

# **The Boston Massacre**

---

*Judy Sutherland*

## Introduction

Nearly, every school child since 1823 has read about the Boston Massacre in a textbook. According to Kyle Ward in History in the Making (2006), "Certain historical events consistently appear in U.S. history textbooks over time. The Boston Massacre is one of these. The massacre has become part of our national narrative, and helps provide moral justification for the war against the British." He further states that through the years textbook have offered varying facts and perspectives on this well-known event.<sup>1</sup> Ward notes history is often used to support current social and political thinking of the time. For example, the 1855 antebellum textbook version of the Boston Massacre "pointed an accusatory finger at the children and the 'negro who had excited the disturbance.' " The "negro" was Crispus Attucks and Ward explains that Attucks participation in the Massacre "would cause controversy" in the evaluation of twentieth century textbooks.<sup>2</sup>

The Scott Foresman fifth grade social studies textbook, The United States, currently used by Washoe County School District students gives a cursory account of the Boston Massacre accompanied by Paul Revere's famous engraving depicting the event. The text does not mention that the depiction was a brilliant bit of propaganda, and of course, the Patriots are portrayed as heroic figures battling the injustice of the British government. Think Luke Skywalker versus Darth Vader.

# **The Boston Massacre**

---

Hiller B. Zobel, author of the The Boston Massacre (1970) , echoes Ward's sentiment: "The Boston Massacre, in short, is a part, not only of our national history, but of our national mythology." <sup>3</sup>

So what historical story of the Boston Massacre should students in the twenty-first century be presented? A version closest to the truth based on facts is best, leaving mythology for the studies of ancient Greece and Rome. What, then, are those facts?

## Boston in 1760s

In order to appreciate the Boston Massacre, one must understand the economic and political climate of Boston in the 1760s. In Hiller B. Zobel's The Boston Massacre (1970), the author uses a plethora of primary sources to recount the rise and influence of "subversive revolutionary organizations" in Boston led by Samuel Adams. Zobel refers to our patriotic founders as "radicals." Zobel also intertwines the role of British mercantilism and its negative impact on colonial America into the events leading up to the Boston Massacre.

In 1760, William Pitt, British Secretary of State and in charge of wars and foreign affairs, decided to "draw from the colonies financial sustenance for Britain's still active European war efforts." In order to secure these revenues Pitt called upon a series of trade and navigation acts. Zobel states:

These acts embodied the mercantilist theory of trade: to ensure that English colonies furnished the mother country with raw materials and with markets for finished goods, and to deny those advantages to international commercial rivals. The statutes required trade to and from the colonies to be carried in British or colonial ships; they tightly restricted manufacture in the colonies; they prohibited export of "enumerated" raw materials to any place but Britain or the colonies; and they imposed duties on goods brought to America.<sup>4</sup>

## The Boston Massacre

---

Britain established several more acts rooted in the mercantilism spirit in the hopes of acquiring revenues from America, none of which were looked on favorably by colonial businesses. In 1764, the Sugar, or American, Act was established. According to ushistory.org, this act "disrupted the colonial economy by reducing the markets to which the colonies could sell, and the amount of currency available to them for the purchase of British manufactured goods. This act, and the Currency Act, set the stage for the revolt at the imposition of the Stamp Act."<sup>5</sup>

Under the orchestration of Prime Minister George Grenville, the Stamp Act was passed by Parliament on February 17, 1765. "The Stamp Act was Parliament's first serious attempt to assert governmental authority over the colonies."<sup>6</sup> The tax itself was relatively light in comparison to the "crushing taxation and serious economic unrest that were afflicting the mother country in 1764 and 1765."<sup>7</sup> It was the "all-pervading" extent of the taxes and the enforcement policies that caused the colonists the most concern. According to Zobel, "The initial Massachusetts reaction was peaceable" and consisted of verbal assaults on the tax. However, "in Boston a group called the Loyal Nine began meeting to plan active opposition to the Stamp Act and the men who effectuate it." The Loyal Nine called upon the English tradition of using "husky, willing bully-boys" to form mobs to conduct an aggressive and physical opposition to the tax resulting in the Stamp Act Riots. "The decision to use the mobs to achieve political ends represented a conscious conclusion that American words could not, alone or even combined with the words of English friends, reach the ears of those who counted, those who could change the revenue policy."<sup>8</sup> These mobs were not rambling rioters, but acted as disciplined soldiers under the command of the Loyal Nine (soon to be known as the Sons of

