

# JOHN MERCER LANGSTON



## **"Continue the Legacy & Advance the Vision"**

John Mercer Langston (December 12, 1829 - November 15, 1897) was an American abolitionist and U.S. Congressman from Virginia. He was the first African-American in the United States elected to public office, when in 1855 he ran for Town Clerk in Ohio.

Langston was born in Louisa County, Virginia, the son of Ralph Quarles, a white plantation owner, and Lucy Langston, a slave of mixed African and Native American heritage. His parents died when he was five years old. Upon his father's death, all of his father's slaves, including Langston, were freed in compliance with wishes expressed in Quarles' will. Langston and his brothers then moved to Oberlin, Ohio, to live with family friends.

He enrolled in Oberlin College at the age of fourteen, and earned both a bachelor's and master's degree from the institution. Langston later applied to Albany Law School in New York, and was frank in disclosing that he was of African ancestry. Upon his rejection, it was strongly intimated to him that if he were to claim other than African blood, he would have been admitted. Denied admission into law school, Langston studied law under attorney Philemon Bliss, an Ohio Congressman who would later be appointed chief justice of the Supreme Court of Dakota Territory by President Lincoln.

Langston became a member of the Ohio bar in 1854, and was the first African-American to be so admitted. He was later admitted to the Virginia Bar, and quickly developed a reputation as an eloquent and persuasive orator, with a unique gift for impromptu speaking. Langston went on to be an active participant in the Abolitionist movement, organizing anti-slavery societies on both local and state levels. He helped runaway slaves escape to the North along the Ohio section of the Underground Railroad, and was a founding member and President of the National Equal Rights League, which fought for the voting rights of African Americans.

During the Civil War, Langston recruited African-Americans to fight for the Union Army, enlisting hundreds of men for duty in the United States Colored Troops. After the war, in 1868 President Johnson appointed him Inspector General for **the Freedmen's Bureau**, a Federal organization that assisted freed slaves

Langston moved to Washington, D.C. in 1868 to establish and serve as Dean of the Howard University School of Law - the first African-American law school in the country. He became President of the school in 1872.

President Ulysses S. Grant appointed Langston a member of the Board of Health of the District of Columbia, and he was elected its secretary in 1875. In 1877, he resigned to become U.S. Minister to Haiti. He returned to Virginia in 1885, and was named the first President of Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute (now Virginia State University).

In 1888, Langston ran for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives as a Republican. He lost to his Democratic opponent, but contested the results of the election. After an 18-month fight, he was declared the winner and awarded the Congressional Seat. He served for the remaining six months of the term, but lost his bid for reelection. Langston was the first African-American elected to Congress from Virginia, and he was the only one for another century.

After a lifetime of firsts and numerous historical accomplishments, Langston died in his Washington, D.C. home on November 15, 1897.

John Mercer Langston was the uncle of world renowned poet, **Langston Hughes**, born James Mercer Langston Hughes - named after his uncle.

