

Five Dead People that Sparked a Revolution:

Why the Boston Massacre is Infamous

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Introduction

The American Revolution is arguably one of the most important events in all of world history. Many different historians have listed it as a top event in world history based on its uniqueness and the global impact it had on human's views of religion, politics/government, and citizen's rights.¹ This argument comes from the fruits of the revolution and what happened after the United States and its government was formed and began to have an impact on the globe (Although not directly evident until the World Wars). However, this government needed to be formed first. The American Revolution did exactly that and eventually created one of the first governments in world history that was driven by citizens and led by representatives the citizens themselves elected. Then in turn, this country helped open up the world to ideas like freedom and citizen's rights.

Like any major event in history, there not only has to be many small happenings that make up the major event, but there is normally a chain of events that led to the beginning of the major event. There is something that sparks the people into action as they create and determine the path of the world's history. In the case of the American Revolution, the colonists were getting tired of the British government showing power and enforcing taxes on them without giving them a say as to where this money would go to and representation in Parliament. Thus, this "unjust" taxation created unrest in the American colonists that led up to a spark of the entire revolution, the Boston Massacre. When studying the revolution, this event is widely accepted as

1. George Frazer, "The American Revolution: Not a Just War," *Journal of Military Ethics* 14, no. 1 (January 2015): 36.

one of the main events that did really spark the American Revolution. In fact, it may even be one of the most widely known, taught, and studied events of the American Revolution as a whole in America today. So with that said, what caused the Boston Massacre, an event with relatively low casualties (five people dead) when compared to major battles of the Revolution, to become one of the most famous events from the American Revolution? This paper argues that the Boston Massacre became famous and well known because of the mystery behind what actually happened, the massive propaganda campaign that stemmed from it, and the loss of civilian life, not soldier life, at the hands of a British military force.

Conspiracy Theories Appeal

The terrorist attacks on 9/11, the assassination of President Kennedy, the moon landing, Elvis Presley's death. All of these events are still famous to this day. But why? Not only because they are shocking and memorable, but these events all have mystery and questions behind them. People as a whole react well to mystery and conspiracy theories. In their journal article regarding this very topic, Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Michele Acke address this very idea. They state that, "Sources of evidence suggest that the relationship between threatening societal events and belief in conspiracy theories can have substantial political implications on people's ideologies and civil behaviors."² Questionable events that happen in society affect the way people act politically in their culture. They not only question if the people reporting the story (the media) are being honest about what happened, but also bring the governing bodies into question, as they may have had something to do with what happened, or are hiding the real facts.

Ultimately when there are questions, people like to dig at the answer from all sorts of different angles. They use any means possible to try and find the truth. This digging into the

2. Jan-Willem Van Prooijeni and Michele Acker, "The Influence of Control on Belief in Conspiracy Theories: Conceptual and Applied Extensions," *Applied cognitive Psychology* 29, no. 8 (August 2015): 759.

event brings up many different facts and facets that contributed to the event. Every single entity involved in a questionable event goes under the microscope and gets analyzed. Thus due to human nature, flaws are found and those flaws eventually raise even more questions in the general public's mind.³ With more questions present, people want more answers. Thus, when an event that contains conspiracy theory, people become more intrigued by it, as they want more answers. This leads to it becoming more popular and appeals to a wider audience, making the event more popular and well known.

The Massacre as a Conspiracy

With that said, the Boston Massacre became famous and well known among people due to the fact that it had a conspiracy theory behind and there is to this a mystery behind what actually happened on that fateful day in March. How can this be seen? This is best seen by taking a look at both sides that were involved on that day, the British military and the townspeople of Boston. Did what these groups of people say happened? Then, did their account fall in line with each other, or create uncertainty?

