

The 'Massacre' That Became a Rallying Cry

A few violent moments created martyrs for the patriot cause

In the winter of 1770, Boston was an occupied city. For nearly a year and a half, tension had been building between the town's almost 16,000 residents and the 1,000 British soldiers garrisoned there. Already angered by new British taxes on imports and the customs commissioners who enforced them, many residents of the city fumed at the presence of the troops. Civilians routinely taunted the redcoats, often even coming to blows with them in the streets.

The city was a tinderbox, but the wiser voices who had warned that an occupying force might only inflame the situation had been ignored.



Angered by new British taxes, Bostonians became EVEN MORE AGGRESSIVE in challenging customs commissioners.

King George III and Parliament were determined to enforce the obedience of the Bostonians, who had shown themselves only too ready, over the past five years, to flout royal laws and representatives.

When Parliament in 1765 passed the Stamp Act, which taxed newspapers and other printed material in the colonies, enraged Bostonians responded by hanging royal stamp officers in effigy. Undeterred, Parliament two years later levied additional taxes on imported paper, glass, tea, and other materials through the Townshend Acts.

Local merchants, fearful that their businesses would suffer, fought back. They adopted a non-importation policy, in essence a boycott of many British goods, hoping it would pressure Parliament to remove the duties.

Citizens also became more aggressive in challenging the customs commissioners. They would mock and threaten them in the streets, and demonstrate at their homes. In response, the Earl of Hillsborough, the colonial secretary in Britain, ordered four regiments of British troops to occupy Boston. By November 1768, some 2,000 redcoats, along with a large number of their family members, had arrived in the city, outraging many residents. In England, there had been a long tradition of citizens opposing standing armies occupying cities in peacetime, and that attitude prevailed in the colonies. Benjamin Franklin, who had become an unofficial colonial spokesman in Britain, had presciently warned Parliament that soldiers sent to the colonies to enforce British law would "not find a rebellion; they may indeed make one."

The influx of troops also came at a particularly sensitive time, as the city was experiencing high unemployment. Many of the soldiers sought part-time jobs in the city and were willing to work for less than Bostonians, only furthering resentment. "If soldiers went around town unaccompanied, they always were threatened," says Richard Archer, professor emeritus of history at Whittier College in Los Angeles and author of *As If an Enemy's Country: The British Occupation of Boston and the Origins of Revolution*. The troops responded by antagonizing the locals. Many of them weren't enthusiastic to be policing the town, and desertions were common among the ranks.

Though some soldiers befriended Bostonians



and even married local women, the situation remained grim. With British troops in the streets, “the front lines and the home front [were] one and the same,” says Serena Zabin, associate professor of history at Carleton College in Northfield, Minn., who is researching the era for a new book.

There were constant scuffles between locals and the redcoats. At town meetings and in the newspapers, citizens railed against the military occupation. Samuel Adams, along with other patriot leaders, repeatedly warned Bostonians that the troops threatened their rights and safety. As the months went on, tensions continued to rise, even after troop levels in the city were reduced to 1,000. Then, on Feb. 22, 1770, a crowd gathered outside the home of Ebenezer Richardson, an unpopular customs agent and loyalist, throwing rocks and eggs. Richardson fired a musket out his window, killing 11-year-old Christopher Seider. Two thousand people would walk in the funeral procession for the boy, who was memorialized by contemporary African-American poet Phillis Wheatley as the “first

martyr for the cause.”

Eight days after the shooting, a British soldier was taunted by an American ropemaker near the harbor. The two men exchanged blows and the scene soon became a brawl between several dozen soldiers and civilians, many of whom were armed with bats. The citizens eventually bested the soldiers, who returned to their barracks. But both sides continued to seethe.

On March 5, the roiling emotions would culminate in a catastrophic encounter. Historians agree that what occurred was spontaneous. “The patriot leadership did not orchestrate that confrontation,” says Pauline Maier, professor of history at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge.

