

Unsolved History: The Boston Massacre

The History Channel,
one-hour documentary,
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On 5 March 1770 in Boston, Massachusetts, eight British soldiers opened fire on a crowd of Colonials who had gathered to protest their presence in Boston, killing five and wounding six. The event is significant because it helped incite the American Revolution. The dead were celebrated as the first martyrs of the Revolution. A black former slave named Crispus Attucks has gone down in history as the first to die for his country.

The accepted version of history holds that the British commander, Captain Preston, deliberately ordered his men to murder unarmed citizens with controlled volley fire, making the incident a symbol of British brutality. Viewed objectively, however, there remain many unanswered questions and surprisingly little is known of such a pivotal event. *Unsolved History* assembled a team of experts to study it as one would a modern criminal investigation.

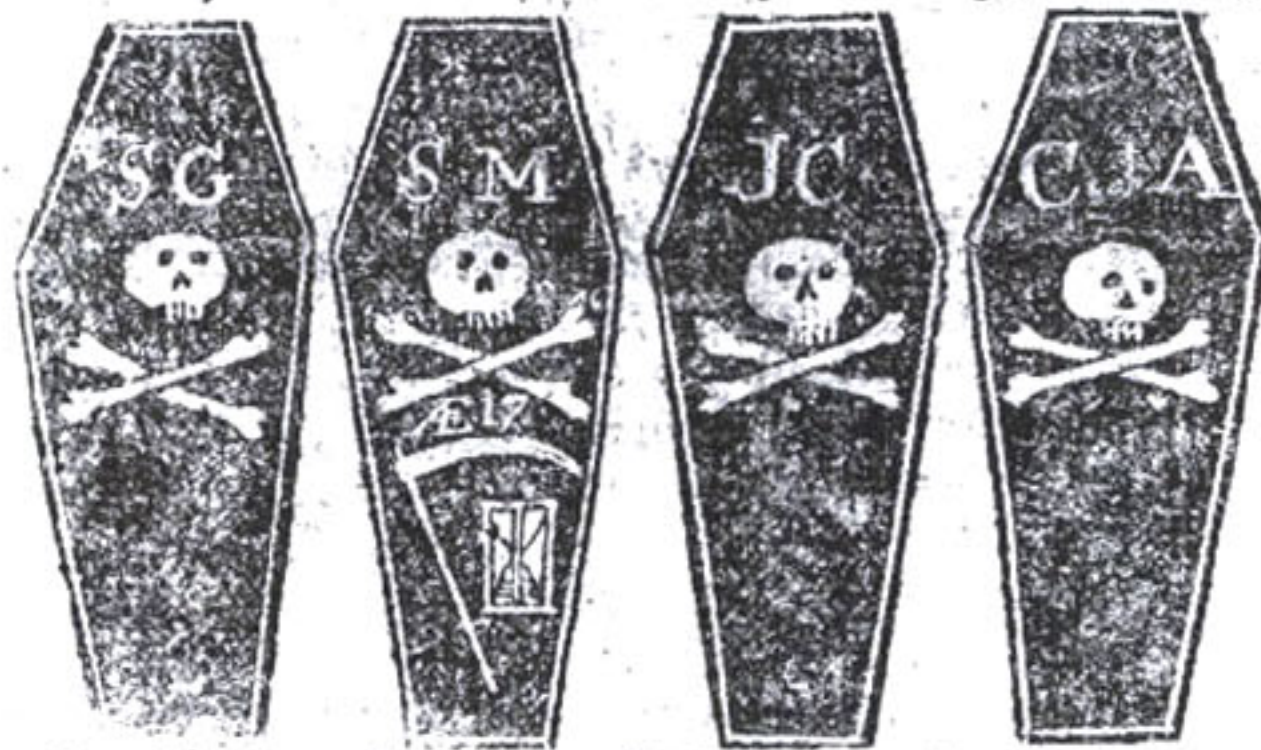
The investigation included a physical survey of the site, which still exists. Re-enactors meticulously recreated known events and compared their observations with contemporary accounts consulted during their archival survey. Documents examined by experts included court transcripts from the trial of the soldiers. It appears that much of the information in the eyewitness testimony, which is often very contradictory, could not have physically happened as described.

