

Review: What were the secret schools that helped prepare Black people to vote?

Nonfiction: "Spell Freedom" offers the untold stories of citizenship schools in the '50s and '60s.



By Maren Longbella
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Elaine Weiss (Nina Subin/Atria)

If there were any doubts about the human capacity to marginalize and suppress, Elaine Weiss' "Spell Freedom" is an excellent reminder.

From the lead-up to 1954 — when the U.S. Supreme Court handed down the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, declaring segregation unconstitutional — to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, white Southerners escalated their campaign of intimidation and violence to keep Black voters from the ballot box.

Simply putting a name on a petition to get reasonable educational accommodations in Clarendon County, S.C., for instance, meant an end to Black livelihoods, destruction of homes or worse.

These are the years "Spell Freedom" covers. The 1954 ruling ostensibly did away with the "separate but equal" doctrine, under which Jim Crow laws had been allowed to flourish since the late 1800s, but the Supreme Court called only for a "prompt and reasonable start to full compliance," providing no timeline for achieving desegregation and certainly no enforcement. It was up to Black citizens to make it happen but how, in the face of such monumental opposition?

As Weiss carefully plots the lines of attack (juggling it all with exceptional skill), she keeps the focus on three Black activists in South Carolina: Septima Clark, a teacher in Charleston; Esau Jenkins, a businessman on Johns Island; and Bernice Robinson, a Charleston beautician. There's also white Southerner Myles Horton, who ran Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, an interracial training center for social change. All were instrumental in helping Black citizens learn how to wield the political power they were entitled to, by becoming registered voters.

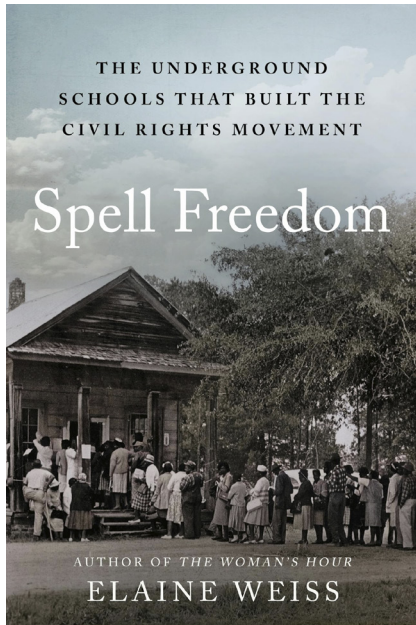
But many Black citizens were illiterate, especially in the rural South. Some couldn't even sign their name. Prospective voters had to provide a signature and often were required to pass literacy tests to register. Education was key, Clark, Jenkins and Horton believed, and so the Citizen Education Project was born.

The first school opened in 1956 on Johns Island; Robinson was recruited to teach adult students who were there to learn to read and write along with "instruction for voter registration, citizenship skills and civic engagement."

The building that housed the school was fronted with a cooperative grocery store; classes were in the back, hidden from view: "We planned the grocery store to fool white people. We didn't want them to know that we had a school back there," Clark said of the venture.

It wouldn't be long before similar schools appeared all over the South.

The network of citizenship schools didn't happen in a vacuum, of course. Rosa Parks would refuse to move to the back of the bus; the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. would advocate nonviolence as he became the face and voice of the civil rights movement.



Spell Freedom (Atria)

Other leaders would push for more confrontational measures; protests and marches would be carried out, and the brutality of whites would rage. But the citizenship schools were the backbone, Weiss contends. This is where Black citizens not only learned the basics, but they also gained the confidence and courage to stand up for their rights.

"Spell Freedom" captures the courageous battle's painstaking planning, the victories and the setbacks. It's uplifting, even as it devastates.

Spell Freedom

By: Elaine Weiss

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