

Walls, Josiah T. (1842–1905)

Florida. Born a slave. Black. Literate. Editor, planter, teacher, lawyer.



Josiah T. Walls, Florida's only Reconstruction black congressman, was born a slave in Winchester, Virginia. At the outbreak of the Civil War, he was impressed into labor as a servant in the Confederate army. Captured by Union forces, he was sent to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, where he received some schooling, and enlisted in 1863 as a private in Company F, 3d U.S. Colored Infantry. He rose to the rank of sergeant and was mustered out in Florida in 1865.

In Florida, Walls went into truck farming and lumbering and quickly prospered. The 1870 census reported him as owning no property, but thanks to his salary as a congressman he was able, in 1873, to purchase for \$5,000 a large plantation formerly owned by Confederate general James W. Harrison. He also practiced law and opened a law partnership in 1874 with black political leaders Henry Harmon and William U. Saunders. In 1873, he purchased the Gainesville *New Era*, making it the state's first black-owned newspaper.

Walls attended the Florida Republican convention of 1867, and was elected from Alachua County to the constitutional convention of 1868. He served in the Florida Assembly, 1868–69, and Senate, 1870, and was mayor of Gainesville in the early 1870s. In 1870 he was elected to Florida's only congressional seat, serving from December 1871 to January 1873, when he was unseated in a challenge by his Demo-

cratic opponent. He was again elected in 1872, serving 1873–75, and was reelected but not seated because of alleged intimidation of voters in 1874. In Congress, he avidly promoted internal improvements in Florida, introducing many bills for grants of public lands, river and harbor improvements, and encouragement of immigration, most of which, however, failed to emerge from committee.

Walls remained a prominent figure in the state after Reconstruction. He served again in the Senate, 1877–79, then devoted himself to his plantation of orange groves. In 1883 he was described as the state's largest truck farmer. He unsuccessfully ran for Congress in 1884 and for the state Senate in 1890. In 1892, he became an active member of the Populist party. A freeze in 1895 wiped out his agricultural enterprise. At the turn of the century, Walls became director of the college farm at Florida A&M University at Tallahassee. He died intestate and in complete obscurity; no obituary was published in any Florida newspaper.

See also Figure 4

Klingman, Walls. Richardson, Florida, 177–83.