

# The Boston Massacre: A Behind-the-Scenes Look At Paul Revere's Most Famous Engraving



Library of Congress

When Paul Revere first began selling his color prints of "The Bloody Massacre perpetrated in King Street" in Boston, he was doing what any like-minded patriot with his talents in 1770 would have done. Only, Paul Revere did it faster and more expeditiously than anyone else, including two other artist-engravers who also issued prints of the Massacre that year. It is unlikely that Revere was a witness to the dramatic events of March 5, but his plagiarized depiction of Pelham's engraving resonated among Americans. He capitalized on the Boston Massacre, widely circulating an effective piece of anti-British propaganda.

Twenty-one days before Revere's engraving was released—on the night of March 5, 1770—British soldiers had killed five Bostonians. Precipitating the event known as the Boston Massacre was a mob of men and boys taunting a sentry standing guard at the city's customhouse. When other British soldiers came to the sentry's support, a free-for-all ensued and shots were fired into the crowd. Three died on the spot, a fourth within the hour, and a fifth died several days later. Six others were wounded.

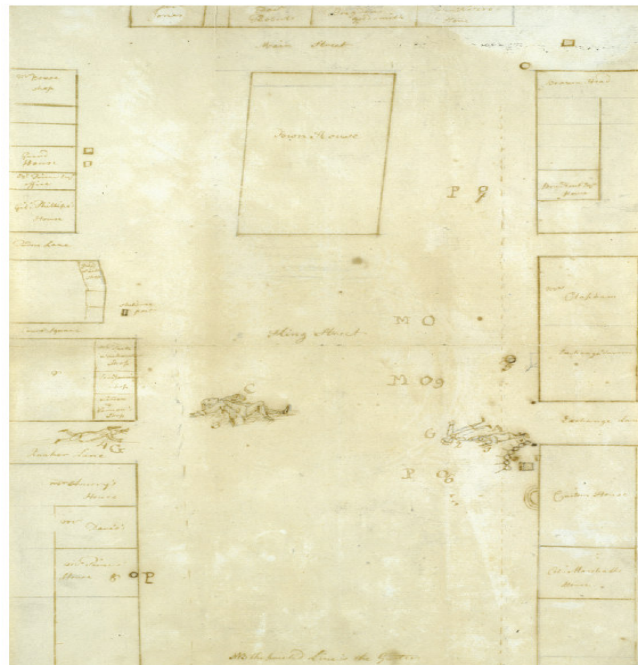
The presence of British troops in Boston had long been a sore point among Boston's radical politicians. Paul Revere wasted no time in capitalizing on the Massacre to highlight British tyranny and stir up anti-British sentiment among his fellow colonists. Revere's historic engraving is long on political propaganda and short on accuracy or aesthetics.

Notice how the British Grenadiers are shown standing in a straight line shooting their rifles in a regular volley, whereas when the disturbance actually erupted both sides were belligerent and riotous. Notice also that Revere's engraving shows a blue sky. Only a wisp of a moon suggests that the riot occurred after nine o'clock on a cold winter night. Notice too the absence of snow and ice on the street, while Crispus Attucks—a black man lying on the ground closest to the British soldiers—is shown to be white. As an aside, it should be noted that as a result of his death in the Boston Massacre, Crispus Attucks would emerge as the most famous of all the black men to fight in the cause of the Revolution, and become its first martyr.

Documentation has come to light over the years indicating that Revere copied engraver Henry Pelham's drawings of the Massacre, produced his own engraving, and three weeks after the occurrence was advertising his prints for sale in Boston's newspapers. By the time Pelham's prints hit the street, Revere's print had flooded the market. Jonathan Mulliken also issued a third engraving depicting the event. Except for a number of minor differences, all three prints appear alike.

In his rush to produce his engraving Revere employed the talents of Christian Remick to colorize the print. Remick's choice of colors is simple yet effective. Notice the use of red for the British uniforms and the blood. The other colors—blue, green, brown and black—all contribute to make this print what is arguably the most famous in America.

Few historians would deny that the "Boston Massacre" proved to be a milestone in America's road to independence. By popularizing the tragic event, Paul Revere's print became the first powerful influence in forming an outspoken anti-British public opinion, one which the revolutionary leaders had almost lost hope of achieving.



*Paul Revere Sketching of the Boston Massacre  
Boston Public Library*

In addition to his famous engraving of the Boston Massacre, Revere also drew a detailed map of the bodies to be used in the trial of the British soldiers held responsible.

## Paul Revere's Engraving and the Indian Captivity Narrative



The Indian captivity narrative was a popular literary genre that experienced a renewed interest among colonial Americans in the 1770s. These stories were often printed and reprinted by Puritan leaders eager to reinforce Puritan convictions among their flock. Authors of the earliest Indian captivity narratives, such as Mary Rowlandson, interpreted their captivity as a form of divine testing on which their rejection of Indian culture was equivalent to resisting a satanic temptation in the wilderness. The resurgent interest in the Puritan captivity narratives coincided with the American Revolution because Americans, like the earliest colonists who were terrorized by attacking Indians, began to see themselves as captives of tyrant savages rather than as subjects of a king.

In the eyes of the Revolution's radical leaders, Boston in 1770 was a captive city, having been occupied by British troops since October 1768. The events that transpired on the chilly evening of March 5, 1770, labeled a "massacre," lent proof to their case that they were captives of savages. When Mary Rowlandson's *Narrative* was reprinted in Boston in 1773, it was no accident that the woodcut that adorned that edition resembled Paul Revere's engraving of the Boston Massacre.

Hardly representative of the attack on Mary Rowlandson's village of Lancaster, Massachusetts in 1676, the Indians are depicted lined up shoulder-to-shoulder, three aiming muskets and the fourth wielding a tomahawk at Rowlandson, who stands outside her home with her own musket leveled at her attackers. One can even see in the woodcut's crude detail an effort to reproduce the facial expressions and coat-like garments of the soldiers in the engravings. Rowlandson did not wield a gun when the Indians attacked her town. Instead, she had fled her burning home with her baby daughter in her arms rather than defending her home as the woodcut illustrates. But the image was developed to indicate that submission was far from the minds of Bostonians in the aftermath of the Boston Massacre. Thus, the Indians, like the British, have been reconfigured as a tyrannical authority and Rowlandson as a courageous defender of liberty.