

John Mercer Langston

John Mercer Langston was elected Virginia's first black congressman more than 100 years ago, and the Louisa County native also served as a "first" in several other arenas.

Langston was born Dec. 14, 1829, to Ralph Quarles, a plantation owner, and Jane Langston, a slave whom Quarles later freed.

When he was 4, both his parents died and he moved to Oberlin, Ohio, with a family friend. He attended Oberlin College and earned bachelor's, master's and theology degrees. After studying under an attorney, he was admitted to the Ohio bar in 1854.

Langston helped create the Republican Party in 1854 and participated in various anti-slavery activities, including the Underground Railroad, which helped runaway slaves flee to freedom in the North.

He became the first black elected official in the United States in 1855 when he was elected

clerk of a rural Ohio township.

He played a major role in recruiting black soldiers for the Union army during the Civil War. When the war ended, he was appointed inspector general for the Freedmen's Bureau, a federal agency created to assist freed slaves.

Langston moved to Washington in 1868 to organize and become dean of the first black law school in the nation at Howard University. He also became the first black to practice before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Langston, seated on left, with first Virginia State University graduates in 1886.



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He was named acting president of Howard in 1872. He was elected a delegate to the Republican National Convention in 1876 and a year later named U.S. minister to Haiti.

Langston returned to Virginia in 1885 to serve as the first president of what is now Virginia State University.

In 1888, he ran as an independent in Virginia's 4th Congressional District, which had a black majority. When the Democratic candidate was declared the winner, Langston contested the results. A congressional panel eventually awarded Langston the seat in September 1890. His term ended 161 days later and he was defeated in a bid for re-election.

Langston retired to Washington, where he died in 1897.



John Mercer Langston and the Fight for Black Freedom, 1829-1865 by William and Aimee Lee Cheek

From Virginia Plantation to the National Capitol by John Mercer Langston

THE TIMES OF JOHN MERCER LANGSTON

First patent granted to a black, Henry Blair, for seeding corn planter

Langston born

Ether demonstrated as an anesthetic in surgery

Langston is first elected black official in the United States

Women in Wyoming gain right to vote

Thomas A. Edison invents the electric light

Statue of Liberty presented to U.S. by France

Langston dies



SOURCES: Photos courtesy of Virginia State University; John Mercer Langston and the Fight for Black Freedom, 1829-1865, by William and Aimee Lee Cheek

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