



John Mercer Langston 1829–1897

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1890–1891
REPUBLICAN FROM VIRGINIA

One of the most prominent African Americans in the United States before and during the Civil War, John Mercer Langston was as famous as his political nemesis, Frederick Douglass.¹ One of the first African Americans to hold elective office in the United States (he became Brownhelm, Ohio, township clerk in 1855), Langston topped off his long political career by becoming the first black man to represent Virginia in the U.S. House of Representatives.

John Mercer Langston was born free in Louisa, Virginia, on December 14, 1829.² His father, Ralph Quarles, was a plantation owner and had been a captain in the Revolutionary War. Langston's mother, Lucy, was a free Native American-black woman who had been Ralph Quarles's slave. Quarles emancipated Lucy and their daughter, Maria, in 1806. Lucy Langston left Quarles shortly after she was freed and had three children outside their relationship: William, Harriet, and Mary Langston. The couple later reunited, though state law forbade them to marry, and had three more children: Gideon, Charles Henry, and John Mercer. When John Langston's parents died in 1834, his father's estate was divided among his three sons and held in trust. Four-year-old John Langston moved in with a family friend, William Gooch, and his family in Chillicothe, Ohio. When Langston was 10 years old, Gooch made plans to move to Missouri, then a slave state. John's half brother, William, sued to relinquish Gooch's custody over his brother, fearing the move would jeopardize John's freedom and his substantial inheritance. The court prevented Gooch from taking the child to Missouri, and Langston became the ward of Richard Long, an abolitionist who had purchased William Gooch's Ohio farm.³ In 1840, John Langston's brother Gideon brought John to live with him in Cincinnati. One of the city's leading black figures, Gideon ensured that his brother

received a good education. In Cincinnati, John Langston heard some of the strongest antislavery rhetoric in the pre-Civil War North, and experienced the violent race riots of 1841 and the restrictive "Black Laws" imposed as a consequence.⁴ In 1843, William Langston took custody of John and returned with him to Chillicothe.

John's older brothers and their colleagues, who were among the first black graduates of Oberlin College in Ohio, inspired him to attend their alma mater. Langston received a B.A. in 1849 and an M.A. in theology in 1852. Langston wanted to become a lawyer, a profession only three black men in the nation had officially achieved nationwide in the early 1850s. After two law schools denied him admission, he studied under local abolitionists in Elyria, Ohio. In September 1854, a committee on the district court confirmed his knowledge of the law, deeming him "nearer white than black," and admitted him to the Ohio bar. He commenced his practice in Brownhelm, Ohio.⁵ In 1854, he married Caroline Wall, also a former student at Oberlin, who was active in the abolitionist movement and the Liberty Party.⁶ The couple raised five children: Arthur, Ralph, Chinque, Nettie, and Frank.⁷

Langston's political involvement started with the Ohio conventions. A series of public meetings held statewide by prominent African Americans, the conventions called for the enfranchisement of black men and promoted their political participation. In 1852, Langston officially allied himself with the Free Democrats, who condemned the Fugitive Slave Law, allowed black delegates at their conventions, and elected Frederick Douglass as the national party secretary.⁸ Langston's political career soared throughout the 1850s and 1860s. On April 22, 1855, he became one of the first African Americans elected to public office in the United States when Brownhelm Township voted him clerk on the Liberty Party ticket.⁹ In 1856, he



left Brownhelm for 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.¹⁰ Following the war, he served on the Oberlin city council. In 1867, Langston served as Inspector General of the Freedmen's Bureau, touring the postwar South and encouraging freedmen to seek educational opportunities. He regularly spoke out against segregated facilities, including churches.¹¹

For the first two decades of the postwar era, Langston held prominent political and educational appointments. In 1868, he returned to Washington, DC, where he established the law department at Howard University, a new college founded to educate African Americans. In the early 1870s, 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 (for whom he had campaigned in 1868) to the District of Columbia Board of Health. Langston served as Howard University's dean from 1868 to 1875 and from 1874 to 1875 as vice president and acting president of Howard; however, he resigned from the university when the board of trustees failed to offer him a full term as president.

In 1877, President Rutherford B. Hayes appointed Langston resident minister to Haiti and chargé d'affaires in Santo Domingo. Following his departure in 1885, Langston petitioned the Court of Claims for over \$7,000 withheld from him after the Democratically controlled House appropriated less than his fixed diplomatic salary. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in his favor in 1886. From 1885 to 1887, Langston served as president of the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute in Petersburg. He left after the college's board of governors fell into Democratic hands.