British Military Account

The main figure for the British during this event was Captain Thomas Preston. He was the commanding officer of the unit that ended up firing on the group of people. He was assigned to patrol the city of Boston and keep the peace, as the extremists in the area were beginning to get out of hand and the British simply wanted to keep Boston safe and peaceful. After the event, Captain Preston was one of the only Englishmen (As he represented the soldiers involved) asked to give an account of what happened to the court that was trying the soldiers involved in the incident. In this account, he begins by talking about how the British government had not come

3. Ibid., 757.

out in full force yet, but only wanted to “aid in keeping the peace of the obnoxious inhabitants in Boston.”⁴ From there, he continues to give an account that starts with a description of the night, in which two of his soldiers were attacked and beat by colonists. Then from there, the townspeople began to ring congregating bells that were rung for important events like legislation and fires. This frightened Preston’s men, as they thought the townspeople were assembling to create a force of people to attack the British soldiers. So the fear from the ringing of the bells combined with what already happened, Preston went out of his way to go see the commotion and what was actually happening. After seeing the unrest, he immediately and hastily ordered for a guard to be assembled outside the state house by the gathering of people. He wanted them there only to help prevent a riot from breaking out and creating a larger problem, while still protecting the king’s money in the state house. However, Preston then talks about how a mob of colonists with clubs and torches came out and surrounded the British soldiers. Then after many insults from the colonists, Preston received intel that the mob planned to carry off one soldier and murder him in order to show the British government that they had power and real capabilities. From there, he sent the messenger back out to get more intelligence and he never came back. Preston then concludes by saying that this environment created by the citizens may lead to soldiers “being off their guard and act rash.”⁵

Overall, Captain Preston paints a picture that his men were definitely provoked by the mobbing colonists to act in ways that they normally would not, while never admitting to any of his men firing a single shot. He simply states that his men may have acted incorrectly, although not certain they did, under the pressuring situation they were put under by a mob.

4. Captain Thomas Preston, “Captain Preston’s Account of What Happened,” (1770). Found at Boston Massacre Historical Society. Captain Thomas Preston. <http://www.bostonmassacre.net/trial/acct-preston1.htm>. (Accessed October 1, 2016).

5. Ibid.

Boston Townspeople Account

There are many different accounts from the colonists involved. This is mainly due to the fact that there was no clear leader to represent everyone, so they all simply wrote their own stories or journals. The most official accounts of what happened on this side come from John Adams, as he was the defense attorney for the soldiers (but still an avid patriot) and James Bowdoin, as he penned the official report of what happened for the city of Boston.

Adams gives an account that stays pretty impartial (as a good attorney ought to do). He gives accounts from all of the witnesses that testified. These tend to contradict each other, as they never come to clear ideas with what happened. In his summation, one person says one thing, and another says a different thing against the first person's idea. However, there is one main fact from Adams's summation that sticks out throughout many of the colonist's stories. This is the fact that when the soldiers were ordered to go to the state house, one of the soldiers appeared beaten up and his bayonet had fresh blood on it.⁶ In other words, this soldier had been involved in a fight and was not simply the victim like their accounts had stated. He did not try to diffuse the situation, and only added fuel to the fire by using his bayonet.

In Bowdoin's account, one main idea about the events that took place stands out. He states that, "the troops were not sent here for any benefit to the town or province, and that we had no good to expect."⁷ In other words, the colonists only saw the troops coming as something to instigate the events and make them larger than they needed to be. They were not staying very far away from where they were congregating by state house (See Figure C).⁸ Thus, they could have

6. John Adams, "Summation by John Adams," (1770). Found at John Adams Historical Society. Boston Massacre Trial. <http://www.john-adams-heritage.com/summation-boston-massacre-trial/>. (Accessed October 1, 2016).

7. James Bowdoin, "A Military Combination: Report of a Committee of the Town of Boston" (1770). In *Colonies to Nation 1763-1789: A Documentary History of the American Revolution*. Ed. by Jack P. Greene, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975), 168.

8. John Hinton, "Boston" (1774). In *The Boston Massacre: A History with Documents*. By Neil L. York, (London: Taylor and Francis, 2010), 18.

easily come over from their camp if there was a need to diffuse the situation. They did not need to act hastily to come over and protect the peace, as their camp was in close proximity (just down the street) of the events already. The colonists saw these swift actions as a show of force. They then attributed that to being what caused people to get shot by the British soldiers, because they were thinking too rashly and hastily.⁹

Ultimately, these two accounts show that there is much confusion about what really happened during the events of the Boston Massacre. Both sides may have even twisted the information to make themselves look good and in the right. As Neil L. York states in his work on the Boston Massacre, “The fact that people were not sure what happened, made them more intrigued and created a desire for them to talk about the event.”¹⁰ So in other words, people of the time and today seem to talk about the Boston Massacre because they want to find out what happened and are genuinely intrigued by the different conspiracy theories that attempt to explain what happened. Thus it does not matter if only a few people died, people want to know what happened and make the event famous by consistently digging into its’ facts and talking about the happenings in conversations (creating oral history).

