

The Boston Massacre: Creating the Narrative of Independence

Grade Level: 6-8

Subject: Civics, U.S. History

Time Required: One or two 50-minute class periods

Historical Thinking Skill: Primary Source Analysis

Objectives: Students will:

- Compare and contrast conflicting testimony of the March 5, 1770 incident that came to be known as the "Boston Massacre."
- Understand the impact of British policies on the colonies in the pre-Revolutionary era.
- Analyze the relative impact of images and words when creating public opinion.

Materials:

- 1) Printed (or projected) copy of Paul Revere's "[The Bloody Massacre at King Street](#)"
- 2) Printed testimony from the trial of British Soldiers in Boston (below)

Background:

If time allows, this lesson should be preceded by a lesson on point-of-view. This lesson will ask students to consider one event from the perspective of colonists in Boston and of British soldiers.

Begin by activating students' prior knowledge by discussing Parliament's attempts to tax the colonies after the French and Indian War. Take a moment to remind students why each of these attempts to tax the colonies had failed: the colonists had organized protests, and eventually the Parliament removed the taxes.

Ask students: When the colonists complained about taxes, and then the taxes had been repealed, what lesson do you think the colonists learned?

The Townshend Acts (1767) were put in place after the repeal of the Stamp Act in 1766, and they were an effort to crack down on the colonists. There were more taxes, but the new law created a special committee to enforce the taxes and punish



smugglers. This special committee put its headquarters in Boston, which had been the scene of many riots and demonstrations against the British Taxes.

The people of Boston staged numerous protests and there were even riots over the Townshend Acts. As a result of the unrest in Boston, in October of 1768, the British sent four regiments of soldiers to live in the city of Boston. This was about 4,000 soldiers in a city of about 16,000 people—this meant there was one soldier for every four citizens of the city. These soldiers were there to keep the peace and protect the officials who collected taxes and arrested smugglers.

The soldiers were not quartered with Boston citizens, they lived in barracks and in Boston Common.

These soldiers were not welcomed by most of the people in Boston. They were shouted at, spat on, and routinely got into fights with colonists.

Ask students: Why would the people of Boston be so angry about the British soldiers living in their town? It's not like they were living with them in their houses, right?

Guide students toward understanding that there were so many soldiers in Boston it was impossible to avoid confrontation. Explain that many citizens of Boston had lost their jobs to soldiers who would take local jobs in their off-hours, as they could accept lower wages because they had their army pay.

Ask students: If you were one of these soldiers stationed in Boston, how would you feel about your posting? Would you want to be there?

Guide students toward understanding that the soldiers were very young, discipline was harsh (they could be whipped for mumbling to a soldier with a higher rank), they lived in horrible, cold places and were often ill, they found the colonists to be ungrateful for their protection, and they were far from home.

Things in Boston became very tense, as soldiers and colonists became involved in more and more altercations. Fearing what might happen with so many soldiers in Boston, the British decided that half of the soldiers should be sent home. Still, this left 2,000 soldiers in the city, and tensions continued to rise.



Lesson Plan:

Divide the class into groups and distribute the handout with the court testimony, giving half the groups the "Witnesses for the Prosecution" and the other groups the "Witnesses for the Defense" quotes. Before you instruct the students what to do with the quotes, begin with the facts of the case:

At 7 pm on March 5, a group of townspeople gathered around Hugh White, a British sentry standing guard outside the Custom House (where the tax money is kept). Reports from eyewitnesses say that the crowd was throwing snowballs and ice at him.

Private White called for backup. The local commander, Thomas Preston, soon arrived with seven other soldiers carrying muskets, loaded and ready to fire.

By 10 pm, the crowd was estimated to be 30 - 60 people. The crowd continued shouting at the soldiers, throwing ice, snowballs, and oyster shells. Several eyewitnesses reported that many in the crowd were carrying clubs and waving them as if to strike the soldiers.

The soldiers fired into the mob, killing three instantly. Two others would die of their wounds the following day. Six others were wounded.

Captain Preston and his men were arrested and charged with murder.

Have each group read the quotes on their handout. Each group should write a brief paragraph that sums up the testimony from the witnesses. What is the essence of each side's "evidence?"

Finally, ask the class to decide on the fate of Captain Preston and his men. You may wish to inform them that they were defended in court by John Adams, who was no friend to the British.

Before concluding the class, show the students the engraving of Paul Revere's "The Bloody Massacre" and ask them if they believe it represents an accurate portrayal of the events of that night. What does Revere get right? What does he get wrong?

Ask your students:

- 1) Why does Paul Revere portray the events of the evening of March 5, 1770 in this way?



- 2) What advantage does he gain for his cause by promoting his version of events?
- 3) Does Paul Revere's portrayal of the event seem to show a bias? Why or why not?
- 4) How do you think colonists reacted to this image? Why?
- 5) Do you think that Paul Revere's depiction of the Boston Massacre qualifies as propaganda? Why or why not?