Settling in south-central Virginia, Langston was viewed as a celebrity by his black neighbors. In 1888, a citizen's committee asked Langston to run for a seat in the U.S. House, representing the "Black Belt of Virginia," a region whose population was 65 percent black.¹² Although

Langston had been assured that his nomination and election were nearly guaranteed, he began an aggressive campaign for the Republican ticket.¹³ Langston lobbied both white and black delegates to the district convention at a lavish party hosted by several prominent black women in Petersburg.¹⁴

His efforts were thwarted by strong opposition from white Republicans led by scalawag Confederate General William Mahone, a central figure in Virginia Republican politics.¹⁵ Using his formidable power over district Republicans—both black and white—Mahone orchestrated a separate district convention, excluding Langston's supporters, to nominate white candidate Judge R. W. Arnold. Though his appeal for support from the National Republican Executive Committee was unsuccessful, Langston obtained the backing of a biracial committee of district Republicans, entered the race as an Independent Republican, and methodically canvassed the district.¹⁶

The election brought out stark racial divisions. Democratic candidate Edward Venable refused to share a debate platform with Langston throughout the campaign.¹⁷ Moreover, because Langston's candidacy threatened to divide the Republican vote, several prominent African Americans campaigned against him.¹⁸ Frederick Douglass, chief among Langston's detractors, wrote a letter denouncing his candidacy, and the Mahone faction spread copies throughout the district.¹⁹ On Election Day, Langston dispatched supporters to monitor every precinct for irregularities. His lieutenants instructed voters to say Langston's name after voting, as evidence of their support. Separate lines for blacks and whites at the polls meant black voters had to wait as long as three hours to vote. Ballot boxes were allegedly emptied of Langston's votes; Langston's supporters were not permitted to witness the count.²⁰ As predicted, the Republican vote split; initial results indicated that Langston lost by 641 votes to Venable. Arnold was a distant third.²¹

Langston contested the result in the House. At first, he had trouble hiring a lawyer; most attorneys in the district were white, and even sympathetic Republicans

feared social and political ostracism.²² Langston finally hired a biracial team of lawyers (the white lawyers charged an exorbitant fee). The case took several twists. One of Langston's witnesses was cross-examined for six days, an incident Langston interpreted as a stalling tactic.²³ Langston meanwhile tried to mend political fences in his district and even agreed to work on Mahone's gubernatorial campaign.²⁴ The Republican majority on the Committee on Elections ruled in Langston's favor on June 16, 1890, but the whole House delayed hearing his case for three months.²⁵ Democrats repeatedly blocked the case from coming to a vote on the floor, primarily by vacating the chamber to prevent a quorum, leaving only a few Members to address their interests.²⁶

On September 23, 1890, Langston's case finally came to a vote before a crowded gallery occupied primarily by African Americans.²⁷ All but nine of the 152 Democratic Members retired to the hallway to avoid a quorum. But Republican discipline prevailed; the majority doggedly mustered enough Members, primarily from their own ranks.²⁸ Over Democratic protests that a quorum was not present, the House declared Langston the winner in a lopsided vote of 151 to 1.²⁹ The vote gave Langston Venable's seat for the remaining seven months of the Congress. Most Democratic Members boycotted Langston's swearing in a few minutes later, but a few offered him cordial congratulations upon re-entering the chamber.³⁰

Langston's experience in higher learning earned him a position on the Committee on Education.³¹ He immediately assisted the Republican majority by voting in favor of the controversial McKinley Tariff, a protective measure designed to drive up the price of cheap goods manufactured abroad. A Democratic newspaper commented that Langston's position on tariffs represented "a wall about the country so high and so great that the British lion would never have been able to get over it without the aid of dynamite or a scaling ladder."³²

Only one week after arriving in Congress, Langston had to return home to campaign for re-election. Despite their previous "truce," William Mahone, now the governor,

refused to support Langston as his district's Republican candidate. Antagonized by Langston's Independent run for office in 1888, Mahone accused him of purposely dividing the electorate by race.³³ Langston responded that Mahone was blinded by racism and "almost a Democrat."³⁴ The district convention backed Langston, whose strong support was primarily from the black population. Republican newspaper accounts indicate that President Benjamin Harrison, congressional Republicans, and the GOP national leadership supported Langston's re-election.³⁵ However, many white Republicans in the district followed Mahone's lead and abandoned Langston, in some measure because of his unpopular vote on the McKinley Tariff.³⁶ Langston lost the election to Democratic candidate James Epes by about 3,000 votes in the state's first Democratic sweep since before secession.³⁷ Democratic newspapers blamed black voters' apathy for their party's solid victory in the state, but the contest mirrored a national trend: From nearly a 20-Member deficit, Democrats in the U.S. House captured a 100-Member majority.³⁸ Langston believed the election was tainted by fraud—as evidenced by long lines for black Republicans at the polls, missing ballots in black strongholds, and undue pressure by Mahone supporters.³⁹ But he feared contesting the election in the strongly Democratic Congress would be expensive.⁴⁰

