

# TEACHER'S GUIDE

## Primary Source Document Collection

### MISSION 1: "For Crown or Colony?"

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#### **Eyewitness Accounts from the Boston Massacre, 1770**

*In the days and weeks following the fateful events of March 5, 1770, over ninety people—from all ranks of colonial society—gave depositions about what they had seen in front of Justices of the Peace gathered at Faneuil Hall. Later that year, townspeople made up the bulk of the witness lists for both the prosecution and defense during the trials of Captain Preston and the other soldiers. Below is a selection of these eyewitness accounts that includes one of the victims of the massacre, Edward Payne (who suffered a non-fatal gunshot wound) and Captain Preston, the officer in charge of the soldiers.*

#### **Depositions from the Town:**

I, Charles Hobby, of lawful age, testify and say, that...between the hours of nine and ten o'clock, being in my master's house, was alarmed with the cry of fire, I ran down as far as the town-house, and then heard that the soldiers and the inhabitants were fighting in the alley...I then left them and went to King street. I then saw a party of soldiers loading their muskets about the Custom-house door, after which they all shouldered. I heard some of the inhabitants cry out, "heave no snow balls," others cried "they dare not fire." Capt. Preston was then standing by the soldiers, when a snow ball struck a grenadier, who immediately fired, Capt. Preston standing close by him. The Captain then spoke distinctly, "Fire, Fire!" I was then within four feet of Capt. Preston, and know him well; the soldiers fired as fast as they could one after another. I saw the mulatto fall, and Mr. Samuel Gray went to look at him, one of the soldiers, at a distance of about four or five yards, pointed his piece directly for the said Gray's head and fired. Mr. Gray, after struggling, turned himself right round upon his heel and fell dead.

Edward Payne, of Boston, merchant testifies that on the evening of the fifth instant, on hearing the bells ring, he supposed there was fire, but on going out he was informed there was not any fire, but a riot...the people round the sentinel were then crying out "Fire, fire, damn you, why don't you fire," soon after, he perceived a number of soldiers coming down towards the sentinel, with their arms in a horizontal posture, and their bayonets fixed, who turned the people from before the Custom-house, and drew up before the door, the people, who still remained in the street and about the soldiers, continued calling out to them to fire. In this situation they remained some minutes, when he heard a gun snap, and presently a single gun fired and soon after several others went off, one after another...at which time, a ball passed through the deponents right arm, upon which he immediately retired to the house.

Daniel Usher...testifies and says, that...he saw several persons, mostly young folks, gathered between the Town House and Coffee House, some of whom were talking to the sentinel at the Commissioners' or Custom-house; after some time, the boys at a distance began to throw light snow-balls at him, which he seemed much enraged at, and...appeared to have charged his gun, giving it a heavy stamp

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upon the door step, as if to force down the lead; and then swore to the boys if they came near him he would blow their brains out. About ten minutes after this, the deponent saw Capt. Preston leading seven or eight men from towards the Town House, and placed them between the Custom-house door, and the sentinel box. About four or five minutes after they were posted, the snowballs now and then coming towards the soldiers, the Capt. commanded them to fire. Upon this, one gun quickly went off; and afterwards he said "Fire by all means!" others succeeding, and the deponent being utterly unarmed, to avoid further danger, went up round the Town House till the fray was over.

#### **Captain Preston's Deposition from March 12, 1770:**

The mob still increased and were outrageous, striking their clubs or bludgeons one against another, and calling out, come on you rascals, you bloody backs, you lobster scoundrels, fire if you dare, G-d damn you, fire and be damned, we know you dare not, and much more such language was used. At this time I was between the soldiers and the mob, parleying with, and endeavoring all in my power 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 pieces, and seemed to be endeavoring to close with the soldiers. On which some well behaved persons asked me if the guns were charged. I replied yes. They then asked me if I intended to order the men to fire. I answered no, by no means, observing to them that I was advanced before the muzzles of the men's pieces, and must fall a sacrifice if they fired; that the soldiers were upon the half cock and charged bayonets, and my giving the word fire under those circumstances would prove me to be no officer. 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 this a general attack was made on the men by a great number of heavy clubs and snowballs being thrown at them, by which all our lives were in imminent danger, some persons at the same time from behind calling out, damn your bloods-why don't you fire. Instantly three or four of the soldiers fired.... 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, but I assured the men that I gave no such order; that my words were, don't fire, stop your firing. . . .

#### **Testimony from the Trial:**

William Sawyer: The people kept huzzaing. Damn'em. Daring'em to fire. Threw Snow balls. I think they hit 'em. As soon as the Snow balls were thrown and a club a Soldier fired. I heard the Club strike upon the Gun and the corner man next the lane said fire and immediately fired. This was the first Gun. As soon as he had fired he said Damn you fire. I am so sure that I thought it was he that spoke. That next Gun fired and so they fired through pretty quick.

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Newton Prince (an African-American member of the South Church): Heard the Bell ring. Ran out. Came to the Chapel. Was told there was no fire but something better, there was going to be a fight. Some had buckets and bags and some Clubs. I went to the west end of the Town House where [there] were a number of people. I saw some Soldiers coming out of the Guard house with their Guns and running down one after another to the Custom house. Some of the people said let's attack the Main Guard, or the Centinel who is gone to King street. Some said for Gods sake don't lets touch the main Guard. I went down. Saw the Soldiers planted by the Custom house two deep. The People were calling them Lobsters, daring'em to fire saying damn you why don't you fire. I saw Capt. Preston out from behind the Soldiers. In the front at the right. He spoke to some people. The Capt. stood between the Soldiers and the Gutter about two yards from the Gutter. I saw two or three strike with sticks on the Guns. I was going off to the west of the Soldiers and heard the Guns fire and saw the dead carried off. Soon after the Guard Drums beat to arms. The People whilst striking on the Guns cried fire, damn you fire. I have heard no Orders given to fire, only the people in general cried fire.

Daniel Cornwall: Capt. Preston was within 2 yards of me and before the Men and nearest to the right and facing the Street. I was looking at him. Did not hear any order. He faced me. I think I should have heard him. I directly heard a voice say Damn you why do you fire. Don't fire. I thought it was the Captain's then. I now believe it. .

Source: *A Short Narrative of the Horrid Massacre in Boston* (reprint; New York: John Dogget, 1849), 63, 74, 86; Hiller B. Zobel, ed., *The Legal Papers of John Adams*, Vol. III (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965), 46-98; *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* (1905), Vol. VII, 8-9.