



“A scene of Villainy acted by a dirty Banditti,  
as must astonish the Public”: The Creation  
of the Boston Massacre

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ON the evening of March 5th, 1770, in Boston, Massachusetts, fighting broke out in the streets between townspeople and soldiers from the British Army who had been stationed in the city to help keep the peace. In the confusion, a crowd gathered in King Street in front of a house rented by the commissioners of the customs; the sentry on duty, feeling threatened, sent for reinforcements from the main guard located down the street. Captain Thomas Preston and eight men came to the sentry's assistance. Unfortunately, the troops' arrival only heightened the tensions; sticks, ice, and oaths flew from the crowd until one of the soldiers fired, followed by the rest of the company, and when the smoke cleared, three men lay dead and eight more wounded.<sup>1</sup> These events have passed into history as the Boston Massacre; a street fight between soldiers and civilians that had its origins in competition between the two groups over scarce jobs whose tragic climax turned into excellent propaganda for Boston's patriots and was a serious blow to the credibility of the British government and its allies in

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<sup>1</sup>This narrative of the Boston Massacre is drawn from *The Boston Gazette*, March 12, 1770.

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America. Framed in this manner, the Massacre has become one of the canonical stepping stones along the American colonists' gradual path to independence from Great Britain. Lost in this account, however, is the story of another transition in power and politics unfolding within the American Revolution, one not simply over, as Carl Becker put it, *who* should rule at home, but *how* they should rule.<sup>2</sup> This paper, by exploring how the fight in the streets of Boston became the Boston Massacre, seeks to illustrate this other transition in power and how the people who took to the streets that icy night in Boston were left out in the political cold.

The Boston Massacre has long provided a fruitful moment in which to explore the political transformations underway during the American Revolution. Hiller Zobel's *The Boston Massacre* argued that the Sons of Liberty used the violent confrontation to educate Bostonians about the real dangers of a tyrannical ministry and to secure their role as the rightful leaders of the resistance to that ministry and its allies in the colonies.<sup>3</sup> More recently, scholars have turned their attention to the power of the lawyers in the trials and the speakers at commemorations of the Massacre to create a visual and linguistic context in which Boston's Whigs could convince the people that they constituted the legitimate voice of authority in the community.<sup>4</sup> Another venerable school of interpretation has focused on the economic dimensions of the Massacre, particularly how it represented an outburst of working-class rage at the soldiers and, indirectly, the

<sup>2</sup>Carl Becker, *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760–1776* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1909), 22.

<sup>3</sup>Hiller B. Zobel, *The Boston Massacre* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1970). Other works in this vein include, Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution; Colonial Radicals and the development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765–1776* (1972; repr., New York: Norton, 1991); Bernard Bailyn, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, enlarged ed. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1992).

<sup>4</sup>Sandra M. Gustafson, *Eloquence is Power: Oratory and Performance in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 171–99; Robert St. George, "Massacred Language: Court Performance in Eighteenth Century Boston," in *Possible Pasts: Becoming Colonial in Early America* ed. Robert St. George (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 327–56; Peter Charles Hoffer, *Sensory Worlds in Early America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 225–27.

imperial government whose actions had taken their jobs and depressed their wages.<sup>5</sup> These interpretations, however, place the principal point of conflict between the patriots and imperial officials and their colonial allies and minimize the differences among the patriots themselves. They leave unexplored any vision of authority that might have existed among the workers and people in the street that the lawyers, orators, and political organizers had to displace to secure their positions as the voices for the community. Even the economic interpretations of the Massacre that stress the different motives between the workers and the patriot leadership have not seen the actions of the former as an expression of a coherent system or style of political authority competing with the one projected by the Boston's patriot leadership. This paper seeks to add this dimension to our understanding of the Massacre, by exploring two different accounts of the event—one very familiar, the other less so—that, when seen in comparison, reveal two very different visions of authority among Boston's patriots: one that afforded the crowd a seat at the table as a partner in the resistance to British authority and another that marginalized the crowd as a threat to that resistance movement, offering in its place the carefully calibrated and reasonable strategies crafted by Boston's Sons of Liberty.

Paul Gilje, Barbara Clark Smith, Dirk Hoerder, and Thomas Slaughter have all chronicled the role of the crowd as a legitimate expression of community sentiment and as an informal means of political participation that gradually eroded over the course of the last decades of the eighteenth century into the nineteenth. In its place, these authors suggest, emerged a more restrictive definition of politics that focused on mobilizing

<sup>5</sup>Dirk Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts, 1765–1780* (New York: Academic Press, 1977); Alfred Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999). Other authors who share this general interpretation include Richard Archer, *As If an Enemy's Country: The British Occupation of Boston and the Origins of the Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Gary Nash, *The Urban Crucible: The Northern Seaports and the Origins of the American Revolution*, abridged ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).

white men as voters.<sup>6</sup> Historians have not, however, fully explored the means through which that transformation of the role of the crowd in American politics occurred. Building on David Waldstreicher's insights into how eighteenth-century print culture created and perpetuated memories of events as arguments intended to define the boundaries and possibilities of political participation, this essay argues that Boston's Whig leaders used printed accounts and depictions of the events of March 5th to reassert their authority over colonial resistance to Parliamentary taxation.<sup>7</sup> They did so in contrast to an alternative set of memories of March 5th, 1770 that challenged the Whig vision of American resistance to the empire as founded in reason and principle and the rejection of violence. In response to this challenge, the Whigs transformed a street fight into the Boston Massacre, which, in turn, allowed them to both delegitimize crowd action as a form of political participation and reassert the superiority of their own reasoned strategies for resistance to imperial authority. At the same time that the creation of the Massacre marginalized the crowd as a political force, the Whigs' account attempted to preserve a role for the crowd in resisting imperial authority by making it, to use Mary Esteve's terms, an aesthetic expression of community sentiment, that is to say, a legitimate expression of the town's feelings of rage and anger at its treatment by British troops, but also, by virtue of the emotional power it represented, a decidedly non-political act.<sup>8</sup> In the end, the Massacre became an emotionally charged illustration of the political and personal dangers of military occupation, but an equally pointed reminder of the dangers of crowd action and an argument for the

<sup>6</sup> Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy: Popular Disorder in New York City, 1763–1834* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987); Smith, *The Freedoms We Have Lost: Consent and Resistance in Revolutionary America* (New York: The New Press, 2010); Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts* (New York: Academic Press, 1977); Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Mary Esteve, *The Aesthetics and Politics of the Crowd in American Literature* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

importance of leaders who relied on reason and observation to carefully craft strategies for resisting imperial authority.

Crowd actions had been particularly problematic for Bostonians throughout the second half of the eighteenth century. Traditional, colorful, and unruly displays by Boston's crowd, notably Pope's Day celebrations, increasingly appeared to a broad cross-section of the population as more anarchy than stable social and political order.<sup>9</sup> Those anxieties came to a head during the protests surrounding the Stamp Act. On that occasion, Boston's Sons of Liberty had mobilized the crowd in order to intimidate officials believed to be either involved in enforcing the Stamp Act or sympathetic to it. While effective, these violent measures, particularly the destruction of Thomas Hutchinson's house in August 1765, raised concerns among moderate colonists who viewed such displays as evidence of the rapidity with which opposition to Parliamentary policy might descend into anarchy.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, when responding to the Townshend Acts, the patriot leaders turned away from crowd actions and to other means to persuade people to support their movement and identify themselves as its, and the community's, rightful leaders. Boston's Whig-controlled town meeting, for example, proposed that people enter into nonconsumption and nonimportation agreements to persuade Parliament to repeal the newly enacted taxes. An essential part of the appeal of this strategy, the town insisted, was the way it substituted carefully considered and measured actions for the violence and unpredictability of crowd action. These "measures," the meeting explained, would "bear to be scrutinized, upon the principles of reason and the constitution" by "a wise and prudent community"; moreover, if its proposals were "pursued with vigor" they would make "all violent efforts . . . unnecessary, and consequently in the highest degree culpable."<sup>11</sup> Framed in this way,

<sup>9</sup>Richard Beeman, *Varieties of Political Experience in Eighteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 243–75. On changing attitudes toward Pope's Days, see Francis D. Cogliano, *No King, No Popery: Anti-Catholicism in Revolutionary New England* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995).

<sup>10</sup>Archer, *As If in an Enemy Country*, 70–71; Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 153–60.

<sup>11</sup>*Providence Gazette*, November 28, 1767.

Whigs identified themselves with a vision of authority founded on their ability to craft prudent policies defined by the dictates of reason and their pointed refusal to embrace more violent measures, which they identified as counterproductive, as well as ineffective.

