



Carrie Mercer Langston Clark

(b.1873-d.1938)

Carrie Mercer Langston was born on February 22, 1873 in Lake View, Douglas County, KS to Charles and Mary (Patterson)Leary Langston. An ardent abolitionist, and follower of John Brown, Charles Howard Langston, was the son of a prosperous Virginia planter and a slave woman of both American Indian and African descent. Mary Leary's first husband, Lewis Sheridan Leary, died in 1859 from injuries incurred aiding John Brown during the Harper's Ferry raid on the federal arsenal.

Carrie graduated from Lawrence High School and followed in her father's footsteps becoming active in numerous community organizations. Accounts from the Kansas State Historical Society state that "She entered the University of Kansas in 1894. There she took a few courses while also working in the Douglas County courthouse. She was appointed deputy clerk at the courthouse in 1895." It notes that she also wrote for the Atchison Blade **advocating for woman's suffrage and equal women's rights in society**. She read papers and poetry she wrote for literary societies. She was active in the Saint Luke A.M.E. Church in Lawrence, Kansas and addressed attendees at A.M.E. church conferences. She helped to organize the Inter-State Literary Association.

In 1892, Carrie Langston refuted what she called the "Male notion" that females are contented with their lot. She criticized men who attempted to relegate women to an inferior position in society. **And she encouraged Black women to become involved in politics.** Many thought her words to be aimed at the Black men in her community who continued to maintain traditional notions about women and their place in society. However, she may have been influenced by the politics of her father who had supported the 1867-woman suffrage effort in Kansas.

Carrie Langston's first marriage was to James Hughes on April 30, 1899 in Guthrie, Oklahoma. The couple later moved to Joplin, Missouri, where James Hughes got a job as a stenographer. The couple moved to Buffalo, New York. When Carrie Langston Hughes learned she was pregnant, she returned to Joplin where James Langston Hughes was born on February 1, 1901. James Hughes, seeking to escape segregation in the U.S. moved to Mexico, where he spent most of his life, becoming fairly prosperous. Carrie moved with young Langston to Buffalo, New York; Cleveland, Ohio; and finally, to Lawrence, Kansas to live at her mother's home. She found employment in Kansas City, Missouri, while her mother cared for the young boy.

When Langston was five, Carrie hoped to reunite with her husband, taking Langston to Mexico to meet his father. While there, the historic earthquake of April 14, 1907 struck Mexico, sending Carrie Langston Hughes with her son back to the U.S. They returned to Lawrence where she left her son to be cared for by her mother while she moved to Topeka.

Carrie's second marriage was to Homer Scott Clark in Kansas around 1915; she helped to raise his young son, Gwyn Shannon Clark. The Clarks lived in Lincoln, Illinois, near Chicago and later in Cleveland, Ohio where Langston graduated from Central High School in 1929. They eventually moved to Brooklyn New York where Carrie performed in a theatrical production, Run, Little Chillun, in 1933.

Carrie's claim to fame may primarily be as the mother of Langston Hughes; however, some historians agree that Carrie Mercer Langston Clark proved herself as a writer, actress and above all, a fighter for women's suffrage. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn's 1998 study *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920*, (based on her 1977 Howard University dissertation) pioneered academic studies on this topic and Carrie Langston is identified as a suffragist (primarily, it is believed) based on a speech she delivered at one of the Interstate Literary Society's programs. The Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas, the dean of the Episcopal Divinity School at Union Theological Seminary in New York, expressed that Langston had the same plan to enfranchise Black women as other Black suffragists. The most effective means for making sure Black women could exercise the right to vote was the formation of their own organizations like the National Association of Colored Women (NACW).

Carrie Mercer Langston Clark died in New York on June 3, 1938.

Sources:

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