

John Hendrix: The prophet of Oak Ridge revealed in a new book

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of June 3, 2024)

Carolyn Krause brings us a review of the presentation Dennis Aslinger, great grandson of John Hendrix, made to about 80 people at the Oak Ridge History Museum on May 9, 2024. The meeting was the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association's monthly public meeting.

Dennis is a good friend and the one person I have relied upon to provide details about the John Hendrix story I tell everyone to whom I provide Oak Ridge history tours or presentations. Several years ago we created webpages based on his genealogical research on John Hendrix.

Now he has compiled that research into a book, *The Prophet of Oak Ridge Revealed*, which more fully documents the details of John Hendrix. Enjoy Carolyn's review of his presentation.

John Hendrix (1865-1915) is well-known locally as the 20th century prophet of Oak Ridge. After responding to a voiced command "as loud and sharp as thunder," he lay on the ground for 40 nights and saw the future. He predicted that a city would arise on Black Oak Ridge as well as the Y-12 complex and that they "would help to win the greatest war that will ever be."

Thanks to the new book, *The Prophet of Oak Ridge Revealed*, written by John Hendrix's great-grandson, Dennis Aslinger of Oak Ridge, readers now know that Hendrix "killed a man in 1887, spent time in jail and was tried for murder." He was acquitted on Oct. 14, 1887, on the grounds that he shot and killed a local bully in self-defense, Aslinger told a large audience in his first talk about the book.

His recent presentation at the Oak Ridge History Museum was hosted by the Oak Ridge Heritage and Preservation Association. (The program was opened with a moment of silence in commemoration of Mick Wiest, an ORHPA founder and former president, who recently died.)

Many have heard the story that John's first wife, Julia Griffith, had left him when their toddler daughter who was sick with diphtheria died shortly after John punished her. Julia blamed John for the death and took their four children immediately to Arkansas, according to the popular but not completely correct narrative.

Aslinger claimed that he has written the first account that documents the date (1898) and location of Julia's successful filing for divorce from John. He also located court records that debunked the claim that she was the person who had him confined in an iron cage in the insane asylum building on Anderson County Poor Farm. That was the building he escaped from in 1901 and correctly predicted would burn down.

In his book Aslinger wrote: "I propose that John Hendrix had a religious awakening during his confinement that eventually led to his prophetic visions. The visions foretold events that would affect world history, yet none occurred further than three miles from his home."

In his story about John's murder trial, Aslinger said that John and his father Luke apparently had suffered beatings by John Gallaher, a member of a prominent family who reportedly was a local bully. "Before the Civil War, Gallagher was a teacher," Aslinger added. "He served in the Confederate Army for three years, and he was wounded at Chickamauga near Chattanooga in the second-largest battle of the Civil War. I think that Gallaher may well have had post-traumatic stress disorder and that made him violent."

In the book he wrote, "Young Hendrix was determined to avenge those wrongs when he became an adult. On the fateful day, Hendrix met Gallaher in the middle of a dusty country road. When Gallaher began to administer what he expected to be a routine beating (of John's arms with a gee stick used to train horses), he was stopped short by two pistol shots to the chest from short range."

Aslinger said that the murder trial was covered by Knoxville and Chattanooga newspapers. Anderson County had no newspaper at the time, but he also obtained information on the trial from Anderson County court records. He found that one lawyer defending John later became a state senator and attorney general for Knox and Sevier counties.

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According to the book, "The trial was held at Clinton, Tenn., on Thursday, Oct. 13, 1887, and John pled not guilty (for shooting and killing Gallaher) by reason of self-defense. John's plea was supported by the bruising on his arms and by the fact that Gallaher's belongings were some distance from his body, showing that Gallaher sat his belongings down and came back toward Hendrix and was therefore the aggressor. John was exonerated." Interestingly, he was not charged for having a pistol at a time in Tennessee when it was generally illegal to "go armed," wrote Aslinger.

On April 29, 1888, John married Julia Ann Griffith of Morgan County, who happened to be his second cousin, once removed (both had the same great-great grandfather – Garrett Hendrix). They both lived in Anderson County at the site of the now-closed Bull Run Steam Plant. They had five children. In 1897 when toddler Ethel Perrygold died after John "disciplined" her, Julia took her four remaining children to her mother's house in Morgan County, not Arkansas with her brother, as the story goes, until later.

