. Moreover, a number of key historians have also provided detailed narratives on the life of Septima Clark and her role with the Citizenship Schools. Jacqueline Rouse, Katherine Charron, and more recently, Deanne Gillespie are among those who have devoted a significant amount of research to Clark and her role prior to, during, and following the Civil Rights Movement.

Katherine Charron, who wrote the biography on Septima Clark, *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark*, challenges Citizenship School narratives claiming that Horton and Jenkins originally conceived the ideas for the Citizenship School

---

<sup>23</sup> See, Aldon d. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 114; Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 94-101; Branch, 263-264; John Lewis, *Walking With the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 79-81.

<sup>24</sup> For Ella Baker see, Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); for Rosa Parks see, Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014); for Fannie Lou Hamer see, Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

program. Instead, Charron suggests that it was Clark who, given her age, maturity, and experience working with and teaching African Americans, developed the plans for the Citizenship Schools herself. This study not only supports Dr. Charron's claim, but also builds off of her work by analyzing the specific roles of the individual Citizenship School teachers, most of whom were women.

*Our Brother's Keepers* analyzes the role one specific individual, Ethel Grimball, not only as a community activist and educator, but also as a political leader. The Citizenship Schools were sites of political mobilization because they resulted in increased voter registration turnout among African Americans. Ostensibly, their teachers, especially at the grassroots, should be considered political leaders because they helped effect social change. And too often, the women of Citizenship Schools in specific and the Civil Rights Movement in general, are not recognized for their efforts in empowering African Americans and helping increase their political activity. By providing a case study on Grimball and the Wadmalaw Island Citizenship School, this project reflects one teacher's influence in challenging white supremacy by educating African Americans and helping them become first-class citizens. Thus, determining Grimball's role to be that of a political leader.

Although much scholarship already exists, the focus on black women and education merits further study. In deconstructing the dominant historiographical narratives of the Civil Rights Movement, this thesis details the prevailing notion that black women constructed their own political agendas because "men who led the

movement shared ‘male chauvinist’ prejudices that obstructed the inclusion of women.’<sup>25</sup> African-American female educators were intellectuals who worked tirelessly in the public sector to mobilize their communities in the fight for racial equality. Darlene Clark Hine argues that these women knew “their freedom and that of their children was linked directly to education,” and so, they deemed school as invaluable.<sup>26</sup> This ideology was a common form of activism among black women since Emancipation. According to historian Steven Hahn, when they “seem indeed to have played a particularly active part in advancing the cause of education ... they seem, as well to have seized every available opportunity to gain literacy ... to have become teachers in their own rights.”<sup>27</sup>

For the purpose of this thesis, education is considered to be all encompassing – youth, adults, and senior citizens of all levels. As Adam Fairclough has suggested, “the burgeoning scholarship on the Civil Rights Movement has neglected the extensive literature on black education” in all pedagogical forms, including adult schools.<sup>28</sup> He also emphasizes another disparity regarding “a paradox of the Civil Rights movement that has never been satisfactorily explained: although the movement displayed an overwhelmingly male leadership, women probably comprised a majority of its most active supports.”<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, these two voids—education and women—in the general scope of civil rights historiography are at the forefront of this study, while simultaneously considering

---

<sup>25</sup> Adam Fairclough, *Teaching Equality: Black Schools in the Age of Jim Crow* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 53.

<sup>26</sup> Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson, *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), 271.

<sup>27</sup> Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 278.

<sup>28</sup> Fairclough, *Teaching Equality*, 46.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

the political influences of women in the rural Sea Islands.

## CHAPTER TWO

### FROM CIVIL WAR TO CIVIL RIGHTS: A HISTORY OF THE SOUTH CAROLINA SEA ISLANDS

Confident that the new president would dismantle the institution to which they were bound, slaves hoped Lincoln's inauguration in 1861 would mark a new beginning, or rather, ending – the end of slavery. This sentiment was most anticipated among enslaved workers along the chain of islands in the Low Country, fringing the South Carolina coast. Situated south of the Charleston Peninsula, the Sea Islands are isolated from the rest of the coastal region, their marshy waters are intertwined with rivers and creeks, creating the most favorable conditions for the cultivation of export crops. While indigo, ginger, and rice were among the island's staple crops, nothing compared to Sea Island Cotton, strenuously cultivated by a single labor force, the slaves. Both the island's land and its enslaved people would be exploited for centuries, but come 1861, everything would change.

In a state that held the highest percentage of slaves — more than half of the population — South Carolina underwent a considerable shift in distinctive African-American politics after the Union invasion of the Sea Islands. Those slaves were liberated. They gained autonomy and would flourish in many sectors of society – political, educational and agricultural. This chapter discusses the series of events that led to emancipation in the Sea Islands and helps us understand why the Citizenship Schools were first established in the Low Country. What was it about these islands that made them promising and vital sites of empowerment nearly one hundred years after the Civil War? Indeed, the history of the Low Country is vital to understanding the character of the

African-American community in the Civil Rights Movement because of the unique culture that manifested itself in the Low Country region of South Carolina.

The Civil War, Emancipation, and especially Reconstruction, shaped African-American identity leading into the 20<sup>th</sup> century particularly when considering the increase in political participation and thriving educational opportunities among freedpeople. In the wake of the Battle at Fort Sumter in April 1861, few white residents were concerned with the idea that Federal fleets might encroach on the islands.<sup>30</sup> Much to their dismay, in November of 1861, Union soldiers invaded the Sea Islands, ending the Confederacy in that region. For the slaves living in the islands, the Port Royal Invasion near Beaufort, South Carolina, signified a victory and freedom.<sup>31</sup> Confederates and plantation owners evacuated. Thomas West Sherman was the commanding general at the time. He reported, “Every white inhabitant has left the islands...left to the pillage of hordes of apparently disaffected blacks.”<sup>32</sup> But most slaves did not go on a looting pillage, instead, they worked the land and kept to themselves.<sup>33</sup> In the 1860 census, South Carolina’s population consisted of a slave majority; at fifty-seven percent – the coast especially – was overwhelmingly black and the same was true upon Union occupation.

---

<sup>30</sup> Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1964), 5.

<sup>31</sup> See, Kevin Dougherty, *The Port Royal Experiment: A Case Study in Development* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 2014); Walter Edgar, *South Carolina: A History* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 361-367.

<sup>32</sup> Rose, 16.

<sup>33</sup> Some scholars argue that there was looting among slaves on plantations. See, Akiko Ochiai, “The Port Royal Experiment Revisited: Northern Visions of Reconstruction and the Land Question,” *The New England Quarterly* 74 (2001), 94.

**Table 1.1: Top Five Slaveholding States in 1860** <sup>34</sup>

<b>STATE</b>	<b>TOTAL POPULATION</b>	<b>TOTAL NO. OF SLAVES</b>	<b>TOTAL NO. OF SLAVEHOLDERS</b>	<b>PERCENT OF FAMILIES OWNING SLAVES</b>	<b>SLAVES AS PERCENT OF POPULATION</b>
SOUTH CAROLINA	703, 708	402, 406	26, 701	46%	57%
MISSISSIPPI	791, 305	436, 631	30, 943	49%	55%
ALABAMA	964, 201	435, 080	33, 730	35%	45%
GEORGIA	1, 057, 286	462, 198	41, 084	37%	44%
VIRGINIA	1, 596, 318	490, 865	52, 128	26%	31%

South Carolina’s slave population was the highest among all states, and the Sea Islands alone were eighty-three percent African American in 1861.<sup>35</sup> Union troops were faced with the problem of determining the status of a staggering number of freedpeople. As scholar Vernon Burton explains, “soldier-bureaucrats created a crazy patchwork of conflicting, shifting policies,” there was little guidance from the Federal government.<sup>36</sup> In August, Congress passed the Confiscation Act of 1861, stripping the Confederates of all property within newly annexed Federal territory. And because slaves were considered property, historian Steven Hahn suggests, “Union lines thereby became liberation zones.”<sup>37</sup> At last, the Federal government established firm policies that eliminated the ambiguity and ensured the abolition of slavery under the Union, but freed slaves still struggled to assimilate.

---

<sup>34</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Civil War Population, 1860” under “Civil War Home Page,” [http://www.civil-war.net/pages/1860\\_census.html](http://www.civil-war.net/pages/1860_census.html) (accessed 12 June 2015).

<sup>35</sup> Rose, 12.

<sup>36</sup> Orville Vernon Burton, *The Age of Lincoln* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 161.

<sup>37</sup> Hahn, 72.

While the expropriation of the Sea Islands was a fervent hope for slaves, the shift from bondage to liberation was a burdensome task for government agents and Union troops. Uncertainty remained as the Confiscation Act granted freedom, but programs such as welfare relief were not a function of the government, instead they became the church's responsibility. There was little structure in the beginning. According to Willie Lee Rose, many freedmen "flocked to the neighborhood of the army camps. There they were as often treated badly as offered employment and help."<sup>38</sup> The situation of the Sea Islands was unique. This was the first time the Federal government dealt with the issue of Negro Refugees. The Union was desperate to control the situation and thus, in November, they began the Port Royal Experiment to establish a stable societal framework among the ten thousand blacks that remained.<sup>39</sup>

Former slaves continued to cultivate the land for their own use. Black laborers were ever so slightly compensated for their work in the fields, off of which the North profited. The Federal government capitalized on the Sea Island Cotton market economy and exported it to Europe. The wellbeing of the African-American population was vital to the cultivation of the cotton, for they were its best harvesters. Without the former slaves, cotton production would hastily decline; the Union maintained the freed slave labor force for fiscal benefit and survival. Certainly, earning wages, regardless of the amount, was a symbol of freedom. But both the Union troops and freedpeople believed that education and political involvement would further establish black autonomy.

---

<sup>38</sup> Rose, 20.

<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth Stephens Griffis, *A Social History of the Sea Islands with Special Reference to St. Helena Islands, South Carolina* (Chapel-Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1930), 159.

Boston attorney, Edward L. Pierce was sent to St. Helena Island, near Beaufort, to observe the conditions in which the former slaves lived. He helped convince the Federal government to supplement black empowerment efforts by establishing schools and relocating northern teachers to the Sea Islands. Pierce was enamored by the intellectual ability of liberated slaves and noticed that there existed “a widespread desire to learn to read” among them. The Federal government questioned Pierce’s observations, worried about the cotton industry if the slaves were in fact granted autonomy. Pierce responded in retaliation stating that African Americans “would certainly be no ‘less industrious, if free, than the whites, particularly as they would have the encouragement of wages.’”<sup>40</sup> Financial compensation for their work would not only give freedpeople the incentive to stay and cultivate the cotton, but it would also grant them a sense of liberation and empowerment like never before.<sup>41</sup> They were one step closer to becoming citizens. Spearheaded by Pierce, the Port Royal Experiment emerged to help freed slaves by luring northerners to the Sea Islands to help; the experiment assisted the African-American population in reaching citizenship.

Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with the production of indigo, enslaved Africans on the Sea Islands lived and worked in the isolated coastal region. With few white people in the area trying to dictate every aspect of their lives, enslaved people developed customs of their own; the most enduring is Gullah. Native Sea Islander, activist, and Penn Center Director, Emory S. Campbell described Gullah as “a culture comprising a system of

---

<sup>40</sup> “The Freedmen of Port Royal, South Carolina,” Official Reports of Edward L. Pierce, (New York: Rebellion Record, 1863) Duke University Library.

<sup>41</sup> Rose, 22.

beliefs, customs, artforms, foodways, and language practiced among descendants of West Africans,” most of whom were slaves living along the coast from North Carolina down to Florida.<sup>42</sup> As a language, Gullah combines English with African-inspired phrases, often based on French lexicon. Their unique dialect was often difficult to understand among non-Sea Islanders. Whites coming into the area in late 1861 and early 1862 – Union troops, Federal bureaucrats, teachers, businessmen— could not understand the language and interpreted Gullah as a primitive practice.

The Gullah culture was, and still is, most prominent in the South Carolina Sea Islands. The reason for this is due to the isolation of that specific coastal region. Steven Hahn concludes that, “the region as a whole contained a dense black population that greatly outnumbered the white and showed more influences of West Africa than was the case most anywhere else in the South,” and that is why Gullah embedded itself in all crevices of Island life.<sup>43</sup> Traditions rooted in slave families extended multi-generationally. Gullah played a significant role among black Sea Islanders throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup>, but Union troops were often dismissive of Gullah culture, mistaking it for unintelligence.<sup>44</sup>

The Port Royal Experiment would try to eliminate the cultural milieu in which the freed slave population found themselves. Many whites agreed with Pierce, to see “what could be done about getting public funds for the education of the Negroes ‘whom this war

---

<sup>42</sup> Emory S. Campbell, *Gullah Cultural Legacies: A Synopsis of Gullah Traditions, Customary Beliefs, Art forms and Speech on Hilton Head Island and vicinal Sea Islands in South Carolina and Georgia* (BookSurge Publishing, 2008), 5.

<sup>43</sup> Hahn, 346.

<sup>44</sup> See, J. Lorand Matory, “The Illusion of Isolation: The Gullah/Geechees and the Political Economy of African Culture in the Americas,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50 (2008), 961.

*must lift into freedom*” as *New York Tribune* correspondent, George W. Smalley, expressed.<sup>45</sup> Churches were among the first set of philanthropic groups that sent volunteers down to the Sea Islands to teach. The American Missionary Association (AMA) also assisted. There were two schools in particular that directly influenced the Citizenship School model and a number of its leaders in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They are the Penn School on St. Helena Island, established in 1861 and the Avery Normal Institute in the heart of Charleston, founded in 1865; both were exclusively African American.

The Penn School was created as a product of the Port Royal Experiment. It challenged social ideals and restrictions by educating African American children in the Low Country. The educational model that Penn fostered represented religious ideals with a collaborative aesthetic, in which each student learned how to be self-sufficient as a pupil and a citizen. The Penn School was one of the foundational models of African-American education because it was the first to teach students how to apply what they learned in the classrooms to their every day lives, typically involving farming, housework and caretaking. Penn essentially set the stage for similar institutions to come whose premise was to act as a vehicle for social change by challenging white oppression against blacks.

The Penn School was established by Northern missionaries who acknowledged the need for support within African-American communities in the South, and female activists were among the firsts to relocate to the Se Islands. Both white and African-American women sought to dismantle the oppressive white regimes in the coastal region

---

<sup>45</sup> Rose, 21.

by helping freed slaves gain empowerment. Laura Matilda Towne was a Pennsylvania native and religious woman who, according to Vernon Burton, “moved in socially progressive circles.” She was selected by the Port Royal Relief Committee of Philadelphia to “distribute provisions and to teach the former slaves the ‘habits of self-support’ and to elevate their moral and social condition” through education.<sup>46</sup> Although freed slaves were certainly intellectual, Towne acknowledged the need among them for guidance and support. She realized the magnitude of the job after she moved to St. Helena Island. Nonetheless, she possessed the patience and the determination necessary to fulfill her responsibilities and help empower the black Sea Islanders.

The first series of classes were held on September 22, 1862 in the local Brick Church, led by Towne and fellow teacher, Ellen Murray.<sup>47</sup> The majority of the student body consisted of female students who were relatively young. African-American males were expected to work in the fields to help provide for their families.<sup>48</sup> Although education was certainly important, it was not a priority for most Sea Island families—survival was. It took many months for students and their parents to become accustomed to the school environment. Pupils were expected to listen and learn from each other and their teachers, most of whom were white women. They acclimated nonetheless to scholarship and students were eager to learn. And when Charlotte Forten, a young black Philadelphian woman, joined Towne and Murray, the teachers began to make significant

---

<sup>46</sup> Orville Vernon Burton, *Penn Center: A History Preserved* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014), 13.

<sup>47</sup> “Miscellaneous correspondence and writings of and about Laura Towne, Ellen Murray, and Alice Lathrop,” Folder 244a in the Penn School Papers #3615, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter SHC).

