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SCHOOL OF LAW

January 6, 1994

Howard University School of Law: One Hundred and Twenty Five Years

By: Professor J. Clay Smith, Jr.

On January 6, 1869, a wonderful and unprecedented event took place in a Nation that had only recently freed black people from bondage: The Howard University School of Law opened its doors. It must have been a joyous day for John Mercer Langston, the first Law Dean, who had been denied admission by two law schools because of his race. Dean Langston must have felt vindicated to head a law school in which he could direct the future of law through the students who would pass through Howard University's law school.

One is bound to wonder whether in the caverns of Dean Langston's mind he anticipated that this Law School would survive to celebrate its 125th anniversary. I think so. I think that the University and the Trustees, who were responsible for calling Langston to organize the Law School, knew that the Law School and its graduates would play a exceptional, and special role in American law. That role was define by a mission mandating that its graduates would be not only well trained, but well directed to emancipate their people from laws, customs, attitudes, and indifference that incapacitated them from full participation in the economic, political and social fabric of a Democratic State.

Early in its origination, the Law School determined that its graduates must tackle all objects of law and politics to the advantage of the disadvantaged. They have succeeded, but I bet not beyond what was expected of them by deans and teachers who helped direct their paths, enhanced their spirits, shared their dreams, praised their efforts, and aggressively encouraged their aspirations of becoming lawyers.

The names of all of the first students, former slaves, that enrolled in the Law School may not be known. However, I call the roll today of known students, who entered the Law School when the key of Justice unlocked the door of Jurisprudence on January 6, 1869. They also were the first "colored students" to graduate from a law school in the world. I call the names of Louis A. Bell, John H. Cook, John H. Johnson, George D. Johnson, George B. Mabson, A.W. Shadd, Charles N. Thomas, Thomas B. Warrick, John H. Williams and Wathal G. Wynn. I also call the name of Charlotte E. Ray, who, in 1872, became the first woman (black) to graduate from the Law

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School.

Special mention is made of Wathal G. Wynn. Wynn was the first black lawyer admitted to the bar of the Commonwealth of Virginia, the first graduate to be admitted to the bar in three jurisdictions (including the District of Columbia and Arkansas), and the first graduate to be murdered by whites for no reason. All of these events occurred between February and December of 1871. Two students named Belcher (Edwin and Eugene R.) were graduated from the Law school in 1872. Drew S. Days III, the Solicitor General of the United States, is a descendent of the Belcher family.

The law school has always opened its doors to all: it graduated Tamatsu Fuwa, a Japanese student in 1898, and white men and women before the turn of this century. Graduates, such as Emma M. Gillette, who became the first woman to head a law school in the nation's history, and is a founder of the American University School of Law (which just recently celebrated its 100th Year), received an LL.B. and LL.M. from the Law School around 1882. The Law School graduated students from South America and Puerto Rico before the First World War, and shortly thereafter from Africa. Our students have invaded almost every state of the republic, and succeed in all of them.

This is a day of celebration, a day for reflection, and a day to give thanks for what this Law School is, has been, and will become. It is a day to celebrate because our law school survived when many predicted that it would not. The prediction was based on the erroneous assumption that black people were too inferior to conquer the abstractions of law, an assumption still shared by the uniformed.

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It is a day to reflect on our role as teachers and students and to renew our dedication to the mission of the Law School to assure that, as caretakers of "Langston's School," we will preserve, protect and enhance its lofty purposes. These purposes have helped to build a Nation and a World; these purposes have emancipated a people from every stumbling block created by others as barriers to thwart the definition of citizenship of the slave progeny.

We have been brought this far by faith, a faith in possibilities unseen and unknown. This year, as Howard University School of Law celebrates its 125th anniversary, the black lawyer celebrates a 150 year anniversary in America. (Macon Bolling Allen was admitted to the bar in Maine in 1844) As our Law School prepares to enter a new century, it will face many challenges in the days and years ahead. Such challenges are to be expected. In facing these challenges, we are obliged to remember that the past has spoken, and directs us to stay on our mission's course. It is our collective duty to take care of the Law School--so that, as Ollie May Cooper ('21) said, "we can pass this blessing on."