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The Boston Massacre, 1770

The British Perspective

On the evening of March 5, 1770 a group of Boston residents gathered at the local customs house to demonstrate their anger over the various taxes Parliament had recently imposed upon the colonies. Tensions between the Royal soldiers that protected the customs house and the locals had been increasing since the troops had been dispatched to Boston two years earlier.

As the fury of the crowd mounted, a young man hurled an insult at the sentry on duty. The sentry responded by smashing his tormentor's head with his rifle butt. The victim gave a shout and ran from the scene only to return shortly with a group of his friends who joined in the taunting.

Church bells summoned townspeople to the scene. Soon, a crowd of as many as 400 howling, wailing citizens confronted the thirteen-man squad of British soldiers sent to defend the Customs House. Standing before the mob with fixed-bayonets, the soldiers were pelted with angry epithets, stones and snowballs. The crowd advanced to within inches of the besieged soldiers, daring them to fire their muskets. Suddenly, a member of the squad fired, prompting his colleagues to fire as well. The crowd fell back in panic revealing three of their number dead on the ground and another two mortally wounded.

The entire altercation lasted approximately twenty minutes. However, these twenty minutes would have a significant impact on history. Within three days of the event, craftsman Paul Revere produced an engraving depicting the confrontation that was distributed widely throughout the colonies. Its inaccurate portrayal of a well-organized squad of soldiers simultaneously opening fire on a defenseless crowd of citizens helped galvanize colonial opinion against the British and opened the pathway that led to independence six years later.

"A general attack was made on the men by a great number of heavy clubs and snowballs being thrown at them, by which all our lives were in imminent danger. . ."

Captain Thomas Preston was commander of the British squad that evening. He, along with the other members of the squad, was tried for murder in a Boston Court. In the following trial testimony, Captain Peterson describes the events of that evening.

On Monday night about 8 o'clock two soldiers were attacked and beat. But the party of the townspeople in order to carry matters to the utmost length, broke into two meeting houses and rang the alarm bells, which I supposed was for fire as usual, but was soon undeceived.

About 9 some of the guard came to and informed me the town inhabitants were assembling to attack the troops, and that the bells were ringing as the signal for that purpose and not for fire, and the beacon intended to be fired to bring in the distant people of the country. This, as I was captain of the day, occasioned my repairing immediately to the main guard.

In my way there I saw the people in great commotion, and heard them use the most cruel and horrid threats against the troops. In a few minutes after I reached the guard, about 100 people passed it, and went towards the custom house where the King's money is lodged.

They immediately surrounded the sentry posted there, and with clubs and other weapons threatened to execute their vengeance on him. I was soon informed by a townsman their intention was to carry off the soldier from his post and probably murder him: on which I desired him to return for further intelligence, and he soon came back and assured me he heard the mob declare they would murder him. This I feared might be a prelude to their plundering the King's chest.

I immediately sent a non-commissioned officer and 12 men to protect both the sentry and the King's money, and very soon followed myself to prevent, if possible, all disorder, fearing lest the officer and soldiers, by the insults and provocations of the rioters, should be thrown off their guard and commit some rash act.

They soon rushed through the people, and by charging their bayonets in half-circles, kept them at a little distance. Nay, so far was I from intending the death of any person that I suffered the troops to go to the spot where the unhappy affair took place without any loading in their pieces; nor did I ever give orders for loading them. This remiss conduct in me perhaps merits censure; yet it is evidence, resulting from the nature of things, which is the best and surest that can be offered, that my intention was not to act offensively, but the contrary part, and that not without compulsion.

The mob still increased and were more outrageous, striking their clubs or bludgeons one against another, and calling out, 'Come on you rascals, you bloody backs, you lobster scoundrels, fire if you dare, G-d damn you, fire and be damned, we know you dare not,' and much more such language was used. At this time I was between the soldiers and the mob, parleying with, and endeavoring all in my power to persuade them to retire peaceably, but to no purpose.

They advanced to the points of the bayonets, struck some of them and even the muzzles of the pieces, and seemed to be endeavoring to close with the soldiers. On which some well behaved persons asked me if the guns were charged. I replied yes. They then asked me if I intended to order the men to fire. I answered no, by no means, observing to them that I was advanced before the muzzles of the men's pieces, and must fall a sacrifice if they fired; that the soldiers were upon the half cock and charged bayonets, and my giving the word fire under those circumstances would prove me to be no officer.

While I was thus speaking, one of the soldiers having received a severe blow with a stick, stepped a little on one side and instantly fired, on which turning to and asking him why he fired without orders, I was struck with a club on my arm, which for some time deprived me of the use of it, which blow had it been placed on my head most probably would have destroyed me. On this a general attack was made on the men by a great number of heavy clubs and snowballs being thrown at them, by which all our lives were in imminent danger, some persons at the same time from behind calling out, 'damn your bloods-why don't you fire.' Instantly three or four of the soldiers fired, one after another, and directly after three more in the same confusion and hurry. The mob then ran away, except three unhappy men who instantly expired, ; . . one more is since dead, three others are dangerously, and four slightly wounded. The whole of this melancholy affair was transacted in almost 20 minutes.

On my asking the soldiers why they fired without orders, they said they heard the word fire and supposed it came from me. This might be the case as many of the mob called out fire, fire, but I assured the men that I gave no such order; that my words were, don't fire, stop your firing. In short, it was scarcely possible for the soldiers to know who said fire, or don't fire, or stop your firing.

On the people's assembling again to take away the dead bodies, the soldiers supposing them coming to attack them, were making ready to fire again, which I prevented by striking up their firelocks with my hand.

Immediately after a townsman came and told me that 4 or 5000 people were assembled in the next street, and had sworn to take my life with every man's with me. On which I judged it unsafe to remain there any longer, and therefore sent the party and sentry to the main guard, where the street is narrow and short, there telling them off into street firings, divided and planted them at each end of the street to secure their rear, momentarily expecting an attack, as there was a constant cry of the inhabitants 'to arms, to arms, turn out with your guns;' and the town drums beating to arms, I ordered my drums to beat to arms, and being soon after joined by the different companies of the 29th regiment, I formed them as the guard into street firings.

References:

This eyewitness account appears in: Charles-Edwards, T. and B. Richardson, *They Saw it Happen, An Anthology of Eyewitness's Accounts of Events in British History 1689-1897* (1958); Hansen, Harry, *The Boston Massacre; an episode of dissent and violence* (1970).

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