According to the book, "All previously published or recorded accounts of John Hendrix's life implied that Julia simply abandoned John but, in fact, she filed for divorce in Morgan County Circuit Court sometime before July 28, 1898." On July 5, 1900, the judge agreed with the allegation of Julia that "John Hendrix is guilty of the wrongs and injuries alleged in the petition" and found that he "is not the proper person to have the care and control of the minor children named Jesse, Elzeny, Eva and Cassy."

Aslinger acknowledged that court records suggest that "John was an abuser." He may even have spanked or violently shaken two-year-old Ethel before she died because he was disturbed by her non-stop crying that can be caused by the diphtheria symptom of a severe sore throat.

"He probably stalked Julia because the court record indicates that he followed her to Morgan County," the author wrote. "After the divorce was final, Julia, her children and one of her brothers travelled, probably by train, from Morgan County to Arkansas. Julia had to be truly terrified of John to move more than 400 miles away, to a place with no family or support system, to ensure that he could not find her and hurt her or her children. John never saw his children again."

What happened to John after his divorce was final in July 1900 and he learned that Julia and his children had left for Arkansas? "I contend that the trauma of losing his wife and children, the grief, and associated sense of guilt, caused him to experience a mental break," wrote Aslinger. John was committed to the Anderson County Poor Farm's insane asylum later that year and escaped from it in the spring of 1901.

Aslinger, who heard many John Hendrix stories from his grandmother, who he helped care for during her recovery from surgery, wrote that she said he "dug out" of the building. She told her grandson, "When they saw him getting away, he said, 'Don't come after me. This place is evil and within a month God is going to burn it down.' And not long after that, it did burn down. People started saying he was a witch." In 2023 Aslinger found a county court record that verified that owing to a lightning strike in the spring of 1901, the insane asylum building burned to the ground.

John made this first prediction when he was 35 years old. His next set of predictions came after he slept on the ground for 40 nights when he was at least 42 and after he was married to his second wife, Martha Jane, on July 5, 1908, in Anderson County. Martha Jane Whitehead Gregory was a divorcee who left Blount County with her five minor children and bought property in Robertsville. "She either followed her eldest daughter Paralee and her husband Perry Raby or they followed her in a show of support," Aslinger wrote. He added that John was either a boarder or renter when the two met.

On Sept. 9, 1909, they gave birth to Curtis Allen "Curt" Hendrix, in Anderson County. In 1912 and 1914, two of Martha Jane's daughters died of typhoid fever.

According to the book, on June 2, 1915, "John Hendrix succumbed to pulmonary tuberculosis at the age of 49 years, six months, and 23 days. It is unknown how long John suffered with this disease, but it was claimed that he became sick with either pneumonia or TB when he slept on the cold, wet ground for 40 nights." Aslinger speculated that he slept on the ground while married between 1909 and 1912.

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During John's fatal illness, he was cared for by Paralee Gregory Raby, who unlike her mother, had no fear of exposure to disease and who "was widely known as a saintly woman, caring for others without regard for her own comfort, safety or health," the author wrote. "On April 22, 1915, knowing that his end was near, John repaid her kindness by selling her half interest in his 15-acre farm for \$1 and the other half interest for taking care of him until his death." John had previously purchased the land from a sawmill operator by performing farm labor.

Following his wishes, John was buried on the hill above his orchard so he could "watch the apple thieves out of his orchard." The original grave marker was hand carved by Perry Raby, but it was stolen long ago. The current John Hendrix grave marker was purchased and placed by Dorothy Bruce, a teacher at Jefferson Junior High School, and her students in 1967. Oak Ridge Historian Ray Smith said the grave marker can be found at 123 Hendrix Dr. in one of the 70 cemeteries and graveyards on the Oak Ridge Reservation.

