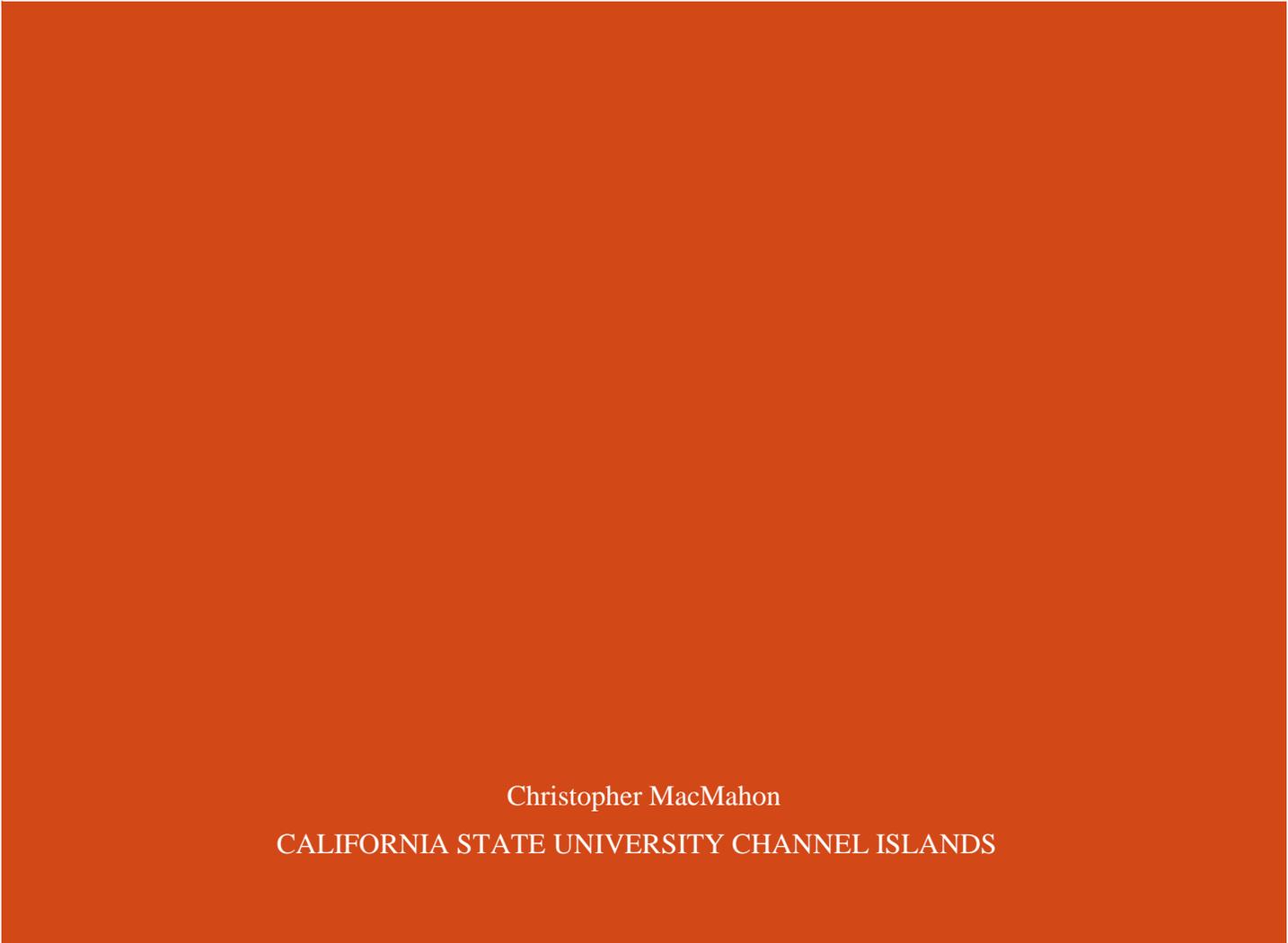




# THE BOSTON MASSACRE AND THE BATTLE FOR PUBLIC OPINION

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On the evening of March 5, 1770 alarm bells rang out in the city of Boston. An unruly mob armed with clubs and other weapons had gathered in front of the Customs House. The mob surrounded the lone sentry posted there threatening to “execute their vengeance on him.” Captain Thomas Preston, the officer of the day, responded to the sentry’s call for aid with a squad from His Majesty’s 29<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot intent on restoring order. Rather than dispersing as instructed, the crowd confronted the troops screaming “Fire! Come on you rascals, you lobster scoundrels! Fire if you dare!” In the heated commotion shots rang out, and four members of the crowd lay dead.<sup>1</sup> Captain Preston and his men surrendered to authorities and were charged with the murders of Samuel Gray, Samuel Maverick, James Caldwell, and Crispus Attucks. In the months following the event, a war for public opinion was waged in the press in which the Sons of Liberty, along with other colonial agitators, transformed the British into the aggressors, and pressed for the conviction of Preston.

