

# John Henry legend: symbol of Black Americans doing dangerous railroad work

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of July 8, 2024)

This is the second of three Historically Speaking columns featuring the recent Flatwater Tales Storytelling Tellers at the Historic Grove Theater, which was packed for each performance.

After Carolyn Krause heard Charlotte Blake Alston at the recent Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival tell the story of John Henry, the African American folk hero and legendary railroad worker, she became curious about the origins of American railroads. Who provided the cheap labor needed to do the dangerous jobs of building the U.S. Transcontinental Railroad between 1863 and 1869 and the railroads in the South?

She learned that the Transcontinental Railroad was largely built by 8,000 to 10,000 Irish immigrants working east to west and 15,000 to 20,000 Chinese immigrants working from west to east. According to a PBS article, "Initially, Chinese employees received wages of \$27 and then \$30 a month, minus the cost of food and board. In contrast, Irishmen were paid \$35 per month, with board provided. Workers lived in canvas camps alongside the grade" and wooden bunkhouses in the mountains during the winter.

According to historian Theodore Kornweibel, 75% of the construction of railroads in the South, including the laying of track and building of tunnels with the help of explosives, was done by free labor supplied by enslaved Black people. He estimated that more than 10,000 enslaved workers a year built the southern railroads between 1857 and 1865. Southern slaveholders and owners of cotton plantations were the principal stockholders and directors of many railroad companies because trains were needed to transport cotton to shipping ports to be exported.

Alston told in a spoken ballad form the story of John Henry, a Black folk hero celebrated in the United States almost as much as the white folk hero Paul Bunyan. Both are considered legends, not real historical figures. John Henry of West Virginia has been portrayed as a symbol for Black American workers who worked hard and sometimes died doing dangerous jobs in building and maintaining the rails.

Below Carolyn summarizes Alston's story of John Henry with selections from the spoken ballad.

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According to Charlotte Blake Alston, men like John Henry had to lay track across all types of terrain, including deserts, prairies, forests and mountains. When the men on "the steel gang line" reached the mountains, they had to start the process of building a tunnel through a mountain.

Men like John Henry, she said, had to wield a 10-pound steel hammer and pound a long steel spike into rock at the side the mountain. The men would continue to hammer steel spikes until they made a deep enough indentation in the rock that dynamite sticks could be inserted into the mountain side.

When the explosive was detonated, it would blast away part of the rock, carving a big hole part of the way through it. The men would continue to hammer, literally, until they had pounded all the way through the rock.

So, the story goes, a man brought to the mountain a steam drill he had invented that, he claimed, could do the work of the men on the steel gang line. John Henry stepped up and said, "I can prove to you that a man is worth more than a machine," insisting that in a race he could hammer his way through the rock faster than the steam drill.

Lots of song ballads have been written and sung about John Henry. Probably the most familiar melody goes this way: "John Henry told his old captain that a man ain't nothing but a man, but before my little steam drill beat me down, I'll die with a hammer in my hand. Lord, Lord, die with a hammer in my hand."

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Alston said that the song ballad she loves on John Henry is a recording of "Prisoners" by Folkways Records. The ballad is delivered in one voice with no accompaniment. "Early Sunday morning, when the bluebirds begin to sing, you can hear those hammers a mile or more; you can hear John Henry's hammering. Oh Lord, you can hear John Henry's hammering."

At the beginning of the ballad, Alston said that John was born in the 1840s with "a hammer in his hand," causing his mother considerable pain during childbirth. He was a big boy with strong hands. When sitting on his father's knee, he made a prediction: "He pointed his finger at a great piece of steel and said, that steel's going to be the death of me."

In his first job on a riverboat, the paddle wheel broke, causing the boat to take on water. He heroically jumped to the paddle wheel and forced it to turn enough to get the boat back into port. Yearning for a more challenging job and hearing about a railroad project, John got a job working on the railroad.

"They needed men of strength to wield ten-pound hammers to drive those steel spikes through. So, the power they could put in the dynamite blasted and carved away the residue." John felt good having a hammer in his hand again and was ready for a test of his strength.

"Well, the men started singing, and the hammers started swinging, and they swung those hammers all day. Each crew worked hard and fast as they could, but John's steel gang led the way. He did the job of ten strong men. And from the owner to the foreman to the waterboy, everybody was in awe of him."

Then a man approached the steel gang boss and told him about the steam drill he had. He said: "I can save you time. This brand-new steam drill can do the work of all the hammers on the steel gang line."

John defended the work of the gang's "good, hardworking" and loyal men. The man replied: "No matter how hardworking they might be, there's no man who can beat a machine. And I dare anybody to challenge the thought that he can beat a drill powered by steam."

John said that he will "take the test," adding that "before I let my steel gang down, I'll die with a hammer in my hand." Alston then said repeatedly, "Hammers of steel rang out" and then said John indicated that "he was not going to let his steel gang down."

She continued: "Little Bill grabbed one of the handheld spikes and placed it against the rock. John Henry picked up a 10-pound maul and prepared to race the clock." After stating repeatedly, "Hammers of steel rang out," she said, "Hiss, hiss, poppa poppa poppa, the steam drill chugged and churned. And shuttle after shuttle after shuttle of coal, that steam drill quickly burned. And John Henry was slamming that spike so hard and fast that it got red hot. Little Bill had to drop it, picked up another, John Henry kept up the fight."

Then John asked for a 20-pound hammer, throwing the 10-pound one away. Soon he asked for a second hammer and began swinging two hammers at the same time faster than he had swung one before.

"But John kept going, swinging both hammers so everybody could see. And when big John Henry had dug five feet, the machine had only dug three. Six foot, eight foot, ten foot John was out drilling the drilling machine. When the steam drill reached the eight-foot mark, John Henry had reached thirteen."

The men running the steam drill kept pouring in more coal, determined to keep on drilling. "But the machine couldn't keep up with big John's pace, seemed to be slowing down. Then all of a sudden, the steam drill started shaking, shuddered and it came to a halt. The machine overheated, stopped dead cold, seemed to be falling apart. 'Yeah,' all the men cried, 'He did it, he beat that thing.'"

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John had manually drilled two holes 14 feet into rock compared with under 10 feet for the machine. "Well, all of a sudden, John stepped swinging and a beam of light shone in his eyes. He had hammered his way through the last bit of rock and broken through to the other side. But when John stepped out into the light, drew in a slow deep breath, his body gave out. He collapsed to the ground just the way he predicted his death. Well, both man and machine were silent."

Heartbroken, the steel gang members carried John's body "off the mountain and buried him in the sand.

And people came from the East and the West to visit the grave of this man. And if you make your way to the Big Bend Tunnel, there's a statue on that spot. It's been vandalized, pulled off its stand and peppered with buckshot."

Alston concluded the story ballad by saying, "But no buckshot would stop the stories and songs to be told throughout this land" about Big John Henry, the steel-driving man and leader of the steel-driving gang, "who died with a hammer in his hand. Hammers of steel rang out!"

This story reminds us about the dangers of the difficult and important work done by poorly paid immigrants and enslaved Black laborers to build American railroads. Trains on tracks have been critical to the success of industrialized America starting in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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Thank you, Carolyn, for bringing us the John Henry story placed in the historical setting of the massive effort to build the nation's railroad system.



Charlotte Blake Alston *Courtesy of Ray Smith*

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A full house at all performances of the Flatwater Tales Storytelling at the Historic Grove Theater *Courtesy of Ray Smith*