The Ripple Effect: Propaganda

Propaganda is something that has been used since the very beginning of time. When people want other people to do something for them and not another, they represent their idea as great and beautiful, while representing the other’s as gross and wrong. This is exactly what the colonists did during the American Revolution and more specifically, the Boston Massacre. In their work about the common people of the Revolution, the Handlins stated, “The rurals (people) of the Revolution desired something to keep them up to date. This was found mostly in some sort

9. Bowdoin, 171.

10. Neil L. York, *The Boston Massacre: A History with Documents* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2010), 158.

of propaganda.”¹¹ The leaders of the revolution used propaganda to relate to those out away from the city, in order to get them on their side and not with the British. They painted a nice picture of their cause, and a dim picture of the British cause.

But now does this make a bloody affair like the Boston Massacre look nice enough for people to follow? The answer to this come from none other than Paul Revere. He created one of the most famous images that depicted the Boston Massacre (See Figure B).¹² Neil York describes the image well in his book as he states:

Paul Revere’s print of the Boston Massacre of March 5, 1770, has shaped Americans’ idea of that dramatic event. Revere copied from a work by Henry Pelham. Rushed into print, Revere’s image made a strong and timely political point. Judged by evidence given at the soldier’s trials and by other eyewitnesses, Revere’s version distorted the event in several respects. He depicted unarmed townspeople, well-dressed and peaceable. He portrayed the soldiers drawn up in an orderly line, firing into the crowd at the command of their captain.¹³

Paul Revere truly made a dishonest picture to sway people against the British. He made the colonists look like slaughter victims of the barbaric British soldiers. Those that died were truly made out to look like martyrs of the Patriot cause.

However, it is not the image itself that becomes important. It is the massive distribution that takes place with the image. Just as Sarkel discusses in her journal article, “The massive audience is the main reason Revolutionary propaganda was successful.”¹⁴ The patriots really knew how to produce their materials in mass quantities and make sure the people that needed to see it did. This is where the ripple effect comes in as well. If one person sees a piece of propaganda that moves them against the British, they are more than likely going to share it with

11. Oscar and Lilian Hanlin, *A Restless People: Americans in Rebellion 1770-1787* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1982), 17.

12. Paul Revere, “Carnage: The Bloody Massacre” (1770). In *Colonies to Nation 1763-1789: A Documentary History of the American Revolution*. Ed. by Jack P. Greene, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975), 165.

13. York, 237.

14. Sandra J. Sarkela, “Freedom’s Call: The Persuasive Power of Mercy Otis Warren’s Dramatic Sketches,” *Early American Literature Review* 44, no. 3 (March 2009): 561.

someone. Then, that person will see the propaganda and react to it. Then eventually almost every colonist will see the work and have to decide for themselves if they want to support the Patriot cause. Thus, the audience and cause for the revolutionaries has now expanded and grown, all because of a piece of propaganda that sent out ripples in society.

This is exactly what happened in regards to the propaganda that stemmed from the events of the Boston Massacre. Philip Davisson talks about this in his book *Propaganda and the American Revolution*. He discussed that propaganda based around the Boston Massacre really created a sense of hatred towards the British, as they used their dominance to kill innocent lives. Although it may not have been totally true, the propaganda simply spread ideas and instilled within the colonists the desire to gain independence away from the British.¹⁵ This propaganda from the Boston Massacre truly did make the minor skirmish of an event way more famous than it should have been. It used the ripple effect to reach a way larger audience (Although done in a manipulative way), that created a larger patriot force to go against the British who kill innocent civilians. Thus with a larger audience, the oral tradition of what happened also grew, as people would share what they remember the event looked like from the propaganda they had been fed. Then eventually a lasting and famous story behind the events of the Boston Massacre was created for generations to hear.

