

The Healthy Poor: Demystifying John Henry

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The Huffington Post:

John Henry is one of the big men of American folklore, a former slave and “steel drivin’ man” who helped pioneer the American frontier in the 19th century. According to legend, John Henry was a man of extraordinary physical prowess who wielded a sledge hammer to clear the way for the nation’s expanding railroads. He was also a man of extraordinary determination. When the railroad owner threatened to replace men and their muscles with a new steam-driven hammer, John Henry challenged owner and machine to a contest of strength. He won, but lost, dying of exhaustion.

That’s the John Henry story most Americans know. But there is another John Henry who is much less famous, though he shares the maladaptive wilfulness that destroyed the folk hero. The real-life John Henry Martin escaped an impoverished sharecropper’s life through raw determination, learning to read and write with little formal education. By dint of gritty attitude and hard work, he acquired a farm of his own by age 40 — only to die in his 50s of hypertension, arthritis and a peptic ulcer.

Read the whole story: [*The Huffington Post*](#)