<sup>48</sup> Burton, 16.

strides with students of all ages.<sup>49</sup> In January 1865, the Freedman's Aid Society of Pennsylvania provided the funding for the construction of a new set of school buildings because the Brick Church became too small for the growing student body.<sup>50</sup> This was a good sign for the Penn School. An increased number of students resulted in higher levels of education among freed slaves.

In 1863, Lincoln passed one of the most wonderful decrees in history. The Emancipation Proclamation greatly affected the African-American population, permanently guaranteeing their freedom. The Emancipation Proclamation resonated with freedpeople as it created feelings of excitement and hope; their future was brighter than their past. Liberation also opened the gateway to citizenship and politics. Burton stresses that the "essential ingredient" to voting rights and political mobilization was education. Freed slaves recognized that "educational opportunity was part and parcel of a determination 'never to be made slaves again.'"<sup>51</sup> Some former slaves witnessed tremendous success with this new found political autonomy distributed among blacks in the Low Country. Robert Smalls, for example, was a Sea Island resident, former slave, and Civil War hero who became a politician and donated money to black schools. Like so many other African Americans, Smalls directly linked empowerment and upward mobility to education.

---

<sup>49</sup> "The Journal of Charlotte L. Forten," Folder 561, Box 59, in the Penn School Papers, #3615, SHC.

<sup>50</sup> Jones-Jackson, 28.

<sup>51</sup> Burton, 30.

The future seemed promising for African Americans when the Civil War ended in 1865 and Reconstruction began that same year.<sup>52</sup> The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments were vital to African American political mobilization. A number of freed slaves, like Smalls, held political office and enjoyed the citizenship benefits in a seemingly free society; they bought and cultivated land, erected churches, acquired honorable jobs, and many sent their children to school. Racism, however, permeated society and few measures were taken to strictly enforce federal laws that acknowledged African Americans as equal to whites. Unofficial rules of government such as the Black Codes and racist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan were upheld and supported by white police, politicians, and citizens.<sup>53</sup> “Klan-style paramilitarism,” as Steven Hahn suggests, swept the South and instilled in whites an extremely violent behavior. Blacks were disadvantaged from the beginning, but they continued to challenge white oppression.

The Camilla Riot on September 19, 1868 exemplified black opposition to white supremacist tactics; it was a representation of the fight for political rights. A number of armed black Republicans, joined by a few white men, congregated in Camilla, Georgia – a town in the white-majority Mitchell County—to rally in support of Congressional nominee, William P. Pierce.<sup>54</sup> Violence ensued when black men responded to gunshots

---

<sup>52</sup> There is much debate regarding the start date of Reconstruction. See, Forward by Steven Hahn in Eric Foner, *Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), xi-xix; David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2001).

<sup>53</sup> See, Leonard J. Moore, *Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921-1928* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

<sup>54</sup> Hahn, 289-290.

fired by whites; nine African Americans were killed and countless more were injured. As Hahn effectively argues, Reconstruction's paramilitaristic attributes were inevitable considering Democrats especially sought to uphold white supremacy and prevent African Americans for gaining political autonomy.<sup>55</sup>

The end of Reconstruction in 1877 negatively impacted the black population of South Carolina as "local whites, even in the heavily black area of the Sea Islands, soon controlled all local political boards."<sup>56</sup> Even though the Sea Islands were isolated from most whites, the ripple effect of oppression found its way to the Penn School. As the end of Reconstruction neared, "hope was fading fast among Towne and friends, and by the end of the century the old South, excepting legal chattel slavery, had returned."<sup>57</sup> The most significant loss for African Americans in the Sea Islands was the loss of political autonomy that they gained during Reconstruction. The white elite again controlled every aspect of society, obstructing justice and depriving African Americans of civil rights. Nonetheless, the Penn School persevered.

Burton suggests that at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, "African-American educators had the additional burden of having to place educational needs in the broader context of an increasingly rigid and entrenched system of racial segregation" and white supremacy. Although violence was not as rampant in the Sea Islands as it was elsewhere in the Deep South, whites combated racial equality and frowned upon the teachers of Penn School. The small, yet powerful, white population in the coastal region left many African

---

<sup>55</sup> Similar violence outbreaks include the Colfax Riot. See, Hahn, 290; Steven Hahn, "Continuing the War: White and Black Violence During Reconstruction," in *Major Problems in American History, Volume 1: To 1877*, edited by Thomas G. Paterson (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 2007), 440.

<sup>56</sup> Burton., 39.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., xiv.

Americans jobless, without land, or autonomy. Penn subsequently battled black deprivation by changing its curriculum. Teachers emulated the Book T. Washington standard of “learning about farming and homemaking, about health, about finances and debt avoidance,” all of which were crucial to citizenship and self-determination.<sup>58</sup> Oppression did not cease, although African Americans became increasingly more self-sufficient. By the end of World War I, whites from Beaufort continued to disparage the African Americans and with the Depression underway, whites intensified their supremacist roles; whites wanted to ensure that they receive the best education, jobs, and property, not blacks.<sup>59</sup>

World War II renewed the demands for equal rights among African Americans. As Johns Island resident, Reverend G.C. Brown described, “World War Number Two is what changed this island financially...they built these roads, and they began to produce more food...there weren’t too many white people here then, but they worked most of the land and they had the farms. The Negroes were little farmers.”<sup>60</sup> Meanwhile, on St. Helena Island, the Penn School became the Penn Center and it continued its legacy of freedom for African Americans. Now, however Penn Center was no longer funded and led by “progressive, paternalistic white northerners. Instead, central to Penn were progressive white southerners willing to work with African Americans to promote racial justice and equality and to dismantle Jim Crow.”<sup>61</sup> Penn Center became an institution that

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 44-45.

<sup>59</sup> Steven Hahn, *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 125.

<sup>60</sup> Guy and Candie Carawan, 10.

<sup>61</sup> Burton, 70.

helped shape black lives by promoting equality. The Penn School was fundamental in shaping the role of academic institutions that stressed equal citizenship and bolstered black autonomy. In the years following WWII, legitimizing African-American citizenship was essential to what would become the Civil Rights Movement:

Penn Center started subtly at first, by facilitating interracial groups, and then grew bolder by setting up citizenship schools. These schools were linked with Penn's earlier abolitionist heritage and drew upon its industrial school model of education, that is, their function was to better lives. At the same time, their purpose was political activism.<sup>62</sup>

These diverse traditions were embodied by the activists of the Civil Rights Movement, and helped cultivate the model of education that schools following Penn based their values and curricula on. As explained in Chapter Three, Myles Horton even believed that Penn and St. Helena's Island itself should be considered as a possible site for leadership workshops.<sup>63</sup> Its unique location and population set the standard for localized schools that provided increasing support for oppressed African-American communities. Penn, however, was not the only institution at the time that was using education as a vehicle for racial equality in South Carolina.

Established in 1865, as a consequence of the Civil War, the Avery Normal Institute started as a missionary institution that focused on the education of African Americans, promoting racial equality and opportunity. The school served as a preparatory academy, exclusively for African American students—both male and female. In contrast to Penn that was situated in the rural Sea Islands, Avery was located in downtown

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>63</sup> "Report of Horton's Trip to the Sea Islands," Folder 1516, Box 31 in the Highlander Research and Education Center Records, 1917-2005, Wisconsin Historical Society (hereafter HRC).

Charleston, a sophisticated urban dwelling for whites and blacks. Under an alliance with the AMA, Avery created an educational model eminent in the South during the Civil War era. Its religious foundation and philosophy of social change had a “beneficial effect on the welfare and elevation of the colored people generally,” argues historian Lee Drago.<sup>64</sup>

It was not until Reconstruction that the opportunity for African-Americans to be self-sufficient became a reality. Before the Civil War, Charleston had many free African-American “artisans and unskilled laborers composed about a quarter of the free black male population” in 1860.<sup>65</sup> This number is exceptionally low and later on, it created a need for a training facility in Charleston that would educate the African-Americans in preparing youth for employment opportunities after high school.

Drago suggests that Avery served as the “vehicle for upward mobility for children of former slaves and working-class parents with middle-class aspirations” along with a “rising group of responsive professionals” in Charleston. Avery delivered schooling different from Penn that would enable the black students the opportunity to pursue politics, manual labor, or higher education. The curriculum at Avery was unique because the teachers wanted “to eradicate racism and transform the South through education.”<sup>66</sup> Ultimately Avery became a model for institutions that sought social change within their communities.

---

<sup>64</sup> Edmund L. Drago, *Charleston's Avery Center: From Education and Civil Rights to Preserving the African American Experience* (Charleston, S.C.: The History Press, 2006), 65-66.

<sup>65</sup> Writings on Avery, 1882-1885,” Folder 3.6, Box 3 in the Avery Normal Institute Records, Avery Records; Drago, 27.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 84-85.

After Reconstruction, few job opportunities were available for black Charlestonians as legislation segregated jobs and white criticism of blacks permeated society. It was particularly difficult for Avery graduates because “white Charlestonians preferred that their own kind teach African-Americans because they viewed northerners like the AMA teachers and the black graduates...as extensions of Yankee imperialism.”<sup>67</sup> This notion of imposed education was not the case among students; they were eager and willing to learn. Evidently, the Avery vision had been instilled in its students, who “passionately believed that by practicing the Protestant ethic, individual African-Americans could make themselves ‘respectable,’ ‘useful’ citizens, thereby lessening the prejudice of whites.”<sup>68</sup> The idea of “useful citizens” is the exact philosophy that was maintained and fulfilled for decades, as it was the fundamental premise of the Sea Island Citizenship Schools.

The Sea Islands were deliberately selected as the location for the first series of Citizenship Schools because they were close enough to urban areas, namely Charleston and Savannah, but were also sheltered from explicit forms of white supremacy, prevalent in cities. The residents were also overwhelmingly African-American. Very few whites settled in the islands after Reconstruction, so the majority of residents were self-employed – working on farms, running businesses. Often, they worked for black island residents – making a conscious effort not to work for white men if feasible. Islanders took pride in being self-sufficient, but this meant that parents also depended on their children

---

<sup>67</sup> “American Missionary Association Annual Reports, 1862-1880,” Box 1, Folder 1, Avery Records; Drago, 62.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 65.

for labor. Their focus was diverted away from education and for most families school was too expensive for children to attend. Child labor continued into the 1950s. Evidently, the Sea Islands consisted of a rural lifestyle and yet these uneducated African Americans were eager for citizenship, voting rights, and political activity.

The Citizenship School program that will be discussed in the following chapter was at the base of grassroots institutions. The program was based on the methods of certain institutions that preceded it, namely the rural Penn School and urban Avery Normal Institute. These two schools each developed a philosophy on racial equality. That ideology differed from other African-American institutions in the South because they evolved during Reconstruction. The schools' founders were dedicated to the programs of instilling a sense of self-empowerment among students in hopes that they would influence in the broader context of society.

Penn and Avery were vehicles of social change in many ways: moral, social and especially racial. The abolitionist spirit was evident with the establishment of Penn School in 1862, and then the Avery Normal Institute in 1865.<sup>69</sup> The two schools marked an era of new beginnings, particularly for the former slaves in the Sea Islands at Penn who were under Union control by the second year of the Civil War. It was this Union victory that freed the Sea Island slaves, breaking them from their slave bonds.<sup>70</sup> With whites abandoning their plantations, and most former slaves refusing to follow, the Sea

---

<sup>69</sup> Vernon Burton, 1.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

Islands became a self-liberating domain for African-American thought, resurgence, and ultimately, power, making them ideal sites for empowerment through education.

Indeed, the history of the Low Country is vital to understanding the character of the African-American community in the Civil Rights Movement because of the unique culture that manifested itself in the Low Country region of South Carolina. As Andrew Young, Executive Member of the SCLC once said, “Citizenship schools were the base on which the whole Civil Rights Movement was built” and this would not have been effective without the model established by institutions before it.<sup>71</sup> Young also points out that “the Citizenship Schools were a natural extension of the historic role played by the American Missionary Association,” which is the same organization that started Penn and Avery.<sup>72</sup> These two schools contributed to the Civil Rights Movement by understanding what political tactics worked best, and applying them to society. In the 1950s, it is clear that “the genius of Septima Clark was her recognition and development of the power of education not only to enhance the power of their constituents, but also to create a community of activists” and this is why the models of Penn and Avery were foundational to the creation of the Citizenship School program.<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> Clark, 70.

<sup>72</sup> Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 135.

<sup>73</sup> Lazar, 250.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE FIRST CITIZENSHIP SCHOOL ON JOHNS ISLAND

A number of key figures helped establish the first Citizenship School on Johns Island in 1957, including Septima Clark, Esau Jenkins, Myles Horton, and Bernice Robinson. Together they began a local movement that would supplement the efforts of civil rights activists on the national scale. Each of these individuals played an instrumental role in the Citizenship School program. This chapter explores the connections among these individuals and their collective idea that literacy education was crucial in the Sea Islands for voter registration purposes. It also contextualizes the Sea Islands and why Johns Island was the initial site of the first Citizenship School in 1957.

Septima Pointsette Clark helped start the Citizenship School program in the 1950s when racial tensions were at the forefront of national politics. Indeed, her upbringing in Charleston and teaching experience in the Low Country contributed to her outlook on using education to promote racial equality. Clark was born in Charleston, South Carolina on May 3, 1898. Her father, Peter Porcher Pointsette, was both a former slave and a soldier in the Confederate Army and her mother, Victoria Warren Anderson Pointsette, was originally from Haiti.<sup>74</sup> The couple met in Florida, then moved to Charleston where he worked in catering and she washed and ironed clothes for large families.<sup>75</sup> They were each determined to put their eight children through school. Clark found school to be invaluable and recalled, “I feel that it was my parents’ interest in our getting the best

---

<sup>74</sup> Clark, 14-15.

<sup>75</sup> Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher*, 24-29; Clark, 16.

education we could obtain that steered me into my life work.” That life work would be teaching and challenging racism in the southern United States.

In the fall of 1903, Clark attended a private school that she said was “in the back room of a two-room home and there were some forty children and two teachers,” both of whom had graduated from the Avery Normal Institute.<sup>76</sup> Clark then attended the Mary Street School in 1906 and soon after, transferred to Burke Industrial School.<sup>77</sup> When she graduated from the seventh grade, Clark was awarded a certificate that qualified her to teach, but her learning days were not over. Clark’s mother was adamant that her daughter further her education, and in the fall of 1910 Clark enrolled at the Avery Normal Institute, starting in the ninth grade and skipping the eighth.

Brilliant and fond of learning, Clark did not go unnoticed at Avery. The school’s principal, Benjamin Cox, and her teachers tried to enroll Clark at Fisk upon her graduation – they claimed she was “college material.” She certainly was, but Clark was unable to afford Fisk, and thus began her calling, teaching. Reverend E.B. Burroughs was a pastor at Clark’s Methodist Church, and he helped secure her a job on Johns Island, just south of Charleston. Acquiring this teaching job was one of Clark’s most memorable and defining moments. Her family was also very proud considering, “teaching was an honorable work that ranked well above most other work available to Negro girls.”<sup>78</sup> Clark’s father was especially pleased because he never allowed his children to work in hotel or domestic services for the whites.

---

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>77</sup> “Transcript of Interview with Clark by Eliot Wigginton,” Box1, Folder 10, Septima Clark Papers, Avery Records; Clark, 20.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 26-28.

While the Sea Islands were located just twenty miles south of Charleston, they exhibited very distinct cultural differences. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, black elites from Charleston became increasingly dismissive of working-class African Americans and those living in the islands. Because the Sea Islands were isolated from Charleston and urban life, Clark's journey to Johns Island in 1916 was new territory and an unsettling transition. She had often read stories or heard tales about the Islanders and their culture, but knew very little about the people. Looking back, Clark realized that much to her dismay, "living conditions on the island were just as crude as the schools." The classroom buildings were barren log cabins with one wood-burning fireplace and the inside was lined with rickety backless benches. Very poor conditions indeed, and yet Clark was expected to supervise the one hundred and thirty two black students who awaited the start of the school year at the Promised Land School on Johns Island.