Returning in December 1890 as a lame duck to his first full session in Congress, Langston made his first speech on January 16, 1891. He emphasized blacks' U.S. citizenship, condemning calls for foreign emigration and what he deemed the Democratic Party's attempt to thwart black freedom. "Abuse us as you will, gentlemen," Langston told Democrats, "we will increase and multiply until, instead of finding every day five hundred black babies turning their bright eyes to greet the rays of the sun, the number shall be five thousand and still go on increasing. There is no way to get rid of us. This is our native country." Frequent, loud applause from the Republican side of the chamber interrupted Langston's speech. Newspapers admitted that Langston's speech rambled, but deemed him one of the most eloquent speakers on the House Floor.⁴¹ One day

after his speech, Langston asked the U.S. Attorney General to send the House all documentation of suits on alleged violations of voting rights.⁴² The Judiciary Committee agreed to Langston's resolution, and it was adopted in the whole House. However, the Attorney General's office never complied, and the disfranchisement of southern freedmen continued.

Not all of Langston's legislative efforts were successful. Langston submitted bills to establish a national industrial university to teach blacks useful labor skills and to observe as national holidays the birthdays of former Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant, but the bills died in committee.⁴³ Langston was unable to secure the appointments of several black candidates to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis.⁴⁴ On February 27, 1891, Langston returned to the House Floor to debate a civil appropriations bill. He used his experience as a diplomat in the Caribbean to advocate protection for American shipping interests.⁴⁵

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, noting that a white candidate would likely have more success. He continued to be active in politics, often speaking publicly about the achievements of his race.⁴⁶ Promised a federal judicial appointment as well as several Treasury Department patronage positions, Langston began campaigning for President Benjamin Harrison's re-election in 1892; however, when the administration withdrew the promised positions, he backed rival Republican James G. Blaine's quest for the nomination. 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. Langston died at home in Washington, DC, on November 15, 1897.

FOR FURTHER READING

Cheek, William and Aimee Lee Cheek. *John Mercer Langston and the Fight for Black Freedom, 1829–1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

"Langston, John Mercer," *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=L000074>.

Langston, John Mercer. From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capitol, ed. William Loren Katz (New York: Arno Press, 1999; reprint of an 1894 edition by the American Publishing Co. [Hartford, CT]).

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

Fisk University (Nashville, TN) Special Collections, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library. *Papers*: 1853–1898, approximately three feet (900 items). The papers of John Mercer Langston consist of correspondence, speeches, drafts of writings, receipts, estate papers, banking papers, handbills, passports, minutes, a scrapbook, and newspaper clippings. Subjects covered in the papers include slavery in the United States, the abolition movement, Reconstruction, American relations with Haiti and the Dominican Republic, Howard University, the War Department, and the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands.

Howard University (Washington, DC) Moorland–Spingarn Research Center. *Papers*: 1870–1891, two linear feet. The scrapbooks of John Mercer Langston contain newspaper clippings, broadsides, programs, and invitations relating to race relations and politics in the United States. Includes information about the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute (now Virginia State University) in Petersburg, Virginia, and the John G. Whittier Historical Association in Memphis, Tennessee. A finding aid is available in the repository.

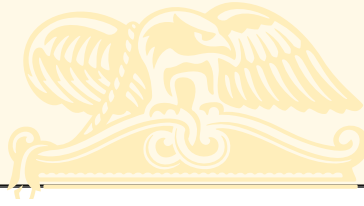
Library of Congress (Washington, DC) Manuscript Division. *Microfilm*: 1853–1898, one reel. The papers

of John Mercer Langston consist of correspondence, speeches, drafts of writings, receipts, estate papers, banking papers, handbills, passports, minutes, a scrapbook, and newspaper clippings. Subjects covered in the papers include slavery in the United States, the abolition movement, Reconstruction, American relations with Haiti and the Dominican Republic, Howard University, the War Department, and the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands. The original papers are at Fisk University.

