John Henry: Fact or Fiction?
John Henry

- The story of John Henry, told mostly through ballads and work songs, traveled from coast to coast as the railroads drove west during the 19th Century.
In time, it has become timeless, spanning a century of generations with versions ranging from prisoners recorded at Mississippi's Parchman Farm in the late 1940s to present-day folk heroes.
A researcher named Guy Johnson discovered through research that the earliest *John Henry* ballads originated in the oral tradition of hammer songs in the 1870s and evolved over time into the ballads with which we are familiar today.
One of the earliest written copies of the ballad, prepared by a W. T. Blankenship and published about 1900 or slightly earlier, was obtained by Johnson. Johnson believed this version represented portions of several earlier versions.
John Henry

- From what we know, John Henry was born a slave in the 1840s or 1850s in North Carolina or Virginia.
John Henry

- He grew to stand 6 feet tall, 200 pounds - a giant in that day. He had an immense appetite, and an even greater capacity for work.
John Henry

- He possessed a beautiful baritone voice, and was a favorite banjo player to all who knew him.
John Henry

- John Henry, who was one among a legion of blacks just freed from the war, went to work rebuilding the Southern states whose territory had been ravaged by the Civil War, the period known as the Reconstruction.
Supposedly, John Henry was hired as a steel-driver for the C&O Railroad, a wealthy company that was extending its line from the Chesapeake Bay to the Ohio Valley.
Steel drivers, also known as hammer men, would spend their workdays driving holes into rock by hitting thick steel drills or spikes. The hammer man always had a partner, known as a shaker or turner, who would crouch close to the hole and rotate the drill after each blow.
The C&O's new line was moving along quickly, until Big Bend Mountain emerged to block its path. The mile-and-a-quarter-thick mountain was too vast to build around. So the men were told they had to drive their drills through it.
John Henry

- It took 1,000 men three years to finish. The work was treacherous. Visibility was unimportant but the air inside the developing tunnel was thick with noxious black smoke and dust.
John Henry

- Hundreds of men would lose their lives to Big Bend before it was over, their bodies piled into makeshift, sandy graves just steps outside the mountain. John Henry was one of them.
As the story goes, John Henry was the strongest, fastest, most powerful man working on the rails. He used a 14-pound hammer to drill, some historians believe, 10 to 20 feet in a 12-hour day - the best of any man on the rails.
John Henry

- One day, a salesman came to camp, boasting that his steam-powered machine could outdrill any man. A race was set: man against machine.
- John Henry won, so the legend says, driving 14 feet to the drill's nine.
John Henry

- He died shortly after, some say from exhaustion, some say from a stroke.
There are many reasons why John Henry’s life became such a legend.

John Henry's life was about steadfastness, raw strength that no system could take from a man.
John Henry

- To the thousands of railroad hands, he was an inspiration and an example, a man just like they who worked in a deplorable, unforgiving atmosphere but managed to make his mark.
Oh, this time will be different... This time he faces not just a boy and his shovel. This time he faces—

Hey kid! Get a snow blower!

Each snowfall he mocks me, that Dr. Dampflok and his Fancy Pants Snowmeister Mach IV.


Hmph. I wonder if John Henry ever felt like beaming those steam engine guys with a snowball?