

# Essay:

## A Brief History of Early Ice Hockey

The Lineal Origins of the Modern Game – by Mark Grant

**Modern ice hockey can be traced** back to an encounter that took place no earlier than the winter of 1749-50 – soon after around three thousand English settlers arrived in what became known as Halifax, Nova Scotia on June 21, 1749. Thomas Raddall, an Order of Canada historian, stated that the “first” settlers observed the Mi’kmaw playing a hockey-like game on ice during some early winter. (Source Documents provided in back.) Later, he said he found several such references while researching his 1948 book, *Halifax – Warden of the North*. In Raddall’s account British officers began playing pond hockey with local Mi’kmaw players who called Halifax *Kjipuktuk*. That great moment marked the literal birth the version of hockey that would evolve into the modern game.

There is a very high likelihood that this first meeting took place in the small inlet featured below, known as Tuft’s Cove, as we know there was a Mi’kmaq settlement there – across the harbor from where the first Halifax settlers were located. If so, this little cove is modern Ice Hockey’s true genesis location, from which all versions of modern Ice Hockey are derived.



At the very least, modern Ice Hockey’s Eden is in the wider Dartmouth-Halifax area. Tuft’s Cove remains the strongest candidate, however, because that’s where the Mi’kmaq settlement was closest to Halifax. It would have been impossible for the English to not see the Mi’kmaw’s playing their winter stick game. Tuft’s Cove became Ice Hockey’s first major stick-making production centre. Imagine sticks being shipped out of here that found their way to every major Canadian city and then beyond, until – ten days after the founding of the National Hockey League in Montreal - Tuft’s Cove blew up in the great Halifax Explosion of 1917.

Back to the mid-18th century. After the two parties began playing together, Raddall

stated that the officers began distributing the Mi'kmaw's "necessary" playing sticks throughout the British military network. In 2021 we suggested that the Mi'kmaq sticks were likely considered necessary because of their flat, thin blades. The sticks used in Britain's three stick games—hurling, shinty, and grass hockey—were all adapted for use on grass. Ordinarily, one would expect that Britain's settlers gradually adapted their grass-oriented sticks for ice. Halifax and Dartmouth settlers were different. The flat, thin blade was already in use there.

Players who used grass-adapted sticks chased pucks on ice. The Mi'kmaw's flat, thin blade was an evolutionary end-point. The flat thin blade made man the master: it allowed users to trap pucks with great efficiency and send them in any controlled direction. Mi'kmaq sticks were simply better. Way better. That's why they began circulating in military locations, with Kingston, Cape Breton, and Windsor being among the likely candidates.

The first time this happened a business partnership was established that would evolve into one of Canada's most successful business ventures. This 'Halifax-Dartmouth-Kjipuktuk' partnership lasted into the 1930s, defeated only by the Great Depression and mass- production. To this day, the story of Halifax's true role in the rise of modern hockey remains early Canada's greatest untold story.

