

Comparison of Eyewitness Accounts of the Boston Massacre

This resource includes four accounts of what took place in Boston at approximately 9:00 p.m. on March 5, 1770. Over an hour beforehand, a crowd started to gather around the lone guard standing watch near the Customs House. Several in the crowd started harassing him, provoking him to strike them. They cursed, insulted, crowded and threatened him, and they even started throwing things at him. Feeling he was in danger, he called for more guards. Quickly nine regulars along with Captain Thomas Preston, the officer of the day, came to his aid. The insults and curses became louder and more abusive. The crowd threw snowballs and moved about in a way that increased the anxiety of the guards.

Account of George Sanderlin during the trial

On hearing the noise [of a fight], Samuel Atwood came up to see what was the matter, and entering the alley heard the latter part of the combat, and when the boys [who had been fighting] had dispersed he met the ten or twelve soldiers [who had been fighting with them] rushing down the alley toward the square, and asked them if they intended to murder people? They answered "Yes, by God," [and struck and wounded Atwood].

Immediately after, those heroes [the British officers] appeared in the square, asking "where were the cowards?" One of them advanced toward a youth who had a stave in his hand. But the young man, seeing a person near him with a drawn sword, held up his stave in defiance, and they quietly passed by him up the little alley to Kingstreet, where they attacked single and unarmed persons till they raised much clamor.

Thirty or forty persons, mostly lads, being by this means gathered in Kingstreet, Capt. Preston, with a party of men with charged bayonets, came from the main guard to the Commissioner's House, the soldiers pushing their bayonets, crying, "Make way!" They took place by the Custom House, and continuing to push to drive the people off, pricked some in several places; on which they were clamorous, and, it is said, threw snow-balls.

On this, the Captain commanded then to fire, and more snow-balls coming, he again said, "Damn you, Fire, be the consequences what it will!" One soldier then fired, and a townsman with a cudgel struck him over the hands with such force that he dropt his firelock; and rushing forward aimed a blow at the Captain's head, which grazed his hat and fell pretty heavy on his arm. However, the soldiers continued to fire, successively, till seven or eight or, as some say, eleven guns were discharged.

By this fatal manoeuvre, three men were laid dead on the spot, and two more struggling for life.

Account of Andrew, an Enslaved Black, during the Trial

The people had sticks. And as the soldiers were pushing with their guns, they stuck their guns. . . .

One of these people, a stout man with a long cordwood stick, threw himself in, and made a blow at the officer. . . . The stout man then turned round and struck the soldier's gun. He knocked his [the soldier's] gun away and struck him over the head [with his stick].

The stout man cried, "Kill the dogs. Knock them over."

This was the general cry. The people then crowded in. . . .

I turned to go, when I heard the word "fire." I thought I heard the report of a gun. I then saw the soldier swing his gun and fire it. . . . I thought and still think it was Crispus Attuk who was shot.

Account of Captain Preston during the Trial

On Monday night townspeople broke into two meeting houses and rang the alarm bells, which I supposed was for fire, but was informed that the town inhabitants were assembling to attack the troops, and that the bells were ringing as the signal for that purpose.

I went to the Main Guard. On my way there I saw the people in great commotion, and heard them use the most cruel threats against the troops. After I reached the guard, about one hundred people passed it and went towards the custom house where the king's money is lodged. They immediately surrounded the sentry posted there.

I sent an officer and twelve men to protect both the sentry and the king's money, and very soon followed myself. The mob increased and were striking their clubs one against another, and calling out: "Come on you rascals, you lobster scoundrels, fire if you dare!"

At this time I was between the soldiers and the mob, endeavouring to persuade them to retire peaceably, but to no purpose. They advanced to the points of the bayonets, struck some of them and even the muzzles of the guns. Some well-behaved persons asked me if the guns were charged [loaded]. I replied "yes." They then asked me if I intended to order the men to fire. I answered "no." While I was thus speaking, one of the soldiers having received a severe blow with a stick, stepped a little to one side and instantly fired, on which asking him why he fired without orders, I was struck with a club on my arm, which for some time deprived me of the use of it.

On this a general attack was made on the men by a great number of heavy clubs and snow-balls being thrown at them. Instantly three or four of the soldiers fired, and directly after three more in the same confusion. The mob then ran away, except three unhappy men who instantly expired. One more since is dead.

On my asking the soldiers why they fired without orders, they said they heard the word "fire" and supposed it came from me. This might be the case as many of the mob called out "fire, fire!"

Account of John Tudor, Justice of the Peace, Boston, Witness to the Events That Evening

On Monday evening, the 5th [of March], a few minutes after nine o'clock, a most horrid murder was committed in King Street before the customs house door by eight or nine soldiers under the command of Captain Thomas Preston . . .

This unhappy affair began by some boys and young fellows throwing snowballs at the sentry placed at the customs house door. On which eight or nine soldiers came to his assistance. Soon after a number of people collected, when the captain commanded the soldiers to fire, which they did, and three men were killed on the spot and several mortally wounded, one of which died the next morning. [A fifth man died several days later.] The captain soon drew off his soldiers . . . or the consequences might have been terrible, for on the guns firing the people were alarmed and set the bells a-ringing as if for fire, which drew multitudes to the place of action.

Lieutenant Governor Hutchinson, who was commander-in-chief, was sent for and came to the council chamber. . . . The governor [asked] the multitude about ten o'clock to separate and go home peaceable, and he would do all in his power that justice should be done, etc. . . . But the people insisted that the soldiers should be ordered to their barracks first before they would separate. Which being done, the people separated about one o'clock. Captain Preston was taken up by a warrant. . . . and we sent him to jail soon after three, having evidence sufficient to commit him, on his ordering his soldiers to fire. So about four o'clock the town became quiet.

Address to the Jurors by John Adams, Attorney for the Soldiers

We talk much of Liberty and property. But if we cut up the law of self-defense, we cut away the foundation of both. Place yourself in the situation of the . . . sentry. . . . The people are crying [out], Kill them! Kill them! Knock them [the soldiers] down!--heaving snowballs, oyster shells, clubs, white birch sticks three and a half inches in diameter. . . . Consider yourselves in this situation and then judge if a reasonable man would not consider they were going to kill him.

Questions:

1. What specific facts do these four accounts have in common?
2. On what specific facts do these accounts most disagree?
3. Which of these four witnesses would be the most believable? Explain your choice.
4. From your data and view, what was the cause of the Boston Massacre?
5. What is the definition of a massacre?
6. What evidence is there that a massacre took place that night?
7. What point of view did John Adams want the jurors to take?
8. John Adams was one of the major colonial leaders who opposed Parliament's acts. Why might he have agreed to defend these particular soldiers?

Source: <http://videoindex.pbs.org/resources/liberty/primary/doc5.html>