

What Happened at the Boston Massacre?

ESSAY DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How can reading or viewing primary sources from different perspectives change your view of an event?
2. Why is it so difficult to know exactly what happened on the night of the Boston Massacre?
3. Why is the Boston Massacre important? Is it important because of the details surrounding the event or because of how Patriot leaders portrayed the event at the time? Please explain your answer.

1. How can reading or viewing primary sources from different perspectives change your view of an event?

Viewing primary sources from just one side of an event (for example, only reading the accounts of Patriots or of Loyalists) can give a skewed perspective of what happened based on that perspective. The more viewpoints and accounts we read, the less likely we are to get a skewed or one-sided version of the past.

2. Why is it so difficult to know exactly what happened on the night of the Boston Massacre?

It is so difficult to know what happened on the night of the Boston Massacre for many reasons, including:

- The accounts differ widely on what happened.
- The people who were there might have seen different things, or had a hard time seeing in the dark and in the crowd.
- People who were there might have purposely or accidentally reported their experience through a biased lens. For example, someone who wanted the British soldiers to be punished might have seen colonists throwing sticks, but might have kept that piece of information to themselves to make the soldiers look worse.
- Historians already have a hard time knowing exactly what happened in the past because we have limited evidence to use in figuring out what happened. In the case of the Boston Massacre, we have limited testimonies to use to piece it together.

3. Why is the Boston Massacre important? Is it important because of the details surrounding the event or because of how Patriot leaders portrayed the event at the time? Please explain your answer.

Answers will vary. Students should support their answer with historical evidence, not an opinion. For example, students might argue that the Paul Revere print made the Boston Massacre more



important because it showed one interpretation of the event that angered people in other colonies and made them sympathetic toward the Patriot cause. Students thinking about the larger influence of the Boston Massacre and how it was portrayed by Patriots might also think about how the Boston Massacre set the stage for the war to break out five years later with the battles of Lexington and Concord in April 1775. John Adams wrote that the Revolution occurred in the “hearts and minds of the people.” While in March 1770, the “people” were not ready to rebel against the King and mother country, the Boston Massacre was one event that helped shift their “hearts and minds” away from British rule.

INTERACTIVE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Soldiers: The soldiers in the image are in a straight line, firing their muskets in unison. How does that compare with the description above? Why would Revere show the soldiers this way? In the account above, the soldiers are described as being in a defensive semi-circle. The change depicted in the image to show soldiers in a firing line makes the soldiers look more aggressive as they fire in unison. In this depiction, the change may intend to make the event look like, as Revere’s print calls it, a “massacre.”

Preston: In the image, one soldier stands behind the other soldiers with his sword up. This is Captain Thomas Preston ordering his men to fire. Why do you think Revere showed this, even though it is unclear whether Preston gave the order to fire?

This depiction, like the soldiers’ firing line, makes the Boston Massacre seem like something that was purposeful and intentional, rather than an accident. Revere might have genuinely thought Preston gave the order to fire, or he might have portrayed it that way to leave no doubt in people’s mind that the soldiers have purposely fired into the crowd on Preston’s orders.

The crowd: Revere’s print shows a crowd of well-dressed colonists standing away from the soldiers. How does that compare with who was in the crowd and what they were doing? Why did Revere show the crowd this way?

Revere showed a crowd of wealthy colonists who were peacefully gathered. They aren’t closing in on the soldiers or throwing objects. This makes it seem like the soldiers fired on them for no reason.

Butcher’s Hall: The sign above the “Custom House” says “Butchers Hall.” There was no Butcher’s Hall above the Custom House in colonial Boston. Think about where the sign is located. What do you think the purpose of the sign is in the image?

Some historians believe that Revere placed the sign above the soldiers to label them “butchers,” inferring that the soldiers have butchered British subjects in America.



Dog: Revere's engraving includes a small dog front and center. The dog stands calmly facing the soldiers. Historians think the dog could mean different things: some say it is a symbol of loyalty, showing that British soldiers are firing on loyal British subjects. Some historians think the dog is a reference to the colonists being treated like dogs. What do you think?

Answers will vary.

Crispus Attucks: Who is depicted here in the image? Why is he important?

Crispus Attucks is shown here in the image. By many accounts, Attucks was the first person to die in the Boston Massacre. He was a man of African and Native American descent who grew up in Massachusetts and eventually became a sailor, possibly after escaping slavery. His life as a sailor brought him to Boston in 1770. Historians don't know how he ended up in the conflict in front of the Custom House in March 1770, but later generations have honored his sacrifice in the name of liberty.

The woman: There's a woman in the image who looks distraught. Is there evidence that any women were present at the Boston Massacre? What is that evidence?

Historians don't know for sure who the woman in the engraving is meant to be. She could be Jane Whitehouse, who witnessed the shooting and gave testimony in the court case. She also could have been inserted to show the grief of a mother whose son was killed to heighten the dramatic effect of the image. Without knowing what Revere was thinking, we can only make our best guess.

Gun in Butcher's Hall window: Look closely and you can see that there is a gun pointing out of the second story window behind the soldiers. There is little evidence that a person was shooting a gun from inside the building that night. Why do you think the image shows a gun in the window?

The gun is another element of the image that suggests the Boston Massacre was purposefully planned, since someone would have to have time to go into the building or, even more sinister, been waiting there beforehand.

"The Bloody Massacre" Image Title: Paul Revere made the title of this image "The Bloody Massacre," although an earlier version of the image had the title "The fruits of arbitrary power, or the Boston Massacre." What is the difference between these two titles? Why do you think Revere used the chosen title?

The title "Bloody Massacre" certainly matches the image itself, which shows soldiers offensively firing into a crowd of peaceful subjects. Revere's title cut out the phrase "the Fruits of Arbitrary power," which isn't as incendiary. The title leaves no question as to how viewers are supposed to interpret what they are seeing: a massacre.

