

# RBC BHM ESSAY

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\$500 Winner

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BLACK  
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Today’s young people can take away an incredible amount, from the lives and experiences of black Canadians, over the past 150 years. However, the most prominent concept that one could attain from said experiences, would be the mantra of never giving up, regardless of what obstacles or challenges lay ahead. There are countless of instances where a black Canadian was put up against a challenge so significant, so overwhelming, but many never gave in, and ended up successful. Many Canadians, and young people, are familiar with the lives of black Canadian heroes like Harriet Tubman, and Mary Ann Shad, but one must also take a look at the unheralded black Canadians, who’s stories, although less well-known, are just as significant.

Take Colchester, Ontario’s Elijah McCoy, for example. McCoy was 14 when he went to Scotland to work as a mechanical engineering apprentice, and he returned as a certified mechanical engineer. However, despite McCoy’s large amounts of training, and impressive qualifications, he was unable to obtain a job because of a policy that did not allow African-Canadians to work skilled jobs. After taking a job as a fireman, and oiler at a railroad, McCoy began to invent objects that would not only differ from current train travel, but vastly improve it. McCoy was, posthumously, rewarded for his success in 2001, when he was inducted into the Inventors Hall of Fame. McCoy perfectly embodies the spirit of black Canadians over the past one and a half centuries, that even when an entire nation says that you are not fit to do something, that does not mean you should give up and stop trying, because if Elijah McCoy had done the aforementioned, then the world would have lost one of its greatest inventors of all time, because he was black.

Another one of the many fine examples of how young people can learn from the experiences of black Canadians is the story of William Hall. Born in 1829, Hall was not only the first black person to receive the Victoria Cross, the highest award given out in the Canadian military, but was also the first Nova Scotian, and the first naval officer, of whom the award was given to. Truly an unbelievable story, Hall was the offspring of two slaves, who fled to Halifax at the end of the war of 1812. Then, as a gunner on the HMS Shannon, in the British army, when Hall and a colleague were the last men standing, in an effort to lift the siege on the town of Lucknow, Ontario. Hall was awarded the Victoria Cross in 1859 for the bravery and heroic acts he showed that day.

More recently, the story of Leonard Braithwaite is extremely inspirational. Born in Toronto, during the great depression, Braithwaite tried numerous times to enlist in the Royal Canadian Airforce during World War Two. He was turned away consistently, until in 1943, where he fought with No. 6 Bomber Command in Yorkshire, England. After the war’s conclusion, Braithwaite decided to become well educated. After graduating with a Bachelor of Commerce degree from the University of Toronto, Braithwaite graduated with a Masters degree from Harvard Business School, succeeded by graduating from Osgoode Law School, in 1958, shortly after, he opened his own law practice in Toronto. Popular in his community, he was approached by the Ontario Liberal Party in an effort to get him to run for provincial parliament. In 1963, Braithwaite ran, and won, becoming the first African-Canadian elected to parliament in Canada’s history. Braithwaite was an active parliamentarian as well, he spoke out against the Separate Schools Act, an law which allowed racial segregation in Ontario schools, which ended with the longtime law being repealed. After being elected multiple more times, Braithwaite later went on to municipal politics, sitting on the Etobicoke’s board of control. Braithwaite’s refusal to give up, his groundbreaking achievements, and his continued involvement in his community, is something that all young Canadians can take away from Braithwaite. Awarded the Order of Ontario, and the Order of Canada, Braithwaite proved himself to be, not just a great African-Canadian, but one of the greatest Canadians of all time.

The stories of Elijah McCoy, William Hall, and Leonard Braithwaite are just a few of the many extraordinary stories of black Canadians, in our nations long history. Out of the many possible attributes to learn from these heroes, the most prominent for young Canadians, should be Elijah McCoy’s perseverance, William Hall’s bravery, and Leonard Braithwaite’s heart.



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