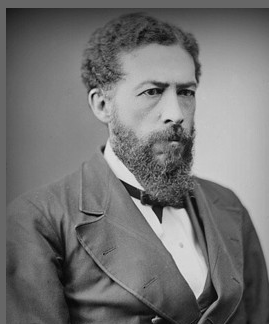


Celebrating the Legacy of John Mercer Langston: Founding Father of Howard Law School and First African American to Pass the Bar in Ohio

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**John Mercer
Langston**

ACHIEVEMENTS

1854: First African American to pass the bar exam in Ohio

1855: Elected to Township Clerk in Brownhelm, Ohio (one of the first African Americans to be elected to a local office)

1865-1867: Served as a city councilman (Oberlin, Ohio)

1867-1868: Served on the Board of Education (Oberlin, Ohio)

1867: Appointed Inspector General of the Freedmen's Bureau

1868: Established the law department at Howard University

1875: Elected Secretary of the Board of Health of the District of Columbia

1877: Appointed U.S. Minister to Haiti

1885: Named President of Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute (now Virginia State University)

1889: First African American elected to Congress

In honor of Black History Month, we celebrate the legacy and achievements of John Mercer Langston—the first African American to pass the bar exam in Ohio and the first African American elected to a local office.¹

Langston was an extraordinary, highly educated, and gifted community organizer in the 19th century. Langston attended Oberlin College at the young age of 14, earning his bachelor's and master's degrees and becoming the fifth African male to graduate from Oberlin College's Collegiate Institute. Despite being denied admission into law school because of his race, John Mercer Langston was able to pass the Ohio bar in 1854 after independently studying law under attorney Philemon Bliss.

After becoming an attorney, Langston gained distinction as an excellent orator, abolitionist, and eventually, politician. Just one year after becoming an attorney Langston was elected to township clerk in Brownhelm, Ohio in 1855. He was involved in the antislavery movement and organized antislavery societies locally and statewide. Langston assisted numerous runaway slaves to escape to the North along the Ohio network of the Underground Railroad.

Langston married Caroline Wall and shortly thereafter moved to Oberlin, Ohio where he served as a city councilman from 1865-1867 and on the Board of Education from 1867-1868. During the Civil War Langston recruited African Americans to fight for the Union Army. After the war, he was appointed inspector general for a federal organization, the Freedmen's Bureau, helping former slaves. Among his many accomplishments, Langston was the first African American to practice before the U.S. Supreme Court. He also carried out extensive suffrage campaigns in Ohio, Kansas and Missouri, with such efforts being memorialized with Congressional approval of suffrage for African American males.

In 1868, Langston moved to Washington, D.C. to help establish the nation's first black law school at Howard University. He became Howard Law's first dean and served briefly as acting president in 1872. Later, Langston was appointed as a member of the Board of Health by President Ulysses S. Grant, where he was elected its Secretary in 1875. And then, in 1877, he was appointed U.S. Minister to Haiti by President Rutherford B. Hayes. In 1885, upon his return to the US, he became president of Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute (now known as Virginia State University).

In 1888, Langston, as an Independent, ran for Congress against a white Democrat. However, although his opponent was initially declared the winner, he contested the results. After 18 months, he was declared the rightful winner and served the six remaining months of his term as the first African American elected to Congress. Langston lived the rest of his days in Washington, D.C. as a political leader and activist and working on his autobiography, *From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capitol*, which was published in 1894.

After a lifetime of notable achievements, Langston died in 1897 at the age of 67. Due in part to his prominence, the honorable legacy of John Mercer Langston lives on in many ways. The Oklahoma Territory town of Langston, and its town college, Langston University, were named after him. Additionally, the John Mercer Langston House in Oberlin, Ohio, has been designated as a National Historic Landmark. Inspired by his recognition as a successful African American leader and advocate, two bar associations, the John M. Langston Bar Association of Los Angeles, California and the John Mercer Langston Bar Association of Columbus, Ohio, carry forward his name. Langston's legacy and achievements are truly deserving of admiration and celebration.

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