

## DBQ: The Boston Massacre

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### Historical Context

After the French and Indian War, some colonists in the English colonies were becoming increasingly angry over taxation laws of the English Parliament. In March of 1770, resentment between British soldiers and colonists erupted into violence in an event known in American history as the "Boston Massacre". Not everyone saw it that way.

### Task

In a well-organized essay, examine the causes of the Boston Massacre and evaluate whether it really was the "massacre" that some in the colonial press made it out to be.

### Some Recommended Outside Information

- Effects of the French and Indian War on the British and their North American colonies.
- Historical circumstances of the Stamp Act, Sugar Act, Townshend Acts, etc.
- How the dispute over taxes led to the American war for Independence

### The Best Essay...

- Thoroughly develops all aspects of the task evenly and in depth
- Is more analytical than descriptive (analyzes, evaluates, and/or creates information)
- Incorporates relevant information from at least **"half plus one"** documents
- Incorporates substantial relevant outside information
- Richly supports the theme with many relevant facts, examples, and details
- Demonstrates a logical and clear plan of organization; includes an introduction and a conclusion that are beyond a restatement of the theme

**Document 1** [The paragraphing is not original.]

"... In my way there I saw the people in great commotion, and heard them use the most cruel and horrid threats against the troops. In a few minutes after I reached the guard, about 100 people passed it and went towards the custom house where the king's money is lodged. They immediately surrounded the sentry posted there, and with clubs and other weapons threatened to execute their vengeance on him. I was soon informed by a townsman their intention was to carry off the soldier from his post and probably murder him... I immediately sent a noncommissioned officer and 12 men to protect both the sentry and the king's money, and very soon followed myself to prevent, if possible, all disorder, fearing lest the officer and soldiers, by the insults and provocations of the rioters, should be thrown off their guard and commit some rash act. They soon rushed through the people, and by charging their bayonets in half-circles, kept them at a little distance. ..The mob still increased and were more 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, [...], and much more such language was used.

At this time I was between the soldiers and the mob, parleying with, and endeavouring all in my power to persuade them to retire peaceably, but to no purpose. They advanced to the points of the bayonets, struck some of them and even the muzzles of the pieces, and seemed to be endeavouring to close with the soldiers. On which some well behaved persons asked me if the guns were charged. I replied yes. They then asked me if I intended to order the men to fire. I answered no, by no means, observing to them that I was advanced before the muzzles of the men's pieces, and must fall a sacrifice if they fired ...While I was thus speaking, one of the soldiers having received a severe blow with a stick, stepped a little on one side and instantly fired, on which turning to and asking him why he fired without orders, I was struck with a club on my arm, which for some time deprived me of the use of it, which blow had it been placed on my head, most probably would have destroyed me.

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, one after another, and directly after three more in the same confusion and hurry. The mob then ran away, except three unhappy men who instantly expired [...] The whole of this melancholy affair was transacted in almost 20 minutes. On my asking the soldiers why they fired without orders, they said they heard the word fire and supposed it came from me. 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. In short, it was scarcely possible for the soldiers to know who said fire, or don't fire, or stop your firing."

- Excerpt from the report of Captain Thomas Preston

"Eyewitnesses to the Boston Massacre - HistoryWiz Primary Sources." *HistoryWiz: for Students, Teachers and Lovers of History*. Web. 10 Dec. 2010. <<http://www.historywiz.com/primarysources/eyewit-boston.htm>>.

1. This version of the account is evidence for (check one):  colonists  Crown
2. I find this testimony (check one)  highly reliable  sort of reliable  unreliable

## Document 2

THE HORRID MASSACRE IN BOSTON, PERPETRATED IN THE EVENING OF THE FIFTH DAY OF MARCH, 1770, BY SOLDIERS OF THE TWENTY-NINTH REGIMENT WHICH WITH THE FOURTEENTH REGIMENT WERE THEN QUARTERED THERE; WITH SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE STATE OF THINGS PRIOR TO THAT CATASTROPHE.

