

Lesson 5: The Boston Massacre

Historical Career Assumed

- Lawyer

Historical Skills Practiced

- *Perspective taking*
- *Developing a well-organized argument*

Lesson Overview

In this lesson, students will assume the role of a lawyer and either have to defend the American colonists or the British military for the Boston Massacre event. Students will read and look at images of various primary sources both in favor of the colonists and in favor of the British military to answer corresponding questions related to each document. Students will then be assigned to defend one of the two participants in the Boston Massacre in groups of three to develop an argument to acquit the other group. Students will write an opening statement with their group using evidence and reasoning to support their claims and share it in court with the judge. You will act as the judge and each group of lawyers must present their case to you and answer your clarifying questions after they give their opening statement.

Students will learn to develop a well-organized argument through this lesson and use their skills in primary source analysis to interpret the various meanings in the sources to defend their argument.

Concept Questions:

- What was the American colonists' view of events and what happened during the Boston Massacre?
- What was the British commander's view of the events and how did it differ from the colonists' view of events?

Topical Essential Questions:

- Why do people who experience the same event have different views of what happened?
- How did Paul Revere's engraving of the Boston Massacre influence the colonists' reaction to the event?

Overarching Essential Question:

- What are the causes of the American Revolution?

Learning Objectives:

- Students will be able to develop a claim about the Boston Massacre using evidence from their reading to support the American colonists or the British military.
- Students will be able to explain their claim in front of the class and respond to questions from the judge.

Instructional Plan

Do Now.

What was happening in the American colonies before March 5, 1770?

After students respond to the Do Now in their almanacs, have them share their responses with the person sitting next to them. While sharing, their partner should be actively listening to their responses, so they can support, extend, or challenge their thoughts. After students share in partners, call on a few students to share with the whole class to review and develop a timeline of what we have learned so far, and how what we learned relates to the potential causes of the American Revolution.

Lesson Introduction.

Have students follow along with the next short introduction and write down key points in their almanacs.

Share with students that while there were many raised tensions within the American colonies against the British, the place where there was the highest tension was Boston, Massachusetts. Explain that Boston was the starting ground for many rebellions and protest groups known as “The Sons of Liberty” and “The Daughters of Liberty.” Share that we will go more in depth about who these groups were and what they protested in later lessons, but for now they should know that Boston was a hotbed of political unrest. Boston had about 16,000 people in it during the early 1770s, and there were 2,000 British soldiers occupied there. That means that for every 8 people, there was 1 soldier to keep them in line. This angered many Bostonians who claimed that they were losing their freedoms. When the Stamp Act and Townshend Acts were enforced, the Bostonians rebelled and coined the cry, “No taxation without representation.” There were many arguments between angry Bostonians and British soldiers as well as with angry Bostonians and Bostonians who were loyal to the British, these people were called loyalists. Some Bostonians often vandalized stores selling British goods and refused to shop at stores that were owned by loyalists.

The Boston Massacre: What Happened?

Explain that while these tensions were being raised in Boston and while there were many feelings of injustice brought on by the angry Bostonians, on March 5, 1770, all of those tensions culminated into one event. No one is exactly sure what happened on that evening, because the reports from both of the sides are not consistent with each other. But generally speaking, on March 5, 1770 there was a soldier named Private Hugh White who was guarding the King’s money in downtown Boston. A few angry Bostonians joined him, and it is claimed that they threatened violence against the British soldier. At some point, Private White struck a colonist with his bayonet which made the colonists respond by throwing ice, rocks, and snowballs at him. Private White called other soldiers to try get reinforcements to attempt to prevent a riot, and when more soldiers came, more colonists came too. While some colonists pleaded with soldiers to hold their gunfire, other colonists shouted threats of violence. As the threats and violence escalated from both sides, a British soldier, either intentionally or unintentionally, shot his gun which caused other soldiers to then open fire, which killed 5 Bostonian colonists. All of the British soldiers were put in jail within a couple hours. A British soldier wrote his side of the story in his jail cell, while leaders in the Sons of Liberty, such as John Hancock and Samuel

Adams, wrote their sides and pushed colonists to continue fighting the British. Eventually, all of the British soldiers were found not guilty except for two, who received minor punishments.

The Boston Massacre in current events.

Ask students to talk with the person sitting next to them to think about some examples in our current events where people who experienced the same event, such as during protest, have different views of what happened. Why does this happen?

Have students share and discuss with the whole class comparing the Boston Massacre to current events.

Boston Massacre Engraving by Paul Revere:

Have students look at the engraving of the Boston Massacre by Paul Revere. Ask students to talk in pairs to source and contextualize it, and then respond to the following questions:

- What is the subject of the engraving?
- What do you notice about the British soldiers in the image?
- What do you notice about the colonists in the image?
- What do you think the message of this image is?



After students share in partners, have them come together to discuss as a whole class. Explain that Paul Revere, a famous member of the Sons of Liberty painted this engraving from his perspective of the Boston Massacre. This painting depicts the British as instigating the fight with brutality and violence while the Bostonians look like the victims.

- Ask students if they think this might be a biased painting?
- What could another perspective of the painting be?

Have students flip to the Historical Skills section of their almanac.

Explain to students that today they will work in groups of three and act as lawyers to defend either the British soldiers or the American colonists. Share that lawyers practice law to defend or prosecute people in court. After the students write this, explain that they will look at primary sources from either the side of the British or from the side of the colonists to develop their

arguments.