Hendrix prophecies that were fulfilled, according to Aslinger, were the predictions of the burning of the Anderson County asylum building, the construction of the L&N Railroad and later its spur in the area, airplanes that will carry freight and passengers and the construction of what became the Y-12 Electromagnetic Separation Plant in Bear Valley and the city on and adjacent to Black Oak Ridge. Here is an excerpt from the best-known Hendrix prophecy:

"And I tell you, Bear Creek Valley someday will be filled with great buildings and factories, and they will help toward winning the greatest war that ever will be. Big engines will dig big ditches and thousands of people will be running to and fro. They will be building things, and there will be great noise and confusion and the earth will shake. I've seen it. It's coming. And there will be a city on Black Oak Ridge that will finally be called Paradise." (I like that last one since I live on that ridge!)

Aslinger noted in his talk that his great-great grandfather's prediction did not account for the destruction of Oak Ridge area communities nor the contributions of the Oak Ridge Gaseous Diffusion Plant (K-25), S-50 Liquid Thermal Diffusion Plant and Oak Ridge National Laboratory (X-10) to helping win World War II.

Then he talked about his grandfather, Curt. He and his wife Linda had eight children (she was carrying the ninth when he was murdered in Union County by two troublemakers). The author's mother was five years old when her father and his Grandpa Curt was killed.

Curt and Linda were evicted from the 60 acres they owned in the Gamble Valley area (including two houses and two barns) and were reimbursed only \$850 when the Manhattan Project predicted by his father was started. He had been a heavy boom operator during construction of TVA's Norris, Douglas, and Cherokee dams. He was employed for a time as a fireman in Oak Ridge during World War II.

Curt wrote a satirical poem about the eviction that his family treasures (you can read it at <https://www.smithdray1.net/curt/biography.htm#:~:text=He%20worked%20as%20a%20fireman,just%20before%20he%20was%20killed>). He was particularly angry, Aslinger wrote, because "he was not allowed to remove a stack of newly purchased cedar fence posts that the government subsequently burned."

Thank you, Carolyn, for an excellent review of Dennis' presentation. I first published the John Hendrix story on my website, www.draysmith.com. I have talked to several others who are descended from John Hendrix and have enjoyed getting to know each one.

Grace Raby Crawford was John Hendrix's granddaughter who was adopted by Paralee and Perry Raby. She wrote a small booklet named, *Back of Oak Ridge*. I was pleased to help her get that book published and it is also included in my book, *John Hendrix Story*, which has the Historically Speaking columns I have published about John Hendrix.

The John Hendrix story was first introduced to me by Ed Westcott. He was proud to have a photograph of the original tombstone which he shared with me. Ed also told me about meeting a man who knew John Hendrix and attested to his prophecies.

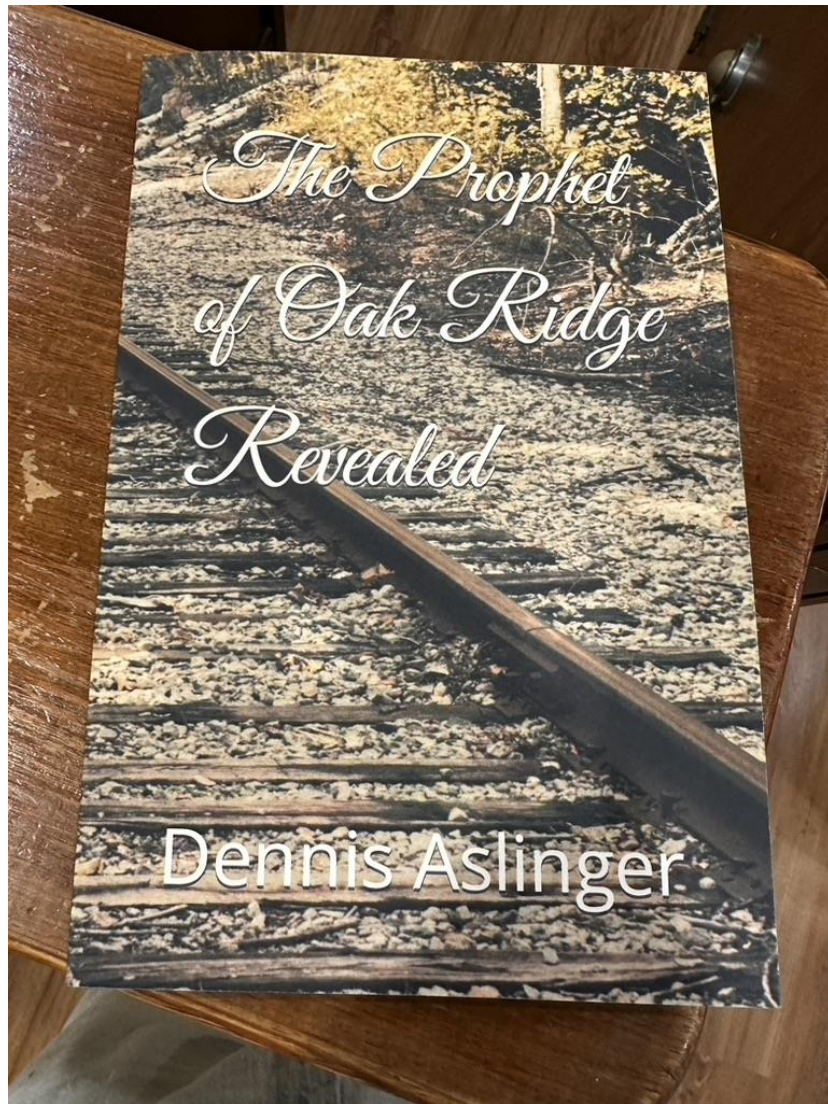
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Dennis Aslinger speaking to a full house at the Oak Ridge History Museum. *Courtesy of Ray Smith*