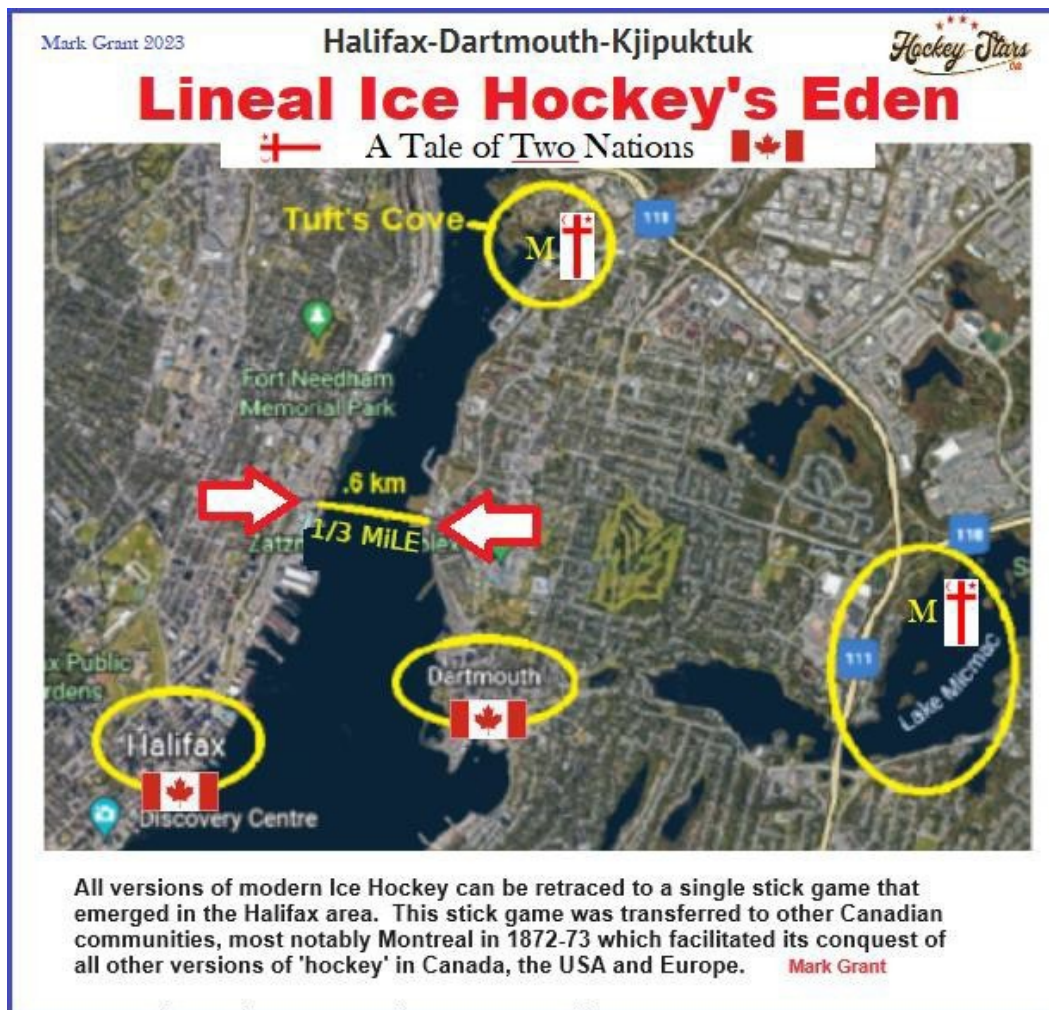
Here's a detail to remember: Raddall also wrote that the officers only *later* started playing with skates. Why? This likely had to do with the skates of that time. Since the introduction of metal skates centuries earlier, people had always strapped them onto boots and shoes. Strap- on skates hindered movement. Bone skates weren't effective either. Until around 1863, Raddall's officers may have decided that it was more enjoyable to play without any kind of skates.

Much later, around 1863, Dartmouth's Starr Manufacturing Company introduced footwear that would rapidly revolutionize the skating world. Starr's famous Acme skate enabled users to leverage their bodies like never before. As far as hockey was concerned, its greatest advantage was that it weaponized turning.

Since they were associated with the local upper class, it's likely Halifax's officers were among the first to get Acme skates. When this happened, something historic and unanticipated occurred: the birth of 19th-century ice hockey's dominant player. In our book, we call this player *radix stellaris*, in an attempt to define the kind of player who conquered all other 'hockey' players before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Radix* means root in Latin, in reference to the tree roots that the Kjipuktuk Mi'kmaw used to craft their flat thin blades. *Stellaris* is a nod to Dartmouth's Starr corporation, maker of the necessary Acme skate.

Suddenly, around Halifax *and nowhere else*, hockey players began what turn out to be the necessary tools of modern ice hockey. The 1863 marriage of the Mi'kmaq stick and Dartmouth's Acme skate allowed Halifax hockey to rapidly evolve. With few weekend distractions and thousands of locals on the ice on favorable days, we can be sure Halifax's finest players honed their craft. For ten years, the Mi'kmaq and Canadian players of Halifax- Dartmouth-Kjipuktuk evolved their game in 19th-century isolation, unseen by most other communities. As the only version of 'hockey' that could evolve, Halifax quietly and quickly became the singular home of *world-class* ice hockey the 1860s.

