



News Release

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Cumberland/Gloucester/Salem Vicinage Celebrates Legacy of John S. Rock

Salem County Native Made History as Doctor, Abolitionist and First African-American Lawyer Admitted to Practice Before U.S. Supreme Court

The Cumberland/Gloucester/Salem Vicinage will celebrate Black History Month with an event honoring the life of Salem-born John S. Rock, a Renaissance man in a time of slavery whose groundbreaking admittance to the bar of the U.S. Supreme Court in 1865 signaled a dramatic departure from the Dred Scott decision that had denied citizenship rights to African-Americans less than a decade earlier.

The free public program, organized by the vicinage's Advisory Committee on Minority Concerns, will be held on Monday, Feb. 29, from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m., in the ceremonial courtroom of the historic Salem County Courthouse, 104 Market St., Salem.

The event will begin with a discussion of Rock's life and times led by two men who spent years researching his story: Christopher Brooks, an associate professor of constitutional and legal history at Stroudsburg University, and J. Harlan Buzby of Pennsville, who wrote "John S. Rock: Teacher, Healer, Counselor," a biography for high school students.

Following the presentation, a panel of African-American leaders from the legal community will discuss Rock's legacy as well as the personal challenges they encountered along their own career paths. The panel members are retired New Jersey Supreme Court Justice John E. Wallace Jr., Superior Court Judge Christine Allen-Jackson, Cumberland County Prosecutor Jennifer Webb-McRae, Bridgeton Joint Municipal Court Prosecutor Demetrica Todd-Ruiz, and attorney Chad B. Davis of the Vineland firm Rosner & Tucker PC.

"We are very proud of this program," said Assignment Judge Georgia M. Curio, who will serve as panel moderator. "John Rock is an important and underappreciated figure in not only African-American history but the history of the American legal system. His story is a fascinating one."

Background on John S. Rock

Born to free parents in 1825 in Elsinboro Township, Salem County, Rock pursued a formal education at a time when it was illegal in most states for blacks to read. By the time he turned 27, Rock had already worked as a teacher, dentist and physician. He was one of the first black men in the United States to receive a medical degree. Rock later moved to Boston, where he treated sick fugitive slaves and emerged as one of the leading black abolitionists in New England as well as a prolific orator credited with coining the phrase "black is beautiful."

When declining health led him to give up his dental and medical practices, Rock began writing U.S. Sen. Charles Sumner of Massachusetts for support in pursuing admission to practice law before the bar of the U.S. Supreme Court. A vocal opponent of slavery, Sumner had once been severely beaten with a cane inside the U.S. Senate chamber by a fellow congressman who took offense to a speech he gave denouncing the political power of slave owners.

At the time Rock made his request, the chief justice of the Supreme Court was Roger Taney, who wrote in *Dred Scott vs. Sanford* that blacks, whether free or slave, could not be considered citizens because they were “so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.” Sumner waited until two months after Taney’s death to appeal to the Supreme Court on Rock’s behalf.

On Feb. 1, 1865, Rock and Sumner appeared together before the new chief justice, anti-slavery champion Salmon P. Chase. Just three days earlier, the U.S. House of Representatives had passed the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, abolishing slavery. With four of the justices who had joined the majority in *Dred Scott* looking on, Chase admitted Rock to the bar of the U.S. Supreme Court, making him the first black man to receive a license to argue cases before the high court. A New York Tribune headline declared that Rock’s admission had “buried” the *Dred Scott* decision.

Soon after, Rock was received by the U.S. House of Representatives, another first for a black person in the United States. On his way home from the ceremony, Rock was arrested for traveling without a pass to show he was a free man.

Rock died of tuberculosis a year later, at the age of 41, without ever trying a case. Though well known in his time, his story is largely unknown today.

“I think part of the reason for that is because he died so young,” said Brooks, the Stroudsburg professor. “Another reason is that, unlike so many others, his legacy is not tied directly to the emotional issue of slavery. For John Rock, it was about something even greater. It was about working within the rules and using the constitution as a tool to pursue justice.”

Rock’s admission to the bar, Brooks said, is “a point in time that should be marked on a calendar, but isn’t. It was an important symbol of the changes that were to come.”

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Space for this event is limited. Advance registration is recommended. Contact Stephanie Weber at (856) 575-5244.