the Boston massacre

Tensions were high in Boston in 1770. The British ruled the American colonies, including Massachusetts. Some colonists, called Loyalists, remained loyal to the King of England. Other colonists wanted to declare America an independent nation. These colonists would come to be called Patriots. Tensions worsened when the British sent more than 2,000 British soldiers, or Redcoats, into Massachusetts. The Redcoats' job was to enforce British tax laws. Many of the 16,000 Boston colonists, however, thought these laws were unfair. The taxes frustrated the colonists, who had to pay even though they were not represented in British Parliament. Redcoats and colonists often clashed. One snowy night in Boston, a small skirmish turned into a riot and changed the course of American history.

On March 5, 1770, British soldier Hugh White stood guard on King Street in Boston. He guarded the British Custom House, where the British monarchy stored taxes collected from colonists. As the moon rose, White encountered a group of young apprentices. They began to insult him. Outnumbered, White struck one of the apprentices on the head with the stock of his musket. This action attracted a crowd of people who threw snowballs and chunks of ice at White. White called out for help. Seven armed Redcoats arrived under the command of Captain Thomas Preston.

Warning bells rang out over Boston. Colonists poured into the streets and rushed to the Custom House. The mob became a riot. The Redcoats struggled and failed to gain control of the crowd. Only Captain Preston could give the orders to shoot. Accounts of what happened next vary from source to source. One Redcoat was jostled and fired his gun. The other British soldiers, either out of fear or because they thought they heard orders to fire, followed suit.

When the smoke cleared, three American colonists lay dead on King Street. One was Crispus Attucks, a former slave of African and Native American descent who worked in the harbor. History remembers him as the first casualty of the American Revolution. The death toll rose to five when two other colonists succumbed to injuries from gunfire. Six others were injured.

In the following months, that confrontation between Redcoats and colonists rose to infamy. Loyalists claimed that an angry mob of colonists taunted the Redcoats, who acted in self-defense. Patriots like Samuel Adams and Paul Revere used the event as revolutionary propaganda. In particular, Revere published a depiction of Redcoats firing on unarmed Boston citizens. He titled it, “The Bloody Massacre in King-Street.” Two of the British soldiers were tried for murder. A Boston attorney named John Adams argued in their defense. Adams considered himself a Patriot, but he reportedly felt it important to give the soldiers a fair trial. Ultimately, the soldiers were not convicted. Adams would later become the second President of the new United States. That fateful encounter on King Street, he said, laid the “foundation of American independence."

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