

Rowan McKenzie, St. John's Catholic High School

2026 Recipient of Tay Valley Township History Scholarship

Essay Question: How have you demonstrated your interest in history, both in and out of school?

One of the most important lessons that history teaches us is that the choices people make every day will eventually shape the future of their communities and environment. By learning from past successes and mistakes, we can better understand the importance of sustainability. My experiences in agriculture and community outreach have helped me see these lessons first-hand.

For as long as I can remember, I have been fascinated with growing vegetables. It began with helping my grandmother in her garden as a five-year-old. At age 12, I started my own market garden on our family's grass-fed beef farm. I sell fresh, organic vegetables at farmers' markets and a local grocer. Any excess, I donate to a local food bank. In addition to being a rewarding, part-time job, I have been able to channel my experiences into outreach efforts focused on promoting gardening and sustainable agriculture at my school, through the community food bank, and with the Ontario Nature Youth Council. It has been rewarding to share my knowledge with youth in my community. I have shown young kids how to start seeds, taught youth how to plant gardens in small spaces, and challenged others to consider how locally grown food can help their economy while promoting biodiversity and supporting pollinators.

My passion for sustainable agriculture has led me to study how agriculture has shaped civilizations over thousands of years. History has proven that societies thrive when they care for their land and support strong, local communities. Yet, the history of agriculture also illustrates the consequences of environmental neglect and unsustainable practices.

Through my outreach efforts at the Ontario Nature Youth Council, I have had the opportunity to meet experts from many domains, including environmental scientists, biologists, and indigenous elders, all of whom carry accumulated knowledge from those who came before them.

I believe that studying history and understanding humanity's past successes, failures, and lessons are crucial to shaping a future where we can cultivate food sustainably. Too often, we fail to see our actions as part of a bigger picture. We must recognize the ecological damage we are doing today from the perspective of someone living in the future, perhaps reading a historical account and wishing they could have changed what happened in the past.

I believe it's everyone's duty to learn from the past, recognize when we are doing harm in the present, and be the change we know we need.