



An event which came to be known as “The Boston Massacre” occurred on the 5th of March, 1770. It happened on King Street, in Boston, and involved soldiers of “His Majesty’s 29th Regiment of Foot” who fired into a gathered crowd.

How did the ruckus begin? Over an accusation of non-payment for a wig which a British officer (Captain John Goldfinch) had purchased from a local merchant.

Edward Garrick, the wig-maker's apprentice, saw Goldfinch walking down King Street and called out:

*There goes the fellow who hath not paid my master for dressing his hair.*

One thing led to another, and soon an angry mob was gathering. People were already angry that so many Redcoats were in Boston.

As the mob taunted the soldiers, they fired their weapons (without orders from their Captain). Five Colonials died.

Two lead bullets, apparently involved in the event, were bequeathed to the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1940. Before that time, their provenance is unclear.

The lead balls are depicted in this image.

Experts believe that the .75-caliber soft lead ball was fired from a Brown Bess musket. If someone were injured with such a lead ball, awful injuries could result.

If the ball struck bone, it could shatter "and cause the lead to flatten and spread, tearing tissue as it passed through." (See [page 177](#) of *The Boston Massacre: A History with Documents* by Neil L. York.)

Some of the Regiment’s soldiers and their Captain, Thomas Preston, were tried for allegedly murdering five people during the ruckus: Crispus Attucks, Samuel Gray and James Caldwell (who died at the scene) together with Samuel Maverick and Patrick Carr (who died later, as a result of their injuries).

All five victims are buried at the Granary Burying Ground in Boston

John Adams, famous for his role in drafting the Declaration of Independence and as America’s second President, defended the soldiers and their Captain.

After winning an acquittal for Preston, Adams started the soldiers’ trial on November 27, 1770. That case also resulted in a not-guilty verdict (for four of the defendants) and a charge of manslaughter (for two others) on December 14th (the following month).

Despite his personal feelings about the Redcoats’ presence in Massachusetts, Adams vigorously defended his clients. His impassioned speech during the soldiers’ trial is memorable in many respects.

Here are some of the points he made during [his final argument](#):

*Gentlemen of the jury, as you are under oath to determine this cause by law and evidence; clubs they had not, and they could not defend themselves with their bayonets against so many people; it was in the power of the sailors to kill one half or the whole of the party, if they had been so disposed; what had the soldiers to expect, when twelve persons armed with clubs, (sailors too, between whom and soldiers, there is such an antipathy, that they fight as naturally when they meet, as the elephant and Rhinoceros) were daring enough, even at the time when they were loading their guns, to come up with their clubs, and smite on their guns; what bad eight soldiers to expect from such a set of people?*

*Would it have been a prudent resolution in them, or in any body in their situation, to have stood still, to see if the sailors would knock their brains out, or not? Had they not all the reason in the world to think, that as they had done so much, they would proceed farther?*

*... When the multitude was shouting and huzzaing, and threatening life, the bells all ringing, the mob whistle screaming and rending like an Indian yell, the people from all quarters throwing every species of rubbish they could pick up in the street, and some who were quite on the other side of the street throwing clubs at the whole party, Montgomery in particular, smote with a club and knocked down, and as soon as he could rise and take up his firelock, another club from a far struck his breast or shoulder, what could he do?*

*Do you expect he should behave like a Stoick Philosopher lost in Apathy? Patient as Epictatus while his master was breaking his legs with a cudgel? It is impossible you should find him guilty of murder. You must suppose him divested of all human passions, if you don't think him at the least provoked, thrown off his guard, and into the furor brevis, by such treatment as this.*

*... Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence: nor is the law less stable than the fact; if an assault was made to endanger their lives, the law is clear, they had a right to kill in their own defence; if it was not so severe as to endanger their lives, yet if they were assaulted at all, struck and abused by blows of any sort, by snow-balls, oyster-shells, cinders, clubs, or sticks of any kind; this was a provocation, for which the law reduces the offence of killing, down to manslaughter, in consideration of those passions in our nature, which cannot be eradicated.*

*To your candour and justice I submit the prisoners and their cause.*

The sentence imposed on the two soldiers found guilty of manslaughter? Branding .. on their right thumbs (after they proved they could read).

This image depicts some of the bullets which were fired during the "Boston Massacre." They are owned by the Massachusetts Historical Society and are on-loan to the Hoover Presidential Library and Museum.

Credits:

[Image online](#), courtesy Hoover Presidential Library and Museum.

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