Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair,” Langston Hughes wrote in his autobiography, when he was shuffled from one mid-Western city to another, to his career as a poet, where he crossed the country and traveled the world, the carpet of Hughes’ life had many an unturned tack in it—splinters, and boards torn up, and places with no carpet on the floor—bare. Despite the many florescents in his life, his fame, and myriad friends, Hughes never became a rich man. Far from it, his career was marked by many flourishes in his life, his great fame, and myriad friends, his poems, “Mother to Son.” Indeed, from his nomadic childhood and his remarkable family pedigree.

Born James Mercer Langston Hughes on February 1, 1902, in Joplin, Missouri, Hughes was originally named after his father, James Nathanial Hughes (1871–1934) and after his maternal grandmother, Jane, John Mercer Langston (1829–1897). It remains a mystery why Hughes discarded his grandmother’s name; and while Hughes had a rocky relationship with his father, this may not fully explain why he dropped his father’s name as well. Freeborn, John Mercer Langston was appointed, among other high profiled dignitaries, as Minister to Haiti, and his brother Charles Henry, Hughes’ grandfather, also held several important positions and was a U.S. congressman from Virginia. Both men were also deeply involved in the abolitionist movement and were leaders of the post-Civil War activities to alleviate the plight of Blacks in America. Long before his birth, his family had already established a distinguished legacy upon which Langston Hughes could stand.

Langston Hughes’ creativity proved path breaking. As early as 1926, he departed not only from traditional poetic forms with their rigid rhythms and formalistic rhyme schemes but also from the dialect poetry adopted by African American writers such as Paul Laurence Dunbar. For nearly three-quarters of a century, Hughes’ work is still relevant and testifies to his eminence as a major singer and seer of the American condition. The range of Hughes’ works extends from his initial embrace of the poetic style of that quintessential American poet, Walt Whitman, to poems that came to be ever more tightly associated with the African American music tradition. Not only did Hughes blaze a new path in African American life in America, but also he established a new African American poetic tradition with his insistence that Black artists look to African American music as the spiritual lodestone of African American art and culture. As he wrote in his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” “I am to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America.”

As a midwife of the New Negro Movement of the 1920’s, Hughes befriended the most distinguished principals of the Harlem Renaissance, including W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston and Walter Thurman. The last two, along with painter Aaron Douglas and the all around artist Bruce Nugent, produced, along with Hughes, the one (and only) issue of the magazine Fire!!, infamous for its treatment of sexually taboo themes and frank depictions of lower class Black life. Eventually, Hughes became an itinerate poet who traveled not only around the States but also throughout the world, including Japan and Russia. Perhaps because of his command of Spanish, he developed an intense affiliation with Spanish speaking intellectuals and artists. He covered the Spanish Civil War for the Baltimore Afro-American in 1937, for example, and befriended Nicolás Guillén, poet laureate of the Republic of Cuba. Also a French speaker, Hughes conversed with Jacques Prévert, one of France’s most popular and influential poets, during his trip to that country. Hughes’ love of these languages points back to the multi-lingual tradition of his granduncle John Mercer Langston who, among his other appointments, had also served as Minister to the Dominican Republic.

By the late thirties and into the early forties, Hughes, now back in the States, expanded his artistic interests and founded several theater companies in cities such as Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. In the meantime, he also wrote the novel Not Without Laughter in 1930, and short stories, as collected in the volume, The Ways of White Folks. But it was not until 1951 that he published his next most notable book of poetry, Montage of a Dream Deferred, with its intense focus on the Harlem community. “What happens to a dream deferred?” asked Hughes: “It explodes.”

His reputation was somewhat marred by his appearance before Senator Eugene McCarthy’s Committee on Un-American Activities. Hughes kept his good humor, however, as later reflected in his newspaper columns, collected and published in 1954 as Simple Tales a Wee. To re-energize his writing career, Hughes published a second autobiography, Wonder As I Wander (Rinehart, 1956), and Ask Your Mama: 32 Moods for Jazz (Knopf, 1961), a landmark, book-length poem that reinvigorated Hughes’ career-long experiment of combining poetry and Black popular music. Hughes’ career was capped by his election to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1963, and to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Six years before his death, he was awarded the Spingarn Medal from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for outstanding achievement by a Black American writer.

More poetry would follow as well as translations, musicals, and newspaper columns until his death in 1967 in Harlem. He was stricken with prostate cancer while living in his brownstone home on East 127th Street, an edifice that has been converted into a national landmark. Since his death, he has also served as a destination for various organizations and people who come to honor the spirit and humanity of James Langston Hughes, the “Black poet laureate” of America.

Professor Raymond Patterson of City College started the Hughes Festival to honor Hughes’ memory and to celebrate great Black writers that followed in his path.