



Boston Massacre

(US.1C)

Evaluating the Portrait

- The next slide will show a portrait, you will independently write down in a journal format, using descriptive words that capture the mood of the portrait, what kind of event the picture seems to be portraying, and, according to the picture, who the aggressors are.



Boston Massacre

- On March 5, 1770 a small group of colonists were up to their usual sport of tormenting British soldiers. By many accounts there was a great deal of taunting that eventually lead to an escalation of hostilities.
- The sentry in front of the Custom House eventually lashed out at the colonists which brought more colonists to the scene. In fact, someone began ringing the church bells which usually signified a fire. The sentry called for help, setting up the clash which we now call the Boston Massacre.

Boston Massacre

- A group of soldiers led by Captain Thomas Preston came to the rescue of the lone sentry. Captain Preston and his detachment of seven or eight men were quickly surrounded. All attempts to calm the crowd proved useless. At this point, the accounts of the event vary drastically.

Boston Massacre

- Apparently, a soldier fired a musket into the crowd, immediately followed by more shots. This action left several wounded and five dead including an African-American named Crispus Attucks. The crowd quickly dispersed, and the soldiers went back to their barracks. These are the facts we do know.

Boston Massacre

However, many uncertainties surround this important historical event:

- Did the soldiers fire with provocation?
- Did they fire on their own?
- Was Captain Preston guilty of ordering his men to fire into a crowd of civilians?
- Was he innocent and being used by men like Samuel Adams to confirm the oft-claimed tyranny of England?

Boston Massacre

- The only evidence historians have to try and determine Captain Preston's guilt or innocence is the testimony of the eyewitnesses. Unfortunately, many of the statements conflict with each other and with Captain Preston's own account. We must try to piece together a hypothesis from these conflicting sources.

Captain Preston's Account

- Captain Preston claimed he ordered his men to load their weapons.
- Captain Preston claimed he heard the crowd yelling fire.
- Captain Preston claimed they were attacked by heavy clubs and snowballs.

Captain Preston's Account

- Captain Preston claimed a soldier was hit by a stick and then fired.
- Captain Preston claimed the other soldiers fired in response to the colonist attack.
- Captain Preston claimed he reprimanded his men for firing into the crowd without orders.

Eyewitness Statements in Support of Captain Preston's Statement

- Witnesses including Peter Cunningham claimed they heard Captain Preston order his men to load their weapons.
- Witnesses including Richard Palmes claimed they asked Captain Preston if he intended to fire and he said no.
- Witnesses including William Wyatt claimed the crowd was calling for the soldiers to fire.

Eyewitness Statements in Support of Captain Preston's Statement

- Witnesses including James Woodall claimed they saw a stick thrown and hit a soldier, which prompted him to fire, quickly followed by several other soldiers.
- Witnesses including Peter Cunningham claimed an officer other than Preston was behind the men and that he ordered the soldiers to fire.
- Witnesses including William Sawyer claimed the crowd threw snowballs at the soldiers.

Eyewitness Statements in Support of Captain Preston's Statement

- Witnesses including Matthew Murray claimed they did not hear Captain Preston order his men to fire.
- William Wyatt claimed that Captain Preston reprimanded his men for firing into the crowd.
- Edward Hill claimed that Captain Preston made a soldier put away his weapon instead of allowing him to continue to shoot.

Eyewitness Statements Opposed to Captain Preston's Statement

- Witnesses including Daniel Calef claimed that Captain Preston ordered his men to fire.
- Henry Knox claimed the soldiers were hitting and pushing with their muskets.
- Joseph Petty claimed he did not see any sticks thrown at the soldiers until after the firing.

Eyewitness Statements Opposed to Captain Preston's Statement

- Robert Goddard claimed he heard Captain Preston curse his men for not firing when ordered.
- Several soldiers including Hugh White claimed they heard the order to fire and believed they were obeying his commands.

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- The facts are unclear. There is some evidence that seems to point to Captain Preston's innocence. Many people close to him did not hear him give the order to fire despite his order to load the muskets. In the confusion of a crowd throwing snowballs, sticks and insults at the soldiers, it would be easy for them to think they received an order to fire. In fact, as noted in the testimony, many in the crowd were calling them to fire.

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- John Adams defended the soldiers in this case believing that the soldiers deserved a fair trial. Because of the lack of evidence, it is not hard to see why the jury found Captain Preston innocent. The effect of this verdict was much greater than the Crown could ever have guessed. The leaders of the rebellion were able to use it as proof of Britain's tyranny.