

Canton
Museum
of Art



TEACHER RESOURCE PACKET

Grade Level: 4th Grade

A look at the real man behind the legend of John Henry and the role of symbolism in portraying both verbal and visual ideas.



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This document, companion artwork images, virtual tour of the exhibit: *"Frozen in Fire"*, and many other resources are available through the Canton Museum of Art website at:

www.cantonart.org/learn/museum-to-go.

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If I Had a Hammer!

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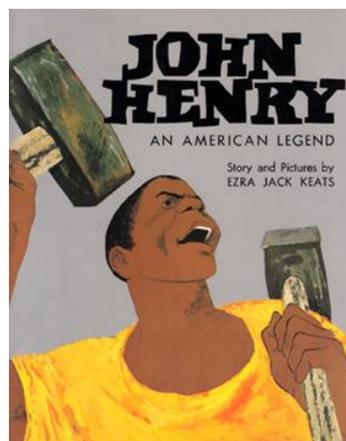
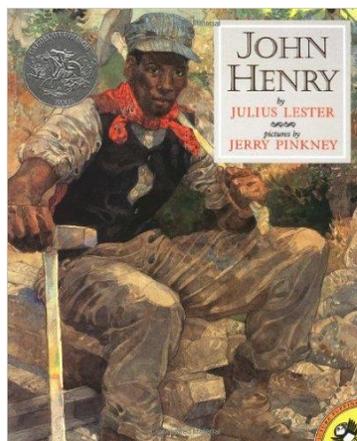
John Henry the Man

Although there is little documentation that proves his existence, it is believed that the real John Henry was born a slave in the 1840s or 1850s in North Carolina or Virginia and that he grew to be six feet tall and weigh over 200 lbs., which was very large for a man during those times. It is speculated that John Henry was arrested for vagrancy (as were many African American men after the end of the civil war) and forced to work for the C&O Railroad through convict leasing. Convict leasing is a system that arose in the south to fill the labor void after the abolishment of slavery. State governments began leasing out prisoners for a fee to private businesses who were then responsible for feeding and housing them. In reality the convicts were half starved, chained during the day, and slept in cages at night. Twenty five percent died from these inhumane conditions. Over ninety percent of these convicts were African American.

John Henry was said to be a steel driver who spent his days driving holes into rock by hitting steel spikes. Dynamite would then be placed in these holes. It is widely accepted that John Henry worked at Big Bend Mountain in West Virginia, digging through rock that blocked the path of the railroad. It took a thousand men three years to finish the tunnel. Hundreds of men, including John Henry, died in the process. After his death, the legend was born. For the railroad workers he was an inspiration and for the poor laborers he was symbolic of protest against terrible working conditions.

John Henry the Legend

There are many different versions of the tall tale "John Henry" including ballads and work songs that followed the railroad as it traveled from the east coast to the west coast. It is believed that the legend originated in Alabama or West Virginia, but it has been impossible to pin down facts that prove it. In summary the tale is about a steel driver with super human strength who is challenged to a race with a steam powered drill. Using two twenty pound hammers, he beats the machine, but at the end of the story dies from exhaustion or a stroke.



There are two well-known children's books about John Henry that are based on the tall tales. One is by Ezra Jack Keats and the other is by Julius Lester and Jerry Pinkney.

John Henry Faced Adversity

John Henry had a difficult path ahead of him. Did he turn around and go back?

No! He kept on going down the road!

John Henry ran into a mountain. Did he say "I can't go any further?"

No! He smashed his way through that mountain!

John Henry grew tired and hungry. Did he become discouraged? Yes. Did he quit?

No! He swept away those negative thoughts and continued to work toward his goal!

A lot of people did not believe that John could win his bet. Did he worry about what other people had to say?

No! He believed in himself and knew he would prove them wrong!

John Henry had a lot of hard times in his life. Did he complain and give up hope? Did he use those hard times as an excuse to quit trying?

No! He said "I am never going to let anything keep me down again!"

John Henry was a real man who became a legend because of his determination and strength. All of us do not have the heroic strength and grit that the tall tale character has, but we can all share a story of a time when we worked very hard and hammered our way through a tough time or face adversity.

Tell your story in five or more sentences where you face adversity:

- This is the hard thing I had to do.
- This is why I kept going down the road and did not turn back.
- These are the things and people who got in my way and made it hard to keep going.
- This is what I did when I faced obstacles in the road.
- This is how I felt when I finished the hard thing I had to do.

When writing your story:

- Establish a situation
- Organize events in the situation so they unfold naturally.
- Use concrete words and phrases (I heard, I saw, I touched, etc.).
- Use a variety of transitional words and phrases (Finally, meanwhile, however, even so, etc.).
- Provide a conclusion.

Resources:

"John Henry and The Railroad." *Whitestone Motion Pictures*. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 Apr. 2017.

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(n.d.). American Folklore: Famous American folktales, tall tales, myths and legends, ghost stories, and more. Retrieved from <http://www.americanfolklore.net/folktales/wv2.html>

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"History Of The Bandana - The Go-To Destination For Bandanas." *Bandanashop.com*. N.p., 2017. Web. 4 Apr. 2017.

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