## The Boston Massacre

---

Liberty) and Samuel Adams. This use of mobs would be evident at the Boston Massacre.

Following the Stamp Act Riot, controlled mob violence continued to be used by radical Americans to show opposition to Britain's authority. The Townshend Act resulted in more aggressive opposition. Zobel notes that Samuel Adams became quite adept at stirring up animosity toward Britain among Boston's merchants and inciting the mobs: "His control of merchants, coupled with his control over the mob, put Boston's economic and physical peace virtually in his sole power."<sup>9</sup> Some of Adam's rioters were brought to trial; however, "because the jurors were elected by town meetings, and because the radicals controlled Boston Town Meetings" no rioter was ever found guilty. "Justice ran only on paths chosen by the radicals."<sup>10</sup>

In an attempt to maintain British authority and peace, British regulars were sent to Boston. These troops just added fuel to the fire of the radicals and their mob puppets: "Redcoats furnished the radicals a series of highly visible hate-figures."<sup>11</sup>

On August 1, 1768 the merchants and traders of Boston with the full support of Samuel Adams and the Sons of Liberty established a nonimportation agreement to protest customs duties. Businessmen of Boston agreed to not trade with Great Britain. Samuel Adams intensified the nonimportation campaign in the fall of 1769. By January 1, 1770, many merchants and traders felt they were entitled to their goods and could begin selling. Samuel Adams disagreed. Importers were identified and harassed. One importer's house was sent upon by the mob, mostly a group of boys throwing stones.

## The Boston Massacre

---

The occupants of the house displayed muskets through the now glassless windows.

Zobel recounts what happened next:

In the street, eleven-year-old Christopher Seider (or Snider) stood idly, just stooping to take up a stone. A sailor, Robert Paterson, watched as Richardson [house occupant] closely; so did others. No one believed that he would fire. Richardson fired. . . Eleven slugs ended up in the chest and abdomen of young Seider.

The eleven-year old Sieder died later that night. Zobel notes that the death of the boy would be used for anit-British propaganda: "Presented with the great windfall of the Richardson affair, Sam Adams began to extract maximum propaganda value." An extravagant funeral ensued and the boy was hailed as a martyr. The *Boston Gazette* proclaimed: "As young as he was, he died in his Country's Cause, by the Hand of an execrable Villain, directed by others, who could not bear to see the Enemies of America made the *Ridicule of Boys*." <sup>12</sup> This was but a prelude to the propaganda opportunity presented by the Boston Massacre.

### The Boston Massacre

By February, 1770, inhabitants of Boston (radicals, Loyalists, and the military) knew that having troops in Boston was fruitless and ineffective, in fact it was counterproductive to its original mission: to establish British authority and keep the peace. Tension between the troops and Americans had intensified, not only in Boston, but in New York, as well. Townsmen and soldiers accused each other of plotting against their side. Sam Adams wanted the troops removed, but did not want to directly engage the soldiers because that would be high-treason. "Roughing up the individual soldiers in

## The Boston Massacre

---

the streets and harassing them in the law courts was one thing; firing on the king's troops quite another." What Samuel Adams and the other radicals needed was an incident in which the troops, not the mob or townsfolk, would be the clearly defined culprits.<sup>13</sup> That "incident" would soon arrive.

