

Evidence for John Henry in Alabama

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Lecture presented at the John Henry Day Celebration in Leeds, Alabama

September 15, 2007

My wife tells me not to bore you to death with details. Prepare to be bored!

First I will review some of the history of John Henry. Then I will address the questions, “Was John Henry a real person who raced a steam drill?” “If so, where?”

I’m going to stick my neck out.

My conclusion is that it is beyond reasonable doubt that John Henry was an ex-slave from Mississippi who died at Dunnivant, Alabama, in 1887 or 1888, probably on September 20, 1887.

I choose the wording, “beyond reasonable doubt,” carefully. This is the standard of evidence for conviction in a criminal case. Direct evidence is not required – circumstantial evidence is sufficient. The evidence for John Henry at Dunnivant is circumstantial. “Beyond reasonable doubt” does not mean that there can be no doubt at all – it means that doubt is not reasonable.

In folklore, a ballad is a story told in song. John Henry is best known through his ballad.

Its first notice in print was in 1909. The earliest known text was collected in 1905. The 1920s brought sound recordings and intensive study by rivals Guy Johnson and Louis Chappell – try to remember those names – Johnson and Chappell. Each spent at least eight years studying John Henry. Johnson published his findings in a book in 1929 and Chappell followed with his book in 1933.

Together they gathered nearly sixty versions of the ballad and a great deal of testimony. Johnson cast a wide net by placing requests for information about John Henry in the nation’s African-American newspapers. He was rewarded with many responses.

The data gathered by Johnson and Chappell form the primary basis for any serious consideration of John Henry. These data are augmented by information from a variety of other sources.

At least eight scholars have looked seriously into John Henry and every one of them has concluded that John Henry was probably a real person. However, this is a biased sample of opinion. It seems likely that the only people who would take the effort to study John Henry would be those who were inclined at the outset to think he was real.

We need evidence, not opinion polls.

What counts as evidence? Every relevant item ... ballad texts, testimony, news accounts, archival records ... anything and everything.

Unfortunately, neither a news account nor an archival record has been found to document John Henry's race with a steam drill. We are left with ballad texts, testimony, indirectly relevant documentation, and other items.

Before considering the evidence, let's look at the broad picture and answer a few general questions.

Isn't John Henry fictional like Mighty Casey (of "Casey at the Bat"), Pecos Bill, and Paul Bunyan? I group these four together because the United States Postal Service did so in 1996, when it issued a set of stamps honoring them as American "Folk Heroes." Three of them, Mighty Casey, Pecos Bill, and Paul Bunyan are certainly fictional. Indeed, they are inventions of professional writers. To distinguish them from genuine folklore, they have been called "fakelore."

I know of no old songs about Paul Bunyan, although there are plenty of recently written ones. Similarly, there are no old songs about Pecos Bill or Mighty Casey.

In contrast, John Henry is celebrated in a folk ballad. John Henry is not fakelore. He belongs to genuine folk tradition.

Isn't the story of John Henry a tall tale? There are tall tales about John Henry: Did you know that he dug a tunnel all the way from Rome, Georgia, to Atlanta in one day? And that that wasn't his best day? Did you know that he had over a thousand women? And that he kept them all happy?

Even so, the basic John Henry story – that he raced a steam drill, won, and died – is not impossible. It is not a tall tale.

Doesn't the fact that John Henry is legendary imply that he is fictional? No. Many real people have gained legendary status. Here are four legendary Americans. (1)

Casey Jones. He was a locomotive engineer who died in 1900 in a wreck at Vaughan, Mississippi. (2) Lee Shelton. In 1895 he killed Billy Lyons in a St. Louis bar during some horseplay over a hat. His nickname was “Stack,” so he was “Stack” Lee. He became known in legend as “Stagolee.” (3) Frankie Baker. In 1899 St. Louis, she killed her man, Allen Britt. She is the “Frankie” of “Frankie and Johnny.” In tradition, “Allen Britt” became “Al Britt” and then “Albert.” Later, in a tin-pan alley rewrite, “Albert” became “Johnny.” (4) Delia Green. She was a 14-year-old Savannah girl who was shot and killed by her boyfriend at a Christmas-eve gathering in 1900. She is remembered in the ballad “Delia,” which is known in the Bahamas, in the popular American folksong craze of the 1950s and ‘60s, and to Johnny Cash fans as “Delia’s Gone.” (Sing refrain.)

