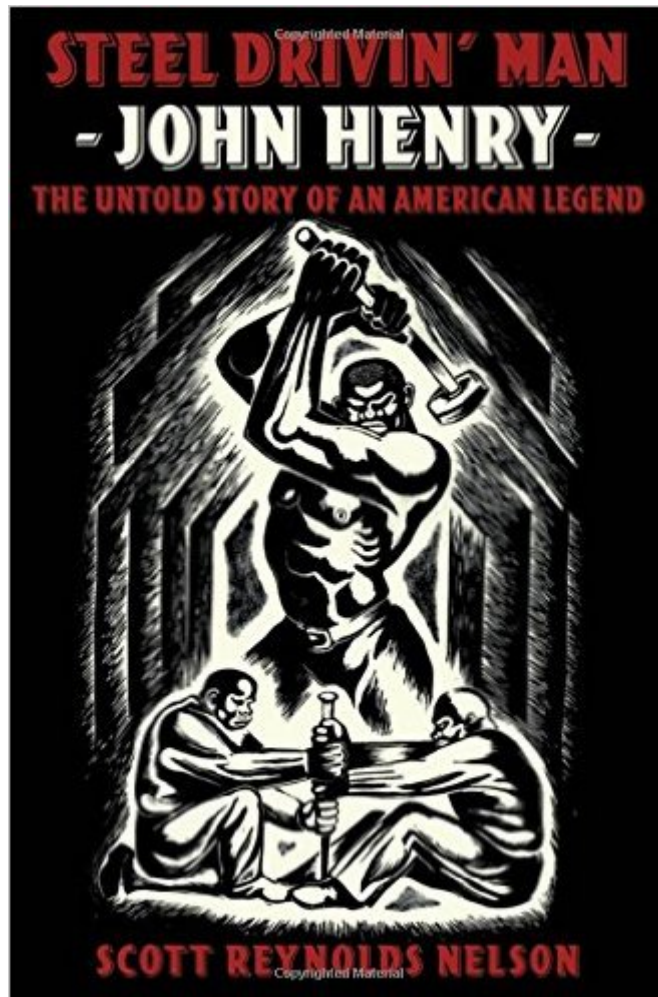


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# Steel Drivin' Man: John Henry, The Untold Story Of An American Legend



## Synopsis

The ballad "John Henry" is the most recorded folk song in American history and John Henry--the mighty railroad man who could blast through rock faster than a steam drill--is a towering figure in our culture. In *Steel Drivin' Man*, Scott Reynolds Nelson recounts the true story of the man behind the iconic American hero, telling the poignant tale of a young Virginia convict who died working on one of the most dangerous enterprises of the time, the first rail route through the Appalachian Mountains. Using census data, penitentiary reports, and railroad company reports, Nelson reveals how John Henry, victimized by Virginia's notorious Black Codes, was shipped to the infamous Richmond Penitentiary to become prisoner number 497, and was forced to labor on the mile-long Lewis Tunnel for the C&O railroad. Equally important, Nelson masterfully captures the life of the ballad of John Henry, tracing the song's evolution from the first printed score by blues legend W. C. Handy, to Carl Sandburg's use of the ballad to become the first "folk singer," to the upbeat version by Tennessee Ernie Ford. Attractively illustrated with numerous images, *Steel Drivin' Man* offers a marvelous portrait of a beloved folk song--and a true American legend.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Although I am a Civil War aficionado, I had rarely read about what happened directly after the war. However, this book has changed my reading habits!! From the time I was a child, I had a special affection for the John Henry songs and "legends". Well, I had no idea he was REAL-- flesh and blood! This book not only brought him alive for me, but the research and presentation was EXQUISITE. Dr Nelson -- in my eyes you have done a tremendous job of bringing alive not only

John Henry, but the terrible wrongs done to thousands of African-American freedmen (and women) in Richmond, by the corrupt "Freedman's Bureau". By reading this book, in my mind's eye AND ear, I could see the men and women who toiled in the often brutal conditions, to dig tunnels and build track. I could almost hear the weird and wonderful chants that helped lay the track and ease the brutal conditions and physical pain that these people, mostly (wrongfully convicted in many cases) convicts endured, usually until they dropped dead from the years of toil and/or silicosis. Could that photograph of a John Henry (page 46) in Bealton VA (not that far from Richmond) really be him? Truth is stranger than fiction - perhaps we ARE looking into his smiling face. And one question I have-- how does the Smithsonian REALLY know which bones are his? (maybe I missed something) The author's narrative, interspersed with highly pertinent photographs AND song verse kept me riveted to this very complex and highly interesting book. Although to some readers the book may seem to start out slow -- it's like a steam train -- it eventually picks up speed and keeps one fascinated.

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