

John Mercer Langston

December 14, 1829 – November 15, 1897

Diplomacy



“Freedom and free institutions should be as broad as our continent.” John Mercer Langston

John Mercer Langston was the first African American congressman from the state of Virginia, a civil rights trail blazer: the first African American to pass the bar in Ohio, the first African American attorney in Ohio and the first president of *Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute*, which became *Virginia State University*. Langston's effectiveness as a civil rights activist both before and after the *Civil War* created a path and process for the *Civil Rights* activists that followed. In 1864, Langston became one of the founding members of the *National Equal Rights League (NERL)* with Henry Highland Garnet, Frederick Douglass and other civil rights activists. Langston was elected its first president. His conviction, influence, vision and **super skill of diplomacy**, helped Langston make strides by providing a voice for African Americans in the United States.

John Mercer Langston was born free on a plantation in Virginia on December 14, 1829. He was the one of five children of a formerly enslaved Lucy Langston and Captain Ralph Quarles, her former enslaver. Lucy Langston was emancipated by Quarles in 1806 and they lived on the plantation until they both died from unrelated causes in 1834. At the age of 5, Langston, along with his siblings, was sent to his father's close friend, William D. Gooch, in Ohio. Langston went on to Oberlin College, an unique college admitting African Americans. He then studied Law and passed the Bar at the age of 24 in 1854.

In 1855, Langston spoke at the twenty-second anniversary of the *American Anti-Savery Convention* held in New York. His speech, claiming that no person in the United States can say “I have my full share of liberty” because of slavery in the nation.

His articulation marked the beginning of public activism in support of African American freedoms.

Langston practiced law until the beginning of the *Civil War*, when he helped to recruit African Americans to the Union army from Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana. At this same time, he became a founding member of the *National Equal Rights League (NERL)*. He was elected the first president of the organization that called for full rights for African Americans, including the right to vote.

Well respected by the leadership of the United States, Langston was appointed a member of the *Board of Health* for the District of Columbia in 1871. He then served as a representative to Haiti under Presidents Rutherford B Hayes, James Garfield, and Chester Arthur. During that time, he also published his speeches under the title *Freedom and Citizenship*. Langston remained an advocate for education, opportunities, and freedoms for all holding education as an essential means to freedom. When Langston became president of *Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute* in 1886, his primary purpose for doing so was to prepare African American teachers for the state's public school teaching, a unique proposition at that time.

Following his service in education, he was elected to a seat in Congress from Virginia, served on the education committee and spoke out in favor of full rights and fair treatment for African Americans throughout the United States. He published an autobiography, *From Virginia Plantation to the National Capital*, in 1894. He continued fighting for equality until his death in 1897.

Scan the QR code to learn more.



Connect for more



REFLECT:

How are you showing diplomacy through your work at SSU in preparation for your future?