Don’t most folk ballads tell fictional stories? No. In 1964 folklorist G. Malcolm Law listed 256 native American ballads that were active in tradition. Laws groups “John Henry” with nineteen others that he considers to be “Ballads of the Negro.” Of these nineteen, eleven are based on historic events and the other eight could be.

Real events are common triggers for ballad composition. The majority of Laws’ 256 native American ballads have historic roots. On this basis alone, it is more probable than not that John Henry’s contest with a steam drill was real.

What about local traditions? Folks around here say that John Henry beat the steam drill right over here at Dunnivant – (gesture) – outside the east portal of Oak Tunnel, the “short” tunnel. They say that and they believe it. One man told me that he grew up hearing stories about John Henry and that they were always told as truth – no qualifications – no doubt about it – John Henry was here.

Should we believe these stories?

Well, when I was growing up, I heard about hoop snakes and whip snakes. A hoop snake takes its tail in its mouth and rolls after you. A whip snake sinks its teeth into your nose and beats you with its tail. These stories were always told as truth – no qualifications – no doubt about it – you might run into a hoop snake or whip snake at any time.

Should we believe these stories? Ten thousand dollars has been on deposit in a New York bank for many years, to be given to the first person to provide real evidence of a hoop

snake. As for whip snakes, some snakes are called that because they resemble whips. No flagellating behavior is known.

Without evidence, we cannot believe stories about hoop and whip snakes, no matter how earnestly we may be assured that they are true. Similarly, without evidence, we cannot believe John Henry legends.

There is another consideration. Dunnavant is not the only place with a local John Henry tradition. Around Big Bend Tunnel, in southern West Virginia, they tell their own stories about John Henry. These stories are told as if they were true – no qualifications – no doubt about it – John Henry was there in about 1871, helping build the C & O railroad. “C & O” stands for “Chesapeake & Ohio.”

That’s not all! John Henry has been claimed for other places.

I doubt that John Henry raced a steam drill and died at both Dunnavant and Big Bend or some other place.

The lesson is that without evidence, local traditions and claims for John Henry cannot be relied on.

Should local traditions be disregarded? Certainly not! The fact that not all local John Henry traditions can be right does not imply that they are all wrong. One of them could be right.

In addition, tradition is important in its own right, whether or not it is historically correct.

The east portal of Big Bend Tunnel is at Talcott, West Virginia, home of an annual celebration, “John Henry Days.” Talcott is raising money for a John Henry Park. A large bronze statue of John Henry stands on the mountainside there.

Talcott is a tiny town in a depressed area. It hopes to benefit from its John Henry legend.

I am fully supportive of Talcott’s efforts. A strong legend associates John Henry with Big Bend Tunnel. It is hallowed ground. Mere facts cannot change that. That legend is well worth celebrating.

Similarly, the legend at Dunnivant is well worth celebrating in its own right. It is just as strong as that in the Big Bend area and it may be older. It should be celebrated no matter what the historic facts may be.

Indeed, look at the cover of today's program. (Hold it up.) It says, "John Henry in Leeds – Celebrating a Local Legend." It doesn't say that we are celebrating the historic fact that John Henry was here. To celebrate the legend we don't have to believe that John Henry was here.

Even so, I believe that he was. Let's turn to the evidence.

First, consider Big Bend Tunnel.

As far as the popular vote of ballad singers is concerned, Big Bend wins hands down. A common line in the ballad says that John Henry was at "Big Bend Tunnel on the C & O road." About 40% of the ballad versions collected by 1933 place him at Big Bend, on the C & O road, or both. Today, that's about all you hear sung.

