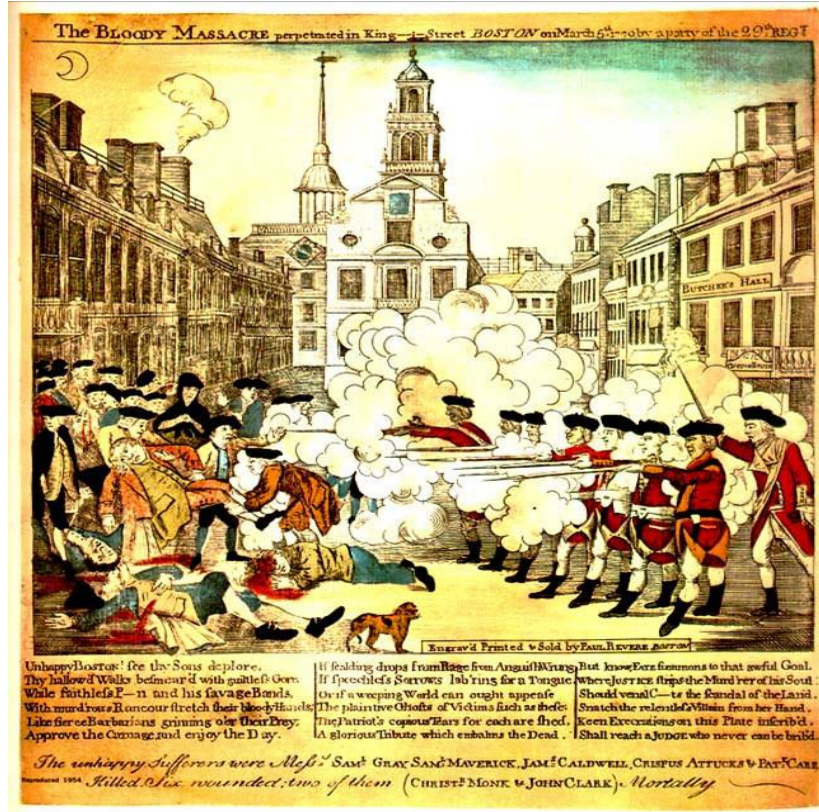


# Boston Massacre



Library of Congress

Beginning in 1764, Great Britain imposed on her American colonies a series of measures that plunged the empire into periodic and even more serious crises with the colonists until armed confrontation exploded into a war for independence in April 1775. In the face of such measures the Americans continued to affirm their loyalty to King and Parliament while rejecting Parliament's authority to tax them without representation. They had developed an ingenious and plausible distinction between taxation and legislation. But the more Americans insisted on this distinction, the more determined and steadfast Parliamentary members became as they sought to teach the colonists that they could not set limits on their constitutional authority.

The main lines of the story are well known. When the British tried to tax the colonies without consent, they resisted under the banner of "No taxation without representation." First came the Sugar Act (1764), laying a fresh set of tariffs on colonial trade and curtailing Americans' longtime habit of smuggling sugar and molasses from the French West Indies. The following year came a Stamp Act (1765), which levied an unprecedented direct tax on virtually every piece of public paper in the colonies—newspapers, almanacs, diplomas, deeds, wills, customs documents. It even taxed tax receipts. Under a brewing storm of defiant American protests and under the pressures of a boycott of British imports, Parliament repealed the stamp duty, but not without announcing in the Declaratory Act (1766) its power to legislate for the colonies "in all cases whatsoever." Soon, Parliament put principle back into practice as they imposed Chancellor of the Exchequer Charles Townshend's duties on all lead, glass, paper, paint, and tea imported into the colonies. Once again, the American colonists mounted an effective opposition, not only to the taxes themselves but also to their enforcement provisions and to the intended use of the money to

strengthen British influence over colonial governments. While moderate voices resisted radical action, an intercolonial boycott of British goods was begun. In Boston, mobs organized and rioted against Townshend's customs commissioners. In 1768, the British dispatched two regiments of troops to Boston; however, their presence failed to maintain law and order. Instead, British troops in Boston aroused popular emotion among Bostonians as the violence intensified between British troops and the mobs.

