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-