It would only take a week before the first appearance of a printed publication which aimed to shape the public’s opinion on the events. Ironically, the piece came not from the Sons of Liberty but in the form of a letter sent by Captain Preston from the Boston Jail. Following an account of the events on the night of the fifth, the *Boston Gazette* printed Preston’s letter in which Preston thanked the citizens of Boston for providing “Advocates for Truth, in Defense of my injured Innocence, in the late unhappy Affair that happened Monday Night last” for which Preston said the people of Boston would forever be gratefully remembered.<sup>2</sup> Through this letter Preston sought to endear himself to Bostonians, presenting himself as a gentleman whose current misfortunes were due to a series of unfortunate circumstances. By demonstrating such an

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from “Case of Capt. Thomas Preston of the 29<sup>th</sup> Regt.” *New-York Gazette*. July 9, 1770. Issue 1436, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Boston Gazette*. March 12, 1770. Issue 779, page 3. Supplement.

amenable appearance, Preston was overtly confronting his present reputation as the sinister butcher of Boston and appealing to the greater reason of his potential jurors.

Three days later on March 15<sup>th</sup>, the *Boston News-Letter* published a eulogy for the men killed in the previous week's events labeling it "the bloody massacre."<sup>3</sup> The term "massacre" was likely adopted by radicals quickly following the event and subsequently used by the publisher. The use of the term massacre in this publication is important as it denotes the sentiment of the publisher and of the town. Many in Boston felt that the deceased had been wantonly gunned down in cold blood, innocent victims of the tyrannical crown. Despite evidence that would later emerge to the contrary, the term "massacre" was widely embraced by an angry populous. To this day, the event is still remembered as the Boston Massacre.

In the same article, placed directly in the center—drawing the reader's attention toward it—was a print of four large, black coffins with skulls and crossbones emblazoned upon them, each bearing the initials of one of the "unhappy victims."<sup>4</sup> The coffin of the youngest victim, Samuel Maverick, included the text "ae 17" or age 17, as well as a scythe and hourglass to indicate that Maverick had been cut down in his youth.<sup>5</sup> Woodcut or engraved prints were rare in colonial papers, and the fact that one appears in this publication shows how important the issue had become to Bostonians. Furthermore, the black caskets required the printer to use much more ink to properly render the image which suggests the printer was expecting the publication to sell well in the midst of the fervor surrounding the "massacre." The message of the image was clear: four innocent men were dead, and British troops were to blame.

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<sup>3</sup> *Boston News-Letter*. March 15, 1770. Issue 3467, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Louise Phelps Kellogg. "The Paul Revere Print of the Boston Massacre," *The Wisconsin History Magazine* 1, no. 18 (June 1918), 381.

Soon, news of the events in Boston would spread outside of Massachusetts, and publishers in surrounding colonies would add their opinions. Articles appearing in the *Connecticut Journal* and *Providence Gazette* called the massacre a “Demonstration of the disruptive Consequences of quartering Troops among Citizens in a Time of Peace.” Troops which, the *Journal* claimed, were there to “enforce oppressive measures...and to quell a Spirit of Liberty.”<sup>6</sup> A writer to the *New-Hampshire Gazette* claimed “Plenty of Evidence will prove the Soldiery to have been wholly the Aggressors, [and] that the Inhabitants have been treated by them with an unexampled Barbarity.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps trying to encourage similar support, the *Pennsylvania Chronicle* printed a letter from Salem which exclaimed “So enraged are the people at the late horrid massacre in Boston, that it is thought, if a proper signal should be given, not less than fifteen hundred men... would turn out at a minute’s warning, to revenge the murders and support the right of the insulted and much abused inhabitants of Boston.”<sup>8</sup> The rage that filled Boston was slowly flowing over to the surrounding colonies, and publications were calling for vengeance to be exacted upon the offending soldiers.