NOTES

- 1 For a comparison of the two men's fame, see, for example, "Mahone Makes a Dicker," 16 September 1889, *New York Times*: 1.
- 2 Though Stephen Middleton notes that Langston's status at birth—slave or free—is controversial, most sources indicate that his mother was freed long before his birth and that he was born free. Some ambiguity stems from whether Lucy Langston was subject to strict Virginia Black Codes and not considered legally free. See Stephen Middleton ed., *Black Congressmen During Reconstruction: A Documentary Sourcebook* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002): 125.
- 3 "John Mercer Langston," in Jessie Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Men* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Research, Inc., 1999): 693–698 (hereinafter referred to as *NBAM*).
- 4 "John Mercer Langston," *NBAM*. Black Laws included, "bonding, return of all fugitive slaves, repudiation of the doctrines and activities of abolitionists, and...the total disarmament and arrest of black lawbreakers."
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Maurine Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976): 140.
- 7 Eric Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders During Reconstruction*, revised edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996): 128.
- 8 "John Mercer Langston," *NBAM*.
- 9 Most standard secondary sources cite Langston's election as clerk of Brownhelm Township as the first time a black man was elected to public office in the United States. See, for example, Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*: 128; William Cheek and Aimee Lee Cheek, *John Mercer Langston and the Fight for Black Freedom, 1829–1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989): 260. However, this honor likely went to Alexander Twilight, who was elected to the Vermont state house of representatives and presented his credentials on October 13, 1836. See *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Vermont*, 1836 (Middlebury, VT: American Office, 1836): 7; Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780–1860* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998): 40. Some sources list the date of Langston's election as April 2, 1885, whereas others list it as April 22. There is also disagreement about his party affiliation: Some sources list him as an Independent Democrat, while others list him as a member of the Free Soil or Liberty parties.
- 10 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 141.
- 11 Frank R. Levstik, "Langston, John Mercer," *Dictionary of American Negro Biography* (New York: Norton, 1982): 382–384.
- 12 William Cheek and Aimee Lee Cheek, "Langston, John Mercer," *American National Biography* 13 (New York: Oxford, 1999): 164–166; Stanley B. Parsons et al., *United States Congressional Districts, 1883–1913* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990): 157–158; John Mercer Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capitol*, ed. William Loren Katz (New York: Arno Press, 1999; reprint of the American Publishing Co. [Hartford, CT], 1894 edition): 451.
- 13 Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capitol*: 439.
- 14 Ibid., 442.
- 15 Mahone's influence is illustrated in several sources. See, for example, "Revolt Against Mahone," 20 September 1888, *New York Times*: 1; "Mahone's Lost Power," 21 September 1888, *New York Times*: 1.
- 16 Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capitol*: 454–455, 458; "Campaign Features," 11 August 1888, *Washington Post*: 2. Langston credited local black women with his electoral success; though unable to vote, they were adept at organizing local meetings.
- 17 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 145; Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capitol*: 462.
- 18 See, for example, J. W. Cromwell, "Letters from the People," 23 August 1888, *Washington Post*: 7.
- 19 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 145; Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capitol*: 466–467.
- 20 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 145; Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capitol*: 477–481.
- 21 Michael J. Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1998): 284.
- 22 Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capitol*: 487–489.
- 23 Ibid., 492.
- 24 Ibid., 495; "Virginia Political Notes," 4 August 1889, *Washington Post*: 12.