Although Promised Land hired a second teacher to help Clark, she found over one hundred students to be a remarkably high number for just two teachers. She immediately noted the racial disparity on the island: "the three white teachers in our community had from three to eighteen pupils each."<sup>79</sup> And Clark was being paid thirty dollars a month as a principal, whereas the white teachers – with the same certification level – were being paid eighty-five.<sup>80</sup> This discrepancy certainly affected Clark. Having to teach over one hundred students – both boys and girls of all ages and education levels – was a daunting task, and knowing that the white population was disproportionately well off was disheartening.

---

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>80</sup> Charron, 69; Clark, 39.

Clark was an eighteen-year old living on a barren island, vastly different from what she was accustomed to her entire life in Charleston. One considerable difference between the city and the islands was the prominence of the Gullah culture. As discussed in Chapter One, Gullah was most prominent in the Sea Islands where its proponents could uphold the values, traditions and dialect, persevering the culture's authenticity for decades, with little white contention. Clark understood Gullah because it was spoken on Henrietta Street in Charleston where she grew up, thus, she did not have any difficulty speaking it and relating to the Gullah Sea Island residents. Trying to teach the students in regular English, however, was challenging. Most youth on the island found lessons in proper English to be strange. But because Clark inserted certain Gullah phrases into her classes, she bonded with her pupils and gained their trust.<sup>81</sup>

Clark believed that education was the key to success in ending systemic racism and helping every student realize his or her potential. She wanted to help dismantle Jim Crow by instilling in her students a sense of empowerment, while supplying them with the tools of reading, writing, and synthesizing information. Although of working-class status, Clark's parents were convinced that a wholesome education for their children would help deflect white scrutiny. Thus, Clark was raised to realize the importance of education and its value, something she carried with her at the Promised Land School. Clark describes her sentiments while reminiscing on her work as a teacher on Johns Island:

In teaching them and thereby helping them raise themselves to a better status in life, I felt then that I would not only be serving them but serving

---

<sup>81</sup> Charron, 71, Clark, 44.

my state and nation, too, all the people, affluent and poor, white and black. For in my latter years I am more convinced than ever that in lifting the lowly we lift likewise the entire citizenship.

Clark's teaching experiences would be instrumental to the educational model that she would later implement in the first Citizenship School, established on the same island almost fifty years later to the date.

Clark sought to eradicate racial injustice in the South. After World War II, Clark's 'radical' background consisted of her working as a teacher in Charleston, joining the NAACP as well as the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority. At this point during the 1950s, she was living in Charleston and was "well known among the cadre of black women busy in both intra-communal and interracial social welfare work."<sup>82</sup> In 1954, Clark refused to drop her affiliation with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) – a requirement for black teachers in South Carolina because the state forbade teachers from belonging to the organization. The government did not want public school teachers to affiliate with progressive groups that would compromise a teacher's ability to educate without bias. Whether a member of the NAACP or not, Clark was indeed biased as a teacher. She believed that black students should learn about black history, and so, as Bernice Robinson discussed in an interview, Clark began "injecting [black history] into her class. And she was warned by her principal, you know, that you just don't do things like that," but she did it anyway because she felt that it would benefit the students.

---

<sup>82</sup> Charron, "We've Come a Long Way," 119.

Indeed, Clark's passion repressed her professionalism. The NAACP regulation made very little sense to Clark and other African Americans in the workforce, but it was just another tactic to scare blacks from congregated and politically mobilization. In retaliation to the NAACP regulation, Clark refused to disaffiliate because she was a proud supporter and she felt that the organization empowered her as a black woman. After the Supreme Court decision against segregation in 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the City School Board fired Clark from her job as a public school teacher.<sup>83</sup> Clark voiced her opposition to the requirement: "if whites could belong to the Ku Klux Klan, then surely blacks could belong to the NAACP." Nonetheless, she viewed her unemployment as an opportunity to travel throughout the South and Northeast to understand what methods various organizations used to dismantle white supremacy.<sup>84</sup>

While at the Promised Land School from 1916 to 1919, Septima Clark taught Esau Jenkins, an eight-year-old Johns Island native. He thoroughly enjoyed school, just as Clark had as a child, but like many students, he had to quit after the fourth grade to help support his family on their farm. The halt in his educational growth continued to bother him into adulthood. He married Janie Bell Jenkins in 1926 and was adamant that his children graduate high school. To guarantee this, however, he would have to work

---

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>84</sup> *Brown v. Board* emerged out of Clarendon County in 1947, whereby Rev. Joseph Albert DeLaine opposed the racial discrimination in South Carolina's education system, the Supreme Court acknowledged that black schools were inadequate compared to white ones. Classes were held in deteriorating buildings with students who traveled great distances without transportation, taught by teachers who were paid significantly less than white teachers. There is a sort of inevitability here that the Citizenship Schools started in South Carolina because of the importance that the majority of African Americans placed on education and the political as well as legal measures they took to promote racial equality on a scholastic level; Septima Clark, *Ready from Within: Septima Clark & the Civil Rights Movement*, (New Jersey: Africa World Press Inc., 1990), 36-37.

extremely hard to afford such an education for his thirteen children.<sup>85</sup> He and his wife worked tirelessly; they did anything necessary “for their children to have a better life...so they started becoming entrepreneurs.”<sup>86</sup>

Jenkins owned a farm on Johns Island where he and his wife grew cotton for five years, and then sold vegetables that they would transport to Charleston.<sup>87</sup> On such trips, they brought along island children to take them to the black public high school, Burke Industrial, in downtown.<sup>88</sup> Jenkins also purchased property on Atlantic Beach for blacks to use recreationally because whites and laws of segregation banned African Americans from the beaches in Charleston County. The bus they bought allowed Jenkins to transport people from the Sea Islands to downtown Charleston, Atlantic Beach, and North Myrtle Beach, so that blacks “would have access to the same opportunities that the white folks had.”<sup>89</sup> Jenkins’s bus business helped Sea Islanders hold profitable jobs in Charleston because he guaranteed transportation to work and back. His bus line covered roughly twenty-two miles; one ran from Summerville and the other from Johns Island, both headed for downtown Charleston.<sup>90</sup> Each of Jenkins’s investments considerably benefitted blacks living in the Sea Islands who had few opportunities otherwise.

On one particular trip, a black woman from Johns Island asked Jenkins if he would teach her the South Carolina laws about voting. She only made it to the third grade before she had to quit school, so she was eager to learn about registering to vote. The idea

---

<sup>85</sup> “Memorials and Funeral,” Box 1, Folder 4, Esau Jenkins Papers, Avery Records.

<sup>86</sup> Bethlenfalvy interview.

<sup>87</sup> “Esau Jenkins Vertical Folder,” Esau Jenkins Papers, Avery Records.

<sup>88</sup> Charron, 223.

<sup>89</sup> Bethlenfalvy Interview.

<sup>90</sup> Clark, *Echo in My Soul*, 135.

inspired Jenkins, and he took the opportunity to educate others who rode the bus each day.<sup>91</sup> He used copies of the South Carolina Constitution and laws, explaining the registration and voting qualifications to those who could not read. Jenkins helped his illiterate passengers memorize sections of the documents he brought so that over time, they could recognize words they had memorized. Others asked if there was a center where they could learn to read and write, so that they could perfect their skills.<sup>92</sup> No such school existed, and the Sea Islands desperately needed a program that would help educate its residents. Indeed, Jenkins was aware that self-empowerment stemmed from education. His entrepreneurial experiences taught him that a black man with a fourth grade education could achieve great success, and can do so while helping others in need.

Jenkins continued his efforts in helping African-Americans in the Sea Islands. One of his enterprises that helped effect social change was the Progressive Club that Jenkins established in 1948. Every third Sunday of the month, local Sea Island residents met at the Moving Star Hall and paid twenty-five cents each, creating a fund for bail money for blacks charged for meaningless crimes.<sup>93</sup> As Jenkins's grandchildren recalled, "there was an issue between a white family and a black man in which the black man was shot. And out of that, that's how the Progressive Club came about. It became a place where African-Americans would have to get together. And so the Moving Star was the incubator involved."<sup>94</sup>

---

<sup>91</sup> "Speeches, Published Writings, and Notes," Box 1, Folder 11, Esau Jenkins Papers, Avery Records.

<sup>92</sup> Clark, *Echo*, 137.

<sup>93</sup> "Esau Jenkins Vertical Folder," Esau Jenkins Papers, Avery Records.

<sup>94</sup> Bethlenfalvy Interview.

The Progressive Club, deemed “progressive” because it reflected the virtue to “look upward and do better,” was a political and legal hub that helped “make people better citizens, take pride in themselves get an education and work in a political movement.”<sup>95</sup> The organization helped provide legal aid, property ownership, and political advice to Johns Island residents, and Jenkins also sought to “promote health and social, educational and civil welfare and combat juvenile delinquency.”<sup>96</sup> Members paid dues to help finance such endeavors.<sup>97</sup> The Progressive Club was “both a consumer cooperative and a defense fund. One of the requirements for membership was to be a registered voter.” Another was to be a man. The Club encouraged political activity and empowerment among black male Sea Islanders.<sup>98</sup>

More radical than Jenkins’s Progressive Club was Myles Horton’s Highlander Folk School that was the site for interracial workshops on social change and education in the mountains of Tennessee. Like Jenkins, Horton played a significant role in the development of the Citizenship Schools, but Highlander did not start off as an institution that dealt with race relations. Founded by Horton in 1931, Highlander was a social program that helped white workers attain rights; the programs focused on labor leadership and unions. Historian Katherine Charron suggests that the Highlander Folk School paralleled the fundamental vision of Avery because of their religious

---

<sup>95</sup> “Interview with Esau Jenkins, Johns Island, S.C., 1960,” SFC Audio Reel 3617 in the Guy and Candie Carawan Collection #20008, Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter, Carawan Papers); “Interviews with Esau Jenkins and John Smalls, Johns Island, S.C., 1960,” SFC Audio Reel 3618, Carawan Papers.

<sup>96</sup> “Progressive Club, 1965-1973,” Box 1, Folder 13, Esau Jenkins Papers, Avery Records.

<sup>97</sup> Guy and Candie Carawan, 155.

<sup>98</sup> Sandra B. Oldendorf, “Highlander Folk School and the South Carolina Sea Island Citizenship Schools: Implications for the Social Studies,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Kentucky, 1987), 59.

backgrounds, “like the AMA, Highlander was Protestant-oriented, interracial, international and democratic in outlook.”<sup>99</sup> Even though Horton assisted white workers, he welcomed blacks as well. Thus, Highlander was considered radical by the 1940s because it incorporated interracial living and “fostered the development of personal bonds rather quickly” between people, regardless of race.<sup>100</sup>

The Highlander Folk School experienced a significant amount of hostility and criticism in the years leading up to World War II. Anytime workers were victimized and exploited by the system, Horton tried to alert people about their fundamental rights. Horton was indeed very liberal and consequently Highlander was often accused of being a communist institution.<sup>101</sup> Highlander was not anti-communist – comprised of white radicals— unlike Penn and Avery and other African-American organizations that were firm in their anti-communist stance. Accusations did not stop Horton. With his interest in helping oppressed people whether in the workplace or in the larger scope of society, it was not long until Horton’s labor efforts led him to realize the extent of racial discrimination in the workplace.<sup>102</sup> Thus, the Highlander Folk School turned its attention to race relations by holding integrated workshops that emphasized the importance of individual rights. The program at Highlander “was a social equality experience based on the belief that only action would change people’s attitudes toward one another,” so

---

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>100</sup> Charron, 222.

<sup>101</sup> Frank Adams with Myles Horton, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire: The Idea of Highlander* (Winston-Salem: John F. Blair, 1975), 109.

<sup>102</sup> Tjerandsen, 141.

Horton made it his job to integrate black and white adults, teaching about the importance of working together to end racial discrimination.<sup>103</sup>

Horton sought to “develop a program where people could multiply themselves” with the tools set forth by a specific pedagogy; leaders were expected to go out into the community and share what they had learned.<sup>104</sup> Highlander quickly embodied a philosophy similar to Penn and Avery about empowering people, helping them “understand that they can analyze their experiences and build on those experiences” to change society for the better.<sup>105</sup> At the time when civil rights activism evolved in the postwar period of the 1940s and 50s, Horton and the Highlander Folk School “made the decision to do something about racism.”<sup>106</sup> Horton was satisfied with the amount of work they had done in the labor sector, with organizing unions and helping workers. It was time to take on a new challenge. Before the *Brown v. Board of Education* case was even decided in 1954, Horton sought to “hold workshops on the potential effects of school desegregation” because he made “an educated guess...that the Supreme Court would decide in favor of integrated schools” in the upcoming months.<sup>107</sup> Horton was right, and in the early 1950s, the South started to change on the premise of racial equality; new legislation was being passed, although at a very slow pace. It was during this time period that Highlander created a number of workshops focusing on civil rights by inviting guest

---

<sup>103</sup> Myles Horton, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998), 95.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

speakers such as, Eleanor Roosevelt, to emphasize the role of the United Nations and how activists in the South might combat racism.<sup>108</sup>

Septima Clark spent the summer of 1954 at Highlander. When the Supreme Court decided against segregation in *Brown v. Board*, Clark returned to the Low Country to speak with Esau Jenkins about the possibility of holding workshops to educate African-Americans in the Sea Islands. That same year, Horton was interested in the literacy work that Clark and Jenkins were involved in, and he invited the two to a United Nations workshop at Highlander.<sup>109</sup> The Emil Schwartzaupt Foundation provided Highlander with a grant to promote leadership opportunities among African-Americans in the South and Horton was expected to secure a location for this undertaking. The Sea Islands seemed promising; they consisted of a dense population of underresourced African-Americans who were rather sheltered from white supremacy and the rest of the South.

In the 1954, Horton was initially interested in Jenkins's Progressive Club and hoped to develop a program based on that organization. However, Clark was adamant that they begin with classes to eliminate illiteracy. Literacy would consequently lead to political activity through voter registration. It was at Highlander in 1954 when Clark sat down with a group of women, both white and black, and for the first time they collectively felt open to discuss their ideas without the interference of men. They concluded that first-class citizenship – helping the illiterate gain political autonomy– was

---

<sup>108</sup> Adams and Horton, 98.

<sup>109</sup> Clark, *Ready from Within*, 42.

a necessity for the African-Americans living in the Sea Islands because they were among the most uneducated blacks in the South.<sup>110</sup>

Clark recalls that when the Citizenship School program was in its incipient stages, Jenkins was already “busy working on the Islands to try and get people to realize the injustices they were living under.” Jenkins wanted the Islanders to realize that the isolated and oppressive lives they were subjected to were not right or normal by any means. And Sea Island residents were astonished to hear of blacks and whites interacting at Highlander. Integrationist activities had been both an anomaly and illegal, so people were excited and nervous about the prospect of venturing up to Highlander themselves. Activists from the South Carolina Sea Islands were particularly interested in these workshops because they faced a number of oppressive issues that were difficult to overcome without help. Jenkins and Clark took many trips to Tennessee in the summers of 1955 and 1956, bringing with them as many eager Islanders as they could for input on the evolving Citizenship School concept.

1955 was the year that Horton and Septima Clark forged a close bond and collaborated on a “program that would be clear enough to be effective, and one the people could run themselves.”<sup>111</sup> Clark quickly acclimated to the Highlander Folk School because she “felt comfortable working for an organization whose aims were similar to

---

<sup>110</sup> “Transcript of Interview with Clark by Sandra B. Oldendorf,” MH-RG2-I-11 in the Highlander Research and Education Center Archives, Monteagle, Tennessee (hereafter, HERC).

