
The Boston Massacre

The events of March 5, 1770, are essential reading for any American student who takes a U.S. history class. Nearly every textbook explains how common American colonists stood up to the British soldiers on that cold night in Boston. What makes this topic so interesting, then, are the differences that appear in the various tellings of the story, putting into question the whole concept of students learning historical “facts” from their history textbooks.

1832

Noah Webster, *History of the United States: To Which is Prefixed a Brief Historical Account of our [English] Ancestors, from the dispersal at Babel, to their Migration to America, and of the Conquest of South America by the Spaniards*

To a free and high spirited people, the presence of an insolent military could not but be extremely irksome and provoking, and it was not possible that harmony could long subsist between the inhabitants of Boston, and the British troops. A slight affray took place between them on the second of March 1770; but on the night of the fifth, the enmity of the parties burst forth in violence and blood. A body of troops being ordered to disperse a number of the citizens of Boston, who were collected in Cornhill, the populace pelted them with stones, upon which the troops fired among

them, killed three and wounded five, two of whom died. With great difficulty the soldiers were saved from the fury of the enraged populace. But this outrage inflamed the animosity of the Americans against Great Britain, and hastened a most important crisis. To commemorate this melancholy tragedy, an anniversary oration was instituted in Boston, and was annually pronounced by some distinguished citizen on the fifth of March, till the close of the revolution.¹

1860

Benson J. Lossing, *A Primary History of the United States*

General Gage, who, you remember, was made governor at Montreal, was then in Halifax with an army. He went to Boston, with many soldiers, to compel the people to pay the duties or tax. It was a quiet Sabbath morning in September, 1763, when he marched into the town, with flags flying and drums beating, as if it had been a conquered city. But the people, strong in the right, felt no dismay.

The colonial governors became more proud, insolent, and overbearing, when they saw the determination of the English government to force the Americans into obedience. They treated them as rebels, and in every way the Americans were irritated beyond endurance. Yet they acted manly and respectful, while they were firm and unyielding.

Even the children partook of the boldness of their fathers and mothers. On one occasion, in Boston, the soldiers had beaten down some snow-hills which the boys had raised. This had been done before, and the lads determined not to endure it longer. The larger boys held a meeting, and several of them were appointed to see General Gage about it.

When the boys entered Gage's room, he asked why so many children had called upon him. "We come, sir," said the tallest boy, "to demand satisfaction." "What!" said the general, "have your fathers been teaching you rebellion, and sent you to exhibit it here?" "Nobody sent us, sir," replied the boy, while his eyes flashed, and his cheeks reddened, at being accused of rebellion.

The lad then told Gage how the soldiers had broken down their snow-hills, and how, when they complained, they were called young rebels. "Yes-

terday," he continued, "our works were destroyed the third time, and we will bear it no longer." The general's heart was touched by the noble courage of the boy. "The very children here," he said to an officer at his side, "draw in a love of liberty with the air they breathe." He then assured the boys that their snow-hills should not be touched again.

The soldiers in New York and Boston became very insolent, and they and the citizens frequently quarreled. In the latter city, on the 5th of March, 1770, a quarrel took place, and that evening there was a riot. Three citizens were killed, and four were dangerously wounded, by the soldiers.

The excitement was very great. All the bells of the city were rung, and no doubt there would have been a great deal of bloodshed, if the governor had not promised justice to the people. They demanded the instant removal of the troops from Boston. This was done, and quiet was restored. The "Boston Massacre," as it was called, was long remembered.²

1873

John J. Anderson, *A Grammar School History of the United States*

When the day came on which the Stamp Act was to go into effect, there were no officials courageous enough to carry it into execution, and, besides, all the stamps had been concealed or destroyed. Business continued to be conducted without stamps, and the colonial merchants agreed to import no more goods while the obnoxious measure remained a law. A change in the British ministry occurring, the act was repealed in 1766.

Parliament, still claiming the right to tax the colonies, passed a bill, in 1767, for levying duties on glass, paper, painters' colors, and tea. The news of this and other obnoxious measures of the British government, produced a revival of the feelings which had been caused by the passage of the Stamp Act; and non-importation associations were formed.

The opposition of the people of Boston being particularly bold, two regiments were ordered by Gen. Gage from Halifax to overawe them. The presence of the troops exasperated the people and affrays ensued, in one of which, called the "Boston Massacre," occurring on the 5th of March,

1770, the soldiers fired upon the populace, killing three men and wounding others.