"[...] Samuel Drowne declares that, about nine o'clock of the evening of the fifth of March current, standing at his own door in Cornhill, he saw about fourteen or fifteen soldiers of the 29th regiment, who came from Murray's barracks, armed with naked cutlasses, swords, &c., and came upon the inhabitants of the town, then standing or walking, and abused some, and violently assaulted others as they met them; most of whom were without so much as a stick in their hand to defend themselves, as he very clearly could discern, it being moonlight, and himself being one of the assaulted persons. [...]

"The violent proceedings of this party, and their going into King street, "quarrelling and fighting with the people whom they saw there" (mentioned in Mr. Drowne's deposition), was immediately introductory to the grand catastrophe.

[...] "The outrageous behavior and the threats of the said party occasioned the ringing of the meeting-house bell near the head of King street, which bell ringing quick, as for fire, it presently brought out a number of inhabitants, who being soon sensible of the occasion of it, were naturally led to King street, where the said party had made a stop but a little while before, and where their stopping had drawn together a number of boys, round the sentry at the Custom House. Whether the boys mistook the sentry for one of the said party, and thence took occasion to differ with him, or whether he first affronted them, which is affirmed in several depositions, -however that may be, there was much foul language between them, and some of them, in consequence of his pushing at them with his bayonet, threw snowballs at him, which occasioned him to knock hastily at the door of the Custom House. From hence two persons thereupon proceeded immediately to the main-guard, which was posted opposite to the State House, at a small distance, near the head of the said street. The officer on guard was Capt. Preston, who with seven or eight soldiers, with fire-arms and charged bayonets, issued from the guardhouse, and in great haste posted himself and his soldiers in front of the Custom House, near the corner aforesaid. [...].

"The said party was formed into a half circle; and within a short time after they had been posted at the Custom House, began to fire upon the people.

"Captain Preston is said to have ordered them to fire, and to have repeated that order. One gun was fired first; then others in succession and with deliberation till ten or a dozen guns were fired; or till that numbers of discharges were made from the guns that were fired. By which means eleven persons were killed and wounded, as above represented."

- Anonymous Account of the Boston Massacre  
"Eyewitnesses to the Boston Massacre - HistoryWiz Primary Sources." *HistoryWiz: for Students, Teachers and Lovers of History*.  
Web. 10 Dec. 2010. <<http://www.historywiz.com/primarysources/eyewit-boston.htm>>.

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#### Document 4

Extract of a Letter from London, Dec. 1769.

"Bernard was at Court last week, and very little attended to; and I am told, attends the doors of the Great frequently, without admission."

"Sir,

Governor of Massachusetts Bay, begins to cry peccavi; and he now makes no scruple publicly to declare, that the acts of violence which have been attempted to be perpetrated at Boston, under his administration there, were entirely against the bent of his natural disposition, as much as they were contrary to the fundamental laws of the colony over which he presided; and that if he deserves blame, other people ought to be brought to account for his conduct. In short, it is too evident, that arbitrary rule is the determined principle of the present alarming era in this kingdom, and nothing but a steady perseverance in the people to vindicate their just rights, can prevent them from falling under the most abject slavery. (London Gazetteer, Nov. 21.)"

"Boston Massacre." *Virtualology A Virtual Education Project*. Web. 10 Dec. 2010.  
<<http://virtualology.com/revolutionarywarhall/boston-massacre.com/>>.

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## Document 5

### "Boston's Bloody Affray"

[...] The committee may have admitted that there was no evidence that the affair was the result of a premeditated "plot to massacre the inhabitants," but it did not hesitate to characterize it as a "massacre." Newspaper and broadside accounts, dated from the day of the committee report, called it "this horrid Massacre." Paul Revere's well-known and somewhat inaccurate colored engraving of the affair, which was labeled, "The Bloody Massacre," was issued on the same day.