<sup>111</sup> “Transcript of Interview with Clark by Peter Wood,” MH-RG2-I-11, HERC.

those of the American Missionary Association” that she had learned as a student at the Avery Normal Institute in Charleston.<sup>112</sup>

Highlander was a stomping ground for social justice even before Martin Luther King came to the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement. Rosa Parks often visited the school and corresponded with Horton about new educative methods that emphasized racial equality. At Highlander, many future and notable civil rights activists began their involvement and attended workshops on peaceful direct action.<sup>113</sup> Among the attendees was John Lewis, who was present at one of the first workshops that Highlander held for college students in 1955.<sup>114</sup> Horton’s center was considered radical because it incorporated interracial living and “fostered the development of personal bonds rather quickly” between people, regardless of race. Highlander was essential to the development of black autonomy in the South.<sup>115</sup>

Clark envisioned a program that would be foundational to voter registration turnout among African-Americans in the Sea Islands. Horton hired her as a staff member in the summer of 1955 to help develop leaders and hold meetings both at Highlander and in the Sea Islands.<sup>116</sup> Through her experience at Highlander, Clark realized that “adult education could inform a larger process of politicization that led to individual and communal empowerment” whereby formally oppressed African-Americans could take

---

<sup>112</sup> Drago, 249.

<sup>113</sup> Burton, 79.

<sup>114</sup> Untitled, Box 2, Folder 11, Highlander Folk School Collection, Tennessee State Library and Archive, Nashville, TN (hereafter: HFS Collection).

<sup>115</sup> Katherine Mellon Charron, “We’ve Come a Long Way,” *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America*, Ed. Charles Payne. (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 222.

<sup>116</sup> Untitled, Box 9, Folder 227, Judge Julius Waties Waring Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C. (hereafter, Waring Papers).

part in the ever-growing Civil Rights Movement that was receiving national attention after the Montgomery Bus Boycott.<sup>117</sup> And so, the recruitment process began. Clark mobilized Sea Island residents who wanted to increase political activity and educate others, “we just wanted a community person,” she recalled; they weren’t seeking certified or trained teachers, instead they wanted leaders who were native to the area so that they could relate to the students.<sup>118</sup> Those interested were invited to attend workshops at Highlander, focusing on the importance of integration and education. Clark and Jenkins “each tried to get another person interested and bring him to Highlander for a taste of democratic living and first hand information.”<sup>119</sup> The prospect of democratic living was certainly a new idea for the majority of African-Americans living in the Sea Islands.

On Johns Island, there was neither an NAACP branch nor any explicit political activity combating racial discrimination. There existed, however, a strong communal bond in which residents shared everything – their problems, wealth, advice, legal aid, political outlooks, and the Gullah culture. The people had the desire to overcome the harsh realities imposed by the white population. Once Clark shared plans for the establishment of the first Citizenship School on Johns Island, residents unequivocally expressed interest in exercising their political rights, starting with reading and writing.

With the Citizenship School developments underway, Clark hoped Bernice Robinson would become the first Citizenship School teacher on Johns Island. Robinson,

---

<sup>117</sup> Charron, “We’ve Come a Long Way,” 126.

<sup>118</sup> “Transcript of Septima Clark Interview by Eugene Walker,” *Oral History Interview with Septima Poinsette Clark*, Interview G-0017, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007), Atlanta, Georgia, 30 July 1976 <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/G-0017/G-0017.html>.

<sup>119</sup> “*Extension Programs, John’s Island and Charleston*,” Box 3, Folder 5, Septima Clark Papers, Avery Records.

however, was a beautician who lived in New York for twelve years; she did was not a trained teacher nor did she graduate from high school, but Clark thought she was a perfect candidate for the position. Horton agreed, he believed that a local leader would be most suitable to direct the Citizenship School classes to instill a sense of equality between the teacher and her students. He wanted teachers to work with a smaller group of people who would return to their communities and teach other residents what they learned. Horton recalled, “you have to work with those people who can multiply what you do,” in order to effect and spread social change.<sup>120</sup> He thought of the Citizenship Schools as local hubs for residents to congregate, learn and work alongside one another so they could apply what they learned from each other in politics and everyday life. The concept of spreading education at the local level was Horton’s customary ethos. Many other school models such as those of Penn and Avery also focused on social change and believed in the concept of local movement, local people, and local learning. However, those were sites of institutionalized education. The Citizenship Schools would be more grassroots based, offering night classes for youth and adults, teaching basic skills such as reading and writing.

Clark thought that “affluent and educated black leaders could serve as role models, but they had to be willing to listen to others” because a hierarchal method of teaching, that is the usual method of teaching, would not stimulate conversation.<sup>121</sup> This was crucial for the successful outcome of Citizenship Schools because the discourse among teachers and students was well balanced and spurred further conversational

---

<sup>120</sup> Horton, 56-57.

<sup>121</sup> Burton, 79.

development. Thus, an educator had to be open to new ideas and concerns that students set forth. That openness was essential for students to grasp the content presented to them. Small groups were capable of effecting the most change, as they taught and learned from each other. It is this type of localized communal effort that augmented the success of the Civil Rights Movement because those at the grassroots were not only helping their local communities, but were changing the larger scope of society as well.

Clark was not opposed to trained teachers, but she recruited leaders who were eager to train others and had close ties to the Sea Island community, regardless of their academic standings. This was certainly the case with Bernice Robinson who became the first teacher at the Johns Island Citizenship School in 1957. Her father was a bricklayer and she remembered that he “would refuse to let us say that we were poor” even though he made very little. This was common for black families; many maintained a sense of pride in spite of poverty and white supremacy. Given his work with the local NAACP in Charleston, Robinson’s father was hopeful about the future – focusing on independence from whites empowerment for his children. Robinson recalled her father making “preparations for [our family] to be independent...he has never called a white man ‘mister’” and never allowed his children to do so either.<sup>122</sup>

Robinson completed Middle School during the Depression, and although her parents sent Robinson’s brothers to the Avery Normal Institute, they could not afford to do so with their daughters. Few opportunities existed for black women in Charleston, so Robinson moved to New York City at the age of fifteen where she lived in an integrated

---

<sup>122</sup> “Transcript of oral interview of Robinson by Sue Thrasher and Eliot Wiggington, November 9, 1980,” Box1, Folder 5, Bernice Robinson Papers, Avery Records.

society – certainly less segregated than the South – and worked in the garment industry. She made enough money to take business classes since she could not afford to go to college and soon after, she opened a beauty shop in White Plains, N.Y. Robinson was extremely successful in New York where she lived for twelve years. She joined the local NAACP branch, got married, and had a daughter, but her life changed when she got divorced and her father became ill. Consequently, she moved back to Charleston.

Upon her return, Robinson realized just how much she had forgotten about the racism in Charleston. She had forgotten what it was like to be scrutinized based on the color of her skin. Thus, she diverted all of her focus toward racial equality, particularly voter registration by the Charleston NAACP in 1947. That same year, Judge Julius Waties Waring, “handed down the decision that the Democratic Party was not a private club and that the primary was open to everyone. Blacks as well as whites,” as Robinson stated.<sup>123</sup> Judge Waring served as the Federal Judge in Charleston under the District Court and became a progressive advocate for racial equality, ruling in favor anti-racist cases. Even so, Charleston was not as progressive as New York regarding race relations. In New York City, Robinson had registered and voted without problems and she wanted the same for blacks in Charleston. She became the secretary for the local NAACP branch under local activist and realtor, Joseph Arthur Brown. He fought segregation and under his presidency, the Charleston NAACP branch increased the number of registered voters; membership registrants went from three hundred to one thousand within a year. Septima

---

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

Clark recognized Robinson's extensive work with the NAACP and voter registration, so Clark invited her cousin to go to Highlander and consider becoming a teacher.

"I never been no teacher and I'm not going to be a teacher...I would help you all, help in any way that I could, I would help a teacher with school, but I ain't no teacher" is what Robinson told Clark and Jenkins when they chose her to lead the school on Johns Island in 1957. Robinson was worried that her lack of certification made her unqualified to teach, but Clark believed that Robinson would best connect with the students. Robinson was convinced and she became the first teacher at the Citizenship School on Johns Island, but she refused to take on the top-down role of a teacher. In her opening remarks to her first Citizenship School class, she said, "I'm not going to be the teacher, we gonna learn together...I'm here to learn with you, you know, learn things together." She maintained this approach throughout the course of her Citizenship School career, and her students benefited from it. The Johns Island school responded to the needs of the Sea Island residents, while simultaneously helping them pass literacy tests for voter registration.

The ultimate goal, of course, was to increase the number of registered African-Americans, but the classes also improved the quality of life for many Sea Island residents. Robinson wanted to empower the adults she taught. The group met two nights a week for two hours, from seven to nine. Since the classes were held late at night, parents often brought their children, so Robinson taught the younger ones how to crochet and sew. Every family member was somehow involved in the Citizenship School and benefited from the classes. Additionally, Robinson maintained her stance on not wanting

to be considered a teacher, she recalled that residents “presented me with what they wanted to learn and I taught them that and we really had a good time with it and that same curriculum went all the way through the Citizenship School. All the way down to the very end when we stopped it.” As she stated, other Citizenship School teachers emulated Robinson’s ethos of learning from each other, creating an environment without the presence of a hierarchy. The first Citizenship School was a great success – registering over one hundred Sea Island residents. Robinson was devoted to the cause, stating, “I got into it and I became so involved with those people that nothing else really mattered” and she paved the way for future Citizenship School teachers.<sup>124</sup>

The Citizenship School curriculum was most effective because “underlying this pedagogy was a fundamental belief in the dignity, life knowledge, intellectual competence, and capacity for growth possessed by adult learners, even when they were illiterate or struggling on the edge of literacy.”<sup>125</sup> The respect for adult learners was a crucial feature of the Citizenship Schools and differentiated them from other unsuccessful efforts to educate Sea Islanders. The schools offered the people a dignified way to become educated and become first-class citizens with the right to vote. The Johns Island Citizenship School was foundational to the other schools that emerged after 1957. It did not take long for residents on adjacent Sea Islands to recognize the impact that one school had on an entire island and they too wanted the same for their communities.

---

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Levine, 134.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### SHEDDING THE CLOAK OF INVISIBILITY: THE LIFE AND WORK OF ETHEL GRIMBALL

In her role as the first teacher at the Wadmalaw Island Citizenship School, Ethel Grimball initiated significant change by providing educational opportunities for unschooled African-American adults. As the daughter of Esau Jenkins, her influence on the island and its residents from 1958 to 1961 is a clear illustration of how African Americans used adult education and subsequently increased voter registration in the Sea Islands of Charleston County, South Carolina. While her experience as a trained teacher in the South Carolina public school system contrasted sharply with Myles Horton's ethos of only hiring untrained teachers; Grimball's participation in the Citizenship Schools represented a new generation of female African-American professionals.<sup>126</sup> Low Country women, such as Grimball, were not simply activists in their communities; they were political leaders whose contributions shaped the larger scope of black women's intellectual historiography.<sup>127</sup> In an era when men dominated the political landscape, African-American women in the South Carolina Low Country used their roles as teachers of the Citizenship Schools to transition into mainstream politics during the Civil Rights Movement.

This chapter explores the connection between the influx of black voting strength in Charleston County by 1960 and the adult education programs led by female citizenship teachers in the Sea Islands. By the time the Voting Rights Act of 1965 became law, the

---

<sup>126</sup> For Myles Horton, see Chapter Three; Frank Adams and Myles Horton, 119.

<sup>127</sup> Mia Bay, Farah J. Griffin, Martha S. Jones, and Barbara D. Savage, ed., *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), xi.

Low Country inhabitants underwent a seismic shift toward empowerment as a result of the voter registration pedagogy instilled in them by the Citizenship Schools. These programs linked “the power of the ballot to concrete strategies for individual and communal empowerment,” and they became the “vital bridges between the freedom struggles of the late nineteenth century and those of the mid-twentieth,” as historians Katherine Charron and James Leloudis state, respectively.<sup>128</sup> African-Americans employed and demanded the ballot to improve their quality of life.<sup>129</sup> This political act helped blacks diminish white racism as schools were “sites of African-American initiative and empowerment, and...of interracial cooperation and alliance” since Reconstruction.<sup>130</sup> Ballot boxes were invaluable in the fight to end discrimination. Emancipation had heralded a new form of black activism in which “the black vote was essential to the liberalization of southern politics” and this continued on into the twentieth century.<sup>131</sup> The same was true decades after the Civil War, whereby “the re-enfranchisement of black southerners gave impetus to the political mobilization of African-Americans,” in the era of civil rights, when black women used education to further this undertaking.<sup>132</sup>

---

<sup>128</sup> Katherine Mellen Charron, “Septima Poinsette Clark: The Evolution of an Educational Stateswoman,” in *South Carolina Women: Their Lives and Times*, ed. Marjorie Julian Spruill et al. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 240.; James L. Leloudis, *Schooling the New South: Pedagogy, Self, and Society in North Carolina, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 223.

<sup>129</sup> Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore and Thomas J. Sugrue, *These United States: A Nation in the Making 1890 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), 355.

<sup>130</sup> Hahn, 276.

<sup>131</sup> Patricia Sullivan, “Southern Reformers, the New Deal, and the Movement’s Foundation,” in *New Directions in Civil Rights Studies*, ed. Armstead L. Robinson and Patricia Sullivan (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 90.

<sup>132</sup> Steven F. Lawson, “From Boycotts to Ballots: The Reshaping of National Politics,” in *New Directions in Civil Rights Studies*, 189.

Ethel Grimball was the third of thirteen children, and this circumstance might have enhanced her leadership abilities. As an African-American living on Johns Island, she had few educational opportunities, but she was nonetheless fond of learning. The school she attended on Johns Island in the 1940s was a “one-room, two-windows, one door, black creosote [painted black] school,” in terrible condition and it was led by an African American history teacher named Isadora Richardson.<sup>133</sup> Richardson was formally trained at the Avery Normal Institute, who became a role model to young women by using the classroom to make her students feel a sense of self-worth. She did so by taking “time with each of us...about us as a total person,” Grimball recalled. Richardson’s teaching methodology later paralleled the ethos crafted by the Citizenship Schools. Richardson was an active member of the rural Johns Island community.<sup>134</sup> Grimball noticed that her teacher “was concerned about the families as well as the children who were in school.”<sup>135</sup> In this particular circumstance, Richardson was not simply an authoritative figure, she was an agent of sociopolitical change. She demonstrated a specific political act by secretly teaching black history, which was not part of the government curriculum. The black women who fall into this category of political activism embodied a “form of leadership that seeks to target the silenced and overlooked members of communities, to help them find their voice, and to support them taking a

---

<sup>133</sup> “Sea Islands: *Ain’t You Got a Right to the Tree of Life*: Jenkins Family, 1971-1972, 1987-1988,” folder 582, Carawan Papers.

<sup>134</sup> Gilmore and Sugrue, 360.

<sup>135</sup> Ethel Grimball, interview by Katherine Mellen Charron, February 26 2002, transcript.

more active role in shaping their individual and collective destinies.”<sup>136</sup>

Central to Richardson’s curriculum was black history. Although the school board did not approve this subject, she included the stories of African-American heroes to promote empowerment. Secretively teaching black history was common, particularly in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Because “women in the rural south have a long history of being doers,” Richardson chose to deal decisively with the lack of African-American narratives.<sup>137</sup> Many teachers wanted their students to understand the trajectory of African-American history, even if it resulted in job termination.<sup>138</sup> As for the school on Johns Island, “they didn’t care what was taught...they just figured [the students] weren’t going to get anything out of it...because most children lived on the plantations and they had to work on the farms.”<sup>139</sup> The lack of educational opportunity due to family dependence was the case for many African-American youth in the Low Country. Very few children completed a level of education past elementary.<sup>140</sup> When Grimball was a teen, busses passed her by with white children heading to school in Charleston. When it came to high school, the African-American children did not have transportation off of the islands to go to school, so they worked on the farm.<sup>141</sup> However, Grimball’s father, Esau Jenkins, was

---

<sup>136</sup> Stephen Preskill, “The Developmental Leadership of Septima Clark, 1954-1967,” in *Toward the Meeting of the Waters: Currents in the Civil Rights Movement of South Carolina during the Twentieth Century*, ed. Winfred B. Moore Jr. and Orville Vernon Burton (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2008), 222.

<sup>137</sup> Joyce Ladner, “A Sociology of the Civil Rights Movement: An Insider’s Perspective,” presented at the American Sociological Association meetings, Atlanta, 1988.

<sup>138</sup> Charron, 70.; “Sea Islands: *Ain’t You Got a Right to the Tree of Life: Jenkins Family, 1971-1972, 1987-1988*,” folder 582, Carawan Papers.

