

The Boston Massacre: Deadly squabble was not quite as the propaganda portrayed it

By [Brian MacQuarrie](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 4, 2020, 6:36 p.m.



An array of cobblestones near the Old State House commemorates the five men killed in the Boston Massacre on March 5, 1770. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Eight British soldiers and their captain, pelted with ice and oyster shells, scrambled to form a defensive semicircle on a late-winter night as an angry, cudgel-wielding crowd spat on the troops and dared them to fire.

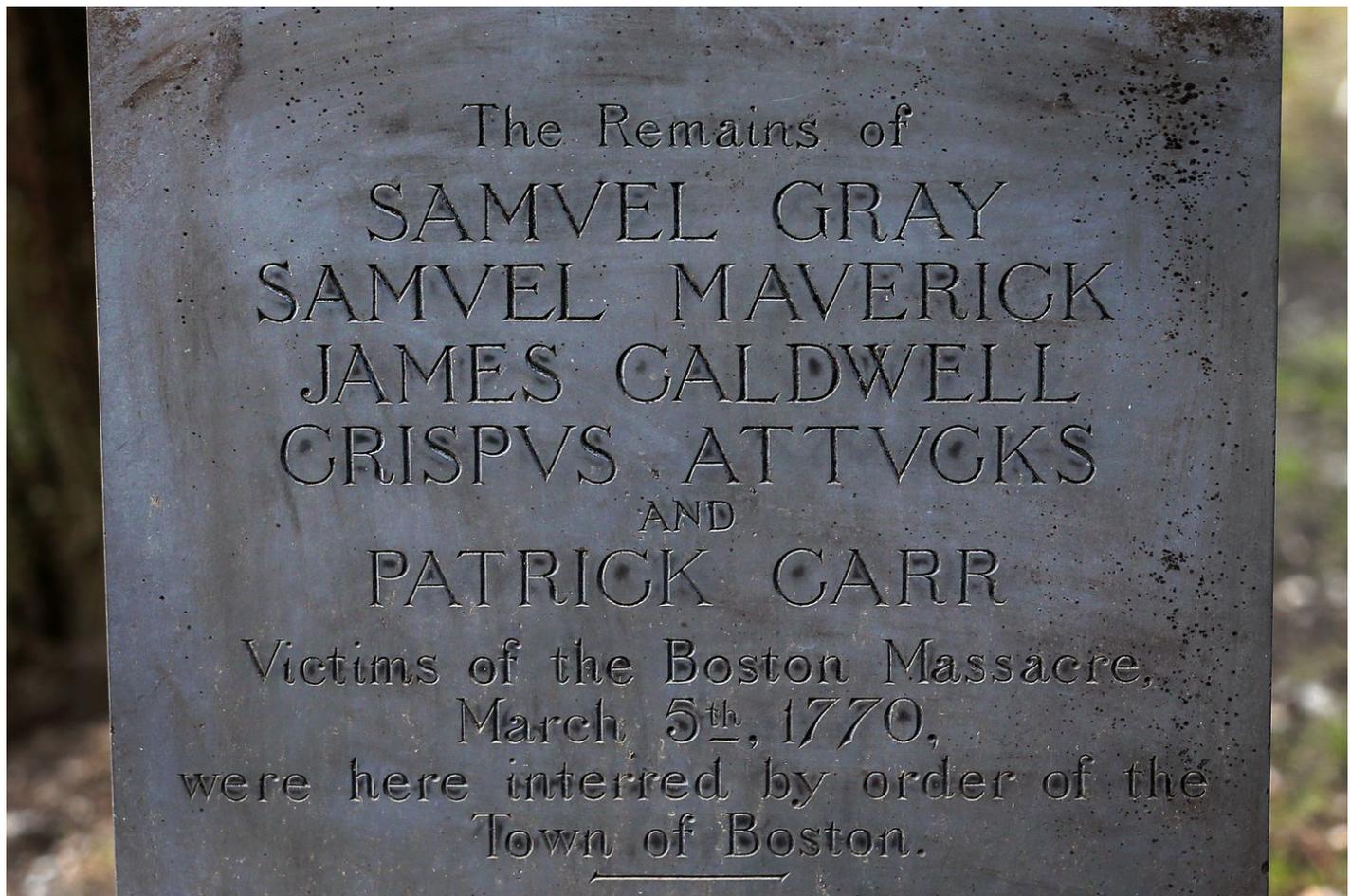
“Kill them!” the crowd cried, pressing toward the soldiers. “Why don’t you fire?” they shouted derisively.

And fire they did, 250 years ago Thursday, into a mass of civilians just yards from the Old State House of today. Five civilians would die, three were wounded, and the bloody chaos that was the Boston Massacre had suddenly quickened the pace toward revolution.

But this was not the coldblooded slaughter of legend, a massacre of Bostonian strangers by faceless troops led by Captain Thomas Preston. When the two sides faced off, they saw drinking companions, fellow tenants, and even in-laws sprinkled in on the other side.

