

Crispus Attucks

“... a crowd of mostly white sailors followed a seafaring man of color into danger; and this time, into history.” (Jeffrey Bolster)

Crispus Attucks has been immortalized as the first casualty of the American Revolutionary War and the first African American hero.



On March 5, 1770, toward evening that day, a crowd of colonists gathered and began taunting a small group of British soldiers. Tension mounted rapidly, and, when one of the soldiers was struck, the others fired their muskets, killing three of the Americans instantly and mortally wounding two others.

Attucks was the first to fall, thus becoming one of the first men to lose his life in the cause of American independence.

His body was carried to Faneuil Hall, where it lay in state until March 8, when all five victims were buried in a common grave. Attucks was the only victim of the Boston Massacre whose name was widely remembered. In 1888 the Crispus Attucks monument was unveiled in the Boston Common. (Britannica)

Attucks has been celebrated not just as one of the first martyrs in what became the fight for American independence, but also as a symbol of African Americans' struggle for freedom and equality.



The life of Crispus Attucks is far less documented than his death.

Early coverage and investigations into the details of the Massacre refer to Attucks as Michael Johnson, a name he may have used as an intentional alias.

After uncovering his actual name, newspapers published a few details about his life, notably his profession, a sailor; his birth in Framingham, Massachusetts; his current residence of New Providence in the Bahamas; and his ship's destination of North Carolina.

His last name, 'Attucks,' is of Indigenous origin, deriving from the Natick word for 'deer.'

Witness testimony during the Massacre trial interchangeably used 'mulatto' or 'Indian' to describe Attucks, indicating his mixed African and Indigenous birth.

His first name reflects the trend in the colonial era of enslavers forcing an Ancient Roman name onto their enslaved people. Attucks shares the name 'Crispus' with the son of Emperor Constantine.

He also appears in a 1750 advertisement in the Boston Gazette. William Brown of Framingham placed an advertisement to call for the return of a twenty-seven year old escaped enslaved man named 'Crispas,' described as a six foot two inch 'mulatto.'

Contemporary sources at the time of his death do not identify Attucks as enslaved or formerly enslaved. How and when he gained his freedom is unknown, but it is possible that Attucks used the name Michael Johnson to protect himself from a return to slavery.

Attucks was born around 1723 somewhere near Framingham, Mass., perhaps Natick, the Praying Indian town.

His mother belonged to the Wampanoag tribe, and his father was an African-American slave. His mother may have been descended from John Attucks, hanged for treason because he sided with his people during King Philip's War.

Crispus Attucks was enslaved for 27 years, probably by a man named William Brown of Framingham. In 1750 he won his freedom by running away to sea. Or he may have bought his freedom.

In any case, he often worked on whalers, and in between voyages he worked as a ropemaker.



Seafaring was one of the few occupations free men of color could enter. Twenty-five years after the American Revolution, one-fifth of the 100,000 men employed as sailors were African-American.

The sea allowed room for black leaders. White sailors would follow a skilled black seamen who could help navigate a ship out of danger.

African-American sailors also provided a vital communications link between North and South and among Africans everywhere. For example, they helped Boston abolitionist David Walker spread his inflammatory pamphlet, Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World, by taking copies to Southern ports.

And though the sea represented enslavement to Africans, it also gave a lifeline to freedom for people like Attucks. Northern sea captains not only employed black sailors, they helped southern slaves sail to freedom on their ships; Frederick Douglass, for example, disguised himself as a sailor to escape slavery. (New England Historical Society)

Information here is primarily from New England Historical Society; Britannica

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