<sup>139</sup> Charron Interview.

<sup>140</sup> Clark, *Echo in My Soul*, 36.

<sup>141</sup> Jacqueline and Nikita Grimball, interview by author, Wadmalaw Island, S.C., October 1 2015, in author’s possession.

adamant that his children receive formal education and complete high school.<sup>142</sup> He did not allow his children to work on the farm. As a successful entrepreneur, he was able to take his children, with others from the islands, to school in Charleston to attend Burke Industrial High School.

When Grimball looked back on her life, it was clear that Richardson shaped her own pedagogical journey beyond the seventh grade. When describing her teaching development, Grimball emphasized: “I want[ed] to be a teacher like Richardson, and also I want[ed] to be able to help the people on Johns Island and that’s why I became a teacher.”<sup>143</sup> And this is exactly what Grimball did after completing high school at Burke Industrial and receiving her education degree at Claflin College. Grimball pursued an incidental political path by becoming an educator to directly influence oppressed blacks. Her role as a leader supplements the narrative that “in the rural South generally, women were in fact much more politically active than men.”<sup>144</sup> Grimball acquired many jobs and furthered her education between her graduation from Claflin in 1954 and her first day at the Wadmalaw Island Citizenship School in 1958. She took twelve semester hours at The Citadel in Charleston and three graduate-level hours from South Carolina State College in Orangeburg, S.C. to perfect her skills as an educator.<sup>145</sup> Grimball developed her role as a professional by pursuing numerous educational opportunities and legitimizing her qualifications as a teacher.

---

<sup>142</sup> “Sea Islands: *Ain’t You Got a Right to the Tree of Life*: Jenkins Family, 1971-1972, 1987-1988,” folder 582, Carawan Papers.

<sup>143</sup> Charron Interview.

<sup>144</sup> Payne, 266.

<sup>145</sup> Charron Interview; Septima Clark, “Notes on Johns Island,” October 15, 1955, Box 3, Folder 2, HFS Collection.

As a consequence of Esau Jenkins's work with racial equality, his stance on integration, and his involvement in the NAACP in Charleston and the Sea Islands, it was impossible for his children, like Grimball, to acquire jobs in Charleston County.<sup>146</sup> There is a distinctive pattern of African-American women especially, who lost their jobs for even their slightest involvement in the national fight for racial equality. Black women were easily replaceable. Septima Clark, Bernice Robinson, Ethel Grimball, Rosa Parks, among countless other African-American women were left jobless at one point in their lives because they fought for a more equal society. Charles Payne makes a congruous point, suggesting, "the pattern of relatively high levels of female participation among either Black or working-class women seems to exist in several types of non-traditional political activities in widely differing circumstances."<sup>147</sup> Thus, they were not confined to their expected roles; they followed political paths that were far from traditional. Similar to Richardson teaching black history, black women who were political agents risked stable employment for the greater cause of civil rights.

In 1955, Grimball secured a teaching position at the Haut Gap High School on Johns Island. However, the school retracted its offer at the start of the school year because of her father's work with race relations.<sup>148</sup> Consequently, Grimball taught in Frogmore (possibly at the Penn School on St. Helena's Island), located in Beaufort County, but by this time, she was married to Julian Grimball and together they had one

---

<sup>146</sup> "Sea Islands: *Ain't You Got a Right to the Tree of Life*: Jenkins Family, 1971-1972, 1987-1988," folder 582, Carawan Papers; Oldendorf, 76; Septima Clark, "Report on the Sea Islands," January 7, 1960, Box 33, folder 90, HFS Collection.

<sup>147</sup> Payne, 277.

<sup>148</sup> Oldendorf, 76.

child, Jacqueline Grimball (Jakki).<sup>149</sup> Grimball had a strong partnership with her husband, and he supported her in the pursuit of all her teaching aspirations. Their relationship was the key to her success as an educator. Grimball traveled to Frogmore on a daily basis, so Julian took Jakki to Johns Island to stay with her maternal grandparents from Sunday through Friday.<sup>150</sup> This trip, however, became too demanding for the family, so after one year of teaching, Grimball went to The Citadel for work and study.<sup>151</sup> At school, Grimball received the qualifications needed for a number of jobs, mostly teaching-related, which prepared her for her role as a female political leader of the Citizenship Schools.

Grimball's experiences as an African-American girl on an island isolated from the white community defined her as a black female intellect. At a young age, she recognized the value of education as a means of empowering others, and she carried this passion with her in her vocational and volunteer work.<sup>152</sup> Indeed, she considered herself a religious woman, but Grimball's role as a political leader in the Low Country community was not simply defined by her involvement in the church. Her work in education was very much based on female trailblazers in the Sea Islands such as Isadora Richardson and Septima Clark. Grimball witness the fact that "women obviously represented an enormous pool of

---

<sup>149</sup> Septima Pointsette Clark, "Transcript of conversation among Clark, Esau Jenkins and others regarding Highlander program at Penn Center, 1958," Box 7, folder 12, Septima P. Clark Papers, Avery Research Center, College of Charleston, Charleston, S.C. (hereafter: Clark Papers); Bethlenfalvy Interview; "Ethel Jenkins Grimball," *Roots Web Ancestry*, accessed 11 July 2015 <http://archiver.rootsweb.ancestry.com/th/read/SCMARION/2006-12/1167313041>.

<sup>150</sup> Bethlenfalvy Interview.

<sup>151</sup> Charron Interview; Septima Clark, "Report on the Sea Islands," Box 33, folder 91, HFS Collection.

<sup>152</sup> Oldendorf, 105.

untapped leadership potential” because those political agents were effecting significant change in the Low Country.<sup>153</sup> These women were role models for Grimball, and they shaped her pedagogical journey as an African-American political leader and intellect.

The Johns Island Citizenship School that started in 1957 proved to be a success. As Chapter Three explains, the school’s adult graduates were registered to vote within six months and this was a tremendous accomplishment for the Low Country. Septima Clark’s efforts were catalytic to this desirable outcome. She actively visited neighboring islands to promote voter registration. Clark attended community meetings and consulted Sea Island citizens who were willing to help her cause – Septima Clark “developed a faith in the ability of communities of the poor to provide much of the leadership for their own struggle and concrete ideas about how that ability could be nurtured.”<sup>154</sup> The inhabitants on Wadmalaw Island, adjacent to Johns Island, were determined to establish the same type of pedagogical institution. Lynn Olson provides a strong analogy suggesting that the expansion of these schools “was like a chain letter, blacks from all over the South being taught that they had the power to change their lives and then going back home and passing the word along.”<sup>155</sup> Many residents recognized that “we’ve got a large number of Negroes...and very few of them vote.” Enfranchisement was inevitably at the forefront of black aspirations, as Clark explained, they planned “to get a school started down there where they too can learn how to qualify themselves for casting their

---

<sup>153</sup> Payne, 168.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 77; Septima Clark, “Letters from Septima to Elizabeth and Judge Waties Waring,” March 22, May 16, June 1, June 30 and August 30, 1955, Box 9, folder 227, Waring Papers.

<sup>155</sup> Lynne Olson, *Freedom’s Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights movement 1830-1970* (New York: Touchstone, 2001), 214.

ballots.”<sup>156</sup> Just as the citizens on Johns Island, Wadmalaw inhabitants too wanted to learn how to read and write, not only for voter registration purposes, but also for empowerment.<sup>157</sup>

From 1957-1958, Esau Jenkins led meetings with Wadmalaw islanders to develop initiatives that would improve the conditions of the community.<sup>158</sup> These meetings were held on a regular basis to voice the concerns of the residents on the Sea Islands. Especially since a number of citizens were newly becoming registered-voters, they needed to understand the political situation in Charleston County: who was running, what their policies consisted of, and how they were going to help the Low Country. According to Grimball, her father took direct action in advising community members “what you need to do and what you need not to do.”<sup>159</sup> This illustrates how important it was for the community to work together as a whole, and learn from each other vis-à-vis political discussion and debate. In these meetings, women used their relationship with people in the community as a platform to vocalize the issues at hand. They pushed for adult education because it would serve as a tool to facilitate social change within the community and free the Sea Islanders of the invisible white supremacist confines.

Juanita Grimball (Aunt of Julian Grimball) regularly attended these meetings that took place at the Progressive Club on Johns Island. Juanita, along with her husband

---

<sup>156</sup> Clark, *Echo in My Soul*, 156

<sup>157</sup> Laylon Wayne Jordan and Elizabeth H. Stringfellow, *A Place Called St. John's: The Story of John's, Edisto, Wadmalaw, Kiawah, and Seabrook Islands of South Carolina* (Columbia: The Reprint Company, 1998), 209.

<sup>158</sup> Septima Clark, “*Extension Programs, John's Island and Charleston*,” Box 3, Folder 5, Clark Papers.

<sup>159</sup> Charron Interview.

James, were devout members of the Wadmalaw community – as partners, they were instrumental in working with the Presbyterian Church to help empower the Sea Island population.<sup>160</sup> Juanita Grimball worked arduously to help institute a citizenship program on Wadmalaw, particularly after viewing a film that Jenkins showed at the Progressive Club. The movie, filmed at Highlander, detailed the efforts of Myles Horton, Septima Clark, Bernice Robinson and Esau Jenkins, in promoting integration and education.<sup>161</sup> Island viewers were mesmerized by Clark’s plans for racial equality in the Low Country. In the film, she and Jenkins were recognizable members of the community, which further instilled a trust in the Low Country residents that these initiatives would be successful.<sup>162</sup> Juanita Grimball requested that the film be shown at her church on Wadmalaw to convince her community that these citizenship classes would be of great help. Indeed, “that movie inspired the people to want a club of their own” and by the summer of 1958, the Wadmalaw Island Citizenship School was in its incipient stages.<sup>163</sup>

Becoming a teacher at the first Citizenship School on Wadmalaw was no spontaneous act for Ethel Grimball:

I got interested in it because I had always been interested in what my dad did and I wanted to help him. And that was my commitment to me, that when I get out of school, I’ll stay on the island and do whatever I can do to work with my dad. And I wanted to be the one to help him to *help people help themselves*.<sup>164</sup>

---

<sup>160</sup> Bethlenfalvy Interview.

<sup>161</sup> Septima Clark, “*Extension Programs, John’s Island and Charleston*,” Box 3, Folder 5, Clark Papers.

<sup>162</sup> Bethlenfalvy Interview; Septima Clark, “Trip to Charleston, Wadmalaw, St. Helena’s and Hilton Head Island,” Box 33, folders 737-743, HFS Collection.

<sup>163</sup> Septima Clark, Box 3, folder 5, Clark Papers.

<sup>164</sup> Charron Interview.

Although she knew of Septima Clark through her father's integrationist work, Grimball formally met Clark at the Penn Center in 1954.<sup>165</sup> Subsequently, Jenkins brought his daughter to Highlander for a workshop that included female leaders in the Sea Islands. There, Grimball expressed her interest in becoming the first teacher on Wadmalaw, given her affiliation with and loyalty to the residents.<sup>166</sup> Similar to Clark, Grimball was a trained teacher. Hiring a leader who held a degree in education was a deviation from Highlander's ethos, as discussed in Chapter Three.<sup>167</sup> Nonetheless, Clark recognized Grimball's potential in helping empower the community due to her relationships with the people of Wadmalaw, her status as a formally trained teacher, and because she was the daughter of Esau Jenkins. This was a particularly unique circumstance for Grimball. She possessed the intellect of a teacher, but she never felt that she was of any higher status than those who could not read or write on the islands. Given these two distinct qualities, it was clear that Grimball would not instill a sense of hierarchy between her and her students but rather, would use her academic knowledge to help guide those attending the adult education program.

Esau Jenkins certainly advocated for his daughter to be hired as Wadmalaw's teacher. He did so possibly out of guilt, because his work had previously deprived Grimball from acquiring employment in the 1950s.<sup>168</sup> Indeed, Esau's other children were

---

<sup>165</sup> Septima Clark, "Notes on Johns Island," October 15, 1955, Box 3, folder 2, HFS Collection; Charron Interview.

<sup>166</sup> Clark, *Echo in My Soul*, 157.

<sup>167</sup> Horton typically avoided college-educated and trained teachers because of their inability to relate to the community and its residents. He feared that the trained teacher would create a hierarchical environment between herself and her students. This dichotomy is investigated in Chapter Three.

<sup>168</sup> "Sea Islands: *Ain't You Got a Right to the Tree of Life*: Jenkins Family, 1971-1972, 1987-1988," folder 582, Carawan Papers.

also deprived of and terminated from employment because of their father's civil rights obligations. Grimball recalled, "we would always be told there wasn't a job available when we knew there was. We'd go around to all these principals and they would just perspire and walk around so nervous when they saw us coming."<sup>169</sup> After Grimball graduated from Claflin, Jenkins helped his daughter find work; he arranged for the St. George School to hire her as a science teacher. However, in the fall of 1954 the school's principal visited the Jenkins' home and informed the family that St. George was unable to hire Jenkins' daughter.<sup>170</sup> This particular situation motivated Jenkins to support Clark's campaign for racial equality after her dismissal by the Charleston School Board due to her affiliation with the local NAACP chapter.<sup>171</sup> Clark's particular discriminatory case is investigated in Chapter One. This situation demonstrates just how prominent of a figure Jenkins was in the community, and how he also wanted his thirteen children to work with others to help facilitate change. He was equally invested in the wellbeing of the Sea Islanders and his children, because he believed that they were all going to affect the greater cause, racial equality.

Septima Clark's mother-like relationship with Grimball deserves further analysis, as it was central to her role as a leader in the community, especially with Clark strongly advocating for Grimball's involvement in the Wadmalaw Citizenship School. Clark

---

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Septima Clark, "Letter from Septima Clark to Elizabeth Waring," October 6, 1955, Box 4, folder 52, Waring Papers.

<sup>171</sup> Septima Clark, "Letters from Septima Clark to J. Waties and Elizabeth," September 16 and 27, 1956, Box 9, folder 228, Waring Papers.; Clark's decision to remain a member of the NAACP is discussed in Chapter Three; Charron, *Freedom's Teacher*, 243-244.

displayed a strong sense of independence, particularly in deviating from being subservient to male leaders in the community. She was a political leader who wanted other African-American women to feel empowered so they too could become agents of sociopolitical change. Clark's role as an activist and mentor supports the narrative suggesting "in the rural South generally, women were in fact much more politically active than men."<sup>172</sup> Grimball embodied the same outlook, as she wanted to follow in her father's footsteps. It was his philosophy that she admired: helping people help themselves. Clark was proof that Grimball could accomplish and concretize her father's vision by helping residents of the Sea Islands become citizens and register to vote. Clark was the political leader of the Sea Islands who advocated for first-class citizenship because it would benefit the greater good of the community. And it is this type of role model that helped Grimball realize her belief of being her brother's and sister's keeper.<sup>173</sup>

The first class on Wadmalaw Island was held in December 1958 and its topic was "Literacy, Fundamental Education and Citizenship Education."<sup>174</sup> Juanita and Ethel Grimball secured a location for the school in a small building adjacent to the local Presbyterian Church on McCullough Dam Road (now a grave site).<sup>175</sup> In a "Report on the Sea Islands Adult Citizenship Schools" submitted by Bernice Robinson, she writes that the class initially consisted of twenty-four students, ranging from young adults in

---

<sup>172</sup> Payne, 266.

<sup>173</sup> Bethlenfalvy Interview.

<sup>174</sup> "Sea Islands: *Ain't You Got a Right to the Tree of Life*: Jenkins Family, 1971-1972, 1987-1988," folder 582, Carawan Papers.

<sup>175</sup> Bethlenfalvy Interview; Septima Clark, "Letter to Esau Jenkins," n.d. Box 33, folders 888-889, HFS Collection.; Tjerandsen, 167.

their teenage years to people in their sixties.<sup>176</sup> The students' academic levels upon entry into the program ranged from the second grade to the sixth grade.<sup>177</sup> According to a statistical chart on the Citizenship Schools, Grimball spent eight hours each week preparing for the class.<sup>178</sup> This is important to consider, because she was a full-time teacher for the adult education program and maintained employment at Claflin, while taking classes. She spent more time on preparatory work than any of the other Citizenship School teachers; the average was about five hours per week.<sup>179</sup> Indeed, these numbers speak to Grimball's work ethic and devotion to the program.

