

## Boston Massacre Lesson Plan

### Central Historical Questions:

*What happened in Boston on March 5, 1770? Who was responsible?*

#### Materials:

- Copies of Documents A and B
- Boston Massacre PowerPoint
- Copies of Boston Massacre Images Handout
- Copies of Guiding Questions

#### Plan of Instruction:

Note: Before this lesson, students should know about the conflict between colonists and British authorities leading up to the Boston Massacre.

1. Free-Write. Have students free-write in response to this prompt: What do you know about what was happening in Boston before March 5, 1770?
2. Share Out. Make sure to establish the following:
  - a. Boston had been the center of the conflict between colonists and the British government in the years following the Seven Years' War.
  - b. By 1770, the British had stationed more than 4,000 troops in Boston to maintain order. The population of Boston at the time was approximately 15,000.
  - c. Residents of Boston were upset by the presence of British soldiers, and there were frequently confrontations between British soldiers and colonists.
  - d. On February 22, 1770, an 11-year-old boy, Christopher Seider, was shot and killed by a British customs official during a protest. Bostonians were outraged and his death was widely publicized.
3. PowerPoint.
  - a. Slide 1: Title slide. *On March 5, 1770, there was a violent confrontation between British soldiers and colonists in Boston. British soldiers killed five colonists in an event that came to be known as the Boston Massacre. The events leading up to the Boston Massacre were chaotic, and there are many conflicting accounts of what took place.*
  - b. Slide 2: Central Historical Question. *Today we are going to be exploring a series of documents in order to answer these questions: What happened in Boston on March 5, 1770? Who was responsible?*

Note: At first, do **not** tell students who created the two images or when they were painted. If students ask about the artists or the dates of creation, tell them that those are excellent questions that will be addressed shortly.

- c. Slide 3: Image 1. In pairs, ask students to answer the questions from the Boston Massacre Images Handout for Image 1.

Share out. Students may note the following:

- i. Participants: The British soldiers are wearing matching red coats and are standing in a line. The American colonists appear to be well dressed, unarmed, and not in formation.
  - ii. Location: The battle appears to be taking place in the middle of a city. One of the buildings is labeled “Butcher’s Hall.” The image is titled “The Bloody Massacre perpetrated in King Street Boston on March 5th 1770 by a party of the 29th Regt.”
  - iii. Casualties: There are several colonists lying on the ground. It doesn’t look like any of the British soldiers have been wounded.
  - iv. Cause: The image does not provide evidence about what led to the violence.
- d. Slide 4: Image 2. *As historians, we never want to accept a single account as evidence of what happened in the past, So, let’s look at a second depiction of the event.*

In pairs, ask students to answer the questions from the Boston Massacre Images Handout for Image 2.

Share out. Students may note the following:

- i. Participants: The British soldiers are once again wearing matching uniforms and standing in a neat line. The American colonists once again seem to be less organized than the British and don’t have matching uniforms.
- ii. Location: The location seems to be the same as Image 1. The building seems to match a building from Image 1.
- iii. Actions of the British troops: The British are firing at the colonists.
- iv. Casualties: There are two colonists who appear to have been killed or wounded. Crispus Attucks is at the center of the image.
- v. Cause: The image does not provide evidence about what led to the violence.

Ask students: *Which image do you think presents a more trustworthy account of the Boston Massacre? What other information would you want to know about the images to better understand the Boston Massacre? What information would you want to help you determine who was responsible for the violence?*

Note: Hopefully, students will address the importance of knowing who made these paintings and when they were made.

- e. Slide 5: Image 1 & Image 2. Share with students that *Paul Revere created the first image, which he titled “Bloody Massacre in King Street.” Revere, a silversmith and engraver, was actively involved in efforts to resist British rule. He was a member of the Sons of Liberty and created engravings that sought to build opposition to the British. Revere began selling copies of “Bloody Massacre” three weeks after the event. He based it on an engraving by Henry Pelham, who was a Loyalist. Pelham was never credited for his work.*

*The second image comes from William Nell’s book The Colored Patriots of The American Revolution. The book was published in 1855. It was one of the earliest and most comprehensive books about African American history. Nell was an African American abolitionist from Massachusetts. He wrote for William Lloyd Garrison’s abolitionist newspaper The Liberator and Frederick Douglass’s The North Star. He also worked to end segregation in Massachusetts’s public schools. In 1851, he lobbied the Massachusetts legislature to create a monument honoring Crispus Attucks. In 1888, after Nell’s death, Boston installed a large monument commemorating the Boston Massacre and Attucks was featured prominently.*

- i. In pairs, ask students to discuss whether this information influences their evaluation of these documents.
- ii. Share out. Students may note the following:
  - 1. Given his involvement with the Sons of Liberty, it seems possible that Paul Revere intended to make the British look bad with his engraving.
  - 2. Revere was in Boston at the time and could have spoken with people involved in the event.
  - 3. Nell may have centered Crispus Attucks because he was involved in efforts to commemorate Attucks’s role in the American Revolution.
  - 4. Although Nell was not alive at the time of the event, he could have consulted other accounts of the event.

