



The Daily Progress/Stephanie Gross

John S. Salmon, who oversaw the installation of the historical highway marker dedicated to John Mercer Langston, the first known

black elected to office in the United States, addresses a crowd in front of the Louisa County courthouse at the marker's unveiling.

Marker a sign of mending black-white ties

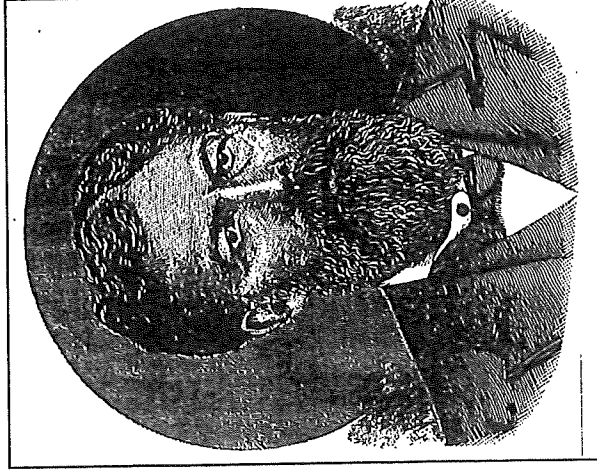
By MAURA SINGLETON
Daily Progress staff writer

LOUISA — A strong breeze carried away portions of the speeches honoring John Mercer Langston on Friday afternoon, and Main Street traffic muffled many of the ceremonial words, but the legacy of Virginia's first black congressman now has a firmer hold in native soil.

A highway marker was unveiled Friday that designates Louisa County as Langston's birthplace. It represents the state's first recognition of a man who was the first known black elected to office in the United States, founder and first dean of Howard University's law department and first president of Virginia State University.

Langston, born in 1829 about five miles northwest of town, also served as a U.S. minister to Haiti and diplomat in Santo Domingo.

"He has much to tell us about what it means to be human, to live a sane, productive and daring life," said William F. Cheek, a San Diego State history professor and co-author of a Langston biography. "His vision of an integrated democratic world, beyond race, class and gender, is ever elusive but ever important



African American Heritage Preservation Foundation

John Mercer Langston, the son of a white plantation owner and a freed slave, was born five miles from the town of Louisa.

to keep striving toward."

The sign now stands in front of the historic county courthouse at the intersection of Route 22 and U.S. 33.

The youngest son of white plantation owner Captain Ralph Quarles and Lucy Jane Langston, a freed slave, Langston used his father's inheritance to educate himself, at Oberlin College in Ohio.

For many blacks in Louisa, the official recognition of such a prominent Louisa native is long overdue. More than a sign in the ground, the marker repairs some of the frayed social ties within the community.

Earlier this year, the Louisa County School Board rejected a 700-signature petition requesting that the newly constructed middle school be named after Langston, according to Lenwood O. Johnson, president of Louisa's chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The board chose instead to call it Louisa County Middle School.

But the injuries go deeper, Johnson explained.

"Several years ago, the School Board, in one of its fits of anti-blackness, ripped the

See LANGSTON on B2

Langston

Continued from B1

names of our beloved black history makers off several of our public schools," he said at the dedication.

"The board tore Alberta Guy Despot's name from one building and renamed it the less appealing Trevilians Elementary. The board tore Zelda C. Morton's name from another building, and Archie Gibbs Richardson's name from still another, renaming those buildings Louisa Middle School."

For Johnson, the sign honoring Langston is a "milestone" in the county's social progress, he said.

Proposed and paid for by the African American Heritage Preservation Foundation Inc., based in Washington, D.C., the marker was approved in December by the Virginia Historical Resources Board.

According to Lucious Edwards Jr., an archivist with Virginia State University, the state's stringent requirements for freed blacks during Langston's time ultimately helped researchers.

The paper trail, at least in Virginia, was heavy.

"Because he was born free in Virginia, a slave state, there were so many restrictions," Edwards said. "He had to register [as free] every three years, and carry it on his body."

That Langston was able to lay claim to part of his white father's inheritance was unusual, he added. In his will, the unmarried Quarles left land and money to all four of the children he had by Lucy Langston.

But "he made sure he left something to his white relations, so they didn't sue" for the entire inheritance, said Edwards.

Among the 75 or so people at the dedication was Langston's granddaughter, Annette L. Langston. She had never visited Louisa County before. The Washington, D.C., native said she has pictures and mementos that belonged to Langston, but never considered trying to write a history of his life.

"I think he did a beautiful job when he wrote his own," she said.

Langston's autobiography is called "From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capitol."