

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • LEGEND

A Hammer in His Hand

John Henry and the Man Nobody Can Prove Existed

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Contribution Track • ERA IV • Appalachia

The Legend

John Henry is an American folk hero: a Black steel-driving man on post-Civil War railroad tunnel construction who, when his employer brought in a steam-powered drill to replace human labor, raced the machine by hand and beat it — then died shortly after, hammer still in his grip. The National Park Service's own telling places the contest at the Big Bend Tunnel on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway near Talcott, West Virginia, built in the early 1870s. The story survives in two related musical forms: fast narrative ballads telling the whole arc, and slower work songs actual laborers sang to set a pace that would not kill them — "this old hammer killed John Henry, but it won't kill me."

Tracking Down a Legend

The first serious investigation came from sociologist Guy B. Johnson, who traveled to Talcott in the 1920s and interviewed elderly residents for his 1929 book *Tracking Down a Negro Legend*. His conclusion was deliberately unresolved — he said one could make a case either for or against the Big Bend identification — and he noted that a Chesapeake and Ohio chief engineer stated flatly that no steam drills were ever used at Big Bend at all, undercutting the very contest the legend describes there.

A Different Tunnel Entirely

In 2006 historian Scott Reynolds Nelson proposed a very different answer in *Steel Drivin' Man*. Using recovered Virginia penitentiary and railroad records, he identified a candidate: a young Black man recorded as John William Henry, convicted of burglary and leased out under Virginia's convict-lease system to work on the Lewis Tunnel, roughly forty miles from Big Bend — where steam drills genuinely were used. Nelson's case rests on inference rather than proof: a name match, a prison record that stops around 1873, and a reading of ballad lyric details as pointing to a burial site behind the penitentiary rather than in West Virginia. Nelson attributes death to silicosis from rock dust, not one dramatic contest, and frames his candidate as representative of the many hundreds of convict laborers killed in unrecorded circumstances rather than a uniquely verified man.

No single identity commands full scholarly agreement. What is certain, regardless of which man the legend describes or whether it describes any one man at all, is the system both candidates moved through: Virginia and other Southern states leased mostly Black prisoners, often convicted of minor offenses, to railroads and mines as forced labor under brutal, frequently lethal conditions — a system that re-imposed enslavement in nearly everything but name after emancipation formally ended it.

NC Local Lens

No documented Fayetteville or Cumberland County connection exists for the John Henry legend — every proposed tunnel site (Big Bend, West Virginia; Lewis Tunnel, Virginia; Coosa Mountain, Alabama) sits outside North Carolina. North Carolina does hold one of the country's largest regional folk-song archives, the Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore, the kind of collection that typically preserves ballad and work-song variants like this one — but this entry could not confirm whether the Brown Collection specifically catalogs a John Henry variant, and states that as an open question rather than a documented tie. This entry claims no confirmed NC connection.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

The central fact of this entry is itself unproven: no single historical John Henry has been definitively identified. Every candidate rests on circumstantial or inferential evidence.

Location and cause of death: disputed between Big Bend (traditional) and Lewis Tunnel (Nelson), and between sudden exertion-death (ballad tradition) and silicosis (Nelson, NPS's more measured framing).

Frank C. Brown Collection: its holdings could not be verified directly in this research pass — confirm against the published index before asserting a specific NC folklore tie.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Steel Drivin' Man: John Henry, the Untold Story of an American Legend* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
2. "John Henry and the Coming of the Railroad," National Park Service, New River Gorge National Park & Preserve, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.nps.gov/neri/learn/historyculture/john-henry-and-the-coming-of-the-railroad.htm>.
3. Guy B. Johnson, *John Henry: Tracking Down a Negro Legend* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1929).
4. Norm Cohen, *Long Steel Rail: The Railroad in American Folksong*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).
5. William Grimes, "Taking Swings at a Myth, With John Henry the Man," *The New York Times*, October 18, 2006.

Prepared by the Two Americas research process. Verify all figures against primary sources before publication if stronger originals become available.