

The Clerk's Black History Series



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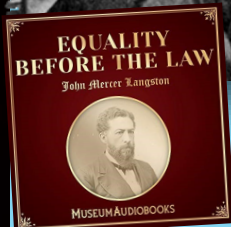


John Mercer Langston

(December 14, 1829 – November 15, 1897)

"First African-American Lawyer in Ohio"

"First African-American Elected to Public Office in Virginia"



John Mercer Langston was born on December 14, 1829, in Louisa County, Virginia, the fourth child of Ralph Quarles, a white man, and Lucy Jane Langston, an emancipated mother of mixed race. Ralph Quarles, a former slaveholder, freed Lucy and their daughter Maria in 1806, in the course of a relationship that lasted more than 25 years. Their three sons were born free, as their mother was free. Both parents died in 1834, when John Langston, the youngest child, was four years old. The parents left the children a fairly large inheritance.

William Langston, an older half-brother of John, moved the children to Chillicothe, Ohio, after the death of their parents. In 1835, John's older brothers, Gideon and Charles started at the Oberlin preparatory school, where they were the first African-American students to be admitted. John Langston was 14 years old when he entered Oberlin Preparatory. John Langston earned a Bachelor's Degree in 1848, and a Master's degree in Theology in 1852 from Oberlin.

Although denied entry into law schools in both New York and Ohio, John Langston studied law as an apprentice under attorney and US Congressman, Philemon Bliss. He was admitted to the Ohio Bar in 1854, becoming the first African-American lawyer in the state of Ohio. He relocated to Brownhelm, Ohio with his new wife, fellow Oberlin student and abolitionist Caroline Wall, and on April 22, 1855, he became one of the first African-Americans elected to public office in the United States when he was elected Brownhelm Township Clerk. John and Caroline Langston became active in the abolitionist movement along with his brothers, helping slaves escape to the North along the Ohio part of the Underground Railroad. In 1856, he returned to Oberlin and served on the town's board of education. During the Civil War, Langston recruited black soldiers in the Midwest. He never served in the Union Army, but hired a substitute to take his place, a practice common among wealthy white men. Following the war, he served on the Oberlin city council. In 1868, he returned to Washington, DC, where he established the law department at Howard University. In the early 1870's, Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts sought Langston's aid in drafting his Civil Rights Bill. In 1871, Langston received an appointment from President Ulysses S. Grant to the District of Columbia Board of Health. Langston served as Howard University's dean from 1868 to 1875 and as vice president and acting president from 1874 to 1875.

In 1888, John Langston entered the Virginia congressional election, as an *Independent* Republican candidate for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. The race caused bitter division between both racial and party lines and Frederick Douglass fiercely opposed Langston's candidacy. Due to voting irregularities, the final results of the election were contested during a two-year court battle. Separate lines at the polls meant black voters had to wait as long as three hours to vote and many ballots were reported missing. In 1890, John Langston was declared winner. Returning in December 1890 to his first full session in Congress, Langston made his first speech on January 16, 1891. Langston served in Congress from September 23, 1890, to March 3, 1891. Langston returned to Petersburg, Virginia, at the end of the 51st Congress. In 1892, Republicans in his Virginia district asked him to run again, but he refused. Langston spent the remainder of his life traveling between Petersburg and Washington and working on his autobiography, *From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capitol*, which was published in 1894. On November 15, 1897, three years after his retirement, Langston died in Washington, D.C.

The John Mercer Langston House in Oberlin, Ohio, has been designated as a National Historic Landmark. The town of Langston, Oklahoma, founded in 1890. In 1941, the historically black college in the same town, founded in 1897 as the Oklahoma Colored Agricultural and Normal University, was renamed Langston University in honor of John Mercer Langston. John Mercer Langston Elementary School in Washington, D.C. was named in his honor. It opened in 1902 as a school for black students and remained open until 1993. John Mercer Langston was the great-uncle of the poet James Mercer Langston Hughes, better known as Langston Hughes.