Note: Make sure to highlight how each image might be considered both trustworthy and untrustworthy. Ultimately, as historians, we need to examine other types of evidence to address the Central Historical Questions of what happened in Boston on March 5, 1770, and who was responsible.

- 4. Explain to students that to continue investigating what happened in Boston and who was responsible for the violence, they will now analyze two documents from people who witnessed the event.
- 5. Pass out Document A and the Guiding Questions.

- a. Explain to students that before they read the document, they are going to *source* it. Historians source documents to know who made them, when, and for what purposes.
  - b. Have students answer the Sourcing Questions. Share out responses. Students may note the following:
    - i. Preston was an officer in the British army.
    - ii. Given that Preston was in jail. Since there was a possibility that charges could be brought against him or that he could lose his job, we might suspect that he claimed others were responsible for the violence.
    - iii. He may have been trying to shape public opinion about who was responsible for what happened.
  - c. In pairs, students read the document and answer the rest of the Guiding Questions. Share out. Students may note the following:
    - i. Preston said that he and his men encountered a very hostile crowd and they feared for their lives.
    - ii. According to Preston, the crowd was taunting his men to fire.
    - iii. According to Preston, he and his men were being attacked when the first shot was fired.
    - iv. According to Preston, he never told his men to fire, and someone else yelled out the order to fire.
6. Pass out Document B.
- a. Individually, students answer the Sourcing Questions. Share out responses. Students may note the following:
    - i. Drowne was a resident of Boston who witnessed the Boston Massacre.
    - ii. The document includes testimony that was given under oath. However, it is important to note that the testimony was gathered as part of an effort by the residents of Boston to shape the narrative about what happened. This might have influenced what residents said in their testimony.
    - iii. It seems as though residents of Boston collected sworn testimony in part to make it seem as though the British soldiers were solely responsible for what happened.

Note: If you have students read Drowne's full testimony, they may note that Drowne claims that masked individuals shot at the crowd from the Custom House. Other witnesses made similar claims. Eric Hinderaker's *Boston's Massacre* (2017, pp. 214-220) provides more details about these claims and whether they are believable.

- b. In pairs, students read the document and answer the rest of the Guiding Questions. Share out. Students may note the following:
  - i. According to Drowne, the British soldiers were the aggressors and hardly any of the residents of Boston were armed.

- ii. According to Drowne, most of the crowd had left by the time the shots were fired.
  - iii. According to Drowne, Preston insisted that his men fire on the crowd.
7. Final Discussion:
- a. What are the similarities and differences between these documents?
  - b. Can we answer the Central Historical Question?
  - c. Which document do you think provides a more trustworthy account of what happened at the Boston Massacre?
  - d. What other types of documents might you want to examine to further study what happened at the Boston Massacre?
  - e. Why might it not be possible to know exactly what happened?
8. Debrief: It may be helpful to tell students about the subsequent trials of the British soldiers. There were two separate trials: Preston was tried by himself, and eight of the soldiers were tried together. John Adams, a leading Patriot, served as a lawyer for the British soldiers. Preston was acquitted of all charges. Six of the eight soldiers were acquitted. Two of the soldiers were convicted of manslaughter for firing into the crowd. Normally the punishment for a manslaughter conviction was death, but first-time offenders were allowed to “plead clergy” and not receive punishment. However, individuals were only allowed to “plead clergy” once and were branded on the thumb to make sure that they only used the privilege once.
- 

## Documents

### Image 1

Revere, Paul. The bloody massacre perpetrated in King Street Boston on March 5<sup>th</sup> 1770 by a party of the 29<sup>th</sup> Regt. 1770. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. Retrieved from <https://www.loc.gov/item/2008661777>

### Image 2

Nell, William. Crispus Attucks, the first martyr of the American Revolution, King Street, Boston, March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1770. 1855. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division. Retrieved from <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47db-e3a9-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99> and <https://www.loc.gov/item/cph26998/>

### Document A

Preston, Thomas. "The Case of Capt. Preston of the 29th Regiment." *Public Advertiser* (London), April 28, 1770. Retrieved from <https://archive.org/details/publicationsofco07colo>

Document B

Drowne, Samuel. "Sworn Testimony." In *History of the Boston Massacre*, 90-91. Albany, NY: Joel Munsell, 1980. Retrieved from [http://www.loc.gov/law/help/rare-books/john\\_adams.php](http://www.loc.gov/law/help/rare-books/john_adams.php)

This lesson was originally developed by the Stanford History Education Group.