It took some time for the school to take hold, but once it did, its progress was unyielding. The Wadmalaw Island Adult School was no ordinary institution, it was "a relatively non-threatening way to get people involved in the broader movement."<sup>180</sup> Much like the other Citizenship Schools, it was not confined to a specific curriculum. There was, however, a standard that Grimball was required to meet as part of the larger Citizenship School pedagogy. The purpose of the school was to learn how to register and vote, a task that was nearly impossible for African-Americans due to measures implemented on the registration form.<sup>181</sup> As Grimball described, "if you were black, you had that specific paragraph to read and they were all big words. The class helped them to

---

<sup>176</sup> Charron Interview.

<sup>177</sup> Bernice Robinson, "Published journal, 1979," Box 3, folder 15, Bernice Robinson Papers, Avery Research Center, College of Charleston, Charleston, S.C. (hereafter, Robinson Papers).

<sup>178</sup> Bernice Robinson, "Citizenship School Workshops: Typescripts and booklets, 1961-1963 and undated," Box 3, folder 18, Robinson Papers, Avery Records.

<sup>179</sup> Bernice Robinson, "Citizenship School Workshops: Typescripts and booklets, 1961-1963 and undated," Box 3, folder 18, Robinson Papers, Avery Records.

<sup>180</sup> Payne, 77.

<sup>181</sup> See Chapter One for discussion on voting implications for African-Americans in South Carolina.

be able to read so they could vote.”<sup>182</sup> Political leaders such as Grimball, “were aware of the obstacles that continued to deter the vast majority of southern blacks from exercising the franchise” and they used the Citizenship Schools to dismantle this political injustice.<sup>183</sup> Using the term “bondage” as an analogy that represents the invisible chains of white supremacy that still limited blacks almost one hundred years after Emancipation, black women such as Grimball “tapped an intense thirst for education among those who had been held in bondage.”<sup>184</sup> The most effective way for African-Americans, especially in the rural south, to free themselves from this oppression was to vote, even before the Voting Rights Act of 1965 became law.

Grimball’s development plan, reviewed by Septima Clark, Bernice Robinson, and Esau Jenkins, outlines the following: aim, purpose, preparation and material used. In this document, she noted that the goal of the program was to “develop the highest type of integrity and respect for all that is good, pure, and beneficial to mankind accompanied by the courage to defend it.”<sup>185</sup> This directly correlates with the philosophy Grimball instilled in her students – “another basic thing that happened to them was self confidence.”<sup>186</sup> Empowerment was a crucial aspect of Grimball’s pedagogical ethos because she wanted to maintain high morale on Wadmalaw amidst white supremacist

---

<sup>182</sup> “Sea Islands: *Ain’t You Got a Right to the Tree of Life*: Jenkins Family, 1971-1972, 1987-1988,” folder 582, Carawan Papers.

<sup>183</sup> Patricia Sullivan, “Southern Reformers,” 90.

<sup>184</sup> Hahn, 277.

<sup>185</sup> Bernice Robinson, “Citizenship School Workshops: Typescripts and booklets, 1961-1963 and undated,” Box 3, folder 18, Robinson Papers, Avery Records.

<sup>186</sup> “Sea Islands: *Ain’t You Got a Right to the Tree of Life*: Jenkins Family, 1971-1972, 1987-1988,” folder 582, Carawan Papers.

efforts of repression. In the purpose category of this plan, Grimball wrote that the objective of the school was to “help adults to develop desirable social attitudes to gain information and broaden understandings and to learn to live a richer life in their surroundings...good citizens.”<sup>187</sup> Her methodology was simple. While enfranchisement was certainly an integral aspect of the Wadmalaw School, Grimball also used the class as a vehicle to empower her students, as she took on the role of her brother’s and sister’s keeper.<sup>188</sup>

Grimball also noted the importance of a personal curriculum under the preparation section, “individual instruction is essential,” she wrote.<sup>189</sup> This philosophy certainly stems from the influence of Robinson who also focused on each individual student in the classroom. Having a prominent female figure as a role model early on in her life shaped Grimball’s own ethos vis-à-vis her students. This development plan shows how deep her connection was to her students and the more national cause of racial equality. Grimball took her role very seriously as she attended to the needs of each specific resident who sought her help. She was in fact a facilitator of change. Educational opportunities were still scarce by the time Grimball started teaching at the Citizenship School. The local residents who attended the literacy classes typically worked on the farms and could not read or write their own names.<sup>190</sup> Subsequently, each student had a

---

<sup>187</sup> Bernice Robinson, “Citizenship School Workshops: Typescripts and booklets, 1961-1963 and undated,” Box 3, folder 18, Robinson Papers, Avery Records.

<sup>188</sup> Bethlenfalvy Interview.

<sup>189</sup> Bernice Robinson, “Citizenship School Workshops: Typescripts and booklets, 1961-1963 and undated,” Box 3, folder 18, Robinson Papers, Avery Records.; Charron Interview.

<sup>190</sup> “Sea Islands: *Ain’t You Got a Right to the Tree of Life*: Jenkins Family, 1971-1972, 1987-1988,” folder 582, Carawan Papers.

unique set of needs and were at different academic levels, as Grimbball notes in the “materials used” field. One commonality among all of her students, however, was the desire to read the Constitution. For these residents, reading America’s foundational document was integral to their citizenship.<sup>191</sup> Grimbball’s perception of her students was that they needed guidance, and she took on the role of teacher and confidant. She used her intellectual ability to effect political change by empowering her students and helping them register to vote.

Grimbball’s work was a tremendous contribution to race relations in the Low Country. Each of her students completed the adult literacy class and all became registered voters on Wadmalaw. She was a political leader in this realm, and Grimbball’s legacy is certainly abiding as many of the graduates experienced great success in their journey during and after the Citizenship School program. Many black female teachers embodied the philosophy of investing in their students to benefit them outside of the classroom.<sup>192</sup> One student in particular credited Grimbball with enhancing his outlook on life. Anderson Mack was about forty years old with a second grade education when he first learned to write his name at the blackboard.<sup>193</sup> He told Grimbball that all he wanted to do was learn to write his own name.<sup>194</sup> Grimbball’s son, Nikita Grimbball, recalls that Mack’s “analysis

---

<sup>191</sup> Charron Interview.

<sup>192</sup> Septima Clark, “Citizenship Program – Statistical Reports on Adult Schools in Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina (1960-1961): Factual Report of Adult Schools, December 1, 1959-February 26, 1959,” Box 3, folder 8, HFS Collection.

<sup>193</sup> Anderson Mack’s age has some inaccuracy. In her dissertation, Sandra B. Oldendorf suggests that he was in his early twenties, in their interview, Jacqueline and Nikita Grimbball suggest he was in his late thirties, possibly forties.

<sup>194</sup> “Sea Islands: *Ain’t You Got a Right to the Tree of Life*: Jenkins Family, 1971-1972, 1987-1988,” folder 582, Carawan Papers.

was that prior to learning how to write his name, he was not a whole man...so having my mother as his teacher...gave him a new definition in his life, and then he went on, of course, to do even more amazing things.”<sup>195</sup> He became a leader on Wadmalaw and established the island’s first community center, which is currently used as a facility for senior citizens.

Grimball created personal connections with her students by helping them gain individual autonomy through reading, writing, and voter registration. Grimball’s experience at the Citizenship Schools helped define her role as teacher given her close affiliation with the community. She was a leader of social and political change who honed in on Richardson’s most influential characteristics and utilized them in her own classroom—to help people help themselves.<sup>196</sup> She represented the female professional who used education to empower her students; ultimately, her students broke down the barriers of white supremacy and changed the political regime in the Low Country by registering to vote. Grimball’s influence “reflected the role of local schools as vehicles of black political power and patronage,”<sup>197</sup> particularly using the Wadmalaw Island Citizenship School as a vehicle for racial equality.

The adult education program on Wadmalaw ended in 1960, but its legacy manifested itself in the political realm of the Sea Islands because the residents became

---

<sup>195</sup> Bethlenfalvy Interview.

<sup>196</sup> “Sea Islands: *Ain’t You Got a Right to the Tree of Life*: Jenkins Family, 1971-1972, 1987-1988,” folder 582, Carawan Papers.

<sup>197</sup> Hahn, 279.

first-class citizens.<sup>198</sup> Wadmalaw Islanders witnessed drastic changes in their community, and self-sufficiency became paramount on the island.<sup>199</sup> There was a distinct shift in voter registration statistics and the 1960 African-American turnout was the highest it had ever been in Charleston County, and more specifically, Wadmalaw Island.<sup>200</sup> It is important to consider these numbers because they serve as evidence in determining the success of the Citizenship Schools. As the Bureau of Census report for 1960 shows, eighty-five percent of Islanders were African-American.<sup>201</sup> Of those, one hundred and fifty were registered voters.<sup>202</sup> In Charleston County alone, there were over nine thousand African-Americans who registered to vote. Residents recognized that “the new black electorate soon had an impact on area politics.”<sup>203</sup> On Wadmalaw, “blacks came within six votes of outvoting whites for the first time” in the island’s history, and this correlates with Grimbball’s Citizenship School and its registered students. Empowerment had finally taken hold, and African-American Islanders used their newfound liberty to cast their vote and voice their opinions.

After her final class in 1960, Grimbball continued to extend her efforts in race relations far beyond the Citizenship School program on Wadmalaw; her involvement in community action agency never faltered. She opened the Citizenship School students to a

---

<sup>198</sup> Aimee Isrig Horton, “Sea Islands: Citizenship Schools/Education: Aimee Horton Thesis, circa 1960,” folder 591, Carawan Papers.

<sup>199</sup> Charron Interview.

<sup>200</sup> Bernice Robinson, “Published journal, 1979,” Box 3, folder 15, Robinson Papers.

<sup>201</sup> Bernice Robinson, “Miscellaneous reports, surveys, and booklets, 1960-1965,” Box 3, folder 20, Robinson Papers.

<sup>202</sup> John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School* (Louisville: University of Kentucky Press, 1996), 198.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

world of self-empowerment while taking on the role of political leader.<sup>204</sup> Grimball had changed the sociopolitical structure of Wadmalaw by helping its residents register to vote. In 1987, she recalled that, “people are still voting today. Blacks now rule Wadmalaw Island for the Democratic Party. Before this the white people...brought a slate in and then they immediately passed that slate,” but her efforts helped change that.<sup>205</sup> No longer were Sea Islanders subjugated to white supremacy, through the Citizenship Schools, African Americans became leaders themselves and wanted to improve the conditions of the Low Country lifestyle by registering to vote. This influx of African-American registered voters was inextricably tied to the adult education program that existed on Wadmalaw from 1958-1960, and thus, Ethel Grimball was not just a teacher, but a political activist who helped empower her community at the local level.

---

<sup>204</sup> Bethlenfalvy Interview.

<sup>205</sup> “Sea Islands: *Ain't You Got a Right to the Tree of Life*: Jenkins Family, 1971-1972, 1987-1988,” folder 582, Carawan Papers.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE TRANSITIONAL PERIOD: CITIZENSHIP SCHOOLS UNDER THE SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE (SCLC)

Clark, Jenkins, and Horton opened a number of Citizenship Schools following Grimball’s success on Wadmalaw Island, which was one of the most challenging schools because of the island’s isolation and overwhelmingly high number of illiterate African-Americans living there.<sup>206</sup> By 1959, Citizenship Schools in South Carolina on Johns, James, and Edisto Islands, as well as in Beaufort and North Charleston, were thriving; workshop leaders were registering more blacks than ever before.

**Table 4.1 - Results of Highlander’s Training in 1965<sup>207</sup>**

STATE	NUMBER OF BLACK ELECTED OFFICIALS	NUMBER OF BLACK REGISTERED VOTERS
FLORIDA	118	554, 000
TEXAS	207	514, 000
LOUISIANA	372	492, 000
ALABAMA	269	429, 000
NORTH CAROLINA	266	421, 000
GEORGIA	271	405, 000
MISSISSIPPI	424	352, 000
SOUTH CAROLINA	235	351, 000
TENNESSEE	137	325, 000
VIRGINIA	93	315, 000
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	254	106, 000

<sup>206</sup> Tjerandsen, 181–187.

<sup>207</sup> “Correspondence of Clark with Highlander Center regarding her work there, 1959-1983,” Box 7, Folder 2, Septima Clark Papers, Avery Records.

For the first time since Reconstruction, black political activism was gaining momentum in the coastal region because of the effective pedagogical training of the Citizenship Schools.

At Highlander, financial and legal instability soon compromised the program. One evening, as Clark remembers, “The Face of the South” was playing on the projector at Highlander, as staff and political activists – black and white – watched in silence when suddenly, a student shouted out, “we’re being raided!”<sup>208</sup> The police asked for Myles Horton and Septima Clark. This was on July 31, 1959 and accusations of Highlander’s being a communist institution filled newspaper headlines. Law enforcers were eager to shut down Highlander – the only institution in Tennessee that was integrated. Meanwhile, Horton was in Europe “attending an adult education international conference” for six weeks, according to Clark. Tennessee District Attorney General Albert Sloan, a prosecuting attorney in charge of the raid, handed Clark a search warrant, looking for alcohol. Clark was shocked, “you won’t even find cooking sherry in our kitchen” because Highlander never served alcohol.

Moments later, once the police completed a search, they arrested Clark, along with a young white man from New York, a Quaker boy, and Guy Carawan. The young New Yorker was arrested because he requested that the officers allow Clark to speak with her lawyer. The Quaker was charged with public drunkenness, although he had not consumed any alcohol. And Guy Carawan was arrested for singing “We Shall Overcome” and playing his guitar. The four were put into the back of a police car, and

---

<sup>208</sup> Clark, *Echo In My Soul*, 3.

Sloan took them to the station without having found alcohol on the premises.<sup>209</sup> After a few hours, all were released, but Highlander's reputation was again tarnished. Police presence disturbed the residents in the Tennessee Mountains, which put the school's future into question. Upon his return, Horton frantically searched for funding alternatives while Highlander was under police investigation.

Horton wanted a new organization, such as the SCLC, to adopt Highlander's responsibilities for the Citizenship Schools by recruiting leaders, administering workshops, assuming responsibility for financial backing of these programs. Horton approached the SCLC in the fall of 1960, proposing that the Citizenship Schools, which led to literacy and voter registration, would benefit the organization as a whole and the national movement toward racial equality. SCLC Treasurer, James Wood, and Chief of Staff, Wyatt T. Walker, both approved of the plan; it "provides a proven curriculum directed by well qualified persons and affords a facility that is established and working."<sup>210</sup> The only hesitant SCLC member was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. because it "was a new approach for King and SCLC leaders. Citizenship Schools had not started as a church program and a black woman [Clark], not a male minister, provided day-to-day oversight and direction," as historian Deanna Gillespie suggests.<sup>211</sup>

Septima Clark spent a year convincing King and the SCLC to create an educational program that stemmed from the Citizenship Schools and could spread throughout the South. She argued that if the program was effective enough to register

---

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>210</sup> "Highlander Folk School, Memorandum on SCLC – Highlander Financial Arrangements, December 1, 1960," Box 38, Folder 2, HFS Collection.