This more restrained style of protest and language of legitimate authority served Boston's patriots well through the first years of the resistance to the Townshend Acts. Newspapers were filled with accounts of virtuous men and women embracing nonconsummation resolutions while merchants and ships' captains selflessly adhered to the prudently designed nonimportation agreements.<sup>12</sup> When some Bostonians tried to recreate the effigy parades and confrontations with offending merchants in a manner reminiscent of the Stamp Act protests, the Sons of Liberty quickly took down the effigies and removed any sign that they approved of such actions, a sentiment captured in the description of any unruly acts that arose alongside the patriots' more reasoned strategies as the work of "Boys and Negroes."<sup>13</sup> The patriots, rhetorically at least, received a gift when, after the 1768 Liberty Riot—a minor affair, the papers assured their readers—the ministry dispatched troops to Boston to keep the peace.<sup>14</sup> After this point, the soldiers' frequent recourse to physical force to impose their will on the townspeople—at least according to the papers—became a convenient way for Whigs to both cultivate anger amongst the people at the empire and highlight the culpability of violence as a political strategy.<sup>15</sup>

By the winter of 1770, however, both the reliance on reasoned and constitutional measures and the desire, publically at least, to avoid violence had become increasingly problematic for the patriot leadership. When a group of merchants

<sup>12</sup>*Boston Gazette*, November 21, 1768; *Boston Gazette*, August 7, 1769; *Boston Gazette*, August 28, 1769.

<sup>13</sup>Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*, 126–39; Samuel Salisbury to Stephen Salisbury, March 21, 1768, Salisbury Family Papers, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA; George Mason to Joseph Harrington, Oct 28, 1769 and Extract of a Letter from Nathaniel Rogers, Oct. 25, 1769, Sparks Manuscripts X, Papers Relating to New England, vol. 3, Manuscripts of George Chalmers, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

<sup>14</sup>*Boston Gazette*, June 13, 1768.

<sup>15</sup>Archer, *As If in an Enemy Country*, 131–35.

who had only reluctantly joined in the patriots' nonimportation scheme used the expiration of the original agreement on January 1, 1770 to once again sell imported goods, the patriots found appeals to reason alone inadequate.<sup>16</sup> To persuade the importers to once again accept nonimportation, the Sons of Liberty, believing that other moderate merchants might also break the agreement if strong measures were not taken, turned to crowds reminiscent of those that had intimidated the Stamp officers.<sup>17</sup> It was not only the merchants over whom the patriots may have been losing influence. As Serena Zabin has argued, by the winter of 1770 British soldiers and working-class Bostonians were becoming increasingly connected, despite the latter's economic woes, suggesting that the town's solidarity was eroding from below as well as above.<sup>18</sup> A strategy that again employed the crowd offered one way for the patriots to reclaim control over both merchants and the workers; it would intimidate the first and provide the second with an expanded role in a movement that hitherto had given pride of place to the leading families and merchants who had given up consumer goods and profitable imports.<sup>19</sup>

The account of the fight between soldiers and workers at John Gray's ropewalk the Friday before the Massacre highlights how the patriots had a more indulgent attitude toward the violent actions of the people in the streets. Reports of fighting between soldiers and civilians had been a staple of the patriot press during the period, but, for the most part, publications such as *The Journal of the Times* portrayed civilians as the

<sup>16</sup>*Boston Gazette*, January 1, 1770.

<sup>17</sup>*Boston Gazette*, January 22, 1770; Zobel, *The Boston Massacre*, 164–65, 172; Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 216–23.

<sup>18</sup>On worsening economic conditions, see Archer, *As If in an Enemy Country*, 165, and Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 234–35, 241–42. An example of attempts to manage these tensions can be found in *Boston Gazette*, April 9, 1770. Serena R. Zabin, "An Intimate History of the Boston Massacre," presented at "So Sudden an Alteration": The Causes, Course, and Consequences of the American Revolution," conference held at the Massachusetts Historical Society April 9–11 2015, cited with permission of the author.

<sup>19</sup>For examples of such appeals, see *Boston Gazette*, January 11, 1768, August 28, 1769, and February 12, 1770.

victims of military aggression and praised the town and its leaders for restraining their anger at the abuse.<sup>20</sup> In this case, however, the authors flipped the script, and celebrated the openly confrontational and violent ropewalk workers who had physically humiliated a group of soldiers. The brawl began when a soldier challenged the workers to “fight him”; one of the workers accepted the challenge and “very speedily tript up” the soldier’s “heels and took his sword.” The brawl escalated rapidly as first more soldiers and then workers came to the aid of their comrades; in the end, the soldiers were left “much bruised” while only “two or three of the workmen [were] slightly wounded.” Perhaps just as important, the workers’ efforts to protect themselves proved more effective than those of the authorities. A justice of the peace’s efforts to restore order had failed, and while Gray successfully “diverted” his workers for the evening, the next day the soldiers returned to the ropewalk to resume hostilities only to be “cleared” from the ropewalk by “bat-wielding” workers.<sup>21</sup> This report would have worked well as a message calculated to warn opponents and inspire certain elements of the population. Not only did it make clear that the soldiers were no match for the native workers, and hence an unreliable source of protection, it also celebrated the workers’ physical mastery of their opponents as a way of bringing soldiers to heel when the efforts of the representatives of either the legal or economic establishment failed. The boisterous and violent methods of the crowd, in other words, appeared as a legitimate, and even necessary, source of the patriots’ claim to authority over Boston’s peoples and streets.

<sup>20</sup>See, for example, *Boston Gazette*, October 17, 1768, December 26, 1768, September 25, 1769, October 30, 1769, and November 6, 1769; more generally, see, Archer, *As if an Enemy’s Country*, 126–32. As Zobel has argued, the citizens of Boston proved a little more aggressive in their response to the troops than these reports suggested; however, this was not the face of the patriots’ resistance that they chose to emphasize in the press or distribute to other colonies. *The Boston Massacre*, 135–44. On the reports of life in Boston in other colonies see, for example, *South Carolina Gazette*, January 12, 1769, March 30, 1769, April 13, and May 4, 1769; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, December 8, 1768, December 15, 1768, and January 5, 1769.

<sup>21</sup>*Boston Evening Post*, March 5, 1770; this account appeared throughout the colonies alongside the account of the Massacre. See, for example, *South Carolina Gazette*, April 6, 1770.



Had the confrontations between soldiers and civilians ended after the initial confrontation at Grays' ropewalk, this public acknowledgement of the laborers' contribution to the resistance would probably have succeeded in striking something of a balance between the restraint of the nonimportation agreements and the force of the crowd that the Whigs intended. The events of March 5th, however, upset any expectation the Sons of Liberty might have had in that regard. The prompt removal of the troops following the Massacre would have emboldened the crowd and its leaders while the fact that their departure had followed a brawl culminating with eight deaths would have resurrected the fear of anarchy that haunted moderate patriots. Unsurprisingly, in this context, in the aftermath of the violent confrontation in King Street, moderate patriots moved quickly to re-establish their control over the movement and to discourage Boston's working people or those sympathetic to them from undertaking any similarly violent actions. As in the days following the destruction of Hutchinson's house, Boston's middling and better sorts organized watches to patrol the streets and restrain both the remaining soldiers and the angry townspeople.<sup>22</sup> Suddenly, it seems, the patriot leadership was having second thoughts about validating the authority of the crowd, or at least allowing others to believe that they approved wholly of it.<sup>23</sup>

Consequently, how people remembered the deadly events of March 5th became important because versions of the events had begun to circulate that, for better or worse, identified the unruly actions of the crowd as the cause of the troops being removed from Boston. An account that appeared in the *New*

<sup>22</sup>Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 216–18, 232–34.

<sup>23</sup>Even before the Massacre, some among the patriots were already ambivalent about celebrating the actions of the crowd. The publishers of the *Boston Gazette*, prominent Sons of Liberty in their own right, decided to omit the report of the fight at the ropewalk from the March 5th edition of their paper. The editors simply noted that the "Particulars of several Rencountres [*sic*] between the Inhabitants and the Soldiery the Week past we are oblig'd to omit for want of Room." The paper, however, included an account of the more measured and orderly funeral of Christopher Seider, the young apprentice whose death fit much favorably into the townspeople-as-victim narrative that previously dominated published accounts of confrontations between soldiers and civilians. *Boston Gazette*, March 5, 1770.

