

NAACP MEMBERS PUNISHED

In 1956, two years after the U.S. Supreme Court handed down *Brown v. Board* outlawing segregation in public schools, the State of South Carolina was still angry at the court and the NAACP. It could not do any harm to the court, so the powers that be took out their anger on the NAACP and its members. The General Assembly passed a law on April 19, 1956, prohibiting any government employee—city, county or state—from holding membership in the NAACP.

The first casualties of this law were twenty-one teachers at Ellore Training High School in Ellore, South Carolina, near the eastern edge of Orangeburg County. Prior to the end of the school year and summer vacation, employee contracts for the next year were passed out, along with a questionnaire, to all the teachers. Those who planned to return in September were requested to complete these documents and return them to the superintendent. The questionnaire asked the following:

- 1) Do you favor integration of the races in South Carolina?
- 2) Do you feel you would be happy in an integrated school system knowing that parents and students did not favor this system?
- 3) Do you feel that you are qualified to teach an integrated class in a satisfactory manner?
- 4) Do you believe in the aim of the NAACP?
- 5) If you join the NAACP while in this school district, would you notify the superintendent and trustee board?



The teachers who were fired from their jobs for being members of the NAACP in Ellore, South Carolina. *Courtesy of Cecil Williams.*

There were thirty-one teachers at the school, and twenty-one of them refused to sign the documents for the next school year. Some of the protesting teachers said they were not members of the NAACP, but they refused on grounds of principle. Dr. Walker E. Solomon, executive director of the Palmetto Education Association (PEA), met with the school principal and teachers, NAACP members, Lincoln C. Jenkins Jr. (NAACP chief counsel) and Thurgood Marshall. Jenkins and Marshall filed a lawsuit in the U.S. District Court challenging the school contract and the entire process. While the lawsuit was working its way through the courts, the PEA assisted the teachers in finding jobs in other counties and out of state. The principal, Charlie Davis, was hired by the American Friends Service Committee. When the South Carolina General Assembly met in 1957, the law was repealed.

The next one to get the axe for not renouncing her NAACP affiliation was Septima P. Clark of Charleston. Mrs. Clark had an early, long history with the NAACP. She was one of the early members of the Charleston Branch when it was organized in 1917. Initially, she taught on John's Island and later worked at Avery Institute in Charleston. It was during this time that she secured the signatures of over twenty thousand persons to present to the



Dr. Walker E. Solomon Sr. was executive director of the Palmetto Education Association (PEA), the black teachers' organization.

school board, petitioning it to hire black teachers in the Charleston County school district. At that time, only white teachers taught in black schools. She moved to Columbia in 1927 and was very helpful in organizing support for the teachers' equal pay lawsuit. In 1956, she was fired from her teaching position because she would not renounce her NAACP affiliation. She was not deterred. She went to Tennessee and worked at the Highlander Folk School training civil rights advocates on how to assist their communities in registering blacks to vote. One of her star pupils was Rosa Parks. In 1962, she wrote her autobiography, *Echo in My Soul*. She taught on Defauski Island for a period of time and then joined Dr. Martin L. King in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), where she taught in citizenship schools in Georgia and South Carolina. At age seventy-six in 1974, she was elected to the Charleston County School Board. She was also a member of the delegation that accompanied Dr. King to Oslo, Norway, when he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964.



Septima P. Clark was fired from her teaching position for failing to renounce her membership in the NAACP. She joined Dr. Martin L. King's SCLC organization and continued her battle to educate blacks on the need to register and vote.

After much prodding from black members of the South Carolina General Assembly, in 1976 she was awarded the one-year salary in the amount of \$3,000 that she would have earned had she not been fired from her teaching position. She served on the board of directors of the Penn Center at Frogmore on St. Helena Island in Beaufort, South Carolina. Even though she did not drive a car, she never missed a board meeting and would take the Greyhound bus, with her grandson David in tow, when she could not get a ride to take her the sixty miles from Charleston to Beaufort.

