

THE BOSTON MASSACRE

In 1770, the streets of Boston were filled with strain and tension. More than 2,000 British regulars occupied the city. Small fights between patriots and loyalists and between patriots and British soldiers were a daily problem. Patriots protested taxes, destroyed British goods, and vandalized stores belonging to colonists loyal to the King, known as Loyalists. British regulars were required to uphold the law and keep the peace.

On February 22nd, a mob of patriots attacked a loyalist's store, and an 11-year-old boy was killed by a local customs officer who fired his gun into the crowd to break up the mob. Boston was a powder keg waiting for something more to ignite it.

A British soldier, Private Hugh White, was guarding the Custom House on King Street on the evening of March 5th, 1770, to discourage vandalism and rioting by colonists. White and a local wigmaker's apprentice began to argue and shout insults at each other. A group of colonists formed around him and began to verbally insult White. White struck a colonist with his bayonet and was warned by a colonist that if he shot his musket, he could be killed by the crowd. Colonists began to pelt him with snowballs, ice, and stones. Bells in the city, which were used as a fire alarm, started ringing. More colonists arrived, and White called for British reinforcements.

Captain Thomas Preston arrived with four more British soldiers. A total of six soldiers were now scattered among a crowd of nearly fifty colonists and onlookers. The colonists struck the soldiers with clubs and sticks. It is unclear who said the word "fire", but after that, a soldier fired his gun. After the first shot, other soldiers fired their guns. Later, in court, witnesses would testify that no one knew who gave the order to fire. In the end, five colonists were killed, and six colonists were wounded. Preston and his soldiers were arrested and jailed.

Despite the bloodshed, patriot leaders like Samuel Adams and Paul Revere urged colonists to continue to oppose British law openly, resist soldiers, and rebel. Paul Revere created an engraving of the event just three weeks after the massacre. It was titled, "Bloody Massacre Perpetuated in Kings Street" and included a poem by Revere that implied the British soldiers enjoyed their day of killing (Paul Revere Heritage Project website).

A trial for the soldiers was held seven months later. John Adams, a colonist, lawyer, and future U.S. president, defended the British soldiers in court to demonstrate that all citizens should have "due process under the law." The jury had to decide if the soldiers had fired in self-defense or deliberately, and which soldier or soldiers killed or wounded the victims.

Sources:

Revere, P. (1770). Bloody massacre perpetrated in Kings Street in Boston [Engraving]. Paul Revere Heritage Project. http://www.paul-revere-heritage.com/boston-massacre-engraving.html#google_vignette

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