*York Journal*, for example, portrayed those events as the culmination of a prolonged brawl between soldiers and the violent actions of the crowd had succeeded in accomplishing what the patriot leaders' prudent and reasonable resistance had not: removal of the troops from Boston. The account began by describing the confrontation at the ropewalk as the latest illustration of a series of encounters in which "the Soldiers were always the Aggressors, and always worsted." After this latest incident, however, "the workmen" perceived "a disposition for further mischief prevailing among the soldiers" and "concluded if they came again, to ring the bells, and alarm the town." When on the following Monday "a considerable body of the soldiers" advanced "toward the rope walk, the workmen rang the Bell cry'd Fire and alarm'd the Town," prompting "a great Number of People" to assemble "near the Town-House, where a Sentry is placed." This development precipitated the arrival of Capt. Preston and his troops, who, "it seems fired among the Crowd." In the chaos that followed, "the Lieutenant Governor, Council, Magistrates, &c., assembled, desired the People to disperse, which they refused, till the Soldiers should retire to their Barracks, which, at last they did, and the People dispersed." The next day, the report continued, Preston had been arrested and "the Governor, Council, Magistrates, &c. assembled, and at the unanimous Solicitations of the People, desired the Commanding Officer to send the whole Body of Soldiers out of Town, to which, at last, he consented." The report concluded with word that "the Country had been alarmed and 40,000 Men in Arms had march'd to Boston, and that the troops had left the Town."<sup>24</sup>

In this telling, the events of March 5th, while unfortunate in some respects, did not resemble a massacre, but rather a much more traditional crowd action in which elements of the town banded together to achieve through force what more traditional means of redress had failed to accomplish. A street fight pitting elements of the town against the soldiers had escalated with tragic consequences for some, but had also succeeded

<sup>24</sup>*New York Journal*, March 15, 1770.

in removing the troops from the city. In the process, it offered a version of events and an implicit plan for successful resistance, quite at odds with the vision of the Sons of Liberty's orderly and reasoned opposition to imperial authority. From the perspective of the crowd and any who sympathized with it, the confrontation between the ropewalk workers—aided by the sailors and dock workers who had rushed to their aid on the prearranged signals—and the soldiers had succeeded where the Whig leadership had failed. The report emphasized this last point, by claiming that the presence of the people in the streets in defiance of Hutchinson's orders and the pleas of several members of the Council and Magistrates (including allies of the Sons of Liberty) had compelled the lieutenant governor to order the troops back to their barracks. Similarly, it was the unanimous sentiments of the populace and the 40,000 armed men who assembled on the outskirts of town that made the troops' removal necessary. In this retelling, the events of March 5th could easily become vindication for using crowds and the violence they brought with them to bring political opponents to heel, or, if viewed from an alternative perspective, one particularly troublingly for the Sons of Liberty, as evidence of the dangers of the patriots' provocative stance in resisting imperial authority.

The New York paper's account of the confrontation between soldiers and civilians might not have mattered much in Boston, but it reflected how many of those involved in the events remembered them.<sup>25</sup> The ropewalk workers' depositions, for example, described their initial confrontation with the soldiers as

<sup>25</sup>The authors' motives in the *New York Journal* are unclear. A paper of undoubted patriot sympathies, it probably assembled the account from the reports filtering into the city after the Massacre, and thus lacked the more massaged quality of the reports that appeared subsequently in Boston. Politics in New York and Boston also differed. Divisions among the patriots in New York had created a group of leaders—Isaac Sears, John Lamb, and Alexander McDougal—more dependent on the crowd than any comparable group in Boston. Consequently, when soldiers and civilians brawled in the streets of New York during the “Battle of Golden Hill” in January 1770, these leaders saw potential allies in a largely moderate and conservative population, which may well have encouraged them to offer an account of the Massacre that was more friendly to the people in the streets of Boston than the men in the committee chambers. Joseph S. Tiedemann, *Reluctant Revolutionaries: New York City and the Road to Independence*,

a test of physical strength in which both sides readily joined and from which the townspeople emerged victorious. Samuel Bostwick recalled that the confrontation started when one of the workers told a soldier inquiring after work “to go and clear my s—t house;” similarly, Jeffery Richardson described the workers being “challenged” by the “soldiers” and “the same hands accepting, again beat them off with considerable bruises”; a recollection seconded by Nicholas Ferriter who reported that as the soldiers became more belligerent the workers “passed the word down the walk for the hands to come up, which they did.”<sup>26</sup>

Other accounts emphasized that a prearranged plan existed among at least part of the population to respond with violence if the soldiers attempted to renew the confrontation. John Rowe’s diary entry for the evening reported that “A Quarrell between the Soldiers & Inhabitants” had broken out and “The Bells rung,” and, prior to the shooting, “A Great Number Assembled in King Street.”<sup>27</sup> A deposition taken from William Le Barron hinted that the ringing of the bell was a prearranged signal; Thomas Cane recollected leaving his job on the wharf to help the ropewalk workers on hearing the bells; Dimond Morton and Josiah Simpson reported the bells’ ringing producing loosely organized groups of townspeople running to King Street looking to confront soldiers.<sup>28</sup> The depositions of Benjamin Frizel, William Wyatt, Edward Payne, and Nathaniel Fosdick all reported that armed civilians were converging on King Street prior to the shooting, and suggested

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1763–1776 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 37–39, 146–49; Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy*, 55–58.

<sup>26</sup>Depositions of Samuel Bostwick, Archibald McNeil, Jeffery Richardson, and Nicholas Ferriter, “Appendix” to *A Short Narrative of the Horrid Massacre in Boston* (Boston: Edes and Gill, 1770), 13, 6–7, 4, 3.

<sup>27</sup>John Rowe Diary, March 5, 1770, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston (hereafter MHS). A similar chronology can be found in William Palfrey to John Wilkes, March 13, 1770 [89]; The Palfrey Family Papers, 1704–, Part II, Correspondence of William Palfrey, Houghton Library.

<sup>28</sup>Depositions of William La Baron, Thomas Cane, Dimond Morton, and Josiah Simpson, “Appendix” to *A Short Narrative*, 15, 31, 47, 50.

that the men assembling in the streets had come expecting a fight.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, contemporaries did not hesitate to place the responsibility in the hands of the crowds for forcing Hutchinson to order the troops into their barracks and Colonel Dalrymple's decision to remove the troops from Boston. John Tudor's recollection that "the people" had "insisted that the soldiers should be ordered to their Barracks 1st before they would separate," indicates that it was the angrily assembled crowd that had forced Hutchinson's hand.<sup>30</sup> Richard Palmes's deposition echoed this sentiment noting that it was after "a gentlemen desired" Hutchinson "to look out of the window" to see the troops and soldiers facing off that the Lieutenant Governor ordered troops to withdraw.<sup>31</sup> Echoes of the New York newspaper's explanation for the ultimate removal of the troops, appeared in Rowe's recollection that the following day, "Most of the Town" was "in uproar & Confusion" and in Ephraim Fenno's deposition that the people would not be easy "till all the soldiers had left the town."<sup>32</sup> John Amory put the matter even more directly, claiming that the killings in King Street had "exasperated not only this, but the neighbouring towns also," and that if Colonel Dalrymple had not "removed the Troops, there is no knowing what might have been the consequences. There is reason to fear it might have been terrible."<sup>33</sup> The workers probably took pride in their accomplishments while Rowe, Tudor, and Amory probably looked at the event with concern—but the *New York Journal's* recreation of the street fight on March 5th, reflected how many in Boston, for better or worse, would have remembered those events and the privileged role it allotted to

<sup>29</sup>Depositions of Benjamin Frizel, William Wyatt, Edward Payne, Nathaniel Fostick, Nathaniel Thayer, Isaac Parker, Robert Goddard, and Robert Patterson, "Appendix" to *A Short Narrative*, 48, 40, 43, 36, 16, 16, 25, 55, 28, 32, 36.

<sup>30</sup>John Tudor Diary, March, 1770, John Tudor Papers, 1732–1793, MHS.

<sup>31</sup>Deposition of Richard Palmes, "Appendix" to *A Short Narrative*, 40.

<sup>32</sup>John Rowe Diary, March 6, 1770; Deposition of Ephraim Fenno, "Appendix" to *A Short Narrative*, 71.

<sup>33</sup>John Amory to Samuel Eliot, March 13, 1770, Letters of John & Jonathan Amory at the time of the Stamp Act and of the Revolution, vol. 145, Amory Family Papers, MHS.

the crowd in removing the troops and securing Boston from them.

The existence and proliferation of this interpretation posed two potential problems for the Sons of Liberty and their allies. In the most immediate sense, it contradicted the image of an orderly resistance carefully calibrated to meet specific desired ends that the patriot leadership had crafted for itself over the previous two years. The ropewalk workers and then the townspeople, principally its working elements, had seized control of the streets and the surrounding countryside and used their assembled strength to overawe their enemies and force them to consent to removing the troops from Boston. The violence that the town meeting had decried had become the most effective means of confronting its enemies, not because it was finely adapted to the situation, but because it inspired fear in moderate men such as Amory, Rowe, and Tudor, to say nothing of Dalrymple and Hutchinson.

