ON THIS DAY IN WEST VIRGINIA HISTORY
December 28

The John Henry statue at Talcott, commemorating the "steel drivin' man" who participated in the construction of the Big Bend railroad tunnel, was erected on December 28, 1972.

CSO: SS.8.9, SS.8.11, SS.8.23, ELA.8.1

Investigate the Document: (The Monroe Watchmen, October 27, 1932)
1. Where is the Big Bend tunnel located?

2. How long is the Big Bend tunnel?

3. How did the workmen dig the tunnels before the steam drill?

Think Critically: Do you know the story of John Henry? How does this account of the story compare to that of the John Henry legend? What role did John Henry have in digging the Big Bend tunnel? Do you believe John Henry was a real person? Have you visited the John Henry monument, located just outside the old Big Bend tunnel, at Talcott?
THE JOHN HENRY LEGEND

Story Retold Of Man Who “Died With A Hammah In His Hand”

Writing again of the John Henry legend at the old Big Bend tunnel in Summers county, Myrtle J. Cooper gives the following interesting details of the story, taken from the C. & O. Railway’s magazine, “The Rail.”

So much for interesting facts, but facts and fancy always will be intermingled by time and play of imagination. It is not strange, therefore, that the story of John Henry has outrun the story of Captain Johnson. Not only songs but books have been written about John Henry and the first steam drill. We read in Guy B. Johnson’s book on the fabled Negro that: “John Henry unassistedly is the Negro’s greatest folk character. His fame is sung in every nook and corner of the United States where Negroes live, sung oftener by wanderers and laborers.”

The story goes that the introduction of the steam drill at Big Bend tunnel was strongly resisted by the workmen. John Henry, steel driver, crystallized their resentment with a boast that he could outsteam the contrivance in a contest. “A steel driver is the man who strikes the steel drill with a heavy hammer, sinking the drill into the rock to make an opening for the blasting charge. A companion worker holds the drill in place and gives it an occasional twist to make the cutting more effective. This man is known as the “turner” or “shaker.”

And so the contest began, with John Henry hammering away to outside the mechanical rival. In the John Henry song, the contest is waged through countless verses. In the end the reputed hero won out, to fall dead “with a hammah in his hand.”

Considerable investigation has been made by writers and folk song collectors to establish whether John Henry really lived, and if he competed with the newly invented steam drill. The pursuit of fact has led to various parts of the country and into picturesque old-time cabins, especially in the vicinity of the tunnel, where aged residents piously recall the days of the first Big Bend and of the incomparable John Henry.

Now that another Big Bend tunnel is underway the stories speed again along the grapevine route from cabin to cabin, to laboring camps and cross-roads, and to cemeteries in the far, lonely places. It seems fitting that, at the moment, the fame of John Henry is brightest at the new Big Bend tunnel, close to the spot where he won to glory.