Is this evidence in favor of Big Bend? Of course it is, but it's not very strong evidence. As folk songs are passed from one person to another, they change, they mutate. Words and phrases are misunderstood or forgotten. Ideas and lines are brought in from other songs. Sections that seem to be missing are filled in with something new. Half-recalled passages are reconstructed, sometimes with changes in meaning. Finally, locales are changed. Songs are relocalized. Sometimes people prefer to sing about familiar, local places rather than unknown, distant ones.

Relocalization is very common. Thus, in one song the "Wexford girl" has become the "Rexford girl," "Oxford girl," "Expert girl," "Export girl," "Noel girl," "Waco girl," "Lexington girl," "Knoxville girl," etc. The locale of some version of a folk song cannot be assumed to be the original locale, nor can it be assumed to be historically correct.

For "Big Bend Tunnel on the C & O road," there is another consideration. Suppose that the John Henry ballad started out specifying some other tunnel and some other railroad but through relocalization came to be sung as "Big Bend Tunnel on the C & O road." This phrase sings well, probably better than the original, and is easily understood. Coupled with the fame of Big Bend Tunnel, that makes it especially attractive to ballad singers. It is easy to imagine mutations leading to "Big Bend Tunnel on the C & O road" but not so easy to

imagine those leading away from it. That phrase is so attractive that it seems unlikely that it would mutate further. It is a stable end point. This is another reason to suspect that it was not in the original ballad and is not historically correct.

Steam drills were not used in the construction of Big Bend Tunnel. Even so, a steam drill could have been brought there for a trial and pitted against John Henry.

There is testimony to this effect, but **testimony about John Henry at Big Bend is not coherent.** Johnson and Chappell interviewed about a dozen men who had worked on boring Big Bend Tunnel. They split evenly, half claiming that John Henry had been at Big Bend and the other half denying it.

One of those denying it was adamant about it. He was there all the time. He knew all the steel drivers. If anyone had raced a steam drill at Big Bend Tunnel, he would have known about it. It didn't happen!

Another man claimed to have seen John Henry race the steam drill, but he was a very poor witness. He couldn't give many details. He didn't see much of the "test," as he called it. As he went about his regular work, he just looked in on it once in a while. It did not attract a crowd nor cause any excitement. He told Johnson that John Henry "overdid" and "took sick and died soon after that," but he told Chappell that John Henry didn't die then but was killed later in an accident.

Vagueness and contradictions impeach this witness.

Further, the incident he describes, one that did not attract a crowd or cause excitement, is not the kind of stuff from which legends are made.

Despite this, Johnson reluctantly concluded that it was probable that John Henry had been at Big Bend Tunnel. Chappell was not reluctant at all. To him the weight of the local tradition at Big Bend was paramount. He didn't find significant other evidence but he didn't need it. Big Bend was John Henry's place.

As a consequence of these studies, the notion that John Henry was at Big Bend Tunnel became the received wisdom. Although there have been a few skeptics, this received wisdom stood without a serious alternative in the scholarly literature for over seventy years.

Between 1960 and 2001, I had read Johnson's and Chappell's books three or four times each. Each time I had been left with an uncomfortable, unsettled feeling about their conclusions.

In the summer of 2001 I read Colson Whitehead's novel, "John Henry Days." Being fiction, the novel contributed nothing to the search for John Henry, but it got me thinking about it and prompted me to reread Johnson's and Chappell's books.

It finally dawned on me that their data flatly contradict their conclusions. I believe that their data eliminate Big Bend Tunnel as a viable candidate for John Henry's place. It is inconceivable to me that locals would have given such incoherent testimony if John Henry had been there. That's not where he was.

So how did John Henry come to be associated with Big Bend Tunnel? There is both testimony and alleged documentation of a well-known steel driver at Big Bend named John Henry Martin. He did not race a steam drill and he lived for years after the tunnel was completed. When the John Henry ballad reached the Big Bend vicinity, people there probably remembered John Henry Martin and identified him with the hero. This would have been part of the relocalization of the ballad to Big Bend.