“But once it happened, they made the most of it.”

Around 9 p.m., a crowd began to form near the Boston customs house on King Street (now State Street). After an argument between a British sentry and a Boston wigmaker’s apprentice, the soldier struck the young man in the head with his musket. A group of young boys reacted,

A British soldier fires on Crispus Attucks, one of five killed in the Boston Massacre.

DID YOU KNOW...

During the massacre trials, one witness for the prosecution actually helped the defendants.

Jonathan Williams Austin, a clerk for defense lawyer John Adams, testified he heard no orders for the soldiers to load or fire their weapons.

shouting insults and lobbing snowballs, some possibly packed with oyster shells. The sentry loaded his gun and some civilians began taunting, "Fire! Damn you, fire!" while others tried to calm both sides.

Before long, church bells rang out, often the signal for a fire, and more people were drawn to



One soldier was HIT WITH A CLUB and fell. As he rose to his feet, he fired his weapon. Several other soldiers then fired.

the scene, some carrying buckets of water and others holding clubs and sticks. The harassed sentry called for help and a number of soldiers, commanded by Capt. Thomas Preston, arrived. Preston and his men formed a half-circle between the customs house and the crowd, which pressed closer and taunted them. "Bloody backs! Lobster scoundrels! Fire!"

The crowd, which has been estimated at between 100 and 400 people, continued to throw snowballs and other objects at the troops. One soldier was hit with a club and fell. As he rose to his feet, he fired his weapon. Immediately afterward, several other soldiers shot into the crowd. Three civilians were killed and lay dead in the snow. Eight others were wounded, two of whom would die over the next week. As a growing mob filled the streets that evening, Preston and his men headed toward the military guardhouse, calling more troops to arms.

Patriot leaders decided against lighting a large barrel filled with turpentine at the top of Beacon Hill in west Boston, an alarm that might have brought thousands of armed men into the city. Facing a dangerous situation and yielding to pleas from all sides, the acting royal governor of Massachusetts, Thomas Hutchinson, called for the troops to return to their barracks. He then placated the crowd by promising a thorough investigation into the deaths. By 3 a.m., some six hours after the shootings, the crowd had fully dispersed.

Locals would soon start referring to the killing of five Boston men and boys by British soldiers on American soil as the "horrid massacre in King Street." The event gave revolutionaries "some kind

Defending the Rights of the Enemy

For more than six months in 1770, nine British soldiers awaited trial for the murder of five Boston civilians in the violent March encounter on King Street. In his autobiography, John Adams recalled that a loyalist merchant approached him the day after the shootings and begged him to take the case of British Capt. Thomas Preston and the eight others. Adams, then a prominent attorney, would seem an unusual choice, as he was an outspoken critic of the British government. Still, two other lawyers, loyalist Robert Auchmuty and patriot Josiah Quincy Jr., said they would sign on to defend only if Adams served with them. "Council ought to be the very last thing that an accused Person should want in a free Country," Adams replied. Pri-

vately, he worried that by representing Preston he might endanger his law practice and his family's safety, considering the angry mood in the city. But he agreed to represent Preston and his men, who would be tried separately. (Bostonians apparently respected Adams's integrity enough to elect him to the Massachusetts Assembly later that year.)

Despite their patriot sympathies, both Adams and Quincy were "trying to make a stand for law and order," says Nathaniel Sheidley, historian for the Bostonian Society, a nonprofit historical and preservation agency. They didn't "want the patriot movement to be seen as unruly and disordered."

After numerous delays, jury selection for Preston's trial began on Oct. 24, 1770, nearly eight months after

the shootings. By then, the much-hated British troops occupying Boston had been removed. Nonetheless, believing that passions among the local citizens were still inflamed, Adams and Quincy relentlessly challenged prospective jurors. Several of those seated were future loyalists, and in the end very few jurors came from Boston, with most from surrounding Massachusetts towns.