The road to the Boston Massacre began on Friday, March 2, 1770, when a soldier inquired about work at a rope factory. Since soldiers' pay was quite low, they often looked to supplement their wages. The rope maker told the soldier he could "go and clean my shithouse." Verbal sparring ensued and the soldier was roughed up a bit by one of the ropemen. The soldier returned with some of his comrades, and ropemen and soldiers squared off. By this time more people (mob) had gathered and the soldiers were driven off. The following day, several soldiers again sparred with rope makers. The feud sporadically continued until the next day, March 4. That evening a rumor spread among the troops that one of their fellows had been killed while scuffling with the ropemen. The rumor was totally unfounded; however, officers walked about the ropewalks searching for the soldier. Because officers and soldiers were roaming about the ropeworks, "The radicals pointed to these incidents as proof of a military plot."<sup>14</sup>

All of Boston was now primed for a full-out confrontation between troops and citizens. A maid even reported that she overheard ropemen stating there would be a battle the following night, Monday (March 5).<sup>15</sup>

The evening of March 5 started out peacefully enough. Private Hugh White kept his post near military headquarters on King's Street across the street from the Custom's House. However, after awhile, Edward Garrick, a wigmaker's apprentice, passed by and

## The Boston Massacre

---

falsely accused an officer, Captain Goldfinch, of not paying his master's bill. The officer had the receipt in his pocket and arrogantly waved the boy off. It was then he noticed a group of stick wielding men approaching. Another apprentice wigmaker and friends came by and stated a group of soldiers had just attacked them. Evidence suggests that inhabitants were clustering in other parts of the town and soldiers were walking about with "something more than ordinary on their minds."<sup>16</sup>

As other Bostonians gathered, Garrick continued to taunt Goldfinch over his supposed debt. White, the sentry on duty, defended his captain's honor. White eventually struck Garrick in the head with his musket. The noise from this fracas brought more people. Then bells began ringing throughout the town and citizens began yelling "fire!" White eventually retreated to the Custom's House.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, more violence erupted north of the Custom's House near the Murray's Barracks. Soldiers with bayonets were reportedly pacing about and voices from a gathering crowd suggested the soldiers be kept in their barracks. Verbal sparring continued and more people gathered. The mob consisted of men and boys. Zobel recounts, "A little boy, seven or eight years old, ran toward the gate holding his head and screaming that he was killed. One soldier grabbed him; 'Damn you for a little rascal!' he said." Snowball throwing ensued and shouts of "afraid to fight" could be heard. An officer asked the rioters to leave, and with the support of a merchant persuaded many in the crowd to do so. However, others lusted after more action and took off for the Main Guard. Men poured down the street and seeing an importer's store decided to break the windows. The mob eventually settled onto Dock Square.<sup>18</sup>

## The Boston Massacre

---

A crowd of about 200 gathered on Dock Square and full-blown rioting began. Men who did not have cudgels broke into market stalls and ripped the legs off of tables and chairs. The mob repeatedly yelled, "Fire!" The ringing of the fire alarm bell brought more people to the streets. Some perplexed citizens wondered where the fire was, but were told it was the soldiers fighting. Soon sailors found themselves in King Street in front of the Custom's House with White still guarding his post. Meanwhile, Captain Preston paced in front of the guard house wondering what to do. Zobel describes Preston's choices:

First, he [Preston] could try to reinforce White, hoping that the show of strength would cool the mob's temper long enough to permit a reasoned decision to disperse. Unfortunately, the crowd was so large, so angry, and so well armed that no one could fairly expect the sight of the handful of Redcoats at Preston's immediate disposal to frighten it into order. . . . Second, Preston could try to rescue White . . . which would leave the Custom's House fully open to the mob. . . Third, Preston might do nothing . . . and cost White his life. In short, no course which Preston could conceivably take avoided, or even minimized, appalling risks.<sup>19</sup>

