

Boston Massacre

It was initially referred to as the “Incident on King Street,” the “Bloody Massacre on King Street” and the “State Street Massacre.” Several decades later, and since, it has been called the “Boston Massacre.”

March 5, 1770, Crispus Attucks, James Caldwell, Samuel Gray, Samuel Maverick and Patrick Carr were shot and eventually died. Others were wounded, but survived. Today the site of the massacre is marked by a cobblestone ring on the traffic island at the intersection of Devonshire and State Streets in Boston.

Let’s look back ...

After the Seven Years’ War had drained Britain’s coffers, the royal government imposed tighter controls over its North American colonies in order to raise revenues. When customs officials complained about the difficulties of collecting from disobedient colonists, Britain sent troops to impose order. The arrival of British soldiers in October 1768 heightened tensions in a city already on the edge of an uprising.

Over the next two years, Boston existed in a state of virtual British military occupation - one out of three men in the city was a Redcoat, a common nickname for British soldiers due to the color of their uniforms. Radical townspeople and idle young men harassed the soldiers, leading to numerous skirmishes and scuffles. (Khan Academy)

Conflicts between the British and the colonists had been on the rise because the British government had been trying to increase control over the colonies and raise taxes at the same time. (Library of Congress)

In March 1770, British officials ordered the removal of all occupants of the Boston Manufactory House - a halfway house for people living in poverty, those who were ill, and those who were homeless - so that a regiment of British soldiers could be garrisoned there. The Manufactory House’s homeless occupants put up a resistance, and the British backed down, but other confrontations ensued.

On March 5th, one such confrontation turned violent.

On that cold, snowy evening in 1770, Private Hugh White was the only British soldier guarding the King’s money stored inside the Custom House on King Street. Private White came under threat of attack from Boston citizens after having an altercation with Edward Garrick.

Soon the town’s church bells rang signaling for more local citizens to come and observe the commotion.

Fearing for his life, White sent word to Captain Thomas Preston. Captain Preston soon arrived with six other armed men, Privates John Carroll, Mathew Kilroy, William McCauley, Hugh Montgomery, William Warren and Corporal William Wemms.

As the crowd continued to grow, Captain Preston ordered his men to load their muskets and then proceeded to tell the mob to disperse.

The crowd continued to taunt the soldiers daring them to fire their weapons and throwing snowballs, ice and oyster shells. Private Montgomery was then struck by an object from the crowd and fell to the ground.

Once Montgomery recovered, he stood up and fired into the crowd without orders given to do so. One by one the other soldiers discharged their muskets. (NPS)

Nervous Redcoats opened fire into the crowd, killing five Bostonians and wounding several others. One of the victims was Crispus Attucks, a free sailor of African and Native American descent who has gone down in history as the first casualty of the American Revolution. (Khan Academy)



When the smoke cleared Crispus Attucks, James Caldwell, and Samuel Gray lied dead in the street with Samuel Maverick mortally wounded, dying the next day and Patrick Carr dying two weeks later. Among the five who ultimately died at the hand of Captain Preston's men, six more were wounded. The crowd soon dispersed, and an investigation ensued.

Captain Preston and the seven other soldiers soon turned themselves in to stand trial. The soldiers were represented by future President John Adams, who after gathering witness testimony, explained to the jury that the soldiers were defending themselves from the unruly mob.

Boston Massacre Trial

The crowd strained forward in the Queen Street courtroom on October 17, 1770. Murmurs and rumblings of anger filled the air. Captain Thomas Preston, a British grenadier, shifted his feet nervously and felt the sweat rising to his brow.

If the jury found him, and his men, guilty of murder as the indictment suggested, he could only expect death as a penalty. That is what these Bostonians wanted. The only hope for Preston and his men lay with this short, stocky country lawyer - a colonial American after all - John Adams, and his too young assistant Josiah Quincy.

Seven months had passed since the “horrid, bloody massacre” took place; but the passions of the people remained strong.

“Sons of Liberty” such as Samuel Adams and John Hancock had seen to that. They reminded the good citizens that the British soldiers were not welcomed, and that mobs had as much right to carry clubs as the soldiers had to carry loaded muskets.

