

THE COMMISSION
FOR HISTORICAL
STATUES
IN THE UNITED
STATES CAPITOL

CANDIDATE UNDER CONSIDERATION

JOHN MERCER LANGSTON

(1829-1897)

Louisa County, Virginia

Contribution to Virginia: *Educator, attorney, diplomat, and the first African American in Virginia to serve as a U.S. congressman (1890-1891).*

CRITERIA

Suggestions for a historical figure to represent Virginia in the U.S. Capitol, where each state is entitled to two statues, must conform to criteria established by the office of the Architect of the U.S. Capitol. That criteria requires that the person honored—

- be deceased,
- be illustrious for historic renown or for distinguished civic or military service, and
- represent only one individual.

While the criteria also requires that the person must have been a U.S. citizen, it does make exceptions for an indigenous person who resided in the present-day U.S., such as Pocahontas, one name already submitted to the commission.

To those criteria, the commission has added additional values and attributes. The historical person must be—

- associated with significant events that changed the course of history
- or associated with significant ideals, writings or concepts
- or renowned for exemplary valor, patriotism, and bravery.

The person also must be one whose primary historical significance ties her or him directly to Virginia — or who spent the majority of his or her life residing in the commonwealth. And the historical figure should represent current prevailing values, according the commission's criteria.

Biography Contribution from the United States House of Representatives (edited)

John Mercer Langston was born free in Louisa, Virginia, on December 14, 1829. 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. Langston grew up in Ohio where he attended Oberlin College and 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 he was admitted to the Ohio bar.



Library of Congress

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. In 1856, he left Brownhelm for Oberlin and served on the town's board of education. 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.

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 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.

In 1877, President Rutherford B. Hayes appointed Langston resident minister to Haiti and chargé d'affaires in Santo Domingo. From 1885 to 1887, Langston served as president of the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute in Petersburg. 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. Although Langston had been assured that his nomination and election were nearly guaranteed, he began an aggressive campaign for the Republican ticket. Langston lobbied both white and black delegates to the district convention at a

lavish party hosted by several prominent black women in Petersburg. His efforts were thwarted by strong opposition from white Republicans led by William Mahone. 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.

The election brought out stark racial divisions and several prominent African Americans campaigned against him, including Frederick Douglass. As predicted, the Republican vote split; initial results indicated that Langston lost by 641 votes to Venable. Arnold was a distant third. Langston contested the result in the House and meanwhile tried to mend political fences in his district and even agreed to work on Mahone’s gubernatorial campaign. 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. 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.

On September 23, 1890, Langston’s case finally came to a vote before a crowded gallery occupied primarily by African Americans. Over Democratic protests that a quorum was not present, the House declared Langston the winner in a lopsided vote of 151 to 129. 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.

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. Langston responded that Mahone was blinded by racism and “almost a Democrat.” The district convention backed Langston, whose strong support was primarily from the black popula-

tion. Republican newspaper accounts indicate that President Benjamin Harrison, congressional Republicans, and the GOP national leadership supported Langston’s re-election. However, many white Republicans in the district followed Mahone’s lead and abandoned Langston. Langston lost the election to Democratic candidate James Epes by about 3,000 votes in the state’s first Democratic sweep since before secession. 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. 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. But he feared contesting the election in the strongly Democratic Congress would be expensive.

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.”

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. 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.