Back in Boston, opinions were much the same. A writer to the *Boston Evening Post* claimed, “The projectors and promoters of the favorite scheme of drawing people’s substance from them without their consent, have ever been the patrons of standing armies.”<sup>9</sup> A letter in the *Essex Gazette* claimed soldiers “pillaged, affronted, and butchered” the citizens of Boston.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Connecticut Journal*. New Haven, Connecticut. March 16, 1770. Issue 126, p. 4. Supplement. and *Providence Gazette*. Providence, Rhode Island. March 12, 1770. Volume VII, Issue 323, p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> *New-Hampshire Gazette*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire. March 23, 1770. Issue 701, p.3.

<sup>8</sup> *Pennsylvania Chronicle*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. March 26 to April 2, 1770. Issue 10, p. 38.

<sup>9</sup> *Boston Evening Post*. March 19, 1770. Issue 1799, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Essex Gazette*. March 13-20, 1770. Volume II, Issue 86, p. 185.

The Sons of Liberty had not remained idle in this time either, and on March 26<sup>th</sup>, an advertisement appeared in the *Boston Gazette* for “A PRINT containing a Rendition of the late horrid Massacre in King Street.”<sup>11</sup> The print was from an engraving by Boston silversmith Paul Revere entitled *The Blood Massacre Perpetrated in King Street Boston on March 5, 1770 by a part of the 29<sup>th</sup> Regt.*<sup>12</sup> The print would become an icon, one which would represent the message of the Sons of Liberty better than any printed letter.

Paul Revere’s print contained several images designed to inflame the passions of the viewer.<sup>13</sup> The image clearly depicts soldiers firing into an unarmed crowd, with victims laying helpless on the ground bleeding out. Captain Preston is depicted with a maleficent look, standing behind his men, saber drawn, giving the command to fire, while a woman in the crowd pleads for mercy. A dog stands loyally with the citizens of Boston, juxtaposed with the brutality of soldiers who would shoot men but not dogs. The Customs House includes a sign labeling it the Butcher’s Hall, and a puff of smoke from a musket is seen emanating from a window of the Customs House suggesting a more sinister plot. The image successfully portrayed the event –which can only be described as a free-for-all– into an organized slaughter of a guiltless populous.<sup>14</sup>

If the image alone were not enough to evoke a response from its audience, an emotional poem was also included below the image on the print. The language used in the poem was quite vitriolic:

“Unhappy BOSTON! See thy Sons deplore. Thy hallow'd Walks besmear'd with guiltless  
Gore. While faithless [Preston] and his savage Bands, With murd'rous Rancour stretch their

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<sup>11</sup> *Boston Gazette*. March 26, 1770. Issue 781, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Revere. *The Bloody Massacre Perpetrated in King Street Boston on March 5<sup>th</sup> 1770 by a Party of the 29<sup>th</sup> Regt.* Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-01657.

<sup>13</sup> See Appendix I for a copy of the print.

<sup>14</sup> Scott Casper. “Deconstructed: The Boston Massacre.” *American History* 34, no. 3 (August 2008): 22-23.

bloody Hands; Like fierce Barbarians grinning o'er their Prey, Approve the Carnage, and enjoy the Day.”<sup>15</sup>

The print was highly popular, with two hundred copies ordered from the first edition, and several additional editions and copies followed the first.<sup>16</sup>

Several months later, during the intermission between judicial sessions while Bostonians awaited justice, their passions were inflamed once more. A letter which Captain Preston had written to colleagues in London pleading his case had been published and found its way back to the colonies where it was reprinted. The letter to London was a stunning reversal of Preston's earlier letter to the citizens of Boston. Preston depicted the citizens which gathered in front of the Customs House as a “mob” with a “malicious temper” that had provoked the troops. Preston said the inhabitants of Boston were nothing more than “malcontents” who were intent on “infusing Malice and Revenge into the Minds of the People that are to be my jurors.”<sup>17</sup> Rather than bestowing them with gratitude, Preston now showed his true disdain for Bostonians.<sup>18</sup> If trying to gain sympathy, Preston's attempt sorely backfired.

The Sons of Liberty and other patriots had presented rhetoric and compelling images to try and sway the public to the cause of liberty and conviction. Preston himself personally appealed to the citizens, but in the end, justice was indeed blind. The jury, hearing all the facts and evidence presented, cleared Captain Preston of any wrong doing. While failing to obtain a conviction, the patriots succeeded in shaping public opinion toward the event for posterity.