Perhaps the implicit quarrel over credit for the removal of the troops would have passed without incident, but another group of observers seized on this narrative as evidence of Bostonians' unruly inclinations. The Sons of Liberty's reliance on violent means to bring dissenters in-line with their plans had been a regular theme of both Thomas Hutchinson's and Governor Francis Bernard's correspondence throughout the Townshend protests.<sup>34</sup> The street fighting on March 5th to these men and their allies offered proof of these assertions and made it clear that self-styled patriots were ungovernable and violent men. To emphasize this point, Bernard and Hutchinson encouraged the compilation of an account of the deaths in King Street entitled "The Case of Thomas Preston of the 29th Regiment," which made the case that the Sons of Liberty's penchant for violence had led to the tragic events and sent it to be

<sup>34</sup>Sir Francis Bernard to Earl of Shelburne, March 21, 1768, Sparks Manuscripts, Papers Relating to New England, vol. 2, George Chalmers Manuscripts; Hutchinson to Thomas [Commodore] Hood, Oct. 30, 1769; Hutchinson to Thomas Gage, October 29, 1769, Thomas Hutchinson Letterbooks, Massachusetts Archives, Vol. 26, Massachusetts State Archives, Boston.

published in England.<sup>35</sup> Hutchinson's explanation for his consent to the withdrawal of the troops leaned heavily on the image of a population griped by a violent rage. The lieutenant governor wrote to Lord Hillsborough that "there was a moral certainty that the people of this Town would have taken to their arms and that the neighbouring Towns would have joined them which would have brought on infinite confusion and if any violence had been begun much bloodshed."<sup>36</sup> The propagation of such reports would have strengthened Hutchinson and his allies in the eyes of the British ministry, but they also were shared by moderates such as Amory and Rowe, among Bostonians disillusioned with the patriot-led resistance to Parliamentary taxation.<sup>37</sup>

In this context of clashing memories and narratives, the patriot leadership offered an alternative vision of what had happened on the evening of March 5th, one calculated to refute the image of coordinated crowd violence and intimidation offered by both their allies in the street and enemies in the government. This effort appeared in the three versions of the Massacre that appeared in print in Boston in the week immediately following the events in King Street: an article that appeared in the *Boston Gazette*,<sup>38</sup> a broadside entitled *A Particular Account of the Most Barbarous and Horrid Massacre*

<sup>35</sup>"An account of Proceedings at Boston From February 7 to March 14th, 1770." Sparks Manuscripts, Papers Relating to New England, vol. 2, George Chalmers Manuscripts; "The Case of Thomas Preston of the 29th Regiment," *Public Advertiser*, April 28, 1770, *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, vol. 7, *Transactions*, 1900–1902 (Boston: The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1905), 4, 6–10.

<sup>36</sup>Thomas Hutchinson to Lord Hillsborough, March 1770, Thomas Hutchinson Letterbooks, Mass. Archives, vol. 26.

<sup>37</sup>The colonists' anxiety in this regard appears in the decision to call a meeting to respond to "The Case of Thomas Preston," and the letter it produced explaining its numerous defects; *Pub. of the Col. Soc. of Mass.*, 7:12–19. For the anxiety in general, see the letter to the Duke of Richmond, "Appendix" to *A Short Narrative*, 86–88.

<sup>38</sup>The *Gazette* account, probably composed by its publishers and prominent Sons of Liberty, Benjamin Edes and John Gill, was subsequently distributed throughout the colonies thereby dictating how the Massacre was perceived throughout North America. It appeared in *Connecticut Journal*, March 16, 1770; *New Hampshire Gazette*, March 16, 1770; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, March 22, 1770; *South Carolina Gazette*, April 7, 1770; Purdie & Dixon's *Virginia Gazette*, April 5, 1770; an edited and abbreviated version also appeared in the *Maryland Gazette*, April 5, 1770 and the *Georgia Gazette*, April 11, 1770.

*Committed in King Street*, and *A Short Narrative of the Horrid Massacre in Boston*. The last was a narrative of events pieced together from depositions given by eyewitnesses in the days immediately following the Massacre by a committee selected by the town meeting consisting of prominent Sons of Liberty James Bowdoin, Joseph Warren, and Samuel Pemberton. Though not immediately released, its contents circulated widely within Boston and beyond, and was almost surely composed with the idea of offering the patriots' public version of the Massacre.<sup>39</sup>

These publications underscored the dangers crowd action as a means of opposing imperial policy and made the case for the crowd's support for the Sons' efforts by transforming the brawl in the streets into a massacre. This version of events portrayed the events in King Street as part of an elaborate conspiracy on the part of the British government and their allies that had been foiled by the careful observation of the Sons of Liberty who had prevented working-class Bostonians' predilection for violence from producing an even greater catastrophe. These accounts combined the conspiracy with a reworking of the events on the fateful evening: they minimized the role of an unruly crowd that would have struck fear in the hearts of moderate Bostonians and emboldened the crowd and its leaders to take similar action in the future. In place of the crowd, the patriots offered a collection of youths, individuals, and sensible Bostonians whose roles as victims in the confrontation underscored the limits of violent confrontation and exposed the cruelty of the troops and their abettors. Finally, these authors shifted responsibility for the removal of the troops to the reasoned discussion between prominent Sons of Liberty and the prudent behavior of town representatives, imperial officials, and military officers. In short, the patriots' account of the events on March 5th created the Massacre. In the process, they equated legitimate authority with the power of observation and reason and

<sup>39</sup>A *Particular Account of the Most Barbarous and Horrid Massacre! Committed in King-Street* (Boston: John Boyles, 1770); Zobel, *The Boston Massacre*, 213–14.



portrayed the crowd's violent actions as, at best, a false form of power or, at worst, an invitation to disaster.

The first step in creating the Massacre lay in exposing a conspiracy that made the fighting in the streets on the evening of March 5th part of a much broader and more nefarious campaign against Bostonians.<sup>40</sup> Conspiracy theories proliferated in the eighteenth century. These theories had their roots in the belief that the world was governed by universal laws discoverable through reason and, consequently, that any action for which no observable cause could be identified must be the result of an unseen conspiratorial hand pursuing some malicious, hidden end.<sup>41</sup> Of course, because conspiracies could not be seen, their exposure required investigation, a process that subtly shifted authority away from those who merely controlled the streets and to those who could discover the "true" explanation. Thus, when seen through a conspiratorial lens, neither the confrontation between soldiers and civilians on March 5th nor the events that preceded them could constitute a satisfactory explanation for what had happened. At best, they were the tip of an iceberg that needed to be fully exposed to be understood; at worst, they were distractions carefully fabricated by the enemies of American liberty to provide cover for their other more wicked schemes. In either case, the existence of a conspiracy conveyed the ultimate legitimacy to those who exposed it, thereby reducing the contributions of the men and women in the street to witnesses or victims of a plot they did not fully comprehend.

As the account in the New York paper and the memories recorded in the depositions made clear, an alternative, viable explanation for the event already existed so the patriots had to manufacture the sense of uncertainty that required a conspiracy to explain the events. Thus, where New York's account of March 5th began with the recent history of the conflict

<sup>40</sup>Zobel notes the length to which the patriots went to propagate the notion of a conspiracy, particularly one tied to the customs service, but does not speculate on the implications of this argument for the Massacre; *The Boston Massacre*, 210–12.

<sup>41</sup>Gordon S. Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 39 (1982): 401–41.

between the soldiers and civilians, Boston's patriot leadership framed their narratives in a light that raised more questions about those events' origins than they provided answers. The *Boston Gazette* began its report by reminding readers that the troops had arrived "under a Pretense" of "supporting the Laws and aiding the Civil Authority" but "in Reality to inforce oppressive Measures; to awe & control the legislative as well as executive Power of the Province, and to quell a Spirit of Liberty." The author proceeded to connect the duplicitous circumstances surrounding the troops' arrival with the actions of a "few persons amongst us" who "had determin'd to use all their Influence to procure so destructive a Measure with a View to their securely enjoying the Profits of an American Revenue."<sup>42</sup> Framed in this manner, the fatal events in King Street became part of a pattern of behavior in which actions did not correspond with statements and in which unseen actors furthered their own interests at the expense of the community. All was not what it seemed in the relationship between the troops and the people of Boston, the paper implied, and readers should keep that in mind when considering the events of March 5th.

With these larger uncertainties, the *Gazette* highlighted a history of the conflict between soldiers and civilians that made it unlikely that an explanation of the events in King Street or their importance could be understood in the context of the evening alone. Instead, the *Gazette* called readers' attention to the string of violent contests that preceded the fatal confrontations on the 5th, but, unlike the New York report noting that the soldiers had come out the worse for wear, the Boston paper ended its brief account by hinting at a broader conspiracy: "why" the perpetrators of these various assaults had "as yet escaped the Punishment due to their Crimes," the paper concluded, "may be soon Matter of Enquiry by the Representatives Body of this People."<sup>43</sup> A *Particular Account* noted that the "most cruel and inhuman Massacre" had occurred despite the town having "Remonstrated in the highest Tokens of

<sup>42</sup>*Boston Gazette*, March 12, 1770.

<sup>43</sup>*Boston Gazette*, March 12, 1770.