But now the jury was set and the true drama was beginning. Only a fair trial would show the world that Massachusetts, and by association all Americans, deserved their liberty by an appeal to justice and not by the rule of a mob.

Captain Preston had his doubts that a fair trial was possible. Yet there was something about his lawyer that gave him hope. This fellow Adams - colonial though he was - was tenacious when it came to the truth, braver than most when it came to risking himself or his family, devoted beyond reason when it came to the law, and undeniably intelligent.

If anyone could help these hapless soldiers in a foreign land, Preston thought, John Adams seemed the man. The lawyer hardly cut a gallant figure standing before the bar wearing the powdered wig and black robe of His Majesty’s court.

Adams seemed at home in the courtroom, like an experienced mariner navigating the shoals of a dangerous coastline. He had been able to impanel a jury from out-of-town, not a single Boston man among them and, Preston felt, the jury seemed uncommonly thoughtful for upstart colonials.

Now Adams was questioning Richard Palmes, a witness most of the crowd recognized, about events that night. Preston could hear Palmes saying,



“That instant ... I saw something resembling Snow or Ice strike the Grenadier on the Captain’s right hand...He [the Grenadier] fired the first Gun.”

“After the Gun went off I heard the word ‘fire!’ The Captain and I stood in front about half between the breech and muzzle of the Guns. I don’t know who gave the word to fire.”

Adams let Palmes’ words settle like fallen snow on the minds of the jury. Who could say where the command “fire” had come from?

Many in the mob had been yelling “fire, damn you ... ye’ dare not!”

Clubs and chunks of ice had been ready in menacing hands. What reasonable man, or even seasoned soldier, would not fear for his life? "Malice aforethought" is what the indictment had charged.

Yet Adams was showing that confusion, terror, and even curiosity were more on the minds of everyone that night in King Street. Even the jury's faces showed the common truth of this.

John Adams was in his element. Like a gladiator he loved the arena where great battles were fought. For Adams, a man's character was not measured by the popularity he inspired in his neighbors, but by the "truth" he pursued.

As he would say in a letter to his beloved Abigail, "I ... have consented to my own ruin, to your ruin, and to the ruin of our children." But he would also assert "the law ... will not bend to the uncertain wishes, imaginations, and wanton tempers of men."

When the jury quickly returned with a "not guilty" verdict against Preston, Adams felt a great weight lifted from his shoulders.

Soon after, the trial of the other eight men - Hugh White, Hugh Montgomery, Matthew Kilroy, John Carroll, James Hartigan, William McCauley, William Warren and William Wemms - began.

By now, Captain Preston had great admiration for their lawyer's abilities. Generally, Preston resented these colonials and felt that "malcontents" were "using every method to fish out evidence to prove [the shooting] was a concerted scheme to murder the inhabitants."

But if a British soldier could be acquitted by a New England jury, perhaps there was more, he thought.

Following one of the first trials in American history to last for several days, even the frenetic crowd seemed exhausted. Testimony after testimony had been used to show both sides of the "massacre" story.

But as Adams said in his summary, "facts are stubborn things ... if they [the soldiers] were assaulted at all ... this was a provocation for which the law reduces the offense of killing, down to manslaughter ..."

In less than three hours, the jury reached a verdict. No malice was found. All eight men were found not guilty of murder. Two, Hugh Montgomery and Matthew Kilroy, were found guilty of manslaughter.

A defense lawyer to the last, Adams negotiated the sentences of Montgomery and Kilroy using an ancient precedent of English law. The "Plea of Clergy" meant that instead of death, the two men would be branded on the thumbs as first offenders, never to be permitted to violate the law again.

Adams would later describe his role as "the greatest service I ever rendered my country."

Why? In a town where British soldiers were hated, there had been a fair trial by jury. In a land where mobs could sway events, the world saw that justice and liberty were valued as the legal rights of all. (NPS)

The Boston Massacre is one of several pivotal events leading to the Revolutionary War, and ultimately, the signing of the Declaration of Independence. (NPS)



Information here is primarily from the National Park Service; Khan Academy

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young