This is why it's incorrect to say early ice hockey only needed any kind of skate and stick. There were two types of 19<sup>th</sup> century hockey, actually: one kind was based on any skate and stick, and the other—Halifax hockey—that required special skates and sticks.



Modern ice hockey's next great turn of events came in 1872 when a Halifax player moved to Montreal at the age of 22. James Creighton, history tells us he was an advanced skater, skilled hockey player with the instincts of a promoter.

Upon moving to Montreal, Creighton started hanging out with rugby players that were associated with McGill University and the Victoria Skating Rink. In what was likely the winter of 1872-73, Creighton's new chums decided to try playing lacrosse with skates. The experiment bombed.

By then, this son of Halifax may have been surprised to learn that nobody in Montreal played hockey on ice. He must have thought about Byron Weston, Joe Cope, William Gill and the others back in Halifax, as his new Montreal friends chased lacrosse balls until they had finally had enough. It would have been then, or soon afterwards, when Creighton suggested they try Halifax hockey.

But rather than suggest that everyone make their own sticks from trees, Creighton would have told the others that he would order Mi'kmaq sticks. In doing so, he put both his and Halifax's reputation on the line. Passing out the sticks wouldn't be enough—Creighton would have to lead by example. If he wanted to keep playing, he'd need to show the Montrealers the *sizzle* of Halifax hockey.

Imagine around two-dozen rugby players gathering at some frozen pond, possibly on the land where Montreal's Forum stands. Or nearby. All of the Montrealers have



Canadian Acme skates or ones that incorporated their evolutionary advantages. These are the recipients of Montreal's first Mi'kmaq sticks. The Halifax conversion is now complete. Montreal is ready to start playing, a uniquely Canadian-Mi'kmaq version of hockey on ice.

It isn't difficult for hockey people to imagine what must happen in a scene where a motivated, and known-to-be-skilled player with ten years' experience feels the need to show two dozen *total* newbies what it means to *tame* a puck on ice. Less obvious, is the part where Creighton had to overcome the aftertaste of the failed lacrosse experiment.

Whether he impressed during warm-up, at Montreal's first hockey game, or both, we know James Creighton *sold* the Montrealers on Halifax ice hockey. We call his performance the 'Selly of the Century' because Montreal took Halifax's game and molded into Canada's official way of playing Ice Hockey. That entire arc began when Creighton transferred *radix stellaris* hockey to Henry Joseph and the others. A near-sacred bond was formed between Montreal and Halifax-Dartmouth-Kjipuktuk that locks down the tale of lineal hockey history for all eternity. Contrary to current thinking, it is a tale that was largely driven by two Halifax technologies, located where the arrow points to in the image below:



For two years the Montrealers played proper ice hockey, and very often according to Henry Joseph. Of them, only Creighton would have understood Halifax hockey's tremendous appeal in general. From the time he was around twelve he watched people increasingly play hockey on the waters around Halifax and Dartmouth. *Radix stellaris* hockey was a big deal back home, even though people didn't call it that. It may have led to the extinction of others old country games played during winter, like 'hurling on ice' (rickets), shinty on ice or grass hockey on ice.

It is widely assumed that James Creighton organized the first demonstration of 'Montreal' ice hockey at the Victoria Skating Rink (VSR) on the evening of March 3, 1875, two years after the Halifax-Montreal transfer. Around forty people paid to attend the event which is where early ice hockey's story begins in most narratives—ten years after the birth of the game's dominant player, which coincided with the 1863 introduction of the Halifax Skating Rink.

The confident Creighton probably wasn't surprised that the March 3rd match was very well-received. Demand for more "necessary" Mi'kmaq sticks definitely followed. (Those who wanted them were likely owners of Dartmouth's Acme skates, then in their tenth year.)