Resentment against the Danger of subjecting a free and peaceable Government to the horrors of a Military Power.”<sup>44</sup> Why, the report implicitly asked, had such a predictable event been allowed to occur? The *Gazette* added another layer of uncertainty by pointing out that after the ropewalk confrontation “Diverse Stories” were “propagated among the soldiers, that serv’d to agitate their Spirits”: notably a reputedly sober sergeant who had gone missing and supposed to “have been murdered by the Townsmen” and “hid” at the ropewalk, only for him to turn up two days later “unhurt, in a House of Pleasure.”<sup>45</sup> These questions and coincidences suggested that something more was at work in the months, weeks, and days leading up to the Massacre than violent roughhousing between soldiers and civilians; some unseen hand appeared to be encouraging conflict by denying justice to one side and provoking misunderstandings and ill-will on the other. The more readers learned, in other words, the more the obvious explanations for the affair fell away, to be replaced by the outlines of something more sinister than a street brawl—a Massacre that could only be fully comprehended through further careful investigation.

That investigation of the conspiracy allowed patriot authors to shift readers’ attention away from what had happened in the streets and to the process of reasoned observation and analysis that would provide Bostonians with the truth. *A Particular Account* made no sweeping allegation, but it did include a telling exchange between a civilian and an army officer that hinted at some larger evil plot at work. Samuel Atwood, on seeing British soldiers fighting boys in the street, asked “if they intended to murder the people?” They answered “Yes by God,” and then slashed him with a sword for his trouble; when the presumably confused Atwood asked some officers to explain the troops’ behavior, they responded, somewhat ominously, “you’ll see by and by.”<sup>46</sup> The *Gazette* spoke to the question of conspiracy more directly, informing readers that “Evidences already

<sup>44</sup>*A Particular Account of the Horrid Massacre.*

<sup>45</sup>*Boston Gazette*, March 12, 1770.

<sup>46</sup>*A Particular Account of the Horrid Massacre.*

collected” showed that the soldiers had made “many Threatenings” against the town. The author would “not pretend to say that there was any preconcerted Plan” on the part of the soldiers, but his promise that “when the Evidences are published the World will judge” suggested that such a plan would eventually be uncovered.<sup>47</sup> This framing of the Massacre directed readers’ attention away from the workers and the soldiers who had brawled in the street and towards the men behind the scenes; the cryptic officers who encouraged their soldiers’ misbehavior and the town’s investigators seeking to make sense of the accumulated evidence. It was this last group who, through their reasoned investigation, would uncover the truth behind the Massacre, and deliver the town from the conspiracy against the lives and liberties of its inhabitants.

Lest readers believe that the removal of the troops had rendered the investigations irrelevant, the *Gazette* ended their reporting on the Massacre with additional, tantalizing claim. “A Servant Boy of one Manwaring the Tide-waiter,” it seems, had deposed that he had “by the Order and Encouragement of his Superiors had discharged a Musket several Times from one of the Windows of the House in King Street, hired by the Commissioners and Custom House Officers.” This shocking development, the author suggested, would allow Bostonians to “be able to account” for an assault on James Otis by a customs officer the previous fall, as well as “the Message” delivered by one Richard Wilmot, “who came from the same House” on King Street, to Ebenezer Richardson who had fired on a crowd in front of his house and killed the young apprentice Christopher Seider; and, of course, the Massacre itself. Thus, this opened “up such a scene of Villainy acted by a dirty Banditti, as must astonish the Public.”<sup>48</sup> The conspiracy, it seems, also included members of the customs service, who, unlike the troops, remained in Boston after the Massacre, and, were these reports true, remained free to conspire against the lives and liberties of the colonists.

<sup>47</sup>A *Particular Account of the Horrid Massacre*.

<sup>48</sup>A *Particular Account of the Horrid Massacre*.

The town-published *A Short Narrative of The Horrid Massacre* certainly claimed to have delivered the goods on that point. In addition to confirming that the troops had been summoned on false pretenses to intimidate the people into compromising their liberties, *A Short Narrative* also identified the commissioners of the customs as the parties most responsible for the Massacre. They had “contrived, and executed plans for exciting disturbances and tumults, which otherwise would probably never have existed,” as well as meddled in the commercial and political affairs of the colony, creating the potent cocktail of hostility from which emerged “the causes of the late horrid massacre.”<sup>49</sup> As to reports that shots had been fired from the house the commissioners had rented on King Street, the *Narrative* temporized. It informed readers that some of the “depositions” the town had taken mentioned “that several guns were fired . . . from the Custom-House; before which this shocking scene was exhibited,” but it refused to say anything definitive as the town was “enquiring into” the affair.<sup>50</sup>

The definitive conclusion that the commissioners lay behind the Massacre, and the strong suggestion that someone in their house had played a role in it, was an important part of the conspiracy and the Sons of Liberty’s attempt to affirm their control over the events. The attempt to link the commissioners to the affair caught them and their supporters off guard, and both struggled to return the public’s attention to crowd’s behavior that evening.<sup>51</sup> It did not hurt that the customs service enjoyed a poor reputation among Bostonians of all stripes, creating the potential for common ground among the patriot leadership and the men who had fought the soldiers on the street. An investigation that blamed the Customs Office for the Massacre could expect to be welcomed by most, if not all, Bostonians.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup>*A Short Narrative*, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11.

<sup>50</sup>*A Short Narrative*, 13, 16, 17.

<sup>51</sup>Hutchinson to Sir Francis Bernard, March 30, 1770, Hutchinson Letterbooks, MHS.

<sup>52</sup>The hostility between the town and the customs officials appears in Zobel, *The Boston Massacre*, 48–85; Archer, *As if an Enemy’s Country*, 65–81; Benjamin L. Carp, *Rebels Rising: Cities and the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford

In the process of exposing the conspiracy behind the Massacre, the *Narrative* moved to the second phase of the patriots' reinterpretation of the event—discrediting the crowd. The town's report did not criticize the crowd's behavior directly but rather pointed to how it had left the people vulnerable to the conspiracy crafted by the commissioners and their allies among the soldiery. The *Narrative* identified the fight at the ropewalk, for example, as giving "occasion to the melancholy event," and proceeded to rehearse the familiar story of a "boxing match" between a soldier and worker escalating into a brawl before adding its own ending. Where previous accounts had stressed the authorities' failure to impose order, and celebrated the physical exploits of the workers in driving off the troops, this version of the affair ended when "Mr. Gray," the owner of the ropewalk "being alarmed interposed, and with the assistance of some gentlemen prevented any further disturbance." After which, "to satisfy the soldiers and punish the man who had been the occasion of the first difference, and as an example to the rest," Gray "turned him out of his service." Gray also met with Colonel Dalrymple "and with him concerted measure for preventing further mischief."<sup>53</sup> In contrast to the earlier accounts where the actions of the crowd had succeeded and those of Gray or a justice of the peace had failed, readers now had a version of events that assigned the ropewalk workers a much more problematic role in the coming of the Massacre. Order had not been restored by these men's violent collective

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University Press, 2007), 43–48. On the importance of the conspiracy over the course of the summer and fall appears in *Boston Gazette*, April 9, 1770; Henry Hulton to Mr. Le Gen de Walmoden, May 5, 1770, Henry Hulton Letterbooks, Houghton Library, and Thomas Hutchinson to Earl of Hillsborough, March 30, 1770, transcripts of the Thomas Hutchinson Letterbooks, MHS. The accusation of a Customs House conspiracy ultimately led nowhere. The servant's testimony was the only eyewitness account from within the house, which was vehemently denied by Edward Mainwaring in the *Gazette*, and though the tide-waiter was tried for his part in the Massacre, it was the servant, Charlotte Bourgate, who was convicted of perjury (though the intervention of the crowd rescued Bourgate from his assigned punishment). *Boston Gazette*, March 26, 1770; *The Trial of William Wemms* (Boston: Flemming, 1770), 214–17; Samuel Quincy to Robert Treat Paine, December 16, 1770, Robert Treat Paine Papers, MHS; Diary of John Rowe, March 28, 1771.

<sup>53</sup>A *Short Narrative*, 16–17.

action, which seemed now to only threaten further escalation and chaos, but for the judicious and timely intervention of the ropewalk owner and other gentlemen. It was Gray's willingness to discipline his own workers and the moderate reason and the law-driven authority it reflected that the authors of the *Narrative* suggested had been the only hope of nipping the Massacre in the bud.

Of course, the agreement between Gray and Dalrymple failed, but, as the account made clear, the roots of that failure lay, inadvertently but undeniably, with the crowd's actions at the ropewalks. The fights, the authors explained, "made a strong impression on the minds of the soldiers," and they set out "to revenge those repeated repulses," and "formed a combination to commit some outrage on the inhabitants of the town indiscriminately" on "the evening of the 5th." Nine depositions followed offering some variation on Caleb Swan's declaration that, on hearing the bells ring for fire on the night of the 5th, the wife of one of soldiers in Preston's company had said "it was not fire," but that "the town was too haughty and too proud; and that many of their arses would laid low before the morning."<sup>54</sup> The various encounters between soldiers and civilians in which the former had always been routed now took on a somewhat different light. Far from projecting the crowd's utility in combatting the troops and the authority they represented, these confrontations became the unintended, but no less real, sources for the resentment among the soldiers that led them to plot the destruction of as many innocent civilians as they could find.