Preston eventually summoned a relief party of seven men to rescue White. When Preston and the rescue party arrived, he tried to march the men with White in tow back to the Main Guard. The mob pressed upon the soldiers, so "The party formed a single line, roughly a semicircle." This protected both flanks of the rescue party, but men from the mob eventually maneuvered behind them. The crowds at this point reportedly yelled, "Damn you, you sons of bitches, fire. . . You can't kill us all." Preston stood in front of the soldiers, trying to calm the crowd. Pressure from the crowd continued; the soldiers were visibly



## The Boston Massacre

---

shaking. By this time the soldiers had managed to attach their bayonets and were thrusting at the crowd. Individual duels broke out.<sup>20</sup>

Someone asked Preston if the guns were loaded and he replied, "yes." Asked if he intended to fire, Preston stated, "by no means." The muskets were only half-cocked and pointed low. The crowd began hitting the soldiers with cudgels and broken table legs and shouts of "Damn you, fire!" could be heard. At last a soldier shot. There was a pause and then more shots rang out.<sup>21</sup>

"Enraged, Preston asked his men why they had fired. They said they had heard the word, 'fire!' and thought he was ordering them to shoot." The mob and soldiers promptly left the area of the Custom's House. However, Preston soon learned that the streets had filled with 1,000 people and cries of "to arms" filled the air. Preston sounded the general alert to arm the entire garrison. "The possibility of a real massacre now gripped Boston."<sup>22</sup>

Governor Hutchinson and several community leaders arrived to try quell the mob. "Hutchinson addressed the people from a balcony facing King Street, expressing his deep concern, and assuring them that he would do everything possible to ensure a full inquiry, so that the law might take its course." The troops were marched off and the crowd dispersed. At 2 a.m. Captain Preston was arrested.<sup>23</sup> The next morning eight soldiers were also imprisoned. They would eventually be tried for murder of Crispus Attucks, Samuel Gray, James Caldwell, Samuel Maverick and Patrick Carr.<sup>24</sup>

# The Boston Massacre

---

## Conclusion

According to the Boston Massacre Historical Society: "Paul Revere wasted no time in capitalizing on the Massacre to highlight British tyranny and stir up anti-British sentiment among his fellow colonists."<sup>25</sup> Paul Revere's engraving does not accurately depict or characterize the Boston Massacre. It was a brilliant bit of propaganda that popularized the event and became "the first powerful influence in forming an outspoken anti-British public opinion."<sup>26</sup> Samuel Adams approved.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ward, Kyle, History in the Making (New York: New Press, 2006), 83.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>3</sup> Zobel, Hiller B., The Boston Massacre (New York: Norton & Company, 1970), 4

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 12-13

<sup>5</sup> ushistory.org. "The Sugar Act." Accessed 5/27/11. <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/related/sugaract.htm>

<sup>6</sup> ushistory.org. "The Stamp Act." Accessed 5/27/11. <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/related/stampact.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Zobel, Hiller B., The Boston Massacre (New York: Norton & Company, 1970), 25

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 25-26

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 70

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 77

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 145

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 178-179

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 180-182

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 183

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 186

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 186

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 187

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 188-189

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 193

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 196

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 198

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 199

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 204-205

# The Boston Massacre

---

<sup>24</sup> Boston Massacre Historical Society. "Participants at the Massacre." Accessed 5 /29/11.

<http://www.bostonmassacre.net/facts-and-numbers.htm>

<sup>25</sup> Boston Massacre Historical Society. "Paul Revere's Engraving Explained." Accessed 5/31/11

<http://www.bostonmassacre.net/gravure.htm>

<sup>26</sup> Boston Massacre Historical Society. "Paul Revere's Engraving Explained." Accessed 5/31/11

<http://www.bostonmassacre.net/gravure.htm>

## Bibliography

Boston Massacre Historical Society. <http://www.bostonmassacre.net>

ushistory.org. <http://www.ushistory.org>

Ward, Kyle, History in the Making. (New York: New Press, 2006)

Zobel, Hiller B., The Boston Massacre. (New York: Norton & Company, 1970)