Fitzgerald

Materials Cause 7 - A Reading on the Boston "Massacre"

In the snowy winter of 1770, 2,000 British soldiers had been stationed in Boston for over 2 years. Residents deeply resented the soldiers, who had been sent there to make the Bostonians, especially the Sons of Liberty, respect British law, not to protect the them.

There were often clashes between the soldiers and citizens. one reason was that the soldiers took work away from the poor, as they would take jobs unloading ships in their spare time, accepting less pay because they already had their soldier's paycheck.

A few days before the "massacre," a fist fight had broken out when a man asked a passing soldier, "Do you want work?" When the soldier replied that he did, the man told the soldier, "Well then, go and clean my shithouse." The angry soldier returned later with about a dozen fellow soldiers, and the fight began.

The "massacre" itself began on March 5th when Edward Garrick, a wigmaker's apprentice, announced to a group that a British officer walking by had not paid his master for a wig that his master had made for the officer. The officer ignored him, but Garrick got louder and louder, repeating the accusation to all who walked by. A British soldier on duty in a nearby sentry box, Hugh White, approached Garrick and said, "He is a gentleman, and if he owes you anything he will pay for it." Garrick answered that no gentleman would be a British soldier. The two continued to argue loudly until the sentry struck Garrick with his musket, knocking him down.

A small crowd, attracted by the fight, closed in around the sentry, yelling: "Bloody lobster back! Lobster son of a bitch!" The crowd grew to about fifty. Some in the mob of mostly young men threw pieces of ice at sentry. The sentry became frightened, as the crowd continued to increase in size and hostility, He left his sentry box, went to the steps of the nearby customs house, loaded his gun, and began to wave it about, calling loudly for the main guard of soldiers to turn out.

Meanwhile, a few blocks north, another fight between civilians and soldiers had broken out. The crowd there bombarded the soldiers with snowballs, forcing them to hurry back to their barracks.

Finally, a third mob, this one about two hundred strong and carrying clubs, gathered in a square by the docks then began steaming toward the main guard house. This crowd grew even louder when a fire bell was falsely pulled, causing people to stream into the street with buckets ready to fight a fire that didn't exist!

The officer on duty admitted to being unsure what to do. if he didn't rescue the sentry, the sentry might be killed by the mob, but trying to rescue the sentry would be dangerous, as the crowd greatly outnumbered the soldiers. The soldiers were not allowed to fire on civilians unless ordered to do so by a judge.

The officer marched with seven soldiers in two columns of four toward the custom house. They did not have their guns loaded but had fixed bayonets on the ends of their guns.,

When they reached the sentry, the officer ordered him to fall in to their column. The soldiers then tried to march back to the main guard house, but the crowd, which at that point was over 300, pressed in around them. Preston tried to march the men back to the main guard house, but the mob began pressing in. Hemmed in, the soldiers lined up--about a body length apart--in a semi-circle facing the crowd. The soldiers were bombarded with all sorts of objects, chunks of coal, snowballs, oyster shells, sticks. The officer ordered the crowd to disperse. A large club-wielding man named Crispus Attucks--a forty-seven-year-old man of mixed race--moved forward, grabbed one of the soldier's bayonets, and knocked him to the ground. As that soldier got up, he yelled "Damn you, fire!" at the other soldiers and fired his musket in the direction of the crowd. The other soldiers also began firing. A blast from the gun of one of the soldiers hit Samuel Gray, as he stood with his hands in his pockets, blowing a hole in his head "as big as a hand." Two bullets hit Crispus Attucks in the chest. As the mob moved toward the soldiers, more guns fired. Five civilians lay dying in the streets; another half dozen lay injured. The soldiers loaded their weapons and prepared to fire again, but the officer commanded them to stop firing.

Word of the shootings reached Governor Thomas Hutchinson, who like all governors had been appointed by the king. He rushed to the scene and confronted the officer, insisting that the soldiers had had no right to fire without a warrant from a judge. The governor then went to the nearby town house, quickly met with Council members, then stepped out on a balcony overlooking the square where the "massacre" had occurred and promised the crowd he would see that justice was done

After midnight, two judges gave the sheriff a warrant for the arrest of the officer, who was brought to the town house and interrogated for an hour about the shooting. At three o'clock in the morning, the judges decided there was evidence enough jail the officer, who would remain in jail for the next seven months. The other soldiers were also arrested.

Thirty-four-year-old Boston attorney and future president, John Adams, took on the job of defending the soldiers. He was the first cousin of Sam Adams (their fathers were brothers), who was the leader of the Sons of Liberty, who actively wrote and spoke about the innocence of Bostonians in the incident.

Paul Revere, another leader of the Sons of Liberty in Boston, made an inaccurate engraving of the incident, that clearly made the soldiers look guilty. This engraving was used to print the picture in newspapers throughout the colonies.

The trials did not begin until October 24th of the following fall. The officer was found not guilty, as it could not be proven that he had given the soldiers an order to fire. The two soldiers who fired their guns were found guilty of manslaughter but in self-defense; their thumbs were permanently branded as a mark that they had not followed orders so that they would be executed if it ever happened again. The other soldiers were found not guilty of all charges. John Adams said that defending the soldiers was "one of the most gallant, generous, manly and disinterested actions of [his] whole life."

### Please note:

### I adapted this account of the Boston "massacre" from an article written by constitutional law Professor Douglas O. Linder, who teaches a seminar entitled *The Great Trials Of World History And The Lessons They Teach Us.*

### The original article and primary sources supporting every aspect the incident noted in the article can be found at <https://www.famous-trials.com/> an educational and non-commercial site maintained by the University of Missouri-Kansas City Law School.

* I highly recommend the website has accounts of many other famous trials you would find interesting.