The opposition to the revenue measures induced Parliament to revoke all the duties laid in 1767, except that of three pence per pound on tea; but as the people were contending against the principle of “taxation without representation,” and not against the amount of taxes imposed, the concession was not satisfactory.³

1885

Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Young Folks' History of the United States*

In Boston the troops made themselves still more unpopular. There was quite a quarrel between them and the boys; for the soldiers used to destroy the snow-slides that the boys had prepared for their sleds. After appealing in vain to the captain, the boys finally went to the British general, and complained.

“What!” he said, “have your fathers been teaching you rebellion, and sent you here to exhibit it?”

“Nobody sent us, sir,” said one of the boys. “We have never injured nor insulted your troops; but they have been spoiling our snow-slides, so that we cannot use them any more. We complained; and they called us ‘young rebels,’ and told us to help ourselves if we could. We told the captains of this, and they laughed at us. Yesterday our slides were destroyed once more; and we will bear it no longer.”

The general ordered the damage to be repaired, and told Governor Gage, who said that it was impossible to beat the notion of liberty out of the people, as it was rooted in them from their childhood.

But the British troops in Boston had already got into more serious trouble. The young men of the town used often to insult the red-coated soldiers, calling them “lobsters,” “bloody-backs,” and such names, and threatening to drive them from the town. On the other hand, the soldiers used to be allowed, by their officers, to stray about the town in the evening, carrying their guns, and without any proper authority to control them. One moonlight evening (March 5, 1770), some soldiers were going about in this way, and got into a quarrel, as they often did. As they were

taunting the people, and calling, "Where are they? Where are the cowards?" some boys began to snowball them, crying, "Down with them! Drive them to their barracks!" The noise increased, until the guard was called out, commanded by Captain Preston.

He came roughly through the crowd, with six or eight men, whom he drew up in line. Many of the people fell back, but about a dozen men, some of whom had sticks, advanced to meet the soldiers, and spoke angrily to them; and some, it was said, struck at the muskets with sticks. The noise increased every moment, till at last Captain Preston gave the word, "Fire!"

When the smoke had cleared away, there were eleven men stretched upon the ground, of whom eight were wounded, and three killed. Among these last was Crispus Attucks, a mulatto, and the leader of the mob. This affair made an intense excitement; and Captain Preston was tried for murder. But some of the leading lawyers of Boston, who were also eminent patriots, defended him on the ground that he had done his duty as an officer and he was acquitted. The public indignation was, however, so great over the whole affair that the two regiments of troops were soon removed to the barracks at Castle William, and were not allowed to stray about the streets. But this bloodshed never was forgotten, and the "Boston Massacre" was another step towards the Revolutionary War.⁴

1909

William H. Mace, *A Primary History: Stories of Heroism*

The king now sent two regiments of soldiers to Boston to force the people to pay the Tea Tax. There were frequent quarrels between the soldiers and the people. One evening in a street quarrel the soldiers killed three men and wounded eight others (1770). Immediately the fire bells rang and great crowds of angry people filled the streets. The next day they filled to overflowing Faneuil Hall, the "Cradle of Liberty." A still larger meeting in the Old South Church cried out that both regiments of soldiers must leave town.

Adams and other leaders were sent to the king's officers to tell them what the people had said. Before the governor and the general, backed by

the king's authority and by two regiments, stood plain Samuel Adams, with only the voice of the people to help him.

The governor, unwilling to obey the demand of the people, said he would send one regiment away. But Samuel Adams stood firm and said: "Both regiments or none!" The governor finally gave up, and Samuel Adams, the man of the people, was a greater leader than ever before.

The king now tried to trick the Americans into paying the tax by making tea cheaper in America than in England, but leaving on the tax. But the people everywhere declared that they did not object to the price, but to the tax.⁵

1955

Glenn W. Moon and John H. MacGowan, *Story of Our Land and People*

The Boston Massacre created bitter feelings. Just before the repeal of the Townshend duties, a serious clash occurred between British troops and a group of colonists. It happened in Boston where feelings between Red Coats and townspeople were growing.

One cold March day in 1770 some carefree boys had a snowball fight in Boston. On their way home they saw a soldier walking back and forth on guard duty. They promptly began to throw snowballs at him. To them it was just fun, but the soldier became frightened. He called for help. Soldiers rushed to aid him.

The noise brought men and boys running from all directions. Both sides hurled insults back and forth. Suddenly an excited young officer yelled a command. The soldiers thought he said "Fire!" They fired their muskets. When the smoke lifted, eleven of the crowd lay dead or wounded in the snow.

This was the Boston Massacre. It was the first time blood was shed in the quarrel between Great Britain and the colonists. Some people call the Boston Massacre of 1770 the opening fight of the War of Independence.

Boston was in an uproar after the Massacre. Angry citizens, led by Samuel Adams, told the governor to get the troops out of Boston. The governor did not want any more trouble, so he sent the soldiers to an island in Boston Harbor.

