

From Olivia Cousins

I am currently the owner and steward of the John Mercer Langston (JML) house, historic site located in Oberlin, Ohio. I initially secured the house with a cousin in July 2002 and then bought him out in May 2004. The house, placed on the National Registry of historic houses in 1985 was purchased from an Oberlin Student Coop Association. This particular JML House carries great historical weight in regards to the struggles of African Americans and their allies against the scourge of slavery in the United States. It has been recognized as a place where significant meetings and work on freedom activities occurred. It is also one of the few properties of its kind that is owned by an African American.

The vision which I shared with the Oberlin Students encompassed the tasks of preservation, restoration and continuation of the Legacy of John Mercer Langston. Much of my time and personal funds has been focused on bringing the house up to code, making much needed repairs, addressing plumbing, electrical and heating issues—all within the confines of standard National Historic houses and the town of Oberlin Preservation guidelines. Since 2001 I have been involved in the process of reinstating the name and works of John Mercer Langston into a more public arena through historical conferences, academic settings, and government meetings. Along the way, I made a decision to establish an educational institute that could eventually take over and oversee this work as I grow older and relinquish sole proprietorship of the house and property.

I currently reside in the JML House. To date two architectural assessments have been completed. These two documents along with pictures of the house have been sent to National Park Service personnel who monitor the status of the house. I am awaiting their internal assessment and recommendations for prioritizing preservation and restoration challenges. Meanwhile I am also searching for a reputable structural engineer with a solid and proven background in historical preservation. As a private owner of a national historic house I stand in need of advice on how to navigate interaction with government agencies that have lots of recommendations and limited funds.

The educational institute which I am in process of setting up has had a presence in both the house and the town of Oberlin since 2002. I initially invited and sponsored the co-authors (William and Aimee Lee Cheek) of John Mercer Langston's biography, *John Mercer Langston and the Fight for Black Freedom, 1829-65*, to give a talk at the Oberlin Public Library. Periodically, I have hosted small "gatherings" at the house for activist women, historical reenactments, and a book signing. Most consistently has been the Institute's work with a small cadre of Oberlin H.S. students. Over the last three years, I have operated a small educational summer training program that offers workshops in the areas of census research on historical records; Oberlin Abolitionist history that balances white and black, male and female contributions; cemetery research & preservation;

introduction to cemetery iconology; first families of Oberlin, OH (black as well as white) personal family genealogy; and introduction to becoming a tour guide. Students are taken on field trips to the Oberlin Westwood Cemetery, the Oberlin College Archives, and the Allen Museum. Last summer they received training in leading a “jump on tour” and as a group took relatives and friends on a tour of historical sites in the town of Oberlin. This summer the focus will be on the structuring, deconstructing, and telling of family stories. I started out with six students and hope to expand to 10 students this summer. The Oberlin Public Library has been gracious in allowing us to meet and hold our workshops in their community meeting rooms. Personnel include me, a community historian/researcher and an Oberlin College Student. Funding for the Institute comes from my personal funds.

The overarching dilemma which I face revolves around nonprofit versus for profit status. This dilemma weighs heavily on board member selection as I also waver between national versus local status. I do have people who have expressed a willingness to serve in either capacity but the number is small. Over the past year I have moved closer to a decision in favor of a nonprofit model. In doing so, I am acutely aware of the fact that I will no longer be owner of the JML House; it is a move that potentially will have a very serious impact on my personal finances. I am also very clear that I will do whatever is necessary to ensure that the JML House is secured and protected for it offers the ability to bring forth forgotten and ignored voices and stories of pre-civil war, civil war and reconstruction eras in both Ohio and the United States.

In Summary, I am an owner and steward of a national historic house that holds great potential for highlighting and sharing the lives and stories of African Americans and their allies who were actively engaged in freedom struggles during pre-civil war, civil war and reconstruction era in the United States. It was the home of a prominent black abolitionist who worked closely with other black and white abolitionists to secure protection, freedom and justice for all who fell under the scope of his life work. I am moving towards the creation of a nonprofit 501 c 3 that will have responsibility for the on-going preservation and restoration of the physical site and the operation of an educational institute that connects the physical house to the lives of Oberlin students, community and outside groups involved in similar works.

- Specific needs include: start-up concerns, recommendations and suggestions for nonprofit status
- Guidance on approaches to preservation and restoration and development of strategy for initiating this work
- Thoughts on the coupling or uncoupling of preservation and restoration work with program development activities and concerns
- Thoughts on initial selection of board members: criteria, needs and talents
- Developing partnerships with groups engaged in similar work: process
- Engaging community support: issues surrounding outreach and ownership

Suggested web sites on John Mercer Langston:

www.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/OYTT-images/JMLangston.html

www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/06/06/AR2008060604509_pf...

www.oberlin.edu/alummag/fall2003/feat_start.html