Alternative Activity:

Have students look at Paul Revere's "[The Bloody Massacre](#)," Alonzo Chappel's "[Boston Massacre](#)," and Henry Q. Smith's "[Boston Massacre, March 5th 1770](#)." Have them interpret the differences in each artist's approach. Conversely, print each image and give one image each to three groups; have students write the story of what they see.

Finally, ask students: Is the "Boston Massacre" a good name for what happened? Why or why not?



Boston Massacre Trial Testimony: Witnesses for the Defense

Questions to think about when reading testimony:

- 1) How was the crowd acting before the shooting?
- 2) Was the order given to "fire" to the British soldiers?
- 3) What caused the first soldier to fire?
- 4) Where was Captain Preston standing in relation to the soldiers?
- 5) Does the witness seem to have any bias for, or against the soldiers?

Deposition of Captain Thomas Preston, March 12, 1770 (Excerpt)

Captain Thomas Preston:

"The mob still increased and were 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...fire and be damned, we know you dare not, and much more such language was used.... one of the soldiers received a severe blow with a stick, stepped a little to one side and instantly fired.... 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—why don't you fire. Instantly three or four of the soldiers fired....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."

James Woodall:

"I saw one Soldier knocked down. His Gun fell from him. I saw a great many sticks and pieces of sticks and Ice thrown at the Soldiers. The Soldier who was knocked down took up his Gun and fired directly. Soon after the first Gun I saw a Gentleman behind the Soldiers in velvet of blue or black plush trimmed with gold. He put his hand toward their backs. Whether he touched them I know not...the Capt., after, seemed shocked and looked upon the Soldiers. I am very certain he did not give the word fire."

Edward Hill:

"After all the firing Captain Preston put up the Gun of a soldier who was going to fire and he said, 'fire no more you have done mischief enough.'"

Richard Palmes:

"I said to Preston are your Soldiers Guns loaded. He answered, [yes] with powder and ball. Sir, I hope you don't intend the Soldiers shall fire on the Inhabitants. He said by no means. I saw something resembling Snow or Ice strike the Grenadier on the Captains right hand.... He instantly stepped one foot back and fired the first Gun. I had then my



hand on the Captain's shoulder. After the Gun went off I heard the word fire.... I don't know who gave the word fire."

Jane Whitehouse:

"A Man came behind the Soldiers walked backwards and forward, encouraging them to fire.... The man touched one of the Soldiers upon the back and said fire, by God I'll stand by you. He was dressed in dark colored clothes.... He did not look like an Officer. The man fired directly on the word and clap on the Shoulder. I am positive the man was not the Captain.... I am sure he gave no orders."

Source: <http://www.bostonmassacre.net/trial/index.htm>



Boston Massacre Trial Testimony: Witnesses for the Prosecution

Questions to think about when reading testimony:

- 1) How was the crowd acting before the shooting?
- 2) Was the order given to "fire" to the British soldiers?
- 3) What caused the first soldier to fire?
- 4) Where was Captain Preston standing in relation to the soldiers?
- 5) Does the witness seem to have any bias for, or against the soldiers?

Ebenezer Hinkley:

"Just after 9 o'clock heard the Cry of Fire. I saw the party come out of the Guard House. A Captain cried out of the window and said 'fire upon 'em.' I followed 'em down before the Custom House door. Capt. Preston was out and commanded 'em. They drew up and charged their Bayonets.... Then I heard the word fire in ¼ minute he fired."

Peter Cunningham:

"I am pretty positive the Capt. bid 'em Prime and load. I stood about 4 feet off him."

William Wyatt:

"I heard the officer say fire. The Soldiers did not fire. His back was to me. I heard the same voice say fire. The Soldiers did not fire. The Officer then stamped and said Damn your bloods fire be the consequences what it will. Immediately the first Gun was fired."

Theodore Bliss:

"I saw the People throw Snow Balls at the Soldiers and saw a Stick about 3 feet long strike a Soldier upon the right. He sallied and then fired.... Then the other[s] fast after one another. One or two Snow balls hit the Soldier, the stick struck, before firing. I know not whether he sallied on account of the Stick or step'd back to make ready. I did not hear any Order given by the Capt. to fire. I stood so near him I think I must have heard him if he had given an order to fire before the first firing."

Isaac Pierce:

"The Lieut. Governor asked Capt. Preston didn't you know you had no power to fire upon the Inhabitants or any number of people collected together unless you had a Civil Officer to give order. The Captain replied I was obliged to, to save my Sentry."

John Cole:

"I saw the officer after the firing and spoke to the Soldiers and told 'em it was a Cowardly action to kill men at the end of their Bayonets. They were pushing at the



People who seemed to be trying to come into the Street. The Captain came up and stamped and said Damn their bloods fire again and let 'em take the consequence. I was within four feet of him. He had no surtout but a red Coat with a Rose on his shoulder. The people were quarrelling at the head of Royal Exchange lane. The Soldiers were pushing and striking with the Guns. I saw the People's Arms moving but no Sticks."

Source: <http://www.bostonmassacre.net/trial/index.htm>

