

Boston Massacre - March 5, 1770



Analysis Questions: (this image is on the class website, or you can **Google image** it.)

1. Who are the aggressors in this engraving by Paul Revere?
2. Where is Captain Preston, the British commander? What is he doing?
3. Describe the crowd—its size, composition, and location.
4. What is the crowd doing?
5. What time of day is it?

Activity 1 – You are viewing an image of the engraving of the Boston Massacre, by Paul Revere. Here are a few notes on what really happened at the Boston Massacre:

- October 1, 1768: British regulars arrived in Boston, MA to maintain order and enforce the taxes the colonists were asked to pay after the French and Indian War, such as the Townshend Acts.
- The elite/wealthy people of Boston resented the British soldiers and considered them a foreign presence.
- The common people of Boston resented their presence because they competed for jobs with the “Lobster backs.” They taunted them and prevented them from carrying out their duties.
- March 5, 1770: The Twenty-Ninth Regiment came to the relief of the soldiers on duty at the Customs House in Boston. They were met by an unruly gang of civilians, many of them drunk after having left a local tavern.
- It was dark, and the crowd threw snowballs, ice balls, horse manure, and anything else lying on the street at the soldiers. The crowd also taunted the soldiers by yelling and calling them names.
- Captain Preston could not control the crowd as they taunted the soldiers. He ordered his troops "Don't fire!" but with the commotion the troops fired and killed three men instantly; another two died later. The first man to die was **Crispus Attucks**, a black man.
- This was not a massacre in the sense that a lot of people died -- only five died.
- The funerals of the dead were great patriotic demonstrations.
- Preston and six of his men were acquitted (Robert Treat Paine as Prosecutor, and John Adams and Josiah Quincy as defense lawyers), but two of his men were found guilty of manslaughter, punished, and discharged from the army.
- The event and the propaganda surrounding it helped lead to the Revolutionary War.

You will now be asked to look at the engraving of the Boston Massacre and, keeping in mind what you just learned, come up with ways in which the picture is misleading and how that may have contributed to the feelings of the colonists:

Misleading imagery:

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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. As you will realize, Revere's historic engraving is long on political propaganda and short on accuracy or aesthetics.

Notice how the British soldiers are shown standing in a straight line shooting their rifles in a regular formation, whereas when the disturbance actually erupted both sides were chaotic, 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. If the mob threw snow and ice at the British troops, did they transport from another location? Also of note, [Crispus Attucks](#) — a black man (also part native) 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.

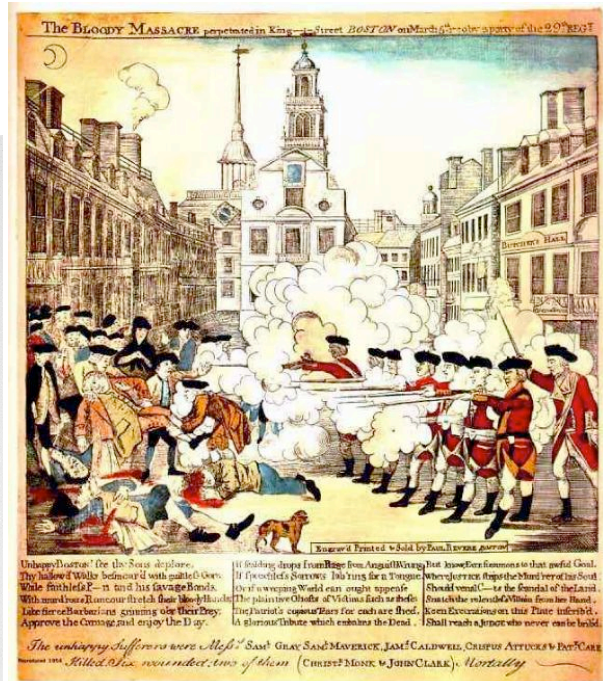
Documentation has come to light over the years indicating that Revere copied engraver **Henry Pelham's** drawings of the Massacre, produced his own engraving, and three weeks after the occurrence was advertising his prints for sale in Boston's newspapers. By the time Pelham's prints hit the street, Revere's print had flooded the market.