It was a deadly confrontation between familiar faces. Little would ever be the same again in Boston, a cramped town of 15,000 people packed into a single square mile

“When they’re looking at each other, they’re not looking at guys with guns and guys with sticks. They’re saying, ‘These are my neighbors,’ ” said Serena Zabin, a Carleton College history professor who explored their relationships in a recently published book.



This tombstone in Granary Burial Ground bears the names of the five men killed in the Boston Massacre on March 5, 1770. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Zabin found church records of 43 marriages between local women and soldiers among four regiments of more than 2,000 troops deployed to Boston in 1768. That's a conservative figure, she stressed, because the number does not include marriages conducted by regimental chaplains and others.

The British soldiers of the 29th Regiment, the unit that fired the fatal shots, had been stationed in Boston for 17 months on March 5, 1770. They walked the narrow streets, they knew the taverns and the shops, and many of those who hadn't brought their wives and children were courting Boston women.

"It's not the case that the soldiers are this distant force. They're not always in uniform, they're not paid very well, and they're doing all the kinds of jobs off-duty that you would normally see in town," added Robert Allison, a Suffolk University professor who specializes in early American and Revolutionary history.

“Soldiers are marrying local women, having affairs with local women, and their children know each other,” Allison said.

That sense of interwoven bonds is nowhere to be found in Paul Revere’s intentionally hyped engraving of the bloodshed. There, a rank of disciplined soldiers fires a coordinated volley into a crowd of respectably dressed Bostonians, including a woman. None of them in Revere’s picture are carrying cudgels or other weapons.



“We do remember it the way Samuel Adams wanted us to remember it, and it’s really not,” Suffolk history professor Robert Allison said of the Boston Massacre. “As historians, it gives us a lot of work to do.” DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

A poem on the engraving describes the troops this way: "While faithless Preston and his savage bands, with murd'rous rancor stretch their bloody hands. Like fierce barbarians grinning o'er their prey, approve the carnage, and enjoy the day."

“It’s a very powerful piece of propaganda,” said Zabin, whose book is titled “The Boston Massacre: A Family History.”

The exact details of what happened that night will never be known. But testimony during the trial of the soldiers, who were defended by future president John Adams, showed that the crowd — dockworkers, sailors, boys, and others — was itching for a fight after weeks of bad blood.

During that buildup, an 11-year-old boy had been fatally shot by a customs worker loyal to the crown. Ropeworkers scuffled with soldiers. And posters warned Bostonians to stay off the streets, Allison said.

The warnings didn’t matter to the crowd that gathered outside Faneuil Hall the evening of March 5. They marched to a warehouse in Brattle Square, near the current Government Center MBTA station, that the British had converted to a barracks, Allison said.

British officers ordered the soldiers to stay inside to avoid a fight, Allison said. As a result, the crowd streamed through an alley that still exists — the narrow walkway between the Sears Block and veterans shelter on Court Street — and proceeded toward the custom house that was located on today’s State Street.

There, a harassed sentry called for backup, and the arrival of those reinforcements ratcheted up the belligerence, fear, and confusion. Eventually, a few hundred people converged on the scene.

The soldiers came from a regiment of approximately 500 men, many of them Scots-Irish who had arrived in Boston in 1768 following unrest over new tariffs imposed on the American colonies. They had been dispatched from Halifax, Nova Scotia, a tiny settlement carved from the fringes of the empire that offered enlisted men little to do amid miserable weather.

For the privates, Boston was a godsend. But for the officers, the posting could be tense and complicated.

"The officers are not at all happy about being deployed to Boston. They're being asked to do urban policing," Zabin said. "That can kind of kill an officer's career, and they're all asking for permission for home leave."

The shootings upended what had been an integrated dynamic between Boston and the military. Samuel Adams wanted the soldiers hanged. Ten thousand people attended the funeral procession to the Granary Burying Ground, Allison said. And although marriages continued between soldiers and townspeople, a die had been cast.

Six soldiers and Preston, separately, were acquitted of murder. Two others were convicted of manslaughter — and branded on the hand as punishment — in a remarkable trial that featured Adams's impassioned plea for dispassionate attention to the law.

The 29th Regiment was pulled out of Boston by the end of April and redeployed to New Jersey. Another regiment, the 14th, was re-stationed out of town at Castle Island. The two other regiments that arrived in 1768 had left the previous year.

The deaths proved to be traumatizing and galvanizing — much like the Boston Marathon bombings in 2013 — said Nathaniel Sheidley, president of Revolutionary Spaces, a new partnership that combined management of the Old State House and Old South Meeting House.

"The world you lived in had just ended, and you have no idea what the world will look like tomorrow," said Sheidley, whose office near the Old State House overlooks the massacre site.

"What would it have felt like when every single person in Boston knew someone who was there that night, and also probably knew someone who was dying in the street and someone who was pulling the trigger?" he asked.

“How would you feel torn by that?”

The lasting myth of the Boston Massacre — a brutal murder by British soldiers of five completely innocent civilians — has endured in the popular imagination.

“We do remember it the way Samuel Adams wanted us to remember it, and it’s really not,” Allison said. “As historians, it gives us a lot of work to do.”

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