If the long-running violence between soldiers and civilians had laid the foundation for the Massacre, those same civilians' willingness to meet violence with violence produced the conspiracy's dreadful conclusion in King Street. The *Narrative* offered seven depositions to illustrate how the "violent proceedings" of the soldiers, "and their going into King-street, 'quarrelling and fighting with the people' . . . was immediately introductory to the grand catastrophe." The soldiers' route

<sup>54</sup>A *Short Narrative*, 17–21.

meant that they “must pass the centry [*sic*] posted at the westerly corner of the Custom House” where “the bloody tragedy was acted.” Thus, when their “outrageous behavior and the threats” had “occasioned the ringing of the meeting house bell,” it “brought out a number of the inhabitants,” who “were naturally led to Kingstreet [*sic*]” where the soldiers “had made a stop.” Once assembled, the sentry at the commissioners’ house, by “pushing at” the crowd of boys “with his bayonet,” prompted the throwing of snowballs and the summoning of the main guard. These soldiers egged matters on by pushing “at several persons with their bayonets” so “that it appeared they intended to create a disturbance,” a suspicion no doubt increased by the report that “Captain Preston seemed to be in great haste and much agitated.” At this point, the account concluded, as snowballs continued to rain upon the troops, “Capt. Preston is said to have ordered them to fire,” leading to the eleven casualties.<sup>55</sup> The account did not exactly blame the townspeople for their own deaths, but it painted a clear picture of a conspiracy which provoked them to anger and then led to a prearranged retribution when the soldiers and the customs officers, or their servants, fired on the crowd. As if to reinforce this idea, the *Short Narrative* included a print by Paul Revere/Henry Pelham of the deadly scene, with suitably vengeful soldiers and an unseen individual in the Commissioners’ rented house firing into a crowd of shocked and frightened civilians [Figure 1].

Tragically, the crowd’s willingness to confront the soldiers and exact revenge had left the townspeople at the mercy of the schemes of the designing men in the army and customs service who made eight Bostonians pay with their lives.

Discovering the conspiracy behind the Massacre, however, did not resolve all anxieties among moderate Bostonians about rowdy behavior; effective or not, violent confrontations pointed more towards anarchy than order. The patriots attempted to dismiss any concerns along these lines by changing the nature, and even identity, of the people in the streets on that fatal evening. If the town had been aroused by the trouble in the

<sup>55</sup>A *Short Narrative*, 26, 25, 26, 27, 28.





FIG. 1.

streets and some of its people deceitfully led to their slaughter, the fighting, various reports suggested, had not involved the kind of crowd that had destroyed Hutchinson's house and haunted moderates' memories. According to both the *Gazette* and the *Particular Account*, for example, as the soldiers sallied out from their barracks to fight civilians, they encountered not workers or sailors, but individuals such as Atwood and "youths," "lads," and "boys." When the final bloody scene unfolded, it pitted a crowd consisting of "mostly lads" throwing snowballs against the armed soldiers who, inexplicably, responded to this mild aggression with bullets.<sup>56</sup> The ropewalk workers who had figured so prominently in the *New York Journal* and the depositions and whose presence might suggest the sort of unruly

<sup>56</sup>*Boston Gazette*, March 12, 1770; *A Particular Account of the Horrid Massacre*.

crowd moderates feared had disappeared to be replaced by boys whose presence, William Pencak has argued, would have connoted play and humor and been a far cry from people likely to be involved in unrestrained violence.<sup>57</sup>

The way in which the youths responded to the attacks of the soldiers, at least up to the fatal encounter in front of the commissioners' rented house, would have added another veneer to this image of a non-threatening crowd. Youth gangs and their violent encounters, according to Barry Levy, were an important part of the socialization process in New England ports; they instructed young men in the harsh realities of life at sea while giving them experience of command, lessons in the importance of cooperation, and the importance of the judicious and appropriate use of violence.<sup>58</sup> Evidence of just this sort of didactic violence abounded in the accounts of the Massacre. According to both the *Gazette* and the *Particular Account*, the fight started when "four youths" had encountered "a soldier brandishing a broad sword of an uncommon size against the walls" accompanied by a "person of a mean countenance armed with a cudgel." When one boy "admonished" the other "to take care of the sword," the soldier assaulted both, leading to a brawl in which one boy "knock'd the soldier down, but let him get up again," and as boys gathered, they "drove" the soldiers "back to the barrack, where the boys stood some time as it were to keep them in"; when the soldiers emerged "with drawn cutlasses, clubs and bayonets" the "unarmed boys and young folk . . . stood them a little while, but finding the inequality of their equipment dispersed."<sup>59</sup> While soldiers attacked the victims mercilessly and indiscriminately, the boys watched out for and advised one another, came to the aid of their fellows in need,

<sup>57</sup>William Pencak, "Play as Prelude to Revolution: Boston, 1765–1776," in *Riot and Revelry in Early America*, ed. Pencak, et al. (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 2002), 127–30. The defense of the soldiers mounted by John Adams and Josiah Quincy targeted this part of the patriots' version of the Boston Massacre, suggesting both the degree to which it constituted an essential part of the patriots' claim to legitimacy and the degree to which the strategies of both sets of court room antagonists reinforced the same vision of legitimate authority; Zobel, *Boston Massacre*, 267–94.

<sup>58</sup>Levy, *Town Born*, 166–72.

<sup>59</sup>*Boston Gazette*, March 12, 1770; *A Particular Account of the Horrid Massacre*.

measured their use of violence against their opponents, and learned when discretion constituted the better part of valor. Thus, even as the young men fought and brawled with the soldiers, the “boys” actions remained well within the boundaries of what the community would have considered as socially useful violence.

The patriots’ reports of the Massacre attempted to ease concerns about the threat to the community posed by the people gathered in the streets in other ways as well. The *Gazette*, for example, printed the names of the principal actors among the townspeople. “Edward Archbald, William Merchant, Francis Archbald, and John Leech” were the youths who first engaged the soldiers, and “John Hicks” was the “young lad” who came to their assistance. Samuel Atwood witnessed the soldiers’ abuse of the boys, received the cryptic warning about the troops’ violent behavior, and, alone and unarmed, was assaulted by them. Benjamin Leigh, who the paper helpfully pointed out was “now undertaker in the Delph Manufactory,” had persuaded Captain Preston to “draw off his men” after firing on the crowd.<sup>60</sup> Names, of course, added credibility to the investigation, but they also changed the nature of the people assembling in the street. Eighteenth-century crowds, particularly those such as the one that attacked Thomas Hutchinson’s house, required, at least in public discussion, anonymity—both to shield the participants from prosecution and to claim to speak for the community, not just parts of it.<sup>61</sup> Identifying the individuals involved in the Massacre made it clear, to both anxious moderates and any ambitious members of the crowd, that the people in the street could not expect the screen of anonymity to either cover their actions or cloak them in the mantle of community sanction. Moderates, in other words, had little reason to view the people assembling in the streets as a precursor to the return of the threatening crowds of the Stamp Act era, and the people

<sup>60</sup>*Boston Gazette*, March 12, 1770.

<sup>61</sup>Charles Tilly, “WUNC,” and William Egginton, “Intimacy and Anonymity, or How the Audience Became a Crowd,” *Crowds*, ed. Jeffery T. Schnapp and Matthew Tiens (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 289–306, 97–110 respectively.

assembling in the streets were simultaneously cautioned not to harbor any such ambition.

The *Short Narrative* also addressed moderates' concerns over the Massacre licensing the crowd and the possibility that any of the crowd's members believed that the community would sanction similar actions in the future. The Revere/Pelham engraving on the pamphlet's opening pages [Figure 1] revealed a gathering of unarmed men, and at least one woman, whose hats, coats, breeches, and shawls denoted a gathering of respectable inhabitants of the middling sort. The authors' use of names and the formatting of the text itself also assured readers that the people gathering before the commissioners' house were not a particularly ominous or disruptive crowd. The report conformed to a simple style in which general conclusions were suggested followed by summaries of depositions clearly attributed to particular persons, each presented in its own discreet, supporting paragraph. The result was to create the image of the Massacre, from its prelude to denouement, as something experienced by individuals scattered across the community with minimal if any connection to each other, and certainly without one that foretold or legitimated a crowd.