News of the Boston Massacre spread quickly. People in the other colonies asked themselves, “Will we be next?” The feeling against Great Britain became more bitter. Repeal of most of the Townshend duties—soon after the Boston Massacre—helped restore good relations. But the Massacre was not forgotten.⁶

1966

Harold H. Eibling, Fred M. King, and James Harlow, *History of Our United States*

Purpose of the Troops

The third measure of England’s new colonial policy was the plan to station 10,000 soldiers in the colonies. England told the colonists that the troops were to protect them against Indians and enemy countries. The Americans were expected to provide living quarters for this army and to pay part of the expense of maintaining it.

Since there was no longer any grave danger from the Indians, the French, or the Spanish, the colonists felt that the real purpose of the troops was to prevent the growing opposition to English laws. It had been a fairly simple matter to say “No!” to a single tax agent armed with nothing more than a quill pen and a stern look. It would not be so easy to ignore a squad of soldiers.

Bloodshed in Boston

Inasmuch as the colonists did not want a British army in their midst, it was only natural that trouble should develop between the colonists and the soldiers. Clashes occurred in Charleston, New York, Boston, and other towns where English troops were quartered.

The regiments of British soldiers stationed in Boston probably behaved themselves well enough. But their coats were red, their ways British, and the people could not forget that they were there to watch the colonists. Little things were easily magnified. In time little things piled up on both sides until there was no longer friendliness between the soldiers and the people.

On the evening of March 5, 1770, a false fire alarm brought many

people into the streets, especially boys. You can picture these boys, disappointed at finding no fire, scooping up snow and making snowballs. What better target than a redcoated sentry standing motionless on his post of duty! They pelted the sentry before the customhouse door and called him names. Frightened, he called for help.

Captain Preston and seven men responded. A crowd gathered. Captain Preston warned the colonists to break up and go home. Insults were called. A group, led by Crispus Attucks, pushed against the alarmed soldiers. A soldier was knocked down. Another was hit by a club. Amid the shouting and confusion the soldiers fired! With a cry of terror, the crowd melted away and sought the safety of carts and doorways.

The soldiers, back to back, made ready to meet another attack. At their feet lay three dead colonists and eight wounded. Two of the wounded died.

The news of this bloodshed swept through the colonies. It came to be called the "Boston Massacre," by American patriots. People began to look with new distrust on the British soldiers. A great town meeting held in Boston demanded removal of the troops. The royal governor, anxious to avoid further trouble, took the soldiers out of the city and stationed them on an island in the harbor.⁷

2001

Wayne E. King and John L. Napp, *United States History*

One evening early in March of 1770, a crowd gathered near a group of British soldiers. The crowd began throwing stones and snowballs at the soldiers. The soldiers then fired a round of shots into the crowd. The first to fall was a free African, Crispus Attucks. A few colonists were killed, and several were wounded.

News of the Boston Massacre, as it was called, spread throughout the colonies. The people of Boston demanded that the British soldiers be removed from the city. The governor of Massachusetts agreed to remove the soldiers to prevent more trouble. The same day, all of the Townshend taxes were repealed except for the tax on tea. Great Britain had lost a good deal of money due to the boycotts. It was believed that the tax on tea was kept mainly as a symbol of the British right to rule.⁸

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Use library and Internet resources to research this topic and then create a timeline showing what events led up to the shooting in Boston that night.
2. After researching this story, explain exactly how many people were killed and wounded that night. Discuss in class what the word *massacre* means. Does this event meet your standards of what a massacre is? Explain.
3. What punishment did the British soldiers receive for shooting into the crowd? Do you agree with this verdict? Explain.
4. Write and present a biography of Crispus Attucks. Describe why you think U.S. history textbooks didn't mention him until the late 1880s, and then in mostly negative terms. Would you consider him the "leader of the mob," as some of these textbooks do?
5. The 1966 textbook mentions other clashes between British soldiers and colonists in the cities of Charleston and New York. Research these other events. Why do you think these historical events didn't make it into the history textbooks and the Boston Massacre does?
6. Find paintings of the Boston Massacre. When were these paintings done and by whom? Do the images in these paintings all tell the same story? Explain.
7. Some of the textbooks in this selection discuss the role of the children of Boston and how they too wanted their independence from England. Look at your current history textbook and see if these same children are mentioned. Explain why certain textbooks over time have included this story while others have not. What impact do you think the story of the children standing up to British authority may have had on some of the students reading these textbooks?

Paul Revere was the artist who created the famous engraving of the Boston Massacre that helped enrage many American colonists against the British troops. Interestingly enough, Revere was not there the night of the violence and very likely used the work of another engraver, Henry Pelham, as the basis of his own.