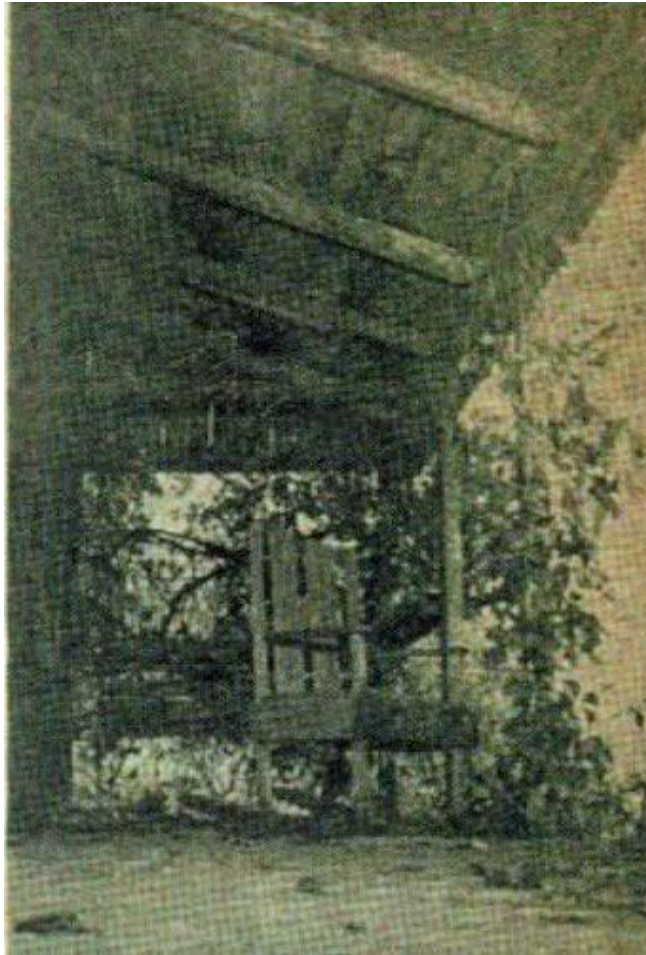
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Prophet of Oak Ridge Revealed written by Dennis Aslinger gives many details of John Hendrix's life that have not been included in earlier versions of the story. *Courtesy of Ray Smith*

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The rocking chair that inspired a display of a John Hendrix mannequin in a rocking chair in the old American Museum of Atomic Energy in Oak Ridge. According to Dennis Aslinger, the exhibit was removed from its successor, the American Museum of Science and Energy, "when a Washington, D.C. bureaucrat felt that folklore had no place in a 'prestigious museum of science.'" *Courtesy of The Oak Ridge Journal*