The *Short Narrative* further reassured any concerned moderates by judiciously assigning the titles Mr. and Mrs. to particular deponents, as well as emphasizing the dependent status of others.<sup>62</sup> Preserving socially significant identifiers, the people

<sup>62</sup>While most deponents were introduced only with the names, the merchants, Henry Bass and Bartholomew Kneeland, and the latter's acquaintance Matthias King, were introduced with the honorific Mr. as were stationer Henry Knox and coroner/physician Robert Pierpont; two of the six deposed women, Mary Russell and Mary Gardner, were given the title Mrs., as was the sister of Mary Brailford's master, Mary Thayer (though the depositions text refers to her as Miss); James Kirkland was identified as Captain. Mary Brailsford's conspicuous reference to living in the house Mr. Amos Thayer and his sister Miss Mary Thayer marked her as a servant; Matthew Adam's deposed he was a servant, and Daniel Calse's reference to working in his father's shop suggests a degree of dependence as well; *A Short Narrative*, 21, 23, 28, 20, 30, 17–18. In other sections, the use of "Mr." is different but still seems to have been a way to make distinctions. Among the victims of the Massacre, for example, it appears to have referred to death, maturity, and whiteness; Gray, Caldwell, Maverick, and Carr received it, as did Payne, Green Patterson, and Parker, while Attucks, and the youths Monk and Clark, did not; *A Short Narrative*, 11–12. In the *Narrative's* account of the Massacre, readers were encouraged to consult the depositions of a group of men

in the street represented a cross section of the community, making it clear the Massacre affected more than the lads in King Street. The investigation, in other words, portrayed the event as unfolding within existing social hierarchies and gave no indication that they had been eroded as a result of it or that anyone should interpret it as an opportunity to commence any such erosion. Just as the process and presentation of the depositions mattered, so too did the choices of depositions to present. The committee chose to name forty-one of the 104 depositions collected. The depositions of those Bostonians attacked in the street came primarily from men travelling alone or in the company of one other person who either had experienced or observed the soldiers' random attacks on other individuals.<sup>63</sup> Depositions that presented the confrontation between the soldiers and civilians in a light more reminiscent of the New York paper's accounts of workers ringing bells to summon other armed townsmen received no mention; included in this group, notably, were the accounts of two of the youths—Francis Archibald and John Leach—who had figured prominently in the earlier accounts of the street fights that led to the Massacre.<sup>64</sup>

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referred to as "Messrs.," some of those so designated—Blass, Benjamin Palmes (merchant), Knox, Kirkwood, Josiah Simpson (shop owner), Samuel Atwood (oysterman from Wellfleet)—appear to have been men of at least modest standing, while others—the laborers Drowne and Samuel Condon, the youths Robert Polley and Daniel Usher, and mariner Benjamin Fizzel—may have benefitted from the association; where Gillam Bass and John Hickling stand in any social hierarchy is unclear.

<sup>63</sup>A *Short Narrative*, 21–25.

<sup>64</sup>Depositions of William La Baron, Nathaniel Thayer, Isaac Parker, John Leach, William Tant, Thomas Cain, Francis Archibald, Nathaniel Fosdick, William Wyatt, and Robert Goddard are in the "Appendix" to *A Short Narrative*, 15, 16–27, 27–28, 30–32, 35–37, 40–42, 57. Of the named depositions, Benjamin Frizel, Samuel Drowne, and Josiah Simpson made reference to organized and armed citizens, though no mention was made of those parts of their depositions in the *Narrative*. As one of the witnesses to the shooting from the Custom House, Frizel could hardly have been excluded; Drowne, a witness at the Custom House, testified to hearing Preston give the command to fire, making his inclusions necessary as well; Simpson's portrayal of angry civilians confronting the soldiers was undoubtedly more than balanced by his portrayal of himself as dissuading them from attacking the soldiers. "Appendix," *A Short Narrative*, 48–49, 54–55, 50–51.

This pattern of transforming the people in the street into individuals at the expense of any collective identity took on a particularly dramatic tone in the portrayal of the Massacre's victims. Both the *Gazette's* and *Particular Account's* descriptions of the men killed and injured in the confrontation in King Street emphasized individual qualities and discouraged readers from perceiving them as having any group identity. Samuel Gray died "on the Spot, the Ball entering his Head, and beating off a large Portion of his Skull." Crispus Attucks, "a mulatto man, who was born in Framingham, but lately belonged to New Providence and was here in order to go for North-Carolina," was "also killed instantly; two Balls entering his Breast, one of them in special goring the Right Lobe of the Lungs, and a great Part of the Liver most horribly"; James Caldwell was "mate of Capt. Morton's vessel" and was "killed, by two Balls entering his Back." Samuel Maverick, "a promising youth of 17 years of age, son of the widow Maverick and an apprentice to Mr. Greenwood," was another casualty; Ivory Turner was "mortally wounded, a Ball went through his Belly, and was cut out at his Back," and he "died the next Morning." Christopher Monk, "about 17 years of age, an apprentice to Mr. Walker Shipwright," was "wounded, a Ball entered his Back, about 4 Inches above the Left Kidney, near the Spine." John Clark, also seventeen and whose "parents live at Medford," was "an apprentice to Capt. Samuel Howard" and was wounded when "a Ball entered just above his Groin, and came out at his Hip, on the opposite Side." Edward Payne was a "Merchant" who "received a Ball in his Arm, which shattered some of the Bones"; John Green, a "Taylor," had "received a Ball just under his Hip, and lodged in the under Part of his Thigh"; Robert Patterson, "a seafaring man, who was the person that had his trowsers shot through in Richardson's affair," had "a Ball" shot "through his Right Arm, and he suffered great Loss of Blood"; Patrick Carr was "about 30 Years of Age" and "work'd with Mr. Field, Leather Breeches-maker in Queen street," and was wounded when "a Ball entered near his Hip, and went out at his Side." Finally, David Parker, "an apprentice to Mr. Eddy the

Wheelwright” was wounded when “a Ball entered in his Thigh.”<sup>65</sup> If, as Ernst Canetti has argued, crowds derived their power and legitimacy from the merging of individuals into a single collective identity, this description of the casualties made it clear that the men facing the soldiers were not a crowd.<sup>66</sup> Individuals distinguishable by their place of origin, their age, their employment, and the injuries that killed or wounded them were brought together only on the page and the implicit accident of being in the same wrong place at the same wrong time. This individualization was accompanied by a clear insertion of the victims into vertical hierarchies; age, employment, and race situated the victims in relationship to those above and below them; even those who shared the common designation as apprentices were distinguished both by their masters and the trades that they were learning.

Subsequent reports did not reproduce the same graphic details about the victims or their injuries, but they persisted in undermining any suggestion that they constituted a crowd. The *Narrative* reported the location of “Mr.” Gray’s, the “mulatto” Attucks’s, and “Mr.” Caldwell’s fatal wounds, but without the anatomical detail found in the other two accounts. Similarly, distinct entries reported that Maverick, “a youth of seventeen,” and “Mr.” Carr had been “mortally wounded” and subsequently died; one entry noted that the “youths” Monk and Clark had been “dangerously wounded” and that it was “apprehended they will die”; another entry recorded that “Mr.” Payne, “merchant,” had been “wounded”; and, finally, a single entry noted that “Messer’s” Green, Paterson, and Parker had been “dangerously wounded.”<sup>67</sup> Arranged by severity of wound, the victims were less individualized than in the previous accounts, but in this manner of presentation, they were still anything but a crowd. Age, race, and, in Payne’s case, respectable occupation

<sup>65</sup>*Boston Gazette*, March 12, 1770; *A Particular Account of the Horrid Massacre*.

<sup>66</sup>Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1984).

<sup>67</sup>*A Short Narrative*, 11–12.

preserved the vertical hierarchies that separated the participants from each other, while suggestions of a broader group identity—apprentice, tradesman, and sailor—had disappeared from the report.

These accounts of the Massacre made the crowd a voice of the community while at the same time suppressing it. They also provided Bostonians, including members of the crowd, with an alternative way of affirming their collective identity. This strategy hinged on replacing the physical experience of assembling, confronting, and combatting British soldiers as the evidence of community sentiment with an emotional response the Massacre produced among those who observed it or read the reports of its aftermath. In the case of the Massacre, the reports substituted emotion for physical experience and the social hierarchies and visions of legitimate authority they reflected as the defining experience of the event.<sup>68</sup> *A Particular Account*, for example, described how in the months prior to the Massacre Bostonians looked on “with the tenderest feelings of Humanity and Compassion,” as “INNOCENCE, in its defenseless state,” fell “an unseasonable Victim to the cowardly Rage of those merciless Miscreants, whose Glory is shame.”<sup>69</sup> The *Gazette*, similarly, described the “Squabbles” between the “Inhabitants of the Town” and soldiers immediately prior to the Massacre as the “natural” tendency of the former to “resent for themselves” the abusive soldiers whom the law had failed to hold to account. Both accounts agreed that in the Massacre’s immediate aftermath “Great Numbers” of Bostonians “assembled at the Place where this tragical scene had been acted; their Feelings may be better conceived than express’d.”<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup>Nicole Eustace, *Passion is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Sara Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, & the Culture of Performance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993).

<sup>69</sup>*A Particular Account of the Horrid Massacre*.

<sup>70</sup>*Boston Gazette*, March 12, 1770; *A Particular Account of the Horrid Massacre*.