If not Big Bend, then where? Perhaps here, at Dunnivant. As far as I am aware, this is the only other location with a long and strong local John Henry tradition. But we have to do better than merely invoke tradition. That's what Chappell did for Big Bend.

At the beginning of my work on John Henry, every piece of information at my disposal was from testimony or a ballad version. Therefore it was unreliable. How does one proceed in the absence of any reliable information?

Here's what I did. First, in Johnson's and Chappell's books I sought – and found – testimony that, from internal evidence, seemed to be from an excellent witness. Second, also in Johnson's and Chappell's books, I sought – and found – an island of coherent testimony in the ocean of incoherence. Third, I sought – and found – documentation of some of the facts stated in this island of coherent testimony. Fourth, I sought – and found – further coherent testimony and consistent elements in versions of the ballad.

The result is a body of coherent testimony, supporting documentation, and consistent elements from the ballad, all pointing to John Henry at Dunnivant.

From internal evidence, I judge C. C. Spencer to have been the best witness turned up by Johnson and Chappell. In 1927 Spencer was about 54 years old and lived in Salt Lake City, Utah. In response to Johnson's solicitation for John Henry information, he wrote a long, detailed letter. At about age 14, he claimed, he had been an eyewitness to the contest between John Henry and the steam drill. He named the place, the railroad, and some nearby places. He gave John Henry's last name, told where he was from, gave two of his boss's names, told where one of them was from, and noted that he thought that John Henry had been a slave in this boss's family. He told how the contest came about, how preparations were made for it, and how a crowd of several hundred witnessed it. He described John Henry's death in sufficient detail that a present-day physician has been able to give an informed opinion of its cause. He told how John Henry's wife had been summoned when he was dying. When Johnson asked Spencer for more information, he replied with a second long and detailed letter. He was a willing informant who did not avoid details. Indeed, he even gave an exact date for John Henry's death: September 20, 1882.

All of this marks Spencer as a potential star witness.

As it turns out, Spencer's testimony is part of an island of coherent testimony involving four other informants. The second and third informants were also found by Johnson. F. P. Barker, of Birmingham, and Glendora Cannon Cummings, of East Lansing, Michigan, named Alabama as the John Henry location. Johnson tried but failed to locate the places to which Spencer's, Barker's, and Cummings's Alabama claims referred. When his leads dried up, he gave up on Alabama and cast his lot with West Virginia.

The fourth informant whose testimony ties in with the others is C. S. Farquharson, of the Public Works Department of Jamaica, who corresponded with Chappell.

Later, after I had found the location described by Spencer, Barker, and Cummings, I became aware of the comments of Mrs. C. T. Davis, of Leeds, Alabama, who was quoted in a 1955 Birmingham news article by Warren Musgrove. Part of Davis's testimony reinforces a part of Spencer's for which there is no other confirming testimony.

Thus, this island of coherent testimony involves five informants, Spencer, Barker, Cummings, Farquharson, and Davis.

Their testimonies don't agree in every detail, but they do agree in some that are particularly important.

Spencer and Barker agree that John Henry was at “Cruzee” or “Cursey” Mountain, Alabama. Cummings said that he was at Oak Mountain, Alabama.

Spencer, Barker, and Cummings agree that it was in the 1880s. Spencer said 1882, Barker “somewhere about” 1882, and Cummings 1887.

Spencer, Cummings, and Farquharson agree that John Henry worked for Shea and Dabney.

Spencer and Davis agree that John Henry and one of his bosses were from Mississippi. Spencer says Holly Springs. Davis doesn't mention a town.

Let's ruminare on this for a moment. These five people are obviously independent informants. They gave their information 40 to 70 years after the incidents they describe, and they lived in distant places: Utah, Michigan, Alabama, and Jamaica. It is not reasonable to imagine that they had been in contact with one another or were colluding in any way. Yet, they gave the same information.

They couldn't have been making things up. If they had been, how often would two people pick “Cruzee” Mountain as the place where John Henry worked? How often would three people pick the 1880s as his time of death? How often would three people pick the names Shea and Dabney for his bosses? How often would two people decide that John Henry and his boss were from the same place and pick Mississippi as that place? If they were randomly choosing, how often would five people agree to this extent?

