

The Legend of John Henry

As the story goes, John Henry was hired as a steel driver for the railroad. Later, the railroad company brought in a steam drill to speed up work on the tunnel. It was said that the steam drill could drill faster than any man. The challenge was on, "man against machine." John Henry was known as the strongest, the fastest, and the most powerful man working on the railroad. He went up against the steam drill to prove that the black worker could drill a hole through the rock farther and faster than the drill could. Using two 10-pound hammers, one in each hand, he pounded the drill so fast and so hard that he drilled a 14-foot hole into the rock. The legend says that the drill was only able to drill nine feet. John Henry beat the steam drill and later died of exhaustion.



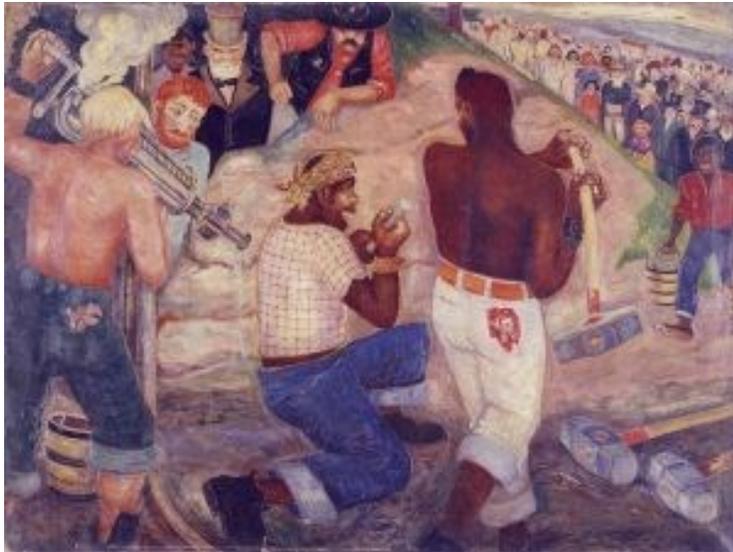
John Henry statue and the Great Bend Tunnel NPS photo/Dave Bieri

There are many versions of the story of John Henry. The historical accuracy of many of the aspects of the John Henry legend are still debated today, including where he might have been born, where he worked, and even if he existed at all.

According to Dr. Louis W. Chappell, an associate professor of English at West Virginia University, and Dr. Guy B. Johnson of the University of North Carolina Institute for Research in Social Science, he was real. Their story of John Henry was developed from the accounts of the men who worked alongside him. They conducted extensive interviews during the mid to late 1920's with many men that had knowledge of the affair. In 1928, Dr. Johnson published *John Henry Tracking Down a Negro Legend*. In 1933, Dr. Chappell published *John Henry a Folklore Study*.

According to Historian, Scott Nelson, he was a real person—a nineteen-year-old from New Jersey who was convicted of theft in a Virginia court in 1866, sentenced to ten years in the penitentiary, and put to work building the C&O Railroad.

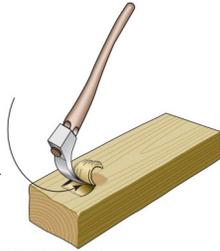
Was John Henry a real person or a made up character?



John Henry on the Right, Steam Drill on the Left, 1944/1947
Palmer C. Hayden,
Oil on Canvas h30 x w40 in.
Palmer C. Hayden Collection, Museum of African American Art,
Los Angeles, CA

In the early 1870s, construction of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway along the Greenbrier and New Rivers employed thousands of workers. Many of these men were African Americans who migrated to West Virginia in search of jobs. Jobs on the railroad were labor intensive and low paying, required long hours, and were at times dangerous.

Railroad workers primarily used shovels, wheelbarrows, mules, and black powder to move millions of tons of rock and dirt to prepare the railroad bed. Workers used axe and adz to cut and shape hundreds of trees into ties, bridge timbers, and lumber for railcars. They sweated in the hot summer sun and froze in the cold mountain winters as they worked to connect Tidewater Virginia with the

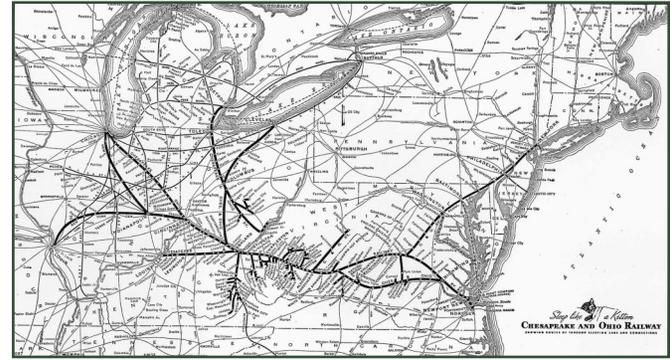


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Adz- a hand tool for shaping wood. It is one of the earliest tools and was widely used in the Stone Age.

The process of building a tunnel in the 1870s was slow and difficult work. Holes were drilled into the layers of rock using a hand drill and hammer. Holes were then filled with powder and blasted in order to make the rock small enough to remove from the tunnel. The drill was held by a "shaker" who turned it slightly after each blow and gave it a shake to flip the rock dust out of the hole. The "steel driver" swung the hammer as hard and as often as he could, pounding the drill into the rock.



Workers digging the Crozet Tunnel



As the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway stretched westward along the Greenbrier River, The Legend of John Henry was born at Big Bend Mountain near Talcott, West Virginia. The Legend of John Henry is just that, a "legend," and through the legend, John Henry became a symbol. He symbolized the many African Americans whose sweat and hard work built and maintained the rails across West Virginia. He was a symbol for the black workers who gave their lives in these dangerous occupations. The legend, as told through ballads and work songs, has kept the story of John Henry and the black railroad workers alive.



LOT 7414-C, no. N91. Library of Congress

Gabriel Brown (left), who performed blues variations on "John Henry" on guitar for Alan Lomax, Zora Neale Hurston, and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle in Eatonville, Florida, 1935. Pictured performing with Rochelle French. Photo by Alan Lomax.