Creighton grew a side business, but he had greater ambitions. The father of Montreal hockey wanted to build what would become one of Canada's greatest cultural pillars.

By 1881, lineal hockey had become such a staple in Montreal that the city decided to showcase the Halifax-Montreal game at its Winter Carnivals. These annual events drew tens of thousands of people from across North America, with some even traveling from Europe.

At the time of the first Winter Carnival, the most experienced Montrealers had the same level of experience using Mi'kmaq sticks and Acme skates that Creighton had at the birth of Montreal hockey. Much of their performance will tell us what Halifax hockey had become by the time of the 1872-73 transfer, therefore.

Although they continued to use the same technologies—or imitations of them—the Montrealers didn't exactly play *radix stellaris* hockey. Early on, rugby players that they were, the Montrealers introduced intentional hitting. This gave rise to two significantly different ways to play lineal hockey: the incidental contact way or with intentional hitting. Winter Carnival visitors saw Montrealers playing *radix stellaris hittem* hockey.

Kjipuktuk Mi'kmaq sticks would have been made available for purchase. Shipment solutions were conceived of in advance. As one sees with Toronto's and Winnipeg's introduction to *radix stellaris* hockey, wealthy Winter Carnival visitors would obtain Mi'kmaq sticks for cliques of friends who had long-ago obtained Dartmouth or Dartmouth-inspired skates.



The envy these cliques inspired had significant *lineal* consequences. Rather than wait for commercial sticks, the more ambitious onlookers fashioned ones that imitated the Mi'kmaq stick's flat, thin blade. With each imitation, the legacy of the Kjipuktuk Mi'kmaq spread. The commercial hockey stick market soon followed. Before long, the 'Micmac' stick became seen as just another brand of *hockey* stick—a superior one, but still just another. This is ironic, as the Mi'kmaq were literally buried by their own success. The term 'hockey stick' implies English provenance. It doesn't reflect how lineal ice hockey history played out. It's more accurate to say those commercial devices were actually "Mi'kmaq sticks," as they all borrowed the Mi'kmaq's prototypical flat, thin blade. Such reasoning would extend into the current age.

With the introduction of the Stanley Cup, Montreal's *hittem* hockey became the official way of playing elite men's hockey in Canada. Both versions thrived, as they do today, with incidental contact hockey having always been the more common version.

In 1886, the year of lineal ice hockey's first international games in Burlington, Vermont, the Montrealers published rules in the *Gazette* newspaper. That they named their charter the Amateur Hockey Association of Canada rules speaks to their ambitions. Drafted a couple of weeks earlier at the Victoria Skating Rink, the AHAC rules were a *Halifax-Montreal* charter its high-sticking rule dating back to 1860s Halifax, per the testimony of James Creighton's childhood friend, the Nova Scotia Supreme Court judge, Byron Weston.

Since their introduction, the original 1886 AHAC rules have become modern ice

hockey's *Magna Carta*. Every version of the modern game, from beer leagues to the NHL, IIHF, and Olympic hockey, is derived from this template.

By the end of the 1800s Ice Hockey's first three Stars had conquered Canada. Their *Montreal-Halifax* invasion would soon spread to the USA and Europe. As hockey gained popularity, pressure grew to allow professionals to compete for the Stanley Cup. The first openly pro leagues emerged as soon as this happened. In a few years, by 1911, the National Hockey Association (NHA) became Montreal's top-dog.

In 1912, a new professional league appeared out west in Oak Bay, British Columbia. The Pacific Coast Hockey Association's debut game took place on January 2nd, involving the hometown Victoria Aristocrats and the New Westminster Royals. The PCHA was the brainchild of Frank and Lester Patrick, icons of great reputation who are said to have played with Art Ross in pond games at the site of Montreal's Forum, the greatest cathedral in 20<sup>th</sup> century hockey.