Even with a more favorable panel, Adams and his co-counselors still had to convince the jurors that the soldiers had not been ordered to fire, but rather had done so in self-defense. Adams "had to walk kind of a delicate line," portraying the crowd as violent without alienating the jurors, says John Ferling, professor emeritus of history at the University of West Georgia in

of moral authority in trying to sustain a patriot movement against the empire,” says Eric Hinderaker, professor of history at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, who is working on a book about the massacre.

War of words. The day after the King Street tragedy, thousands of people gathered near the site of the shootings and demanded that Hutchinson remove the troops from the city. Preston and his eight soldiers had surrendered themselves overnight. They were jailed and ordered to face trial on murder charges (see box). Concerned that the crisis could provoke an open revolt throughout Massachusetts, the governor urged the British military commander to remove his troops from Boston. Within days, they were restationed at a fort several miles away.

With conflicting rumors circulating about precisely what happened during the King Street incident, town leaders began interviewing witnesses and recording their testimonies. Radicals and loyalists collected their own very different accounts and printed them in rival pamphlets, which were sent to England. One side painted the British soldiers as “parading the Streets with their drawn Cutlasses and Bayonets, abusing and wounding Numbers of the Inhabitants,” while the

other spoke of citizens “tearing up the butchers stalls for clubs, and swearing they would murder the first officer or soldier they should meet with.”

Patriot leaders well understood the propaganda value of the deaths. They seized every opportunity to keep alive memories of the massacre, including making commemorative orations. The funeral of the victims, like Seider’s before, became a spectacle, attended by more than 10,000 people.

Paul Revere, a silversmith active in the patriot cause, made an engraving memorializing the shootings. It was copied from a drawing by a Boston artist that showed a steady line of stone-faced soldiers, muskets raised, firing in unison into a crowd of unarmed men. Prints of the engraving circulated widely, later gracing the cover of popular almanacs. “These were efforts to not only keep the memory alive, but to really elevate its significance as a kind of an emblem of British tyranny,” Hinderaker says. Though it didn’t provoke a war, what came to be known as the Boston Massacre did lead people to start thinking about where their loyalties lay as the American colonies and the British authorities increasingly saw themselves on different sides of a growing divide. ●

By Michael Morella

Carrollton and author of *John Adams: A Life*.

“**Motley rabble.**” The prosecutors called witnesses who claimed Preston gave the order to fire. But Adams and Quincy were able to present the testimony of others who strongly disputed this. With several dozen witnesses testifying in all, the trial spanned an extraordinary six days, almost unheard of at the time, when most hearings lasted a day or less. After receiving final instructions, the jurors deliberated. A few hours later, they reached their verdict: not guilty. Once freed, Preston would remain in Boston only until the completion of his soldiers’ trial; then



John Adams defended the British soldiers charged with murder.

he returned to England.

A month after the captain’s acquittal, Adams defended the other soldiers. He described the crowd on King Street as a “motley rabble” who menaced a small group of soldiers with clubs and chunks of ice. The deathbed testimony of Patrick Carr, who had been shot in the incident, proved critical. “He forgave the man whoever he was that shot him,” Carr’s physician testified. He believed the man only “fired to defend himself.”

The jury apparently agreed. All of the soldiers were acquitted of murder, though two were found guilty of manslaughter. Frustrated at the out-

come, patriot leader Samuel Adams, John’s cousin, wrote a series of newspaper stories under the pseudonym “Vindex” that challenged the verdicts, but by then tensions in Boston had lessened.

John Adams would go on to an illustrious career as a Founding Father who signed the Declaration of Independence and eventually became the second president of the United States. But perhaps none of his actions so well showed “his character and his competence” as his defense of the British soldiers, says James Grant, a journalist and author of *John Adams: Party of One*. Adams himself would later refer to it as one of the most “disinterested Actions of my whole Life,” for a “Judgment of Death against those Soldiers would have been as foul a Stain upon this Country as the Executions of the Quakers or Witches, anciently.” —M.M.