Never. The probability that these five people could independently invent the information they agree on is zero.

This information has a source.

What is that source?

Perhaps some published fictional story? None has ever been found.

Perhaps the source is some orally circulating story with no foundation in fact? Details such as “Cruzee” Mountain and “Shay” and “Dabney” seem to be strange inventions for a widespread fictional story. There is nothing particularly attractive or impressive about

these details. Why would they be invented or recalled if they were fiction? It is unlikely that the source of information is a circulating fictional story.

The most likely source of the John Henry information in the Alabama claims and associated testimony is history itself. The best explanation, by far, for Spencer's excellence as a witness and for this island of coherence in John Henry testimony, spanning five independent informants, is that John Henry was, in fact, a Mississippian who was at "Cruzee" Mountain, Alabama, in the 1880s, working for Shay and Dabney.

As I have presented it, this conclusion rests entirely on testimony, not local tradition, not the ballad, not documentation. In addition, it refers to an unidentified place in Alabama.

Where is this place?

Neither Johnson nor Chappell ever found "Cruzee" or "Cursey" Mountain. In the summer of 2001 I sat in my office pondering these names. They don't agree precisely, so perhaps neither is precisely correct. What do they sound like?

As I mulled this over, "Coosa" popped into my mind. I thought I'd heard the river called the "Koosee." Indeed, in the oldest literature, the name is spelled "K-O-O-S-E-E." "Coosa," "Koosee," Spencer's "Cruzee," and Barker's "Cursey" all sound a lot alike.

When I realized this I Googled "Coosa Mountain." I got a railfan hit that mentioned both Coosa and Oak Mountains at Dunnivant, Alabama, and a railroad tunnel through each of them.

That was real pay dirt. Although Spencer and Barker had put John Henry at what I now thought was Coosa Mountain, Cummings had specified Oak Mountain. Here they both were, just two miles apart, with the same railroad track running through each of them. This was the beginning of the documentation supporting the island of coherent testimony. I had found the place in Alabama. Here! I'll bet some of you never knew it was lost!

This confirmed some of Spencer's additional testimony. He said that Red Mountain was about 15 miles away. So it is. He said that Rising Fawn, Georgia, was near. It's about a hundred miles away.

It didn't take long to discover that the Columbus & Western Railway Company, the C & W, had built an extension from Goodwater, Alabama, to Birmingham in 1887-88. In the process they bored Coosa and Oak Tunnels. Construction began in early 1887 and the new

line was opened on July 1, 1888, about six months behind schedule due to extremely hard rock encountered in the middle of Coosa Tunnel.

Steel drivers say that rock is really hard when you drill on one hole all day and then have to mark the spot with chalk so you'll know where to put the drill the next morning.

Now I needed to find Shea and Dabney. I haven't found Shea, but the Chief Engineer for the C & W was Captain Frederick Yeamans Dabney. "Captain" was his Civil War rank.

He was born in Virginia but moved to Raymond, Hinds County, Mississippi, in 1835, before he was a year old. His father was a lawyer and judge. His was a family of American aristocrats who placed great value on education and accomplishment. Educated in civil engineering at Rensselaer, he had already begun his career in railroad design and construction when the Civil War broke out. His family opposed secession but cast their lot with the Confederates once war broke out.

Fred Dabney served in Artillery and Engineering. He designed and supervised the construction of the defenses at Port Hudson, Louisiana, on the Mississippi River. After this stronghold had repulsed Yankee attacks in May, 1863, they laid siege. Forty-eight days later, on July 9, after they had heard that Vicksburg had fallen, the Rebels surrendered and the Union gained complete control of Mississippi River traffic.

Fred Dabney was captured and sent to the Union prison on Johnson's Island, Lake Erie, Ohio, where "only" about three hundred men died from harsh conditions and starvation. It is reported that his health suffered for the rest of his life.