The town meeting's committee, of which Samuel Adams was a member, then wrote a longer account, called "A Short Narrative of the Horrid Massacre," and submitted it a week later under the signatures of the formal heads of the committee, Bowdoin, Pemberton, and Warren. The meeting accepted it and had it printed, and copies of it were immediately sent to England in order to give an account of the events that would help shape the reporting of the event there. Calling it a "massacre," rather than a "riot," a "tragedy," or a "disturbance," as the soldiers and colonial officials were inclined to do, went far toward absolving the residents of Boston of blame for the incident and indicting public opinion against the soldiers. In addition, calling it a "massacre," rather than a "murder," suggested that it might have been organized, and not a spontaneously unfolding event."

- "Boston's Bloody Affray | Teachinghistory.org." *Teachinghistory.org*. Web. 10 Dec. 2010. <<http://teachinghistory.org/history-content/ask-a-historian/23472>>.

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**Document 6** [Paraphrasing is not original]

Deposition of William Wyat, March 7, 1770

***William Wyat provided the account below of the Boston Massacre just two days after the event. It was one of 96 such accounts collected by the town of Boston and printed for distribution in England as part of a pamphlet entitled "A Short Narrative of the Horrid Massacre in Boston Perpetrated...by Soldiers of the 29th Regiment.***

"I, William Wyat, of Salem, coaster, testify and say, that last Monday evening, being the fifth day of March current, I was in Boston, down at Treat's wharf, where my vessel was lying, and hearing the bells ring, supposed there was a fire in the town, whereupon I hastened up to the Town house, on the south side of it, where I saw an officer of the army lead out of the guard house there seven or eight soldiers of the army, and lead them down in seeming haste, to the Custom house on the north side of King street, where I followed them, and when the officer had got there with the men, he bid them face about. I stood just below them on the left wing, and the said officer ordered his men to load, which they did accordingly, with the utmost dispatch, then they remained about six minutes, with their firelocks rested and bayonets fixed, but not standing in exact order I observed a considerable number of young lads, and here and there a man amongst them, about the middle of the street, facing the soldiers, but not within ten or twelve feet distance from them ; I observed some of them, viz., the lads, &c., had sticks in their hands, laughing, shouting, huzzaing, and crying fire; but could not observe that any of them threw anything at the soldiers, or threatened any of them.

Then the said officer retired from before the soldiers and stepping behind them, towards the right wing, bid the soldiers fire; they not firing, he presently again bid 'em fire, they not yet firing, he stamped and said, " D[--] your bloods, fire, be the consequence what it will ;" then the second man on the left wing fired off his gun, then, after a very short pause, they fired one after another as quick as possible, beginning on the right wing; the last man's gun on the left wing flashed in the pan, then he primed again, and the people being withdrawn from before the soldiers, most of them further down the street, he turned his gun toward them and fired upon them. Immediately after the principal firing, I saw three of the people fall down in the street; presently after the last gun was fired off, the said officer, who had commanded the soldiers (as above) to fire, sprung before them, waving his sword or stick[...] And I remember as the said officer was going down with the soldiers towards the Custom house, a gentleman spoke to him and said, " Capt. Preston, for God's sake keep your men in order, and mind what you are about." And further I say not."

March 7, 1770. WILLIAM WYAT.

Source:

Originally published in "A Short Narrative of the Horrid Massacre in Boston Perpetrated in the Evening of the Fifth Day of March, 1770, by the Soldiers of the 29th Regiment, which with the 14th Regiment Were Then Quartered There..." (Boston, 1770); republished, with additional material, by John Doggett, Jr. (New York, 1849).

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## Document 7

Testimony of Matthew Murray, October 26, 1770

***Seven months after the protest and shootings known as the Boston Massacre, Captain Thomas Preston, who commanded the soldiers in King Street that evening, went on trial for murder. Matthew Murray served as a defense witness in the trial and was called by Preston's lawyers to give evidence they believed would help acquit their client. There were no formal court reporters at that time, and all that remains of Murray's testimony is an anonymous summary found among the papers of John Adams, one of Preston's lawyers.***

