

Every time you see a robot moving with precision on a factory floor. Every time you watch a machine adjust itself automatically. Every time you witness automation working without human hands, you're watching the legacy of a black man who history tried to erase. There have been many successful and influential scientists and inventors throughout history. The names of Leonardo da Vinci, Nicolaus Copernicus, Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, and Nikola Tesla are some of the most common ones we hear, but there are so many out there whose stories are not known. The likes of Philo Farnsworth, Dr. Charles Drew, and Lise Meitner are not taught about as readily as others, but their discoveries and contributions have made huge impacts on our everyday lives.



Another of those inventors is a man named Elijah McCoy, and he invented the foundation of modern robotics in 1872, decades before anyone thought of a robot. He created the first machine that could think for itself, the first device that could self-regulate and maintain its own operation without stopping. When companies tried to copy his invention with cheap knockoffs, engineers would demand the “Real McCoy” a phrase that

became part of our language while the man behind it disappeared from history books. So how did the black engineer born to escape slaves become the father of automation? How did his invention lead directly to robots assembling cars, performing surgeries, and exploring Mars today?

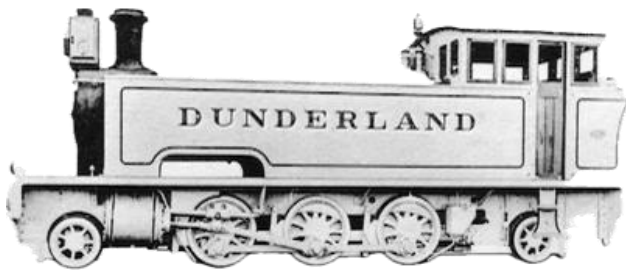
While there is a chance you might know a bit about McCoy, you are more likely to have heard the phrase tied to his legacy. If you have ever mentioned or heard the expression referring to the "Real McCoy," this is the guy you're referencing. McCoy was a Black inventor who acquired a number of patents during his career, some of which revolutionized the way society functioned. Here's how his name became synonymous with authenticity in the world of 20th-century inventions.

Early Life - Elijah McCoy was born on May 2, 1844, in Canada to parents who had escaped slavery in the United States. According to (ThoughtCo.com), when he was 3, the McCoy's returned to the United States and settled in Michigan. McCoy came from a large family, including 11 brothers and sisters, and his interest in machinery and mechanics was evident from the time he was small.

When McCoy was 15, he traveled to Edinburgh, Scotland, for an apprenticeship in mechanical engineering. Upon completing his time abroad, he returned to the United

States as a certified engineer and began looking for work. Though McCoy was more than qualified, he was often overlooked for jobs that required his level of education due to the color of his skin. He was eventually able to secure a job as a locomotive fireman and oiler for the Michigan Central Railroad. Though this job was below his abilities, it turns out that it would be a significant steppingstone toward the rest of his career.

Early Career



With his advanced education and natural inclination for all things mechanical, Elijah McCoy made the most of his job and Michigan Central Railroad. His job involved refueling the steam engine and maintaining the oiler, which ensured that the appropriate parts of the machine stayed properly lubricated (per ThoughtCo.com). The lubrication of these moving parts was especially important due to the potential of them overheating.

While working there, McCoy subsequently created some of his first inventions (per Biography.com). As he worked daily on the train engines, he discovered many different issues with the efficiency in which

they function, especially in regard to the oiler. In response to these nagging problems, he developed his first major invention, an automatic lubricator for steam engines. He designed it to function by using the train's steam pressure to pump oil where needed, without having to stop the train. This revolutionary invention was just the start for Elijah McCoy when it came to his inventing career.

Many Inventions and Patents

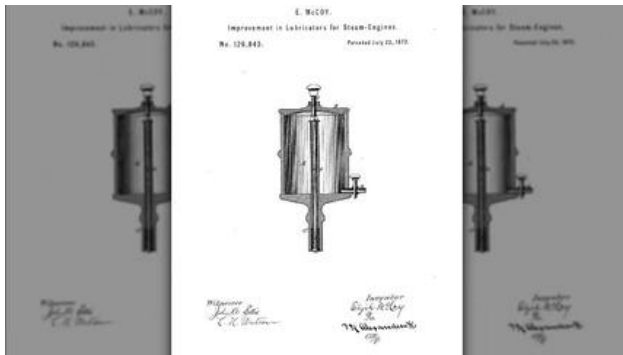


In 1872, Elijah McCoy received his first patent for an invention, which eventually became known as the "oil-drip cup," according to Smithsonian Magazine. After receiving his first patent, he continued to improve his original invention, as well as develop other devices to improve the efficiency of train maintenance. These other improvements he made allowed for trains to travel greater distances without having to stop as often (per ThoughtCo.com)

Elijah McCoy's oil-drip cup greatly improved the train maintenance industry, and his hard work began to pay off. The Michigan Central

Railroad promoted him and asked him to instruct their employees on the use of his inventions. McCoy was also then asked to consult for the railroad on the issue of patents. Eventually, McCoy secured patents for other inventions of his, including household items like ironing boards and lawn sprinklers. Throughout his lifetime, Elijah McCoy secured almost 60 patents for his inventions, according to Biography.

The Real McCoy



+The common expression "the Real McCoy" may have ties to this revolutionary inventor. When referring to something as "the Real McCoy," you are basically saying something is the real deal — a genuine artifact, not a fake copy. According to ThoughtCo, though the exact origin of the saying is unknown, there are a couple of places it may have come from.

While some believe it comes from the Scottish phrase "the Real McCay" (via The Guardian), others believe it originated when referring to the inventions of Elijah McCoy. Railroad engineers, in particular, are believed to have started using it when they were looking for the "real McCoy system," ensuring they were getting the real equipment and not

an improperly made knock-off. According to Smithsonian Magazine, McCoy's oil-drip-cup design was fairly simple and easy for the competition to replicate. However, McCoy's original design had the best reputation, and therefore everyone wanted to make sure they ended up with the real deal.

An Inspiring Legacy

Elijah McCoy eventually moved to Ypsilanti, Michigan, in 1882 and continued both inventing and consulting for the railroad (via Smithsonian Magazine). At the age of 72, he patented his graphite lubricator, which was designed for the super-heater locomotives that were used during that time. Four years later, he finally established his own company — Elijah McCoy Manufacturing Company — where he produced his own products and those of others (Blackpast.org). Shortly after opening his manufacturing company, tragedy befell McCoy and his family (via Biography.com). He and his wife were in a terrible accident that took her life and left McCoy with financial, physical, and mental problems. Seven years later, he passed away on October 10, 1929, at the age of 85.

Though his name and his work may have inspired the use of a new colloquialism in the English language, Elijah McCoy left behind an even greater legacy. McCoy was inducted into the National Inventor's Hall of Fame in 2001, and in 2012, the Elijah J. McCoy Midwest Regional U.S. Patent and Trademark Office in Detroit was named in honor of him (per Inventors Digest).

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