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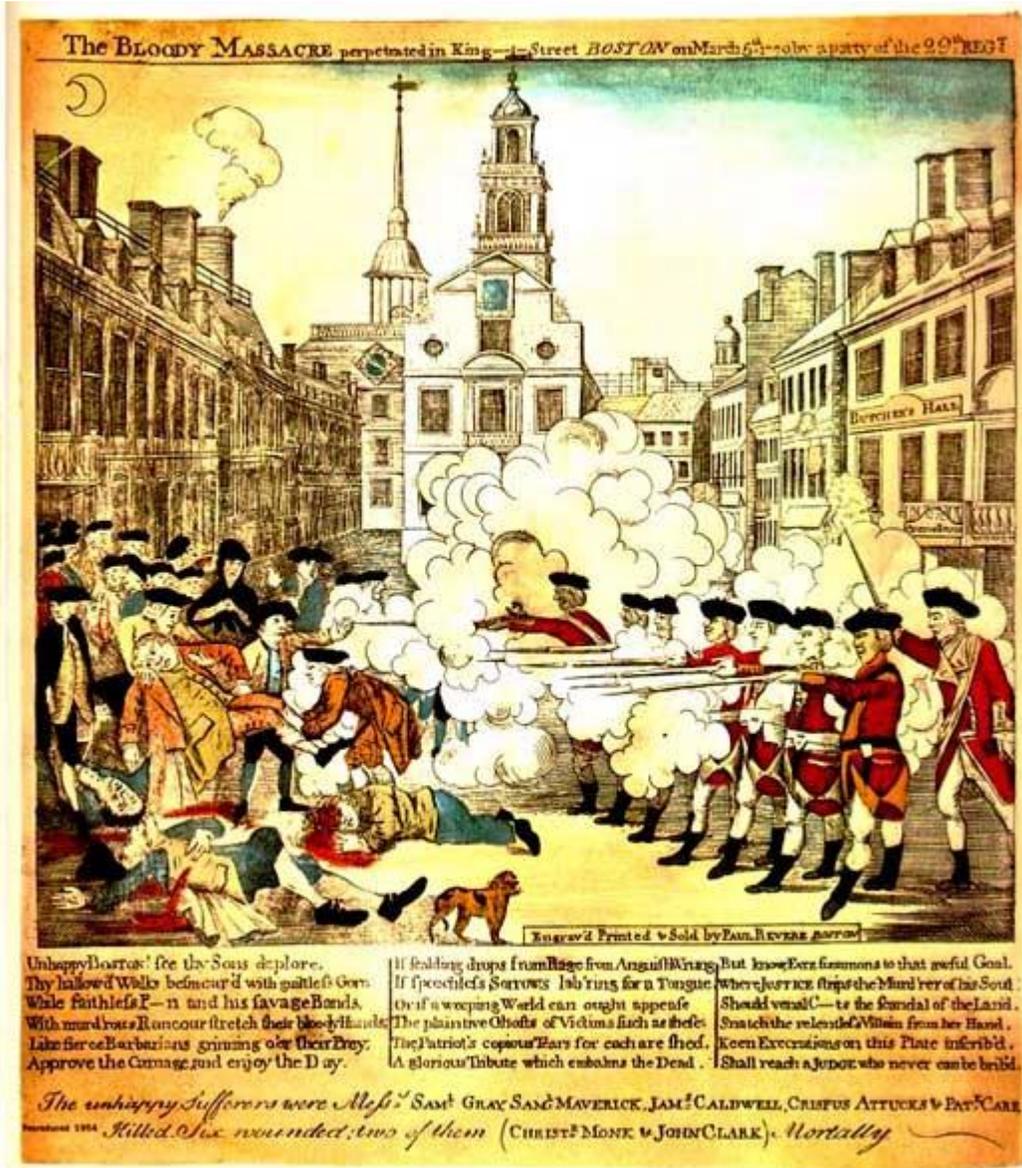
<sup>15</sup> Revere

<sup>16</sup> Kellogg, 383-384.

<sup>17</sup> See “Case of Capt. Thomas Preston of the 29<sup>th</sup> Regt.” *New-York Gazette*. July 9, 1770. Issue 1436, p. 2,

<sup>18</sup> Neil Longley York. “Rival Truths, Political Accommodation, and the Boston ‘Massacre,’” *Massachusetts Historical Review* 11 (2009), 59.

Appendix I



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### PICTURE

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