

The Boston Massacre: Spark of the American Revolution

By Blake Tandy

The Boston Massacre occurred on March 5th, 1770, and is one of the pivotal events in American history that helped lead to the American Revolution. This deadly confrontation between British soldiers and American colonists was a turning point that highlighted the escalating tensions over British military presence, British taxation, and British tyranny, ultimately uniting the colonies and propelling them towards the fight for independence.

Boston, 1770, the tensions are high and the colonists are getting angry. The British government is trying to assert more power by stationing troops in Boston, imposing a series of taxes and acts aimed at colonists, and by British troops taking local civilian jobs. The Boston colonists do not like this and are getting pushed to their limit by these acts. On the night of March 5th, 1770 a confrontation between a British soldier and a group of colonists quickly escalated. The group of colonists reportedly began to taunt the British soldier, Private Hugh White.⁽¹⁾ This angered White and the situation intensified as more colonists joined in. Captain Thomas Preston and a small group of soldiers came to White's defense but the crowd kept growing and getting more hostile, throwing objects at the soldiers. Ultimately the soldiers ended up firing into the crowd killing 5 people and injuring several others in what is known today as "The Boston Massacre".

It is not one hundred percent known what prompted them to do this whether that be self defense, or just flat out anger but many people have different thoughts. According to Captain Thomas Preston someone in the crowd shouted "Damn you bloods why don't you fire" which led to the soldiers actually shooting⁽²⁾. Preston later stated that he asked the soldiers why they fired without his order to which they responded that they heard the word "fire" and thought it was a command from him⁽²⁾. However, according to anonymous eyewitness accounts Preston is said to have ordered the soldiers to fire, and repeated this order⁽³⁾. Regardless, this incident was a tragic event in American history and one of the major factors that led to the American Revolution.

The immediate aftermath of the Boston Massacre saw both legal responses and propaganda responses. The soldiers involved were immediately arrested and put on trial for murder⁽⁴⁾. Surprisingly John Adams, who would later become president of The United States, defended the British soldiers. Adams believed in the right to a fair trial and argued that the soldiers acted in self defense⁽⁴⁾. The prosecution was led by Samuel Quincy and Robert Treat Paine, who argued that the British soldiers used excessive force against an unarmed crowd. This trial looked at all aspects of the event, and used the accounts of several different eyewitnesses. Ultimately the jury acquitted six of the eight soldiers accepting the self defense argument, while the other two Hugh Montgomery and Matthew Kilroy were found guilty of manslaughter⁽⁵⁾. This trial was notable for keeping the rule of law and demonstrating a fair legal proceeding, even with the widespread anti-British sentiment.

John Adams' role in the trial, defending the British soldiers was later seen as a good act and contributed to his reputation as an integral leader. This act of defending the British soldiers ultimately helped Adams get elected for president. The name “the Boston Massacre” was used very much after the trial as more anti-British propaganda and Britain was becoming to be seen as a symbol of tyranny. This new view of the British shifted the mind of colonists and paved a way towards more radical actions. Not long after the massacre and trial, The Boston Tea party happened which is another major event that accelerated the American Revolution and only two years after that began The Revolutionary War, ultimately resulting in American Independence.

The Boston Massacre occurred on March 5th, 1770, and is one of the pivotal events in American history that sparked the lead to the American Revolution. This deadly confrontation between British soldiers and American colonists was a turning point in our country's history that highlighted the escalating tensions over British military presence, British taxation, and British tyranny, ultimately uniting the colonies and propelling them towards the fight for independence, and the birth of a new nation.

1. “The Boston-Gazette, and Country Journal, 12 March 1770.” Massachusetts Historical Society, masshist.org/dorr/volume/3/sequence/101
2. “Case of Capt. Thomas Preston of the 29th Regiment.” Massachusetts Historical Society, masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=462&pid=2
3. : “Anonymous Account of the Boston Massacre.” *Anonymous Account of the Boston Massacre*, August 2017, 1.
<https://search-ebscohost-com.libdata.lib.ua.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=pwh&AN=21212333&site=eds-live&scope=site>.
4. : Kenneth A. Turner; Tanasha N. Stinson, "Certain Principles Are Eternal: The Boston Massacre Trial and the Moral Courage of John Adams," *Army Lawyer* 2021, no. 4 (2021): 74-82
5. John F. Tobin, "Boston Massacre Trials, The," *New York State Bar Association Journal* 85, no. 6 (July/August 2013): 11-17