- 25 Considerable coverage of the contested election is included in the *Congressional Record*. See *Congressional Record*, House, 51st Cong., 1st sess. (9 September 1890): 9917–9923; *Congressional Record*, House, 51st Cong., 1st sess. (17 September 1890): 10152–10169; *Congressional Record*, House, 51st Cong., 1st sess. (19 September 1890): 10241–10244.
- 26 The “disappearing quorum” was a dilatory parliamentary tactic frequently employed by members of the minority party who refused to answer roll calls, and thus prevented the House from conducting business by not allowing it to achieve a working quorum. Republican Thomas Brackett Reed of Maine had resorted to the tactic when he was Minority Leader in the 1880s. Yet, as Speaker, with his party firmly in the majority, Reed refused to allow Democrats to stall legislation in this manner. On January 29, 1890, he ordered that the Democrats lingering in the hallways outside the chamber and those in the chamber refusing to vote be considered present. Reed also threatened to leave unsigned legislation requiring his signature before presidential approval until the House considered majority legislation; this would hold up several bills important to southern lawmakers. The Speaker’s iron fist soon earned him the epithet “Czar Reed.” See Charles W. Calhoun, “Reed, Thomas B.,” in Donald C. Bacon et al., eds., *The Encyclopedia of the United States Congress* Volume 3 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995): 1687–1690. For newspaper coverage documenting Democratic stall tactics in Langston v. Venable, see, for example, “Wanted—A Quorum in the House,” 22 September 1890, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 2; “Reed Is Wild,” 20 September 1890, *Boston Daily Globe*: 1; “Speaker Reed Annoyed,” 20 September 1890, *New York Times*: 1.
- 27 E. W. B., “Republicans Steal,” 24 September 1890, *Atlanta Constitution*: 1.
- 28 For contemporary accounts of Republican efforts to achieve a quorum, see “Langston Gets His Seat,” 24 September 1894, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 71; E. W. B., “Republicans Steal.”
- 29 The lone vote against Langston came from Republican Representative Joseph Cheadle of Indiana. Cheadle remained a devoted Mahone supporter, insisting that the divided Republican vote in the Virginia district was the sole reason for Democratic victory and that seating Langston was an abuse of power. The Indiana Representative would defect to the Democratic and Populist parties in 1896. See “Cheered by Democrats,” 18 September 1890, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 7; “Pleading for Right,” 18 September 1890, *Atlanta Constitution*: 9; “Cheadle, Joseph Bonaparte,” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, available at <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=C000339>. Though Langston recalled that two other Republicans remained in the chamber to maintained the quorum, but refused to vote, 14 members (four Republicans) were officially recorded as present and not voting. See Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capitol*: 499; a full account of Langston’s seating can be found in the *Congressional Record*, House, 51st Cong., 1st sess. (23 September 1890): 10338–10339.
- 30 Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capitol*: 500–501; Thomas Miller of South Carolina was seated one day after Langston. Langston recalled being offered a seat next to Henry Cheatham of North Carolina, the only other black Member in the House.
- 31 “Pleading for His Race,” 1 March 1888, *Atlanta Constitution*: 1.
- 32 “The Influence of Mahone,” 10 October 1890, *New York Times*: 5.
- 33 “Mahone May Oppose Langston,” 27 September 1890, *New York Times*: 5; “Mahone and Langston,” 31 October 1890, *Washington Post*: 1.
- 34 “Langston’s Next Fight,” 15 November 1890, *Washington Post*: 2.
- 35 “Langston Is Confident,” 8 October 1890, *Washington Post*: 1.
- 36 “Negroes His Only Support,” 30 October 1890, *Washington Post*: 1; “The Issues in Virginia,” 29 October 1890, *New York Times*: 5.
- 37 Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997*: 292; “Solid in Virginia: The Apathy of the Negroes a Feature in the Contest,” 6 November 1890, *New York Times*: 2.
- 38 See Office of the Clerk, “Political Divisions of the House of Representatives (1789 to Present),” available at http://clerk.house.gov/art_history/house_history/partyDiv.html.
- 39 “Langston’s Next Fight.”
- 40 “Langston Will Not Contest,” 10 March 1891, *Washington Post*: 5.
- 41 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 147.
- 42 *Congressional Record*, House, 51st Cong., 2nd sess. (17 January 1891): 1524.
- 43 In 1885, President George Washington’s birth date (February 22) became a federal holiday. Since the 1971 passage of the Uniform Monday Holidays Act, Washington’s Birthday has been celebrated on the third Monday in February and is known as “President’s Day” in recognition of all Presidents.
- 44 Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capitol*: 517.
- 45 *Congressional Record*, House, 51st Cong., 2nd sess. (27 February 1891): 3490–3493.
- 46 See, for example, “Langston Upholds His Race,” 8 January 1894, *Washington Post*: 5; “Emancipation at Alexandria,” 23 September 1895, *Washington Post*: 7.



LANGSTON EMPHASIZED BLACKS’
U.S. CITIZENSHIP, CONDEMNING
CALLS FOR FOREIGN EMIGRATION
AND WHAT HE DEEMED THE
DEMOCRATIC PARTY’S ATTEMPT
TO THWART BLACK FREEDOM.

“ABUSE US AS YOU WILL,
GENTLEMEN,” LANGSTON TOLD
DEMOCRATS. “...THERE IS NO
WAY TO GET RID OF US. THIS IS
OUR NATIVE COUNTRY.”