

The Legacy of John Adams

The Boston Massacre

Long before the American Revolution began, there was building resentment toward the British over taxation of commonly imported products, including paper, glass and tea. The colonists actively resisted what they considered to be these unfair taxes, so British troops were moved into Boston to maintain order and enforce British rule.

After 18 months of tension between the colonists and soldiers, on March 5, 1770, British soldiers fired into a crowd of protesters near the Customs House on



Paul Revere's engraving of the Boston Massacre

King Street (now State Street) in Boston. Five colonists died. The term *massacre* quickly became associated with the event. Some reports claimed the soldiers were provoked with hurled insults, snowballs, and other objects. Others argued that the soldiers violently overreacted. The soldiers and their commander, Captain Thomas Preston, were arrested and indicted for murder.

Although a prominent leader in the American colonial resistance, John Adams agreed to defend these men. Adams believed He argued the soldiers had fired in self-defense and that the protesters were an unruly mob. The jury acquitted six of the soldiers. Because the other two had fired their weapons, they were found guilty of manslaughter and punished by having their thumbs branded.

Adams believed his defense during the Boston Massacre trials was, "... one of the best Pieces of Service I ever rendered my Country." Adams represented the British soldiers, reviled by many in the colonies, demonstrating his respect for the rule of law and the rights of the accused, even when the accused were extremely unpopular.

Newspaper Activities:

- ◆ The public protests before the Boston Massacre are similar to recent events and demonstrations by people within the United States and around the world. Look through the newspaper (in-print or electronically) for examples of people protesting. Compare and contrast these current protesters with the Boston colonists and the actions/reactions of the British soldiers. Discuss what you've found as a class. What role, if any, do you think the free press has in these demonstrations?
- ◆ In the news, identify situations when lawyers accepted cases that involve unpopular defendants.

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The Boston Massacre: 1770	Modern Protests Today

Follow Up: Firm British control and the colonists' reaction to it, ultimately lead to the American Revolution and beginning of a new nation. What do you think might be the long term effects of protests going on today?

Bonus Activity: Look for stories that involve prisoners in Guantanamo and legal actions involving the handling of their cases. How do their cases compare with other cases routinely brought before American courts?