After the war he married and settled in Crystal Springs, Copiah County, Mississippi, about 20 miles south of his boyhood home, Raymond.. He continued his career in railroad construction. Among other positions, he served as General Manager of the Vicksburg, Shreveport, and Pacific Railroad. By late 1886 he had become Chief Engineer for the C & W and was about to build its extension through Dunnivant and Leeds.

Spencer wrote that John Henry and his boss were from Holly Springs, Mississippi. There is a Holly Springs, Mississippi, but it is obvious that Spencer confused it with Crystal Springs. Since Captain Dabney was from Crystal Springs, John Henry had to be

from there, too, if we accept Spencer's and Davis's testimonies that they were from the same place.

According to Spencer, the steel driver was John Henry Dabney, who had been a slave in the Dabney family. Captain Dabney's uncle had a large plantation outside of Raymond, Mississippi. He owned 154 slaves in 1860. John Henry might have been one of those.

However, there is another possibility. In 1860 Captain Dabney's father owned eight slaves. In a memoir by one of Captain Dabney's sisters, there is a fond mention of a slave boy named Henry who was a teenager during the Civil War. In 1869 a black Henry Dabney married Margaret Foston in Copiah County, Mississippi. In the census of 1870 he is 20 years old. Thus, he was born in 1849 or '50. In the census he does farm work. We have no direct information that this Henry Dabney is the legendary steel driver, but he is certainly a prime candidate.

So far we have a star witness, five informants offering coherent testimony, and documentation confirming several aspects of this testimony, all putting John Henry at Dunnivant, Alabama, in 1887, or supporting this idea.

Adding to this is Dunnivant's local legend. I first became aware of it through an issue of *The Right Way*, the Central of Georgia magazine, that commented on it briefly. Then I found among Johnson's papers at the University of North Carolina a copy of an article that had appeared in the Central of Georgia Magazine in October, 1930. This article includes a photograph of a steel drill sticking up from the rock outside the east portal of Oak Tunnel, said to be the last one driven by "Jawn Henry" before he died.

The article indicates that Dunnivant's John Henry legend was old in 1930. According to Jerry Voyles, it was old when his grandfather heard it in 1912. Thus, the legend may be oral history that goes back to the time of John Henry's death in 1887.

According to one of Johnson's informants, a man who had worked on the construction of Big Bend Tunnel, he had never heard of John Henry until people started coming to the Big Bend area asking about him. Chappell visited Big Bend in September, 1925. There is no evidence that a substantial local legend existed at Big Bend before 1925. It is possible, even likely, that the solidification and proliferation of the Big Bend legend was prompted by Chappell's 1925 visit and inquiries. Johnson speculated as much.

The 1930 Central of Georgia Magazine article includes the text of the John Henry ballad that contains the line, “The Central o’ Georgia Rail Road / Gonna be th’ death o’ me.” Peter Brannon collected it in Alabama. The C & W was owned by the Central Rail Road and Banking Company of Georgia, which became the Central of Georgia in 1895. Another early ballad text places John Henry on the “Georgia line.”

Of early ballad texts, a couple of dozen put John Henry on the C & O, two put him on a Georgia line, and none put him on any other railroad. What can we make of that?

As noted earlier, the popular vote of singers is very weak evidence. Singers sing what they like, and once an attractive line such as “Big Bend Tunnel on the C & O road” enters tradition, more and more singers will take it up. Consequently, common elements of a mature ballad must be regarded with suspicion. They are likely to have been in the original only if they were attractive to singers.

It may seem counterintuitive, but a rare element of a ballad demands serious consideration. If it were attractive to singers, it wouldn’t be rare, so why is it found at all? It is likely to be a relict, a residue from an early version, still recalled by one singer or a few. It may be left over from the original ballad.

The rare “Central o’ Georgia Rail Road” and “Georgia line” should be taken seriously, while the common “Big Bend Tunnel on the C & O road” should be viewed with suspicion.

Are there other elements of the John Henry ballad that point to Dunnivant? Yes, there are several. Here are some of them.

Ballad texts almost always refer to John Henry’s boss as the “Captain,” not as “boss,” “overseer,” “foreman,” etc. Although “captain” was a common title for a white boss, no matter who he was, Fred Dabney was literally a “Captain.” This could account for the nearly universal use of “Captain” in the ballad.

Some ballad texts have people “out west” hearing of John Henry’s death and catching an “east-bound train” to go “where John Henry’s dead.” John Henry Dabney’s relatives and friends lived in Mississippi, west of Alabama, so they would have traveled east to Alabama.

Two ballad texts put John Henry between two mountains. This makes perfect sense for the Dunning Valley, which lies between Coosa and Oak Mountains. “Between two mountains” doesn’t make much sense for Big Bend, where there are mountains all around.

One ballad stanza begins, “John Henry’s cap’n Tommy / V’ginny gave him birth.” Captain Dabney was born in Virginia. “Tommy” could have started out as “Dabney.” Being unfamiliar, “Dabney” would not last long in tradition. It sounds a lot like “Tommy,” so “Tommy” is a plausible replacement by mishearing or reinterpreting.

The same version continues, “Loved John Henry like his only son / And Cap’ Tommy was the whitest man on earth.” Fred greatly admired his uncle, who was noted for his humanity toward his slaves. After the war, the uncle remained a friend of some of his ex-slaves. Fred Dabney was about 15 years old when the Henry Dabney of the census was born. These circumstances suggest that Fred Dabney could have had a fond attachment to John Henry Dabney, as the ballad suggests.

One ballad text says that John Henry’s hammer could be heard in Chattanooga, “two hundred miles away.” This is a plausible tall tale for Dunning, which is actually about 135 miles from Chattanooga, as the crow flies, but Chattanooga would be an unlikely choice for a ballad maker at Big Bend.

One ballad text gives a day of the week for John Henry’s death. It says, “John Henry died on a Tuesday.” Spencer said that he died on September 20, 1882, but in fact the year had to have been 1887, the only September during which the C & W was under construction. September 20, 1887, was a Tuesday.

If the date or day, or both, had been random choices, their probability of agreement would have been 1 in 7 (1 in 6 if you leave out Sunday). Therefore it is not likely that either was a random choice.

The most likely interpretation is that both represent historic fact.

The late Neil Patman, a blues singer from Athens, Georgia, sang “Maggadee” as the name of John Henry’s woman. He told me that his father had sung it that way.

The Henry Dabney of the 1870 census was married to Margaret. She was “Margaret Dabney” and could have been called “Maggie D.” “Maggadee” sounds very much like “Maggie D.”

In the ballad as it is commonly sung today, John Henry’s wife or woman is almost always “Polly Ann.” Her name appears in lines like these: “John Henry had a little woman / Her name was Polly Ann / When John Henry took sick and had to go to bed / Polly Ann drove steel like a man.” Earlier, she had other names, including “Mary Magdalene” and “Mary Ann.” Could these names have derived from “Maggie D”?

Yes. “Maggadee” sounds like “Magdalene,” which is incomplete without “Mary,” giving “Mary Magdalene.” In addition to being long and cumbersome, “Mary Magdalene” does not provide a rhyme for “man.” “Mary Ann” solves these problems. “Polly” is a nickname for “Mary.”

Thus, we arrive as “Polly Ann” through a plausible sequence of mutations. Margaret Dabney is known as “Maggie D,” which is heard as “Maggadee,” which becomes “Mary Magdalene,” then “Mary Ann,” and, finally “Polly Ann.”

“Polly” has long been a very popular name in ballads. I doubt very much that “Polly Ann” was in the original ballad or that it is historically correct. It is “too good to be true.” Instead, it is a plausible derivative of “Margaret Dabney.”

In some versions of the ballad, John Henry is taken to the “new buryin’ ground” and “buried in the sand” within sight of the railroad.

Sand Ridge Cemetery is about a mile, as the crow flies, across a valley from the railroad tracks. There is an unobstructed view from the tracks to Sand Ridge.

