



Florida's First Delegate to Congress (1822): The Story of Joseph M. Hernández

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Background

José Mariano Hernández was born on May 26, 1878, in St. Augustine, Florida. He is best remembered for becoming Florida Territory's first delegate to Congress on October 2, 1822.

How could a man of Spanish descent be the first person to represent Florida in Congress?

- Spain governed Florida from 1783-1821 as two colonies, East Florida and West Florida. Spanish East Florida, where Hernández was born, was described as "a province virtually devoid of people, a place rich in land but poor in inhabitants" (Gov.info 70). This is where Hernández will reside during his tenure and do most work once he is appointed to office.
- Living in Florida as a citizen of Spain, Hernández was involved in the First Seminole War (1817-1818), volunteering to resist US expansionists as a part of the Spanish military. This war set the stage for Spain to cede Florida to the US in 1821, and for Hernández to pledge his allegiance to the US.
- Hernández had built a powerful base that included unlikely friendships and immense plots of land. One of his friends was Governor William Pope DuVal, who nominated Hernández to become a member of the legislative council. At the time of US annexation Hernandez owned a grand total of 25,670 acres of land in Florida. The legislative council nominated him as territorial delegate to Congress, where he ran opposed.

Methods

My research project's goal is to see how a Hispanic man shaped a new territory run by US rule. I utilized both primary and secondary sources to identify:

- how Hernández came to power,
- what he did in Congress to support Florida, and
- what happened to him after his political career.

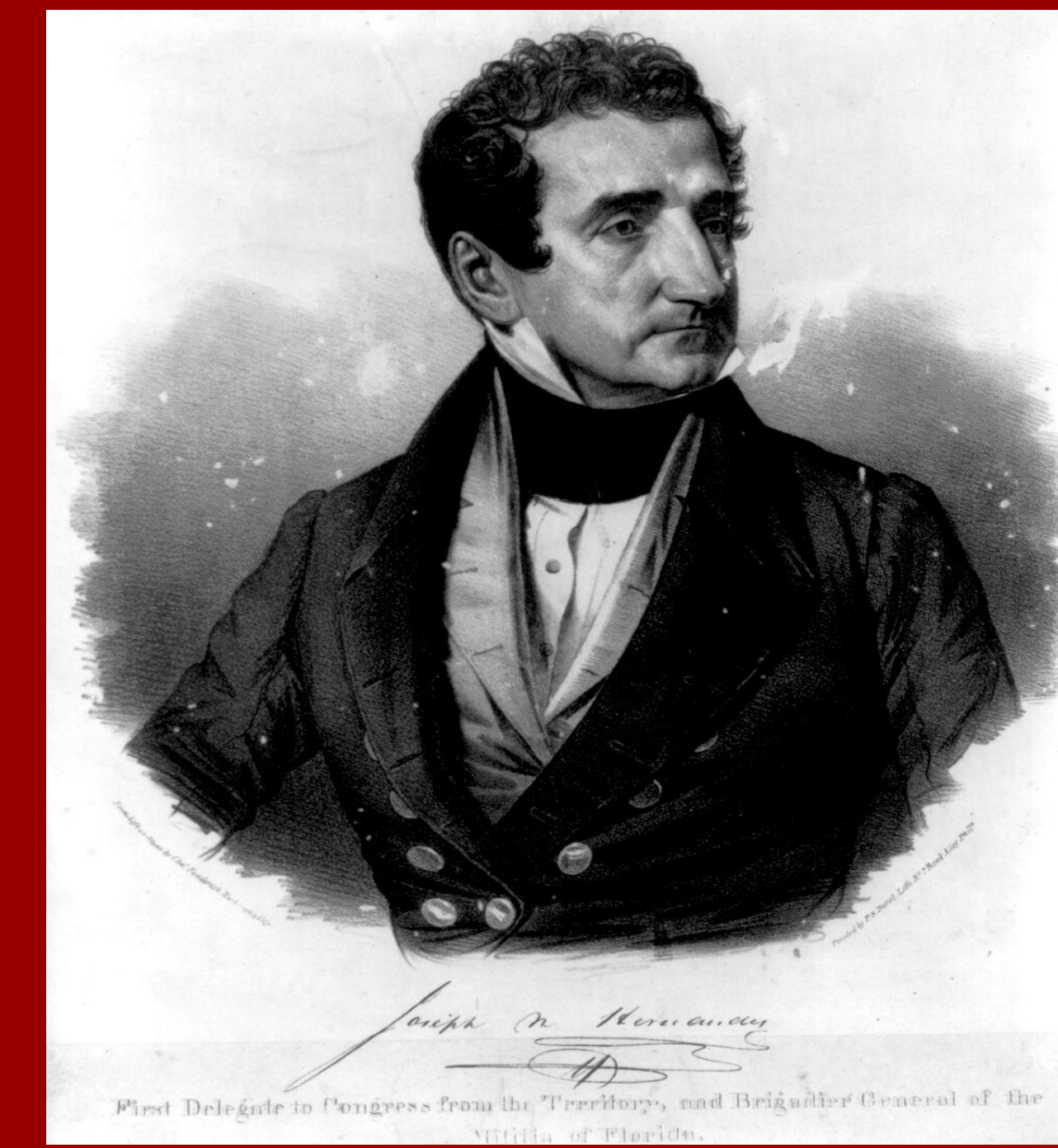
My sources for exploring the impact of Hernández as the first Territorial Delegate of Florida include:

- three of the acts that Hernández persuaded Congress to pass. These acts show the goals and aspirations Hernández had as a delegate and demonstrate his character as a citizen of Florida, wanting the best for his fellow citizens.
- A newspaper story from the East Herald that brings to light public opinion about Hernández. This newspaper shows the opinions of the people of Florida during the time of his bid for reelection.
- A biographical sketch on Hernández's life from start to finish. This biography depicts Hernández's life on his journey to becoming a delegate, what he did as a delegate, and his life after politics.

These three sources provide a thorough understanding of the life of Joseph M. Hernández and how he built a bridge between cultures in Territorial Florida.



East Florida Herald, May 7, 1825, detailing public response to Hernández's unsuccessful bid for reelection.



Official US House of Representatives portrait of Joseph Marion Hernández (1788-1857).

Research

Joseph M. Hernández bridges Spanish and English cultures in Territorial Florida. After Spain ceded Florida to the US in 1821, rather than retreating with other Spaniards to places like Cuba or Mexico, he stayed. Later Hernández was elected on October 2, 1822, and sworn in on January 3, 1823, as Florida's First Territorial Delegate to Congress.

Once in office Hernández wanted to:

- verify status of land grants,
- advocate for infrastructure improvements, and
- foster relationships with Spanish elites, Indians, and territorial authorities.

One of his first bills was submitted on January 20, 1823, where he asked the House Committee on Public Lands to award "public lots and houses within the city of Pensacola" to the city rather than the federal government (Gov.Info 73). This allowed for new settlers to have homes in this new American territory. He lobbied for the construction of a 380-mile road stretching between St. Augustine and Pensacola, the two largest settlements at the time. He promoted resolving conflicts with American Indians in hopes of finding a smoother transition from Spanish to US rule: a goal that led Hernández to support the controversial Treaty of Moultrie Creek and its policy of restricting Natives to reservations.

Towards the end of his term the populace had mixed feelings about Hernández. In 1823, Richard Keith Call replaced Hernández as Florida's Territorial Delegate to Congress. When Hernández ran again in 1825 the East Florida Herald had this to say, "In the faithful execution of the various and important trusts committed to him his good sense and information on every subject connected with the interest and prosperity of this territory have inspired confidence and esteem in the Administration...and gained for Florida many warm and valuable friends on the floor of Congress" (see above). Supporters of Joseph M. White suggested that having a Hispanic Delegate would be a liability for Florida, arguing that White "is better acquainted with our language, the organization of our political institutions, and the mode of transacting business in the councils of the nation" (Gov.Info 75). Despite prejudice against his Hispanic heritage, Hernández continued building bridges between cultures. He became President of the first Legislative Council for Florida Territory to meet in Tallahassee (1824).

Discussion

I feel a connection with Joseph M. Hernández because he is a bridge builder. So is my dad.

Hernández was an accomplished man in many ways: bilingual, a renowned soldier, a groundbreaking politician, and a planter. Everything he accomplished circles back to his heritage. His heritage led to the creation of a bridge between the Spanish and US Floridas which he inhabited.

Although my dad is not a famous politician, I still feel connections between him and Hernández. Hernández had to find his way in a Florida governed by the US rather than Spain, and my dad had to find a new life in the US after fleeing from Cuba. Both men saw the need to have a new identity in their current situation. José Mariano Hernández changed his name to Joseph Marion Hernández, and my dad changed his name from Enrique Jesús Castellat to Henry Castellat. In my eyes this action symbolizes a fresh start where they both felt the need to make a change in their lives to build bridges in the new world they were entering.

Unlike Hernández, my dad would be building actual bridges, as an architect. Both men inspire me to find opportunities for lasting public service.

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