In the days prior to the Boston Massacre, the air was thick with tension as local Bostonians met soldiers with epithets on the streets while children pelted the redcoats with snowballs. A crisis developed in the wake of an article published in the *Boston News-Letter* by Theophilus Lillie, a local merchant, who turned the argument of Samuel Adams and his group of no representation on its head. Lillie argued that it seemed "strange that men who are guarding against being subject to Laws [to] which they never gave their consent in person or by their representative, should at the same time make Laws, and in the most effectual manner execute them upon me and others to which Laws I am sure I never gave my consent either in person or by my representative." Lillie's words enraged the mob which formed on the morning of February 22, 1770 outside his shop to hang a sign identifying him as "IMPORTER." When Ebenezer Richardson, a neighbor of Lillie's, tried to take the sign down, he drew the scorn of the mob. Tagged as "Knight of the Post" for providing information on Boston's merchants to the Customs office, Richardson drew an angry response from the crowd as they grew restive and curses were exchanged. Later, Richardson was followed home where he barricaded himself. Suddenly, after his windows were broken, a gunshot rang out. Richardson, who had fired to disperse the crowd, had killed an 11-year old boy, Christopher Seider, and wounded another. The mob then attacked Richardson, who was saved only by the intervention of William Molineux, a well-known Son of Liberty. Richardson was convicted of murder but at a second trial, King George III pardoned him of his crime.

Samuel Adams and the Sons of Liberty marked the occasion of Seider's funeral to link the young boy's death to the repressive actions of the British measures. As several thousands marched with the coffin, the scene testified to the extent of popular emotion within Boston to the Townshend Acts. Street brawls ensued on a daily basis between Boston's citizens and the British troops occupying the city. In addition, the fact that the British troops took work and pay (British soldiers were often willing to work for 20% less than civilian laborers) away from them, led more and more to the growing resentment among the local population.

The hatred swelled up on the evening of March 5, 1770, as a crowd that John Adams later characterized as "a motley rabble of saucy boys, negroes and mulattoes, Irish teagues and outlandish Jack tars" gathered in the square before the customhouse. Before them stood the main guard of the Twenty-ninth Regiment, and behind the soldiers, peering uneasily out the customhouse windows, were some of the men responsible for bringing the troops to Boston. What brought the crowd to the customhouse was an incident that had occurred earlier nearby on King Street. When Edward Gerrish, an apprentice looking for a fight, insulted an officer he happened to encounter, Private Hugh White, a sentry who had heard Gerrish's taunt, struck him under the ear. Gerrish also reported that another soldier then attacked him as well. Word of what had happened to Gerrish quickly spread throughout the streets and a small crowd sought Private White out. The crowd of approximately 20 then assaulted White with snowballs packed with ice. White retreated to the customhouse where he prepared to hold off the growing crowd.

A block away but within sight of White and the customhouse, Captain Thomas Preston, the British officer in charge that evening, watched uneasily as the crowd closed in on Private White. Preston then heard church bells began tolling, the signal that help was needed to put out a fire.

Someone, eager to draw a larger crowd to fuel the mob, had obviously shouted fire or sent word to nearby churches that a fire was raging near the customhouse. In any case, several new arrivals joined the crowd. While some of these people carried bags and buckets, the former to help the fire victims save their belongings, the latter for carrying water. But others also carried clubs, swords, and bats. Captain Preston sensed danger and ordered a guard, consisting of six privates and a corporal at its head, to march down and rescue Private White. However, once the guard, marching in a column of twos pushed through the crowd, the mob filled in behind it and surrounded them. Captain Preston then ordered his men to form a single line, a rough semi-circle, facing out from the customhouse. Finally, Captain Preston made a fatal mistake when he instructed his men to load their muskets.