Other misleading imagery:

- The event in the engraving seems to be on the wrong street.
- The soldiers were lined up as if they had planned to shoot.
- Their Captain seems to be leading them on, when in fact he tried to stop them.
- The colonists look very passive.

Comparison with another engraving:

The Boston Massacre, engraving based on a painting by **Alonzo Chappel**, 1868, National Archives, ARC 513326



1. Revere changed the sign on the building to read "Butcher's Hall" instead of Customs House. What effect might this alteration have had on viewers?
2. How do you think Revere intended his viewers to understand the event?

3. Why did several people who witnessed the same event recall it differently? What does this phenomenon tell you about the study of history?
4. List all the differences you can find that make the engraving by Alonzo Chappel more accurate?

Excerpt from *John Adams* by David McCullough:

John Adams was asked to defend the soldiers and their captain, when they came to trial. No one else would take the case, he was informed...Adams accepted, from in the belief, as he said, that no man in a free country should be denied the right to counsel and a fair trial...

There were to be two ...fair trials in the new courthouse on Queen Street. The first was of the British captain, Thomas Preston...The second was of the soldiers. In the first trial Adams was assisted by young Josiah Quincy, Jr., while the court-appointed lawyer trying the case was Josiah's brother, Samuel...Whether Captain Preston had given an order to fire, as was charged, could never be proven...Captain Preston was found not guilty...

Close study of the facts convinced Adams of the innocence of the soldiers. The tragedy was not brought on by the soldiers, but by the mob, and the mob, it must be understood, was the inevitable result of the flawed policy of quartering troops in a city ... [claiming to keep] the peace:

We have entertained a great variety of phrases to avoid calling this sort of people a mob...The plain English is ...[they were] most probably a motley rabble [crowd] of saucy boys, Negroes and mulattoes, Irish teagues [derogatory term for Irish Catholic] and outlandish jacktars [drunken sailor]. And why should we scruple [hesitate] to call such people a mob, I can't conceive, unless the name is too respectable for them...Soldiers quartered in a populous town [Boston] will always ...[cause] two mobs where they prevent one...

Analysis Questions:

1. Why did Adams agree to defend the soldiers, when he was a leading voice against British actions?
2. What does Adams blame as the real cause of the incident?
3. Adams refers to the "mob" as:
 - "a motley rabble"
 - "negroes and mulattoes"
 - "Irish teagues"
 - "outlandish Jacktars"

Even though he argues that the mob action was a response to the Quartering Act, why do you think he refers to the colonists in such a negative tone?

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Excerpt from *A People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn

Impressment [the practice by the British of drafting colonists into the British navy] and the quartering of troops by the British were directly hurtful to the sailors and other working people. After 1768, two thousand soldiers were quartered in Boston, and friction grew between the crowds and the soldiers. *The soldiers began to take the jobs of working people when jobs were scarce.* Mechanics and shopkeepers lost work or business because of the colonists' boycott of British goods...

On March 5, 1770, grievances of ropemakers against British soldiers taking their jobs led to a fight. A crowd gathered in front of the customhouse and began provoking the soldiers, who fired and killed first Crispus Attucks, a mulatto worker, then others. This became known as the Boston Massacre. Feelings against the British mounted quickly. There was anger at the acquittal of six of the British soldiers (two were punished by having their thumbs branded and were discharged from the army). The crowd at the Massacre was described by John Adams, defense attorney for the British soldiers, as "a motley rabble of saucy boys, negroes, and mulattoes, Irish teagues and outlandish jack tarrs." Perhaps ten thousand people marched in the funeral procession for the victims of the Massacre, out of a total Boston population of sixteen thousand. This led England to remove the troops from Boston and try to quiet the situation.

Analysis questions:

1. What 4 items does Zinn blame for the Massacre?
2. How is Zinn's characterization of the causes of the incident and the people involved different from those of Adams?
3. How do we know that popular opinion supported the "motley rabble of saucy boys," as Adams referred to them?