The birth of early Ice Hockey's Fourth Star marked the beginning of a rivalry that would divide Canada for fourteen years. The Patrick brothers used their father's wealth and their connections as elite players to lure top NHA players to British Columbia. It quickly became clear that PCHA hockey was just as good as the NHA's. When Stanley Cup trustees noticed this, they decided that the new Cup champion would be determined annually through a competition between the East and West champions.

To attract fans, the NHA and PCHA introduced various innovations while retaining all the essential elements of *radix stellaris hittem* hockey. The Patrick brothers were the greatest innovators, credited with introducing over two dozen modern features. All of these debuted in the West, establishing British Columbia as a key player in early ice hockey's development.

The West's final great innovation came in 1925, when the Victoria Cougars defeated the Montreal Canadiens by introducing shift hockey. In the NHL, players had been skating full sixty-minute games as players had always played. In the 1925 Cup finals, Lester Patrick had the Cougars play in five-minute shifts, marking Stanley Cup hockey's introduction to attrition warfare. It is said that the series ended, well before its official conclusion, in west-central Oak Bay, on March 30, 1925. Whatever the truth, Georges Vezina, Howie Morenz, and the rest of the Montreal Canadiens were sent home as losers, thanks to the final major contribution of early ice hockey's fourth Star.

According to this reckoning, Ice Hockey's 'early' era ended in 1926. That year, the East hosted the Stanley Cup finals, with Victoria facing the Montreal Maroons at the newly constructed Forum. This time, the East won. Lester Patrick stayed in town to handle some business. On May 4th, he sold all of the West's player contracts to the NHL. This is how "the West was won" in the true story of Ice Hockey.

For the next forty-six years, elite hockey was largely defined by the NHL. Changes there were often adopted by lower leagues and institutions like the IIHF. From start to finish, this 'middle' period of modern ice hockey was almost exclusively a Canadian affair.

The middle era ended most dramatically, on Saturday September, 2, 1972 at Montreal's Forum which others have called the "Vatican of hockey." As the world looked on, the Soviet Union and Europe began the first of eleven test matches that pitted a team of Canadian NHL all-stars against players from the Soviet Union, Sweden, and Czechoslovakia's best leagues.

By the second period of that first game, it was clear that ice hockey had entered a

new age. This was the great lesson of best-on-best hockey: Europe was no longer playing second- fiddle to North America. It wouldn't take long for the Americans to catch up either, which they did a few years before they won their first best-on-best title, at hockey's Vatican.

Since 1972, modern ice hockey has increasingly become a North American-European game. This is fitting, as only those two continents contributed to the creation of modern hockey, which began in Halifax, Nova Scotia, no earlier than the winter of 1749-50.

Contrary to what many people have been thought to think, the origins of modern Ice hockey are no mystery. The paths of all modern games can be retraced concisely, in a retrospective journey that leads to one location: Halifax-Dartmouth-Kjipuktuk. There, and there alone, a game was played in the 1860s with a stick that tamed the puck and skates that weaponized turning. Next to you watch a game, play close attention to how the proper stick and skate define how hockey is to be played on ice. Think about how different the games would play out if players used grass-adapted sticks and strap-on skates like the ones that had been used for centuries until the introduction of the Starr skate. Both technologies have proved to be indispensable since their introductions.

The stick game that became modern ice hockey was literally born in Halifax-Dartmouth- Kjipuktuk, no earlier than 1749, to the *exclusion* of all other “hockey” playing communities, past and present, in North America, Europe and worldwide. In terms of provenance, it is a Canadian-Mi'kmaq game, since this game relied on two technologies that these nations contributed to modern Ice Hockey.

As far as where Ice Hockey was born, if current thinking in 2025 is to have any substantive value - what with our various Land Acknowledgement agreements - it follows that modern Ice Hockey was literally born in two nations at once, in Canada and the Mi'kmaq First Nation.

For a deeper dive, check out my free book, *The Four Stars of Early Ice Hockey* at [www.hockey-stars.ca](http://www.hockey-stars.ca).