Have students flip to the Historical Skills section of their almanac.

Share that students will take part in the skill of “perspective taking” by looking at different perspectives of the same event, the Boston Massacre. Have students write in the historical skills section of their almanac that perspective taking is when you look beyond your own point of view to try to consider how someone else might feel. Explain that students will take part in perspective taking by looking at primary sources of either the British perspective or the colonists’ perspective to try to understand how each of the sides felt during the Boston Massacre.

Perspective Taking Activity

The primary sources will already be in their almanac, so when you assign groups just inform students which primary source they will be responsible for reading and answering questions on prior to writing their opening statement. Half the class will read the British perspective while the other half will read the colonist perspective. Have students work in their groups of three to source and contextualize their primary sources. In this investigation, students will also answer corresponding questions to provide them with supports to understand the purposes of each source. After this, they will work together to write a paragraph long opening statement to defend their “client” (the British or the colonists) and then will present their statement to the judge (you) and the jury (the class) and will be responsible for responding to the court’s questions.

Opening statement share out.

After groups finish writing their opening statement, have each group of lawyers share their statement with the court. After they share their statement, they will be responsible for answering questions from both the judge and the jury. Every group is responsible for asking at least one question for all the share outs.

Exit slip.

Why do you think the Boston Massacre was a rallying cause that started the American Revolution?

Document A: Thomas Preston (Modified)

Captain Thomas Preston was an officer in the British army. While in jail, he wrote this narrative. A British tax collector brought this account to London on a ship that left Boston on March 16, 1770. The account was then re-printed in Boston newspapers in June 1770 after copies of the London newspaper were brought to Boston.

At about 9 some of the guards informed me that people were gathering to attack the troops. On my way there, I heard the crowd threaten the troops. About 100 people went towards the Custom House where the king's money is kept. They immediately surrounded the soldier there and threatened him. I was told that they were going to carry off the soldier and probably murder him. I immediately sent an officer and 12 men to protect both the soldier and the king's money. I followed them to prevent, if possible, any problems. I feared that the officer and soldiers might be **provoked** by the insults of the rioters. I told the troops to go out without loading their weapons and I never gave orders to load them.

The mob still increased, striking their clubs together, and calling out, "Come on you rascals, you bloody backs, you lobster scoundrels, fire if you dare." At this time I was between the soldiers and the mob, trying to **persuade** them to leave peacefully. Someone asked me if I was going to order the men to fire. I answered no, saying that I was in front of the guns, and would be shot if they fired. While I was speaking, one of the soldiers was hit with a stick, stepped a little to one side, and instantly fired. When I turned to ask him why he fired without orders, I was struck with a club on my arm.

The soldiers were attacked by a great number of heavy clubs and snowballs were thrown at them. All our lives were in danger. At the same time, someone from behind called out, "**Damn your bloods** — why don't you fire?" Instantly three or four of the soldiers fired and then three more fired in the same confusion. The mob then ran away, except three unhappy men who instantly died. When I asked the soldiers why they fired without orders, they said they heard the word fire and thought it came from me. This might be the case as many of the mob called out fire, but I told the men that I gave no such order. My words were, don't fire, stop your firing.

Source: *The Case of Capt. Preston of the 29th Regiment*, Public Advertiser (London), April 28, 1770

Vocabulary

provoke: to make someone angry

persuade: to convince someone to do something

damn your bloods: an insult in the 18th century

Document B: Samuel Drowne (Modified)

On March 12, 1770, Boston residents held a town meeting, which was how local government decisions were made. At the meeting, the colonists appointed a committee to produce an account of what happened March 5th to send to officials in London because they wanted to influence the way the events of March 5th were portrayed. Drowne was one of 96 residents of Boston to give sworn testimony to justices of the peace about what happened between the British soldiers and residents of Boston. These accounts were taken by ship to London on April 1, 1770.

Samuel Drowne of Boston, of lawful age, testified that about nine o'clock of the evening of the fifth day of March he saw about 14 or 15 soldiers of the 29th regiment, some were armed with swords or bayonets, others with clubs or fire-shovels. They came upon the people of the town and abused some and violently assaulted others. Most of the townspeople did not even have a stick in their hands to defend themselves.

Most of the soldiers went to King Street. Drowne followed them, and saw them fighting with people there. Drowne thought that there were no more than a dozen people there. When the soldiers arrived, most of the people left. Some of them were first assaulted by the soldiers. Then the soldiers went towards the main guard house. At the same time, five soldiers and a corporal armed with guns came out of the guard house. By this time, there were two hundred people on King Street.

Drowne saw Captain Preston, whom he knew well, with a number of soldiers armed with guns near the Custom House. Drowne believed that most of the crowd left after seeing the armed soldiers. No more than twenty or thirty remained on King Street. Those who remained were mostly sailors and other persons who were poorly dressed.

Several of them dared the soldiers to fire. Drowne then heard Capt. Preston say to the soldiers, "Damn your bloods! Why don't you fire?" The soldiers did not listen and Preston immediately said "Fire." The soldiers fired randomly.

Source: *Summary of the sworn testimony of Samuel Drowne, March 16, 1770.*

Lesson sources

<https://sheg.stanford.edu/history-lessons/boston-massacre>