In these versions of events, the crowd who fought and the people who observed the Massacre became one through their shared response first to the abusive practices of the soldiers and then the striking violence and barbarity of the Massacre. These accounts aesthetically transformed the crowd, making it an expression of community sentiment rooted in the understandable and widely shared sense of outrage Bostonians felt toward the soldiers.<sup>71</sup> They did so, however, without conveying to the crowd the same political authority and legitimacy displayed by those who had exposed the conspiracy. The eighteenth-century language of emotion, for example, privileged individual reactions that were shared by other like-minded observers, but these feelings did not constitute an expression of political interest or serve as a precursor to political action.<sup>72</sup> Thus, the call to feel compassion and appreciate resentment bound individuals in a community that implicitly acknowledged the legitimacy of the people's or crowd's complaints and anger without acknowledging them or the actions they had provoked as legitimate political activity.<sup>73</sup> That sense was particularly powerful in the final instance, where words had failed to describe an experience that could only be felt. At this pivotal juncture, the authors acknowledged the crowd and its feelings, but directed readers not outward to their fellow Bostonians in the streets, but inward to themselves and the emotions they felt to understand the true meaning of the Massacre. This inward turn also marked a necessary transition for those seeking to move beyond the aesthetic violence of the crowd and toward more purposeful political action. The same theories of emotion that validated the crowd's and town's reactions to the events of the evening also stressed that authority resided in those who could control their anger in a way the crowd had obviously failed to do.<sup>74</sup> Those who could control their feelings would lead the town

<sup>71</sup>Esteve, *The Aesthetics and Politics of the Crowd in American Literature*, 3.

<sup>72</sup>Eustace, *Passion is the Gale*, 103.

<sup>73</sup>Esteve, *The Aesthetics and Politics of the Crowd in American Literature*, 18–21.

<sup>74</sup>Eustace, *Passion is the Gale*, 190.

through these tragic events and, by extension, in opposition to ministerial plots against the people's lives and liberties that had produced them.

This basic assumption became quite clear in the manner in which these accounts of the Massacre explained how order had been restored. Left to their own devices, all three accounts implied, crowds would have pursued actions detrimental to their own interests and the town's. The *Gazette* described how after the Massacre outraged people stood "ready to run upon the very Muzzles of" the soldiers' "Muskets." Fortunately, the exertions of "Men of Influence and Weight with the People" prevented this catastrophe. These same men were then able "to procure" the people's "Compliance" with the lieutenant governor's request "to let the Matter subside for the Night" and accept his promise to "do all in his Power that Justice should be done, and the Law have its Course." They did so "by representing the horrible Consequences of a promiscuous and rash Engagement in the Night, and assuring" the assembled people "that such Measures would be taken in the Morning, as would be agreeable to their Dignity, and a more likely way of obtaining the best satisfaction for the Blood of their Fellow Townsmen."<sup>75</sup> If the soldiers and customs officers had entered into a conspiracy to attack the townspeople, only the timely intervention of those less affected by the events had prevented them from achieving their objective. *A Short Narrative* added particular emphasis to this point, by stressing that prior to the timely interference of the "men of the weight," the final stage in the conspiracy appeared to be ready to play out: "The soldiers outrageous on the one hand, and the inhabitants justly incensed against them on the other: both parties seeming disposed to come to action. In this case, the consequences would have been terrible."<sup>76</sup> Where the *New York Journal*, John Tudor, and Richard Palmes had suggested that the angry crowd confronting the soldiers had persuaded Hutchinson to quarter

<sup>75</sup>*Boston Gazette*, March 12, 1770.

<sup>76</sup>*A Short Narrative*, 31.

the troops, in these accounts that same crowd only appeared to be about to initiate its own destruction. Real power, these later accounts implied, lay in the ability to restrain oneself and allow the rule of law to carry the day, which the authors had promised was the surest way for the townspeople to preserve their lives and receive satisfaction for their losses.

If the patriot leadership and their allies gave themselves a vital role in anticipating the conspiracy and preventing its worst outcome, they also claimed responsibility for bringing about the final removal of the troops. Where the New York account had ultimately claimed that honor on behalf of the outraged people in the square with the united voice of the meeting the next day and the march of 40,000 supporters, the Boston accounts emphasized the carefully measured, reasoned response of the town's prominent men. Seated in the Old South Meeting House, the people heard "some animated speeches becoming the occasion" that produced "a Committee of 15 respectable Gentlemen" to go to the lieutenant governor and demand the troops be removed. When he dithered, the meeting appointed a committee of John Hancock, Samuel Adams, William Molineux, William Phillips, Dr. Joseph Warren, Joshua Henshaw, and Samuel Pemberton to convey "the unanimous Opinion of the Meeting" that the troops be removed. Faced with this delegation, Hutchinson asked the "Advice" of his Council who were "unanimous of opinion" that troops should be moved to Castle William in Boston harbor. In an extension of the events of the previous evening, the leading men of the community had met, discussed the situation, and concurred in a solution reflecting the opinion of the town. The town's praise of the "Wisdom and True Policy" of the "council and Col. Dalrymple" in pressuring the reluctant Hutchinson to remove the troops added further weight to the power and propriety of this more restrained and calibrated form of authority. Unsurprisingly, when it came to the armed men assembling from surrounding towns, the accounts emphasized that their fellow colonists "were deeply affected with our Distress," but by stressing that only "the Signal" was "wanting to bring" them to Boston, the authors effectively confined influence of the 40,000 armed men to that

of emotional support.<sup>77</sup> The power derived from careful observers applying reason to the Massacre had crafted a solution to Boston's occupation by British troops that addressed the particular needs of the circumstances with an application of a minimum of required force.<sup>78</sup>

The flurry of publications recounting the Boston Massacre did not end crowd actions or decisively settle the question of what role they would play in revolutionary politics or that of the early republic. They do, however, illustrate how a legitimate expression of opinions, primarily though not exclusively, of workers and artisans gradually became marginalized from the mainstream of American politics. In the years that followed, the Massacre became an oft-invoked reminder of the barbarity of the British Army and the corruption of imperial government and of the dangers of the crowd to both itself and, by extension, colonial resistance to Parliamentary authority. The first copies of the *Short Narrative*, for example, found their way into the streets in July 1770 as the crowd was again asserting its voice by tarring and feathering opponents, offering a seemingly timely reminder of the limitations and dangers of such strategies.<sup>79</sup> The assumptions contained in the publications, similarly, provided the script that both Whigs and their opponents would embrace in the soldiers' trials that fall, as the attorneys for the crown and town and Preston and his soldiers attempted to apportion blame to the parties by defining the true innocent victims of the other party's unreasonable predilection for violence. Thus, even in "losing" the trial, the Sons of Liberty "won" the argument that what mattered was not the success of the workers in driving the troops from town but identifying the true culprits who produced the Massacre and acquitted its perpetrators. At the same time, the people who had taken to

<sup>77</sup>*Boston Gazette*, March 12, 1770.

<sup>78</sup>Zobel hints at the contrived nature of the explanations for Hutchinson's and Dalrymple's actions in recounting councilor Royall Tyler's speech that made clear the real threat of violence the troops and their allies faced if they were not removed as the key point operating on the minds of the lieutenant governor and the lieutenant colonel. *The Boston Massacre*, 209–10.

<sup>79</sup>Zobel, *The Boston Massacre*, 229–32, 236.

the streets to confront and ultimately remove the British soldiers from Boston took on an ever more clearly defined role as the aesthetic representations of the Massacre were reduced in illuminated paintings and annual orations to being the tragic victims of a tyrannical conspiracy they neither understood nor were capable of halting without the guidance of their more restrained allies.<sup>80</sup> The Boston Massacre, in other words, became an annual reminder of the limits of the physical authority of the crowd and the superiority of the Sons of Liberty's vision of authority grounded in conduct that would bear the scrutiny of reason.

While historians should not romanticize crowds such as those that brawled with the soldiers in the streets of Boston in the winter and spring of 1770, neither should they dismiss what the story of the Massacre stripped of the crowd's actual participation says about the importance of Boston's patriots' claims to rule. Whatever its shortcomings, the idea that crowd action constituted a legitimate form of political participation provided the people in the streets with a means to define resistance to Great Britain in their own terms. In a way, perhaps, that gave artisans and laborers with little to sacrifice in terms of tea and imported finery a place as equals in the defense of colonial liberty, and in another way, that defined tyranny and oppression in economic terms, liberty in terms of prices and wages, as well as representation in matters of taxation.<sup>81</sup> Without the ability to enter into the debate on their own terms, however, the priorities of the sailors, apprentices, and laborers who took to the streets on the night of March 5th, 1770 could only shape resistance to Great Britain to the extent they were allowed to fit into the well-calibrated strategies of the patriot leadership. The transformation of the brawl in King Street into the Boston Massacre, in other words, underscores that the American Revolution came to define how people claimