

# THE PRESCRIPTION FOR CHANGE

**Safeyyah Raji**

Craig Kielburger Secondary School,  
Milton, ON

\$500 Winner

Canada is known as a 'cultural mosaic' because of its proudly multicultural society. Each mosaic tile represents the heritage, history, and beauty of the diverse individuals who have made Canada their home. African-Canadians have certainly earned their shining place on Canada's great mosaic through their contributions to science, literature, and art. One of the many African-Canadians whose work has resonated with me is Anderson Ruffin Abbott, a writer, journalist, activist, and the first African-Canadian born doctor.

Abbott was born in Toronto on April 7th, 1837. Although Abbott's prominent family was able to provide him with an exceptional education, he still had to wade through the vicious waves of racism and oppression. In 1857, Abbott graduated from the Toronto School of Medicine. The year 1861 became a pivotal moment in Canadian history as Abbott was granted his licence to practice from the Medical Board of Upper Canada, making him the first African-Canadian born doctor.

In 1863, Abbott applied as an assistant surgeon for the Union Army during the American Civil War but was not accepted. Although a reputable and respectable Canadian doctor, he was still subjected to prejudice because of his skin colour. Despite this, Abbott did not give up and reapplied as a medical cadet in the U.S Coloured Troops. Between June 1863 and August 1865, he served in Washington, DC as a civilian surgeon. Abbott worked in multiple U.S hospitals, saving many lives while he fought against the horrors of racism during the war. His work made him a popular figure in the Washington community and he formed a unique relationship with President Abraham Lincoln, serving as a doctor at his deathbed.

Abbott's tenacity as a doctor and civil servant in the military was profoundly recognized by both Canada and the U.S. After President Lincoln's assassination, Mary Lincoln, the wife of Lincoln, presented Abbott with the shawl worn by the President at his first inauguration in appreciation of his efforts to save her husband's life. In 1891, Abbott was one of the 273 Civil War veterans in Toronto to wear the Grand Army badge. The following year, Abbott received the highest military honour that a person of African descent has received in Canada and the U.S at that time; he was appointed aide-de-camp "on the staff of the Commanding Officer Department" of New York. Abbott is an outstanding example of African-Canadian military efforts in the Civil War.

In April 1866, Abbott returned to Canada, where he established a medical practice and played an active role in the community. He was the president of the Wilberforce Education Institute from 1873 to 1880, where he fought against racially segregated schools. He argued, "it is just as natural for two races living together on the same soil to blend as it is for the waters of two river tributaries to mingle" ("Biography – Abbott, Anderson Ruffin"). Abbott's fiery passion to extinguish Canada's racial barrier inspired me to be a part of "Youth in Action" at my school, where I have used my artistic talents to raise awareness on the severity of the global water crisis. His perseverance has allowed me to have an integral part in raising 10,000 to build a school in Asemkow, Ghana. Abbott's life is a reminder of the power of using our talents to make a positive change in the world.

Abbott's writing demonstrates the impact of spreading knowledge. His writings have not only opened the minds of Canadians, but of people all over the world. As a journalist, Abbott wrote editorials and articles for many magazines and newspapers in Canada, the UK, and the U.S. His writings explore topics such as black history, the Civil War, Darwinism, biology, poetry, and medicine. Among other things, his writings push people not to accept things the way they are but to become agents of change. Abbott was a living example of how much African-Canadians had to offer to society. He showed the world that people of African descent can achieve anything when given the chance.

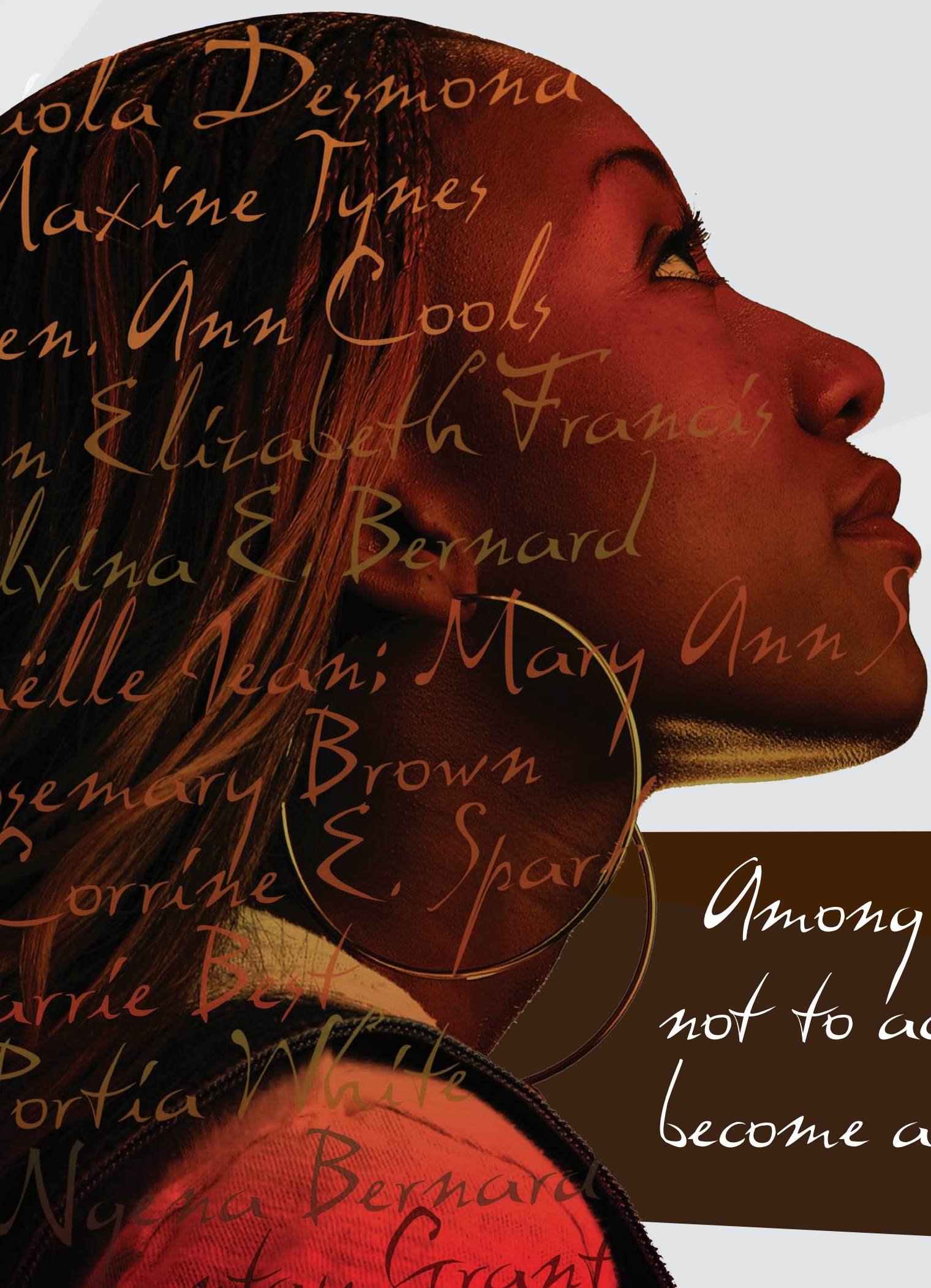
Abbott passed away in 1913, at the age of 76. He is remembered for his role in the Civil War, a crusader for racial integration and a maven in black history. Abbott's contributions have greatly influenced Canada's diversity and heritage. He is a prime example that there are no restrictions to making a difference. His legacy will continue to spark a light in many African-Canadians to leave their tile on Canada's mosaic.

## 2016 RBC BLACK HISTORY MONTH STUDENT ESSAY COMPETITION

[www.rbc.com/essay/](http://www.rbc.com/essay/)



RBC Royal Bank



*Among other things, his writings push people not to accept things the way they are but to become agents of change.*