A standoff ensued as the British soldiers pointed their muskets towards the crowd. The crowd began shouting, “kill them” and then a piece of ice struck Private Hugh Montgomery, who then slipped on the icy ground. He regained his footing and fired the first shot. The remaining British soldiers then unleashed a deadly volley. Eleven men were struck; three died instantly. One man would die within the hour, the other several days later. No shots were fired at the soldiers.

Bostonians were enraged. Governor Thomas Hutchinson feared that public order would break down completely if something was not done. He contemplated removing the 14<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> British Regiments—the source that raised popular emotion to a rage. In the end, Hutchinson decided to jail Captain Preston and the soldiers to quell the city’s anger. While many of Boston’s radical leaders demanded immediate judicial action, the judges of the superior court opted to delay action until the autumn when the mood of the city, like the weather, had cooled.

When the trial commenced on October 24, 1770, John Adams rose to defend Captain Preston. Adams argued that the crowd had not only been harassing the soldiers but also had attacked them. The prosecution had not produced reliable evidence to prove that Preston had ordered his men to fire into the crowd Adams insisted. Thus, Adams concluded that the jury must acquit Captain Preston. The prosecution maintained that although a few boys in the crowd had hurled a few snowballs towards the soldiers, that the crowd was in general peaceful and had gathered only out of curiosity to see what was happening.

The court heard ninety-six witnesses who offered a variety of testimony that made it nearly impossible to discern what had actually happened on the evening of March 5 in front of the customhouse. Several witness reported that they had heard Captain Preston give the command to fire while others claimed to have seen shots fired from the windows of the customhouse. When the trial concluded at 5:00 p.m. on October 29, the jury needed only three hours to reach a verdict. Ironically, the decision was not announced until the following day. The jury’s verdict that Captain Preston and his men were found innocent did not sit well with the people of Boston. To further diffuse the anger of Bostonians, Preston was sent back to England where he received a generous pension from the king as compensation for his suffering.

Americans throughout the thirteen colonies had been anxiously following the events in Boston from afar through newspaper reports. For years, Bostonians, despite occasional instances of mob violence and agitation, had successfully managed to restrain their anger and offered no open affront to the presence of British troops in their city. Therefore, they were able to win universal sympathy throughout the colonies (and even win some converts in England) and make the whole policy of employing troops against them seem ridiculous, if not odious. Indeed, when word arrived of blood spilled at the hands of British troops, many Americans were gravely concerned.

In Concord, Massachusetts, a town soon to play a critical role in the outbreak of the Revolution, and elsewhere, most were faced with a startling crisis as their loyalty to the King and the Empire was sorely tested. Reverend William Emerson of Concord, who happened to be in Boston on March 8, 1770, the day of the funeral for four men killed in the Boston Massacre, was deeply moved by the solemn funeral procession. His opinion that the victims were “Martyrs in ye glorious Cause of Liberty,” was one shared by a growing wave of Americans. “I was almost overcome with a relation of the tragical Scene,” he wrote to his wife. “May it deeply impress our Minds.”

As he reflected on the events that led to the American Revolution, John Adams concluded that the “foundation of American independence was laid” on that fateful chilly March evening in Boston in 1770. In spite of the cooling of tensions in the wake of the Boston Massacre as the British diffused the crisis, the spark of revolution continued to foster not only in the minds of Bostonians but also in the hearts of colonists throughout the nation who were forced to come to grips with the difficult decision to turn their backs on the mother country to launch a war for independence.

Sources: Zobel, Hiller B. Zobel, *The Boston Massacre* (1970); Robert A. Gross, *The Minutemen and their World* (1976); Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* (1982); Edmund S. Morgan, *Birth of the Republic, 1763-1789*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (1992); William Bruce Wheeler and Susan D. Becker, ed., *Discovering the American Past: A Look at the Evidence*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (2002); <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/bostonmassacre/bostonmassacre.html>