The results from ballistics tests using replica Brown Bess muskets were compared with data from victim autopsy reports. These appear to show that Attucks was at the back of the crowd and almost certainly was hit by a spent bullet that struck another protester first. Forensics evidence refutes the claim that the British double-loaded their weapons. In instances of multiple wounds, the bullets came from different guns, calling into question whether the firing was premeditated.

Finally, an acoustical study in a sound studio shows that Captain Preston, who was in front of the soldiers facing the

Manacres, and the original... Hours to the Gates of this City many Thousands of our brave Brethren in the Country, deeply affected with our Distresses, and to whom we are greatly obliged on this Occasion—No one knows where this would have ended, and what important Consequences even to the whole British Empire might have followed, which our Moderation & Loyalty upon so trying an Occasion, and our Faith in the Commander's Assurances have happily prevented.

Last Thursday, agreeable to a general Request of the Inhabitants, and by the Consent of Parents and Friends, were carried to their Grave in Succession, the Bodies of Samuel Gray, Samuel Maverick, James Caldwell, and Crispus Attucks, the unhappy Victims who fell in the bloody Massacre of the Monday Evening preceeding!



On this Occasion most of the Shops in Town were shut, all the Bells were ordered to toll a solemn Peal, as were also those in the neighboring Towns of Charlestown Roxbury, &c. The Procession began to move between the Hours of 4 and 5 in the Afternoon; two of the un-

Four coffins of men killed in the Boston Massacre.
Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

crowd, could not have been heard by his men even if he had given the order to fire. In fact, testimony from the trial shows that one of the soldiers was struck with a stick and probably fired in anger or in self-defence. The other soldiers likely reacted spontaneously or responded to the crowd taunting them to fire. Captain Preston desperately tried to stop the shooting and quickly removed the soldiers from the scene.

The mob brought the tragedy upon themselves

The evidence shows that the Boston Massacre was not a massacre, but a riot in which the soldiers acted in self-defence. They were in a semi-circular formation with their backs against a wall, not arrayed in a skirmish line. They were faced by a rowdy, intoxicated mob of 200 to 300 people, some armed with clubs, who were closing in on and intimidating them. The mob brought the tragedy upon themselves by their actions; and Crispus Attucks was not the first to die for his country.

Many observers at the time believed that the Sons of Liberty conspired to create the incident, but if they did not, they certainly blew it out of proportion and exploited its propaganda value to inflame anti-British sentiment. The remarkable contrast between a sketch drawn by Samuel Adams at the time of the trial and his famous engraving produced years later, clearly show his anti-British bias.

Unsolved History research team members appear almost unanimous in their conclusions, the exception being Historical Researcher Murray Dorty. Dorty argues that the Boston Massacre was a case of murder since the crowd was unarmed. Another team member disagrees, citing the disproportionate numbers, severe provocation and the obvious fact that clubs can be deadly at close range.

While Dorty cannot entirely dismiss the findings of the team, he persists that

Attucks' sacrifice started a glorious conflict that led to the birth of [this] nation; that his death inspired others so they could sacrifice their lives for a cause, which "made [us] the nation we are." Here we have an example of someone who is having trouble letting go of the myth that has become history. This still happens today when people who have much invested in an ideology are willing to exaggerate or even lie to persuade others to support them; and to ignore objective evidence that clashes with their assumptions.

Unsolved History's re-examination of the Boston Massacre helps validates the Loyalists who recognized that support for the American Revolution was in part based on distortions & falsehoods. This is significant because, for such machinations to have been necessary, many people must have been supportive, or at least indifferent to British rule. Secondly, if history is the collective memory that defines who a people are and how they see themselves, and if the rationale for the creation of their country turns out to be based on false assumptions, perhaps they should re-examine who they are.

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