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Downtown Oberlin Walking Tour of Civil War Monuments

Langston House

Extended Tour

Langston House

Bardwell House

Westwood Cemetery

Main Tour



Courtesy of Geoffrey Blodgett

Langston House, 207 East College Street

Geoffrey Blodgett

Oberlin Architecture, College and Town -- A Guide to its Social History (Oberlin, Ohio: Oberlin College, 1985).

John Mercer Langston, the famous black abolitionist and civil rights leader, lived here from 1856 to 1871. Born in bondage on a Virginia plantation, the son of a white master and a slave mother, Langston was freed when his father died, and sent north to be educated. He graduated from Oberlin in 1849, read law with an antislavery judge in Elyria, and became the first black lawyer to practice in Ohio.

He proudly recalled in his autobiography that he was also the first colored homeowner on East College, the most fashionable street in town. Shortly after moving into this newly built house, Langston emerged as the acknowledged leader of the local black community, and won far-reaching prominence in abolitionist circles. On the night in January 1863 when news arrived in Oberlin of the Emancipation Proclamation, Langston read it to a packed crowd in the college chapel, and amid rockets, bonfires, and rifle salutes, black townsmen marched up East College to Langston's house to honor the event.

Langston left Oberlin after the war to work with the Freedmen's Bureau. He later joined the faculty of Howard University's law school. President Hayes named him minister to Haiti in the late 1870s, and a decade later he served a term in Congress as a Virginia Republican. He died in Washington in 1897.

Langston's home was placed on the National Register in 1975. In 1983, Oberlin's middle school on North Main was named for him.

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