"Heard the Bells and ran out and heard what was in King street. I went in and got the handle of a Broom. Went to King Street. Saw no Soldiers. Went to Murrays Barracks. The Soldiers were gone. They bid me go home. Went into King Street, heard the Barbers boy say this is the man struck me with the breech of his Gun. The Centinel went to the steps and loaded. They dared him to fire. The Guard came down. I saw 'em load. Somebody spoke to the Captain and told him he had best withdraw none of the People would interrupt him. I stood next to the Grenadier. Saw a stick or piece of Ice strike him upon his right side. On which he instantly fired and I went off. I heard no order given. I stood within two yards of the Captain. He was in the front talking with a Person, I dont know who. I was looking at the Captain when the Gun was fired. The Soldier stood on the Captains right. I saw two or three Snow balls thrown at the Soldiers before the Gun was fired, but none after for I went off immediately. The Captain had a Sword in his hand. I know not whether he had a Surtout on but believe he had. I know Capt. Preston by sight. The Prisoner is the Man. A Woman crowded by and spoke to the second Soldier on the right. I think if the Captain had given orders anything loud I should have heard."

Source:

The original document is in the Public Record Office, London. The above version was taken from a scan of the original published in L. Kinvin Wroth and Hiller B. Zobel, eds., *The Legal Papers of John Adams*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 3: 69-70.

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# The Plain English Version

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*Documents 1, 2, and 4 are particularly difficult for young readers. They have been translated here into more modern and somewhat simpler form.*

## Document 1

On my way there, I saw some people all excited and heard them threatening the troops. A few minutes after I reached the guard, about 100 people passed by and went towards the custom house where the king's money is kept. They immediately surrounded the soldier posted there and threatened him with clubs and sticks. Someone standing by told me they were planning to kidnap and murder him. I immediately sent an officer and 12 men to protect the soldier and the king's money. I also rushed over in case in all the excitement the soldiers did something they would later regret.

The soldiers soon kept the people back using bayonets, but more and more people came. They slammed their clubs and sticks together and chanted insults at the troops. They dared them to fire. They used foul language and swearing. I tried my best to talk everyone down peacefully. It didn't work.

A bystander who was not so badly behaved asked me if the guns were loaded. I said yes. He asked me if I planned to order the men to fire. I said absolutely not! Just as I said that, a soldier got hit with a club and as he stumbled back, he fired without orders. I got hit in the arm so hard – if it were my head, I would have been killed!

Our lives were now in danger as the crazy mob advanced on us. They kept daring us to fire. Suddenly, three or four soldiers fired. The mob ran away scared, except for the three guys who were killed. When I asked them if they fired without orders, they said they heard the order to fire and thought it came from me.

## Document 2

Samuel Drowne says that around 9 pm on 5<sup>th</sup> March he was standing in his doorway in Cornhill and he saw around 14 or 15 soldiers coming from Murray's barracks. They were armed with daggers and swords and such. They came upon some of the citizens who were standing or walking. They beat up a few as they met them – all unarmed citizens. Samuel Drowne says he was beaten up as well!

This violent gang of soldiers walked up King street beating people up.

The outrageous behavior of the soldiers caused someone to ring the meeting house bell as if there were a fire. It brought out lots of people. A number of tough boys went over to surround and threaten the guard at the Custom house. Maybe they thought he was one of the rough soldiers in the gang beating people up? There was a lot of swearing and the boys started pelting the guard with snowballs. He threatened them with his bayonet and knocked hard at the door of the custom house to be let back in. A small group of seven or eight soldiers soon came to his rescue, led by Captain Preston, and they had guns and bayonets. They placed themselves in front of the Custom house to protect the guard and the custom house. They formed a half circle and then in a short time began to fire on the people.

They say Captain Preston ordered them to fire and to have repeated the order. One gun was fired first, then others one after another all on purpose until ten or twelve were fired. Eleven persons were killed or wounded.

#### Document 4

Piece of a letter to the Editor of a London newspaper in Dec. 1769 (a year before the Boston Massacre)

To the Editor:

The governor of Massachusetts Bay begins to say he's guilty and sorry for the acts of violence the soldiers under his command have committed in Boston under his command. He says it goes against his nature to be so cruel just as much as it goes against the colonial laws. He says other people are to blame for his actions. It seems sadly true that governors do whatever they want in this kingdom without regard to the law. People need to stand up for their rights or else become slaves!