Civilian Outcry

In war, there are some rules that one should follow. These created a “safer” and “healthier” climate for war, if there is such a thing. In other words, one must attempt to be a civil gentleman during war. This includes the idea of only attacking those that are attacking you, or the opposing army, and not the civilians around the scene and places of battle. In the case of the

15. Philip Davidson, *Propaganda and the American Revolution* (New York: Norton, 1973), 140-149.

Boston Massacre, these “gentlemen” rules of war were not followed, and civilians lost their lives. The people involved in the street riots that took place before shots were fired had no idea what to think and were almost numb to what had happened. Bonnie L. Lukes states that, “The Boston Crowd could not take in what had happened. They could not believe that the soldier had actually fired on them...one testified later that he thought the bodies were overcoats left behind by frightened people running away.”¹⁶ The people did not know what to think, as they were shocked that the British had actually broken the rules of war and fired on civilians. They felt like most people do after tragedy, a little helpless and confused.

The British Empire was one of the world’s largest at the time and had some of the greatest military might. Along with that, they also had the best navy fleet in the world. This is what many in Boston saw as a symbol of their power in the town that is surrounded by large amounts of water and harbors (See Figure A)¹⁷. The British clearly had superior power, but were normally gracious, as they only flexed their military might when they needed to. Yes the Americans may not have always followed these rules of war as they engaged in guerilla warfare at times and played a little “dirty,” but they still saw these things as respectful and good. The American colonists really did respect the British people and government for the most part when it wasn’t corrupt. Gordon Wood writes that, “Everywhere, even the wealthiest of the colonial gentry, strained to imitate the best of the English.”¹⁸ This fact added to the type of a shocked response that came from people when they realized that civilians had unnecessarily been killed by the British. An eyewitness named Theodore Bliss recalled the events stating, “There were about

16. Bonnie L. Lukes, *The Boston Massacre* (San Diego, CA: Lucent Books, 1998), 42.

17. “Two Revolutionary War Maps of Boston Harbor.” Found at Big Map Blog. Revolutionary War Maps. <http://www.bigmapblog.com/2014/tworevolutionary-war-maps-of-boston-1776/>. (Accessed October 1, 2016).

18. Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Press, 1992), 113.

100 people in the Street. The muzzles of the Guns were behind him in utter shock.”¹⁹ Everyone involved, both British soldiers and Bostonians, were in shock that such a respectful establishment like the British government had acted disrespectfully and killed civilians. This fact created an infamous feeling to the event that they would be remembered in oral history, as people felt betrayed and were traumatized. Thus, they remembered this event of the Boston Massacre and told the story of that day. It lived on and made this seemingly small and minor event again even more famous and memorable within the scope of history.

Conclusion

Now it can be seen that the events of the Boston Massacre were not something simple and minor to the people involved at the time. They were events that completely shocked them. The colonists wanted to imitate the British in almost everything they did, but when they turned against civilians (even if it was accidentally), the colonists lost respect for them and did not see that type of an event as minor. So then this led to a propaganda campaign that split the Americans away from the British and encouraged people to go away from the British, as they had abused their power. The British could no longer be respected, as they had seemingly used their power innocently against innocent people.

So why is this event of the Boston Massacre still relevant and taught today? It really comes down to tradition and how people see the event. There is mystery behind so people do want to figure out what really happened that evening, there was a massive propaganda campaign that brought many new people onto the side of Patriots that stemmed from it, and there was awe in the abuse of power by the British, as they killed civilians. Ultimately, people used these three items to create a large oral and written tradition of the Boston Massacre that has lasted and kept

19. Theodore Bliss, “Deposition of Theodore Bliss,” (1770). Found at Boston Massacre Historical Society. The Soldiers Trials. <http://www.bostonmassacre.net/trial/d-bliss.htm>. (Accessed October 1, 2016).

current people's interest peaked in the event that helped sparked a massive event in the course of global human history that altered the course of the future. It became a folk story of the time that commemorating martyrs for independence. Without these ideas of mystery, propaganda and losing respect of the British, the Boston Massacre may not have popular and sparked the revolution of ideas and political ideologies that helped change the way the world works and treats people forever.

Figure A



Figure B



Figure C



Yellow Line: Where the most of the British Troops landing and stationed on Long Wharf
Red Dot: Location of Boston Massacre on King Street

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