

Topic Page: [Boston Massacre, 1770](#)

Definition: **Boston Massacre** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

(1770) Riot by American colonists, angered over the quartering of troops in private homes. Starting with some snowballing, it was put down by British soldiers and resulted in the death of five civilians, including Crispus Attucks. The riot was exploited for anti-British propaganda by Samuel Adams and the Boston radicals. The soldiers were tried for murder, defended by John Adams, and acquitted.

Summary Article: **Boston Massacre**

From *Gale Encyclopedia of U.S. Economic History*

The Boston Massacre occurred on March 5, 1770, when a band of nine British soldiers opened fire on a mob of more than 100 Bostonians gathered outside the Boston Custom House, killing five colonists and injuring six others. One in a long train of abuses noted in the Declaration of Independence, the massacre became an important catalyst for the American Revolution as a symbol of the British tyranny and oppression that had stifled the once-prosperous colonial economy. After the French and Indian War (1754–63), a conflict between Britain and France waged in North America, the British Crown had passed a series of laws levying new taxes on the colonists and demanding the colonies quarter British troops. Colonists reacted defiantly by boycotting British goods and harassing tax collectors. When violence erupted in the 1770 massacre, the British were forced to reevaluate their economic policies even as revolution continued to gain support among colonists.

Tensions leading to the massacre began to mount in 1763 when the British Crown levied taxes to pay debts incurred from the French and Indian War. The same year the Crown prohibited colonists from settling lands acquired in the war, and the colonies sank into a prolonged postwar depression. Colonial resistance to British rule intensified with the Townshend Acts, a series of laws passed by Parliament in 1767 to raise revenue and demonstrate the Crown's authority over the North American colonies. In 1768 Parliament's secretary for American Affairs, Wills Hill (Lord Hillsborough) (1718–93), ordered four British regiments to be stationed in Boston after a crowd had mobbed customs officers who had seized a merchant ship owned by radical patriot John Hancock on suspicion of smuggling. In response, on August 1, 1768, Boston merchants signed a nonimportation agreement that boycotted imported British goods, hoping to put economic pressure on Parliament to repeal the Townshend Acts. Although the boycott was later adopted by several other colonies and Parliament was eventually persuaded to repeal the acts, the boycott also prolonged the economic hardship for Boston's poorest citizens.



A docent in period costume stands on the site of the Boston Massacre, which took place on March 5, 1770, outside the Boston Custom House. This photo was taken in 2012. VOA/UIIG/GETTY IMAGES

From the time the British soldiers arrived in Boston, animosity between the military and the town's citizens was evident. Soldiers broke into private shops and stole goods. Citizens took soldiers' equipment or encouraged soldiers to desert their units and seek refuge in the surrounding countryside. Sometimes the differences between the groups erupted in violent confrontations that were made worse by colonial courts' bias toward the citizenry. For instance, on July 13, 1769, a private soldier named John Riley exchanged blows with a grocer named Jonathan Winship, who complained to the justice of the peace, Edmund Quincy (1703–88). A warrant was issued for Riley's arrest, and he was fined. When he did not pay the fine, Quincy ordered him to jail. Several members of Riley's regiment rescued him from the courthouse, fighting off the court's constable. In another incident, on October 24, 1769, British Ensign John Ness was charged with assaulting a colonial official named Robert Pierpoint and stealing his cargo of wood. On the way to answer the charges before a justice of the peace, Ness and his men were mobbed, and several were injured. Then on February 22, 1770, loyalist sympathizer Ebenezer Richardson was attacked in his home by a mob of radical, stone-throwing patriots. One of the stones hit Richardson's wife, and in a rage he seized a gun and fired into the crowd, killing an 11-year-old boy named Christopher Seider. All of these events increased tensions between radical patriots and supporters of the Crown, setting the stage for the March 5 massacre.

On Friday, March 2, 1770, British Private Patrick Walker, hoping to find work during his off-duty hours, approached rope maker John Gray's store but was insulted by worker William Green, who invited the soldier to clean out his latrine. More citizens and soldiers joined the exchange, and it broke out in a fight. The fighting spread on Saturday, resulting in a fractured skull and arm for one of the soldiers. Rumors of armed and angry townspeople looking for an excuse to fight spread throughout the town. On the evening of March 5, Private Hugh White was threatened by a crowd made up largely of the working poor of Boston, including day laborers, apprentices, and merchant seamen. White called for assistance and was supported by a squad of eight soldiers, including British Captain Thomas Preston (c.

1772–c. 1798) and two soldiers who had been involved in the fight at Gray's store the previous day. The mob began pelting the soldiers with mud, ice, and snow, and despite Preston's best efforts to diffuse the situation, tensions between the civilians and soldiers quickly escalated. Within the space of a few minutes, the soldiers began firing. Among those who died in the massacre were Crispus Attucks (1723–70), a former slave turned sailor; James Caldwell (c. 1753–70), another sailor; Patrick Carr, an Irish tailor; Samuel Gray (1718–70), a rope maker; and Samuel Maverick, the brother-in-law of mob leader Ebenezer Mackintosh (1737–1816). Six other colonists were wounded, some of them innocent bystanders who had not been part of the mob. Many of the colonists who formed part of the mob competed directly with the soldiers for jobs. Others, such as Attucks and Caldwell, held jobs that were affected by the boycott and may have been prepared to take their frustrations out on the soldiers who represented the British government.

Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson (1711–80) and his supporters worked through the night to avoid further bloodshed. Tensions were partially relieved by the arrest of Captain Preston and his eight men early the following morning, but the soldiers had to wait until the following October before the lieutenant governor decided they could receive a fair trial. After a three-day trial, defense lawyer John Adams secured Preston's acquittal. Of the eight other soldiers, six were found not guilty. The other two were convicted of manslaughter and were branded on their thumbs before being returned to their regiments.

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Captain Preston's acquittal and the relatively light sentences given to the two soldiers were due in part to the desire of the radical patriot faction to make martyrs out of the victims of the Boston Massacre. However, there was also an economic motive. By the autumn of 1770 the Townshend Acts had largely been repealed and merchants in New York, Boston, and elsewhere were no longer observing the nonimportation agreement. As a result jobs were more plentiful, work for unskilled laborers was easier to find, and the crowds of unemployed urban poor that made up the mobs of citizens melted away. Nevertheless the event convinced both radical patriots and conservative loyalists that the British government was more interested in collecting taxes from the colonists than in protecting their lives and liberties, fomenting support for revolution.

SEE ALSO *American Revolution; Boycott; French and Indian War; Loyalists; Townshend Acts (1767)*

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