<sup>211</sup> Deanna Gillespie, "They Walk, Talk and Act Like New People: Black Women and the Citizenship Education Program, 1954-1970," (PhD diss. Binghamton University, 2008), 139.

rural blacks to vote and educate them in the process, then the same could be implemented elsewhere. Black ministers formed the SCLC in 1957, riding on the wave of activism following the Montgomery Bus Boycott; the organization came under King's leadership by 1960. Just as the Civil Rights Movement was quickening its pace –with the sit-ins, boycotts, and freedom rides throughout the South. The SCLC was flourishing under King. Grassroots forms of activism, such as the Citizenship School program, were in line with King's vision in attaining racial equality. He believed that voter registration was absolutely crucial to the cause. Nevertheless, the SCLC's acquisition of the Citizenship Schools and its program was no easy task for the organization

The transition from Highlander to the SCLC took place between February and August 1961 and Clark and Robinson increasingly felt mistrustful and alienated.<sup>212</sup> Septima Clark's role in the SCLC was unclear but Bernice Robinson's was apparent – she would not be hired in the transfer. Horton did not want to lose Robinson and he hoped that she would continue working at Highlander as a liaison. As cousins, Clark and Robinson did not like the thought of not working alongside one another. They expressed their feelings to Horton in a series of letters, “we are not concerned about the separation of salary, only the separation of services,” said Robinson.<sup>213</sup> Neither wanted to compromise their partnership.<sup>214</sup>

Clark and Robinson experienced tremendous condescension from their male cohorts. While they maintained a professional relationship for the sake of the Citizenship

---

<sup>212</sup> Levine, 174.

<sup>213</sup> “Letter to Myles from Bernice,” M-RG2-I-11, HREC.

<sup>214</sup> Levine, 174.

School's well being, both Clark and Robinson expressed dismay at the patronization. Neither of them had been in relationships with men for quite some time, and this only added to their independent nature and mindsets. Clark and Robinson worked well together: "We need each other. We don't think anyone can plan for us, but with us," they wrote in a letter to Horton, SCLC committee members, and Dr. King.<sup>215</sup> But ultimately, the SCLC did not want two women in charge of the Citizenship School program. This type of male hierarchy was certainly common during the Civil Rights era.<sup>216</sup> Men in power sought to maintain that chauvinistic entitlement and viewed any woman who questioned such authority as a threat.

While Esau Jenkins, Myles Horton, and Septima Clark shared ideas about the need for a program to help blacks, it was really Clark with Jenkins' support who brought the Citizenship Schools into existence. That realization certainly loomed over Horton's head. Horton's relationship with Clark and Robinson was tense due to the financial issues and the potential re-allocation of the Citizenship School program.<sup>217</sup> Once the arrangements were finalized in August 1961, Clark and Robinson were unable to work directly together. As Horton expressed in a letter to Clark, "I also sympathise with the desire you and Bernice have to work together...this seems to be financially impossible at

---

<sup>215</sup> "Letter from Septima and Bernice to Myles Horton and the SCLC," M-RG2-I-11, HREC.

<sup>216</sup> See, Peter J. Ling, "Gender and Generation: Manhood at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference," in *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement* ed. Peter J. Ling and Sharon Monteith (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 120; Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 13 and 22; Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 84; Martha C. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>217</sup> Levine, 173.

this time.”<sup>218</sup> Although she missed Robinson deeply, Clark was able to forge new relationships with two SCLC affiliates, Andrew Young and Dorothy Cotton, who both found the Citizenship School program to be exceptional in its efficacy. Once part of the SCLC staff, however, Clark had to continually face an attitude of male superiority.

According to Clark, Reverend Abernathy constantly questioned why she was on the SCLC’s Executive Board or Trustee Board. Luckily, Dr. King would respond, “she was the one who proposed this citizenship education which is bringing to us not only money but a lot of people who will register and vote.” Indeed, she was the creator and one of the founders of the Citizenship Schools, which received much praise and attention within three years of the program’s existence; thus, she was on the Executive Board. And yet, Reverend Abernathy still “asked that [question] many times. It was hard for him to see a woman on that executive body.” Clark’s interpretation of the male dominated hierarchy is a testament that even her own allies could not view black women as political leaders. Clark wrote, “we live in a man-made world...[men] didn’t feel as if women had really enough intelligence” to seriously engage in political Civil Rights Movement activity.<sup>219</sup>

The “style of leadership” that black women – directly or indirectly involved in the Citizenship Schools – contributed to the Civil Rights Movement is of real significance. Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker and of course, Septima Clark, all shaped the radical model for black womanhood in the mid-twentieth century, and they were each

---

<sup>218</sup> “Correspondence of Clark with Highlander Center regarding her work there, 1959-1983,” Box 7, Folder 2, Septima Clark Papers, Avery Records.

<sup>219</sup> “Transcript of Clark Interview by Eugene Walker,” Box 2, Folder 11, HREC.

involved with the Citizenship School program in one way or another. Clark maintained a unique relationship with each one of these women. She first met Rosa Parks in 1955 when Parks visited Highlander for a workshop on the United Nations.<sup>220</sup> Parks was interested in dismantling segregation while encouraging young activists to get involved in the fight for racial equality. Thus, she was an avid supporter of the Citizenship School program. In 1961, Young, Clark, and Cotton recruited Hamer as a community leader and workshop developer even before she became a vibrant leader in the public eye.<sup>221</sup> Hamer's work as a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) member in the Mississippi Freedom Summer stemmed from the Citizenship School workshops she attended as a young activist. Indeed, the Citizenship Schools were foundational to the success that these female leaders exhibited later on in the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>222</sup>

Meanwhile, Baker and Clark maintained correspondence even before the SCLC acquired the Citizenship School program. Clark noticed Baker's ability to effectively educate blacks in communities throughout the South. The promotion of black female political leadership in grassroots initiatives was certainly important to Clark, best exemplified by Bernice Robinson and Ethel Grimsby's roles as teachers in the Citizenship Schools. Unsurprisingly, Clark reached out to Baker stating, "I would like so much to have you serve with me on an educational committee for Highlander...I need your help planning bigger and more vitalizing workshops for the entire South. I feel that

---

<sup>220</sup> Clark, *Ready From Within*, 32.

<sup>221</sup> Clark, *Echo in My Soul*, 70.

<sup>222</sup> See, Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

working together we can be of greater service to those who seek our aid.”<sup>223</sup> The two shared a similar outlook on how to help blacks in their communities – through education and empowerment. Days later, Baker responded.

I have a deep and abiding interest in the work you have done, and are doing, and would like to discuss your plans more fully when I come to Highlander in May. I don't think I ever told you, but several years ago, when I first read the thrilling account of your experiences in promoting citizenship schools on the Sea Islands in South Carolina, I yearned for the opportunity to meet you. Little did I dream, at that time, that we would have an occasion to work together here in our beloved Southland. So you see, I have long since been committed to the idea of “teaming-up” with you.<sup>224</sup>

The respect and admiration between the women was mutual. There was indeed comfort in finding capable black women in male-dominated organizations such as Highlander and the SCLC. The two women maintained a close bond after their initial meeting at Highlander on May 25, 1960.

The SCLC hierarchy certainly affected Ella Baker. According to Andrew Young, she “was a determined woman.” She reminded King and his affiliates “of the strong Mommas they were all trying to break free of.” In analyzing this issue, Young concluded that “the Baptist Church had no tradition of women in independent leadership roles” and perhaps that is the reason for why there “was dissatisfaction all around.”<sup>225</sup> By the end of 1960, Ella Baker could no longer work with the male chauvinists of the SCLC, so she channeled her activist efforts toward the SNCC.

---

<sup>223</sup> “Correspondence of Clark with Highlander Center regarding her work there, 1959-1983,” Box 7, Folder 2, Septima Clark Papers, Avery Records.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Young, 137.

Baker warned Clark of the gender inequality in the SCLC, specifically, “of the things about the men that [Baker] disliked, and that they disliked about her, a woman.”<sup>226</sup>

There were many instances in which Baker was discriminated against because she was a politically active and radical woman, who arguably had more savviness than her male affiliates. Clark’s account of Baker’s experiences is worth acknowledging because it provides some insights on the dynamic between men and women of the SCLC.

[Ella Baker] had brains. And because of the brain power that she had, [the men] didn’t like the things that she said to them. She didn’t see why a brochure should have sixteen pictures of Dr. King...she thought that was real foolish...so I felt that she had a real point there, but nobody was going to listen to her at that time.

Disillusioned, Baker left the SCLC in 1960. Clark also had her share of issues with some of the male staff. Whether it was James Woods, Press Secretary of the SCLC, or her close friend, Myles Horton, Clark found that often they “didn’t have any patience...to listen to people who would come in and had to tell so many things. I found that true with most of the men.”<sup>227</sup> However, it was not all men. She was fond of Jesse Jackson who “worked real well with the underprivileged people” and Hosea Williams who “was a dynamic leader” that spread the Citizenship Schools to the islands along the coast of Georgia. Ultimately though, Clark admired Andrew Young the most out of all the male SCLC staff because he took “the low and avoid[ed] ego battles.”<sup>228</sup>

Young first visited the Highlander Folk School in the summer of 1959 to learn about Clark’s education program and its effectiveness. There, he participated in and ran a

---

<sup>226</sup> “Transcript of Clark Interview by Eugene Walker,” Box 2, Folder 11, HREC.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Young, 138.

number of workshops alongside Clark, and she quickly became his most trusted and dependable mentor.<sup>229</sup> Unlike other men, Young was humble, and sincerely respected women in leadership roles, perhaps given his previous work with women in the Congregational Church. He recalled that he “could learn a lot from Septima and Dorothy,” and stated that “in an SCLC staff meeting, Dorothy would be expected to get coffee, but in a Citizenship School staff meeting, I was as likely to get the coffee as any of the women.”<sup>230</sup> Evidently, there was little to no tension between Clark, Cotton and Young, regarding gender inequality. But it is certainly interesting that in his memoirs, Young is quite candid about his knowledge of the “stirrings of the coming feminist revival in the early days of the civil rights movement,” a revival that Clark and Cotton both discussed in private.

Dorothy Cotton was a young black female intellect who received her master’s degree from Boston University and acquired teaching certification from Virginia State University before she joined the SCLC. As Young recalls, “the Civil Rights movement had not yet discovered women’s rights” by 1960, so she “was determined not to be intimidated by the gathering of young, self-important egomaniacs who became the staff that would ultimately change the South and impact the planet.”<sup>231</sup> While Cotton was certainly aware of the “prevailing paradigm at the time...that men were the leaders and women were the followers,” she did not let it affect her like it did Baker, even though

---

<sup>229</sup> “Transcript of Clark Interview by Eugene Walker,” Box 2, Folder 11, HREC.

<sup>230</sup> Young, 139.

<sup>231</sup> Dorothy Cotton, *If Your Back’s Not Bent: The Role of the Citizenship Education Program in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Atria Books, 2012), xiii.

they were close friends.<sup>232</sup> Cotton chose to confront the issues through her arduous work ethic and professionalism, so that no one could speak ill of her. While she was Reverend Wyatt Walker's administrative assistant in the SCLC, Cotton traveled to Highlander to attend a workshop in 1961 where she formally met Clark.

Young joined the SCLC as a result of his work in education at the Highlander Folk School.<sup>233</sup> Once he was officially hired, Young suggested that they choose the Penn Center or the Dorchester Center as the headquarters for the newly named Citizenship Education Program (CEP) workshops because they were "sites of black Reconstruction church-related schools, retained usable old structures, and were the repository of memories of the kind of hopes and aspirations [SCLC] planned to revive."<sup>234</sup> They decided to start at Dorchester in McIntosh, Georgia, because the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries held title there, so it would be the perfect base for the southwide citizenship school program. And perfect it was.

By the summer 1961, the SCLC officially established the CEP workshops that stemmed from Clark and Jenkins's initial Citizenship School pedagogy. Young was the Director, Clark was the Director of Citizenship Education Workshops, and Cotton was the Educational Director. The program thrived under the SCLC even while the "broader society regarded King's celebrity as a key catalyst." Clark maintained her belief that "empowering people to make their own decisions guaranteed forward motion."<sup>235</sup> Indeed, Clark, Cotton, and Young put all their efforts toward guaranteeing racial justice. They

---

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>233</sup> Young, 133.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>235</sup> Charron, 315.

congregated at the Dorchester Center, just south of Savannah, where they began a series of workshops for disadvantaged blacks in the community, with the ultimate goal of increasing voter registration. While the small staff of three was successful at implementing programs throughout the coastal region of Georgia, they journeyed throughout the South to recruit community leaders and encourage them to start local CEP classes.

Clark, Cotton, and Young traveled to parts of Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Alabama, ending that recruitment trip in Tennessee at the national SCLC meeting in the summer of 1961.<sup>236</sup> According to Clark, they “were looking for those who could read well aloud and who could write legibly to come and be trained and go back into their communities and work with the illiterate.” It was a daunting task to persuade local leaders to travel to Georgia for CEP workshops, and then training them on how to run programs of their own. Nonetheless, many realized the potential of this opportunity to help educate members in their community, while advocating racial equality. And the qualifications were not extreme. “We didn’t need anyone with a high school diploma, nor did we need anyone with a college education,” Clark recalled, “We just wanted to have a community person, so that the illiterates would feel comfortable and happy with” their local workshop leader.

White people often reacted with violence to the recruitment endeavors. Clark discussed a specific event in Tallahassee, Florida when Young was recruiting people, and he ended up being badly beaten. A similar event happened to Clark in 1965 while she

---

<sup>236</sup> David P. Levine, 180; “Transcript of Clark Interview by Eugene Walker,” Box 2, Folder 11, HREC.

was in Natchez, Mississippi, “one night in a Baptist Church the Ku Klux Klan surrounded us and had planned to come into the Church...but the Chief of Police came out” and ordered everyone – black and white – to go home.<sup>237</sup> Clark figured that the KKK showed up because “we had carried a large number of people up to the courthouse to register to vote” that day, and “while there, one of the white men of the White Citizens’ Council kicked a white boy who was working along with me.” She had to get the Chief of Police to protect them at the registration office, by order of the Attorney General in Washington D.C. White violence against African-Americans advocating racial equality was typical, particularly when it involved education, the right to vote, and community autonomy.

The violence, however, did not impede their continual recruitment trips. Clark, Cotton, and Young also ventured to Savannah in 1961 to increase voter registration there, near the South Carolina Sea Islands where they had achieved much success. With help from the young SNCC men and some SCLC staff, they “put 9,000 black registered voters on the books.” Their travels were successful in establishing workshops and increasing registration, even before the 1965 the Voting Rights Act ensured African Americans the right to vote. Upon recruitment, the leader’s role was to “promise that they would go back to the community and open up a school, and they were supposed to teach two nights a week, two hours each night,” Clark stated.<sup>238</sup> This parallels the same strategy that Clark utilized in the Sea Islands with Grimball, for example, which shows that Clark’s pedagogy from 1957 was still effective years later. The only difference was the material

---

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

used by Citizenship School teachers, because registration forms and requirements for the election laws varied by state.

Clark was pleased by the number of community leaders the CEP recruited by the end of 1961. Indeed, she was delighted to see that the program she developed in the mid-1950s was still being carried out. She encouraged students to achieve greatness for themselves and to use their empowerment to help others.<sup>239</sup> The CEP provided activists the credentials to establish their own schools. They shared what they had learned in Citizenship Schools, and prospered as activists who took a stand by registering others to vote. Young activists were shaped by the presence of the CEP in the South. The programs increased the number of young people involved in the grassroots efforts of the national Civil Rights Movement, marking a new form of learning for a wide variety of African-Americans interested in exercising their citizenship to its fullest potential. The Citizenship Schools that emerged out of the SCLC created a sub-culture of students and workshop graduates who “thirsted more for the ability to act on their own behalf, a feeling of self-reliance and independence, privileges they had never enjoyed because they lacked formal education.”<sup>240</sup>

Clark, Cotton, and Young’s efforts in the CEP were validated in 1962, when large-scale organizations such as the NAACP, SNCC and CORE formed the Voter Education Project, which resulted in a staggering 70,000 registered black voters in the

---

<sup>239</sup> LaVerne Gyant and Deborah F. Atwater, “Septima Clark’s Rhetorical and Ethnic Legacy: Her Message of Citizenship in the Civil Rights Movement” *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 5. Special Issue: *The Voices of African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement*, (Sage Publications, Inc.: 1996), 589.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

South.<sup>241</sup> They increased both the mass support for civil rights and of course, the number of African-Americans eligible to vote. Before 1961, Clark was accustomed to a less precipitated plan of action; in the Sea Islands they taught at informal locations such as kitchens, porches, and yards. Clark was proud of her ardent program under the SCLC, “I worked out a Citizenship Education Program that was carried to eleven Deep South states where people who could read well aloud and write legibly were trained to teach others in a one week’s workshop.”<sup>242</sup> The group of three – Clark, Cotton, and Young – helped increase the number of black elected officials to 2,603 in eleven Deep South states.<sup>243</sup>

Within two years, 9,575 black graduates of the CEP registered to vote, and classes were spread across several southern states. It was clear that the Citizenship Schools were essential for the Civil Rights Movement; graduates from the schools were leaders in most of SCLC’s campaigns.<sup>244</sup> Before the SCLC’s involvement with the Citizenship Schools, its “idea of education for leadership training translated into teaching others the philosophy and tactics of nonviolence, not providing people at the grassroots with the tools to empower themselves.”<sup>245</sup> The Citizenship Schools changed that. They offered oppressed blacks the opportunity to learn to read and to register to vote.

According to historian Jacqueline Hall, under the SCLC, the Citizenship Schools “became all-African American sites of mobilization and allowed people to define the

---

<sup>241</sup> Clark, 70.

<sup>242</sup> “Correspondence of Clark with Highlander Center regarding her work there, 1959-1983,” Box 7, Folder 2, Septima Clark Papers, Avery Records.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Charron, “We’ve Come a Long Way,” 117.

<sup>245</sup> Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher*, 293.

movement on their own terms.”<sup>246</sup> They manifested themselves in local communities, extending far beyond the confines of the Sea Islands. Indeed, Clark’s Citizenship School program was the conduit through which illiterate African Americans became empowered.<sup>247</sup> There was a distinctive pattern throughout the South that “if you look[ed] at black elected officials and the political leaders, you [would] find people who had their first involvement in the training program of the Citizenship Schools.”<sup>248</sup> The CEP was a series of pedagogical initiatives that achieved racial justice on the local level and more. Clark’s humility resonated throughout her program, as she ensured that the focus was maintained on the development of students versus the popularity of the CEP or the attention it received. As historian Stephen Lazar concludes, “the schools were a humanizing force against the dehumanization of segregation, transforming its students into agents for social justice...and creating a sizeable portion of the local leadership” of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>249</sup>

---

<sup>246</sup> Hall, 34.

<sup>247</sup> Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher*, 5.

<sup>248</sup> Clark, 70.

<sup>249</sup> Lazar, 244.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSION

The role of local political leaders during the Civil Rights Movement was essential to its success because they helped dismantle Jim Crow at the grassroots. This study explains how the Citizenship Schools under Septima Clark, Bernice Robinson, Esau Jenkins, and Myles Horton helped effect social change. But *Our Brother's Keepers* discusses in depth the role of Ethel Grimbball, using the Wadmalaw Island Citizenship School as a case study, to show that African American women were political leaders and risked their livelihood to empower others.

While Septima Clark was not directly involved in race relations until the 1920s, she dedicated the rest of her life to racial equality for African Americans. And her efforts continued until her death in 1987. The Citizenship Schools prove that efforts at the grassroots certainly helped the cause on a national scale. Although large organizations such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the NAACP were involved in racial politics since the 1940s, they were governed and supported by a male majority, which was expected at the time. But in the 1950s and 1960s, grassroots institutions shifted from male-dominated organizations to youth and female efforts at the local level, specifically the SCLC and SNCC. The Citizenship Schools were also sites where black women held important political roles.

In 1954 Septima Clark, deemed “the queen of the Civil Rights Movement” by Dr. King, conceived the plans for the Citizenship School model of education.<sup>250</sup> She

---

<sup>250</sup> Gyant, 577.

imagined local leaders holding classes for African Americans who would learn to read, write, and increase black political activity starting with voter registration. By 1957, her plans were realized and the first Citizenship School on Johns Island opened, resulting in tremendous success among local Sea Islanders. Voter registration numbers skyrocketed and African American residents on surrounding islands requested that the same schools be established in their communities under Clark and Esau Jenkins's supervision. The Citizenship Schools were some of the most foundational grassroots institutions in history because they helped empower African Americans and engaged in political campaigns throughout the South. Their leaders also enacted social change by creating a school environment without hierarchies.

The teachers— most of whom were women— maintained the same ethos as Clark and helped the schools gain momentum. Teachers – also simultaneous for local political leaders in this study – made the Citizenship Schools sites of political mobilization where African American adults learned from each other and develop skills together. But taught more than reading and writing, they focused on “driver education, social security, today’s cash crop, income taxes and health services.”<sup>251</sup> Ethel Grimball was one of these women on Wadmalaw Island who helped people help themselves and there are countless more women who did the same. These African American women were teachers, community activists, and political leaders; their roles in the Citizenship Schools at the local level contributed to the national fight for racial equality and black political empowerment.

---

<sup>251</sup> “Sea Island Program from January 1 to July, 1959,” Box 49, Folder 9, HFS.

Once African Americans completed the Citizenship School programs, they used their acquired skills to register to vote in 1957. On Johns Island alone, hundreds of African Americans faced the white registrars and flawlessly read the state's constitution—a literacy requirement for blacks. Jenkins reported, “not a single person...who attended the school before and up to that time failed. Everyone passed.”<sup>252</sup> Sea Island residents were astounded at the success of the Citizenship School methods and lessons that empowered so many. By 1958, around six hundred African Americans passed the state exam and successfully registered to vote; this staggering number sparked a movement at the grassroots.

The Citizenship Schools administered a widely influential model of education at the grassroots level, directly involved women in political mobilization efforts, and helped African Americans develop skills so that they too could effect social change. Many graduates and program attendees became prominent civil rights leaders in the national movement, including Bob Moses, Ella Baker, Rosa Parks, and John Lewis. As this study shows, the Citizenship Schools were certainly powerful and impactful institutions in the South, which became more evident when the programs were taken over by the SCLC. Although the curriculums were manipulated to fit the needs of other communities throughout the South, they were still foundational to voter registration success and were rooted in the Citizenship School ethos. After the Voting Rights Act of 1965, legislative oppressive tactics against blacks were dismantled and voter registration increased once

---

<sup>252</sup> “Transcription of a meeting at the home of Septima Clark,” February 17, 1959, Box 3, Folder 4, HFS.

again, in part because of the Citizenship Schools, although there is little quantitative evidence to support this claim.

African American women in particular helped shape the national Civil Rights Movement by effecting social change at the grassroots vis-à-vis the Citizenship Schools. These women helped a generation of students, from young adults to senior citizens, who started to see themselves as first class citizens. For the first time since Reconstruction, African Americans held direct political influence by registering to vote. Of course, the male leaders and teachers alike were crucial to the success of the Citizenship Schools, but the women helped maintain the programs' momentum by prioritizing their students over everything else.

*Our Brother's Keepers* supports the claim that African American women can in fact be considered political leaders, especially in mobilization efforts such as the Citizenship School programs. Ethel Grimball's role as a teacher and community leader helps show that African American women, whether certified teachers or not, effected social change, particularly at the local level. These women were indirectly involved in politics simply by educating others and helping them become first class citizens. Grimball maintained the role of her brother's keeper on Johns Island into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Because she was an educator, her son Nikita Grimball recalls, "She was in an education environment for employment" throughout her life. She worked for the census bureau, helped migrant families, and led outreach programs in the Sea Islands. Ethel Grimball knew that her efforts would make a difference in the community and that was exemplified through her work with the Citizenship Schools, after which she continued to

empower others.<sup>253</sup> As she often said, “We are our brother’s keepers.” The women of the Civil Rights Movement whether wives, sisters, mothers, or political leaders, worked diligently with their male counterparts as their keepers, to help dismantle Jim Crow and fight for racial equality by way of the Citizenship Schools.

---

<sup>253</sup> Bethlenfalvy Interview.

## REFERENCES

### PRIMARY SOURCES

#### Manuscript Collections

Charleston, SC

Avery Research Center for the Study of African American History and Culture, College of Charleston

Avery Normal Institute Papers

Septima Pointsette Clark Papers

Esau Jenkins Papers

Bernice Robinson Papers

Chapel Hill, NC

Southern Oral History Project, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina

Clark, Septima Pointsette, Interview with Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Charleston, SC, July 25, 1976.

Clark, Septima Pointsette, Interview with Peter H. Wood, Charleston, SC, February 3, 1981.

Clark, Septima Pointsette, Interview with Eugene Walker, Atlanta GA, July 30, 1976.

Guy & Candie Carawan Papers

Durham, NC

David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University

Official Reports of Edward L. Pierce

Madison, WI

The Highlander Research and Education Center Papers, 1917-1978.

Nashville, TN

Tennessee State Library and Archives

The Highlander Folk School Collection

Washington, D.C.

Moorland-Springarn Research Center, Howard University

Judge Julius Waties Waring Papers

Interview in Author's Possession

Jacqueline and Nikita Grimball,. Interview with author, Wadmalaw Island, S.C., October 1 2015.

## PUBLISHED WORKS

- Adams, Frank, with Myles Horton. *Unearthing Seeds of Fire: The Idea of Highlander*. Winston-Salem, N.C.: John Blair Publishing, 1975.
- Adickes, Sandra E. *The Legacy of a Freedom School*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005.
- Bay, Mia and Farah J. Griffin, Martha S. Jones, Barbara D. Savage. *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015.
- Branch, Taylor. *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998.
- Blight, David. *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. Cambridge: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2001.
- Burton, Orville Vernon. *The Age of Lincoln*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2007.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Penn Center: A History Preserved*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014.
- Campbell, Emory S. *Gullah Cultural Legacies: A Synopsis of Gullah Traditions, Customary Beliefs, Art forms and Speech on Hilton Head Island and vicinal Sea Islands in South Carolina and Georgia*. BookSurge Publishing, 2008.
- Carawan, Guy, and Candie Carawan, eds. *Ain't You Got a Right to the Tree of Life? The People of Johns Island, South Carolina – Their Faces, Their Words and Their Songs*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989.
- Carson, Clayborne. *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Chafe, William H. *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.
- Charron, Katherine Mellon. *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Chesnutt David R. and Clyde N. Wilson. *The Meaning of South Carolina History: Essays in Honor of George C. Rogers, Jr.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991.

- Clark, Septima, *Echo in My Soul*. New York: EP Dutton & Co., 1962.
- Clark, Septima, with Cynthia Stokes Brown. *Ready From Within: A First Person Narrative*. Trenton: Africa World Press, 1990.
- Collier-Thomas, Bettye, and V.P. Franklin, eds. *Sisters in the Struggle: African-American Women in the Civil Rights – Black Power Movement*. New York: New York University Press, 2001.
- Crawford, Vicki L., Jacqueline A. Rouse, and Barbara Woods, eds. *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- Dougherty, Kevin. *The Port Royal Experiment: A Case Study in Development*. Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 2014.
- Drago, Edmund L. *initiative, Paternalism, & Race Relations: Charleston's Avery Normal Institute*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990.
- Edgar, Walter. *South Carolina: A History*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998.
- Evans, Sara. *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.
- Fairclough, Adam. *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Teaching Equality: Black Schools in the Age of Jim Crow*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001.
- Fields, Mamie Garvin, with Karen Fields. *Lemon Swamp and Other Places: A Carolina Memoir*. New York: The Free Press, 1983.
- Foner, Eric. *Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983.
- Gilmore, Glenda Elizabeth and Thomas J. Sugrue. *These United States: A Nation in the Making 1890 to the Present*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015.
- Glen, John M. *Highlander: No Ordinary School*. Louisville: University of Kentucky Press, 1996.

- Griffis, Elizabeth Stephens. *A Social History of the Sea Islands with Special Reference to St. Helena Islands, South Carolina*. Chapel-Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1930.
- Gyant, LaVerne and Deborah F. Atwater. "Septima Clark's Rhetorical and Ethnic Legacy: Her Message of Citizenship in the Civil Rights Movement." *Journal of Black Studies*. Special Issue: *The Voices of African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement*. Sage Publications, 1996.
- Hahn, Steven. *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Hale, Jonathan. *The Freedom Schools: Student Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.
- Hall, Jacqueline Dowd et al. "I train the people to do their own talking': Septima Clark and Women in the Civil Rights Movement." *Southern Cultures*. Volume 16. 2. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 2010.
- Hine, Darlene Clark and Kathleen Thompson. *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America*. New York: Broadway Books, 1998.
- Horton, Aimee Isgrig. *The Highlander Folk School: A History of Its Major Programs, 1932-1961*. New York: Carlson Publishing, 1989.
- Horton, Myles, with Judith and Herbert Kohl. *The Long Haul: An Autobiography*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1998.
- Jones-Jackson, Patricia. *When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions on the Sea Islands*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987.
- Jordan, Laylon Wayne and Elizabeth H. Stringfellow. *A Place Called St. John's: The Story of John's, Edisto, Wadmalaw, Kiawah, and Seabrook Islands of South Carolina*. Columbia: The Reprint Company, 1998.
- Lawson, Steven F. "From Boycotts to Ballots: The Reshaping of National Politics." *New Directions in Civil Rights Studies*.
- Lazar, Stephen. "Septima Clark Organizing for Positive Freedom." *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture and Society*. London: Taylor & Francis, 2007.

- Lee, Chana Kai. *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999.
- Leloudis, James L. *Schooling the New South: Pedagogy, Self, and Society in North Carolina, 1880-1920*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996.
- Lewis, John. *Walking With the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998.
- Ling, Peter J. "Gender in the Civil Rights Movement." *Crosscurrents in African American History*. 1999.
- Ling, Peter J. and Shanon Monteith. *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004.
- Matory, J. Lorand. "The Illusion of Isolation: The Gullah/Geechees and the Political Economy of African Culture in the Americas." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. 2008.
- May, Gary. *Bending Toward Justice: The Voting Rights Act and the Transformation of American Democracy*. New York: Basic Books, 2013.
- McGuire, Danielle L. *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance – a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*. New York: Random House, 2010.
- Moore, Leonard J. *Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921-1928*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991.
- Moore Jr., Winfred B. and Orville Vernon Burton. *Toward the Meeting of the Waters: Currents in the Civil Rights Movement of South Carolina during the Twentieth Century*. Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2008.
- Morris, Aldon D. *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*. New York: The Free Press, 1984.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. *Sex and Social Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Ochiai, Akiko. "The Port Royal Experiment Revisited: Northern Visions of Reconstruction and the Land Question." *The New England Quarterly* 74. 2001.
- Olson, Lynne. *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights movement 1830-1970*. New York: Touchstone, 2001.

- Payne, Charles M. *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America*. New York: NYU Press, 2005.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- Patterson, Thomas G. *Major Problems in American History, Volume 1: To 1877*. Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 2007.
- Robinson, Armstead L. and Patricia Sullivan. *New Directions in Civil Rights Studies*. Armstead L. Robinson and Patricia Sullivan. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991.
- Rose, Willie Lee. *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1964.
- Springer, Kimberly. *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.
- Spruill, Marjorie Julian and Valinda W. Littlefield, Joan Marie Johnson. *South Carolina Women: Their Lives and Times*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012.
- Tjerandsen, Carl. *Education for Citizenship: A Foundation's Experience*. Santa Cruz: Emil Shwarzhaupt Foundation, 1980.
- Young, Andrew. *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America*. New York: HarperCollins, 1996.
- Zelden, Charles L. *The Battle for the Black Ballot: Smith v. Allwright and the Defeat of the Texas All-White Primary*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004.

## UNPUBLISHED MATERIAL

Charron, Katherine Mellon. "Teaching Citizenship: Septima Pointsette Clark and the Transformation of the African-American Freedom Struggle." PhD. diss., Yale University, 2005.

Ladner, Joyce. "A Sociology of the Civil Rights Movement: An Insider's Perspective." American Sociological Association meetings. Atlanta. 1988.

Levine, David P. "Citizenship Schools." PhD. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1999.

Oldendorf, Sandra B. "Highlander Folk School and the South Carolina Sea Islands Citizenship Schools: Implications for the Social Studies." PhD. diss., University of Kentucky, 1987.