The College of Charleston bestowed an honorary doctorate upon her in 1978. It was the first time a person of color had been so honored by that institution. Mrs. Clark died on December 15, 1987, and is buried in Old Bethel United Methodist Church Cemetery in Charleston. She was a member of the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority.

OVER IN SUMTER, James T. McCain, cousin of Osceola McKaine, was elected president of the Sumter NAACP Branch in 1938. He worked as dean at Morris College in Sumter until 1949, when he left to become principal of Palmetto High School in Mullins, South Carolina. When the school board learned about his NAACP affiliation, he was asked to write and sign a

statement saying he had nothing to do with the NAACP lawsuit *Brown v. Board*. He refused. The school board fired him. He then became principal of Scotts Branch High School in Summerton, where the *Briggs v. Elliott* lawsuit originated. Again, he was dismissed because of his NAACP connections. McCain then joined Alice Spearman at the South Carolina Council on Human Relations, an organization recently founded to improve race relations in the state. He remained in that position for two years.

In 1957, James Farmer, president of CORE (Congress on Racial Equality), hired McCain as a field director for the southern states. McCain traveled the South training people for nonviolent direct-action protests. He was the mastermind behind the Freedom Rides. When the freedom riders arrived in Rock Hill, South Carolina, in 1961, McCain dragged future South Carolina Supreme Court chief justice Ernest A. Finney Jr. out of a social function in Sumter to go to Rock Hill to meet the riders.

McCain conducted a workshop in Mississippi the week before Chaney, Goodman and Scherner, the three young men who died in Mississippi during the freedom summer (1964), met their fate.

When CORE had its split in 1969, Roy Ennis took the action arm of CORE, and Ronnie Moore took the education arm, and they went in separate directions. McCain convinced Jim Felder to spend six months with the Scholarship, Education and Defense Fund for Racial Equality



James T. McCain was fired from several teaching positions in South Carolina because of his NAACP affiliation. He served as southern field coordinator for the Congress On Racial Equality (CORE) for twenty years.

(SEDFRE), the education division, directing a project to identify Hispanic school board members across the United States. The project ended with a conference of Hispanic school board members in Washington, D.C., in 1969, a first of its kind for Hispanics.

James T. McCain passed away on June 5, 2003, at age ninety-eight. He is buried in Hillside Memorial Park in Sumter.

ANOTHER DEFIANT PERSON WHO REFUSED to renounce her NAACP membership was Gloria Rackley Blackwell. Blackwell was a native of the Little Rock section of Dillon County. She graduated from Lincoln High School in Sumter and Claflin College in Orangeburg. She later earned a master's degree from South Carolina State College and a doctorate from Emory University in Atlanta. In 1963, she was declared unfit to teach and fired from her teaching position because she was a field organizer for the NAACP.

Her activism started in the early 1960s, when she was arrested for sitting in the whites-only waiting room of the Orangeburg Regional Hospital. She had taken her daughter Jamal to the emergency room for an injured finger.



Gloria Rackley Blackwell and her daughter, Lurma, walking beside the school from which she was fired because of her NAACP activities. *Courtesy of Cecil Williams.*

Her attorney, Matthew J. Perry, defended her so vigorously and argued her case so forcefully that he was cited for contempt of court. The case was dropped shortly thereafter, and she filed a civil lawsuit and won the case against the hospital.

After being fired by the school board, Blackwell worked for the NAACP as a field organizer, traveling all over the state in a small Chevy, sometimes with students from Claflin or South Carolina State College, urging parents to fight for the rights of their children to be enrolled in the white public schools. Her daughters, Lurma and Jamal, became regular protesters on the picket lines—so much so that Lurma was sentenced to reform school for having a lengthy arrest record at age thirteen.

On December 7, 2010, Gloria Rackley Blackwell died from heart failure at Piedmont Fayette Hospital in Atlanta. She donated her body to Emory University and the Morehouse College School of Medicine for research purposes. Blackwell was honored in Dillon, South Carolina, on January 15, 2011, with a parade and memorial service. Her daughters and Jim Felder spoke at the services.