Although the earliest marked graves in Sand Ridge Cemetery date from the turn of the twentieth century, there are many unmarked graves of unknown date. It is not known exactly when Sand Ridge Cemetery was created. However, a genealogist claims that Godfrey Isbell was buried there in about 1882. This suggests that Sand Ridge Cemetery existed in 1887 and that it could have been new at that time.

Margie Isbell says that she has been told that a black man is buried at an edge of Sand Ridge Cemetery. There is at least one other site outside the present fence that looks like a sunken grave.

All of this is consistent with the ballad and suggests that John Henry may lie buried at Sand Ridge Cemetery.

Are there elements of the John Henry ballad that point to Big Bend Tunnel? Except for explicit mentions of Big Bend Tunnel and the C & O road, I have not found any.

Are there elements of the John Henry ballad that are not consistent with Dunnivant? With the same exceptions, I have not found any.

That completes my presentation of evidence today. Some of the evidence from ballad texts is pretty weak, but the case does not rest primarily on that evidence. It serves instead to reinforce the evidence from testimony and documentation. Weak evidence that supports a case that is already strong is significant. Further, the cumulative force of many pieces of weak evidence can be strong

What evidence do we lack? We have no newspaper headline, “Steel Driver Dies After Beating Steam Drill.”

The few Columbus and Western records that I have seen are not helpful. We have no reports from Captain Dabney and no correspondence between him and other executives of the C & W. We have no contractor’s reports and no contractor’s correspondence with Captain Dabney.

The Georgia Historical Society tells me that they have a very large number of records from the Central of Georgia that are in storage, uncataloged, deteriorating, and inaccessible. The records we seek may be there.

We have no contemporary diaries or letters that tell about the steel-driving man. This bothers me. If hundreds of people witnessed the contest between John Henry and the steam drill, as Spencer claimed, wouldn’t many of them have written about it in some form? The problem, I suppose, is that such ephemera tend not to survive. Sometimes miracles happen, though, so I am hopeful that contemporary writing about John Henry may yet surface.

Right now, we must be satisfied with what we have. What is that, all told?

We have a star witness, C. C. Spencer, who gave his testimony in about 1927. He claimed to have known John Henry, to have witnessed the events leading up to his race with a steam drill, the contest itself, and John Henry’s death. He gave many details, including that

the steel driver was John Henry Dabney, that he had a boss named Dabney, and that they were both from Mississippi.

We have four other corroborating witnesses from the late 1920s through 1955. They lived in distant places, Utah, Birmingham, Michigan, Jamaica, and Leeds. They verify the place as Dunnivant, the time as the 1880s, the names of John Henry's bosses as Shea and Dabney, and the home of John Henry and his boss Dabney as Mississippi.

We have documentation that Captain Frederick Yeamans Dabney was the Chief Engineer for the Columbus & Western, that he supervised the construction of its extension from Goodwater to Birmingham in 1887-88, and that he lived in Crystal Springs, Mississippi.

We have documentation of a Henry who was a slave to Captain Dabney's father and a Henry Dabney who lived after the Civil War at Crystal Springs and who was 37 or 38 years old in 1887. He was born in 1849 or 1850 and in 1869 he married Margaret Foston.

We have a strong local tradition that John Henry was here at Dunnivant when the Columbus and Western line was being built.

We have a number of lines and phrases from the ballad, "John Henry," that are consistent with his being at Dunnivant or with other aspects of relevant testimony and documentation.

In my opinion, all of this adds up to overwhelming circumstantial evidence that John Henry was a real man who raced a steam drill and died at Dunnivant.

Dunnivant, Alabama, is the only proposed John Henry location with a strong and coherent local tradition that has reinforcing ties to documentation and the ballad.

Those who would not place John Henry at Dunnivant have the burden of providing a reasonable alternative explanation of how all the evidence outlined here came to exist. I have not been able to think of such an explanation and none has been proposed.

The best explanation of the evidence is that it is true.

Therefore, I believe that it is "beyond reasonable doubt" that John Henry was at Dunnivant.

Thank you.