

Generations of STEM: Elijah McCoy

The Real McCoy

Elijah McCoy was the son of slaves who escaped to Canada. He had an early interest in engineering and trained as a mechanical engineer in Scotland at the age of fifteen.

After his training, he moved to the United States, but faced discrimination as African Americans were not welcome as professionals.

He took a job as a fireman and oiler for the Michigan Central Railroad, which led him to invent a system for continual lubrication of engine parts. It was this invention that allowed trains and steam engines to run continually without a break for oiling.

Throughout his lifetime, he received nearly 60 patents for other inventions including an ironing board, lawn sprinkler and various lubricators. However, without financial backing, his patent rights often were sold to others.

Competitors often tried to copy his inventions — but machinists and train engineers only wanted the original. This is credited as a possible origin of the phrase “the real McCoy,” as they requested the genuine product, not the copy!



Image Source: [Wikipedia](#), [Ypsilanti Historical Society](#) Information Sources: [Biography.com](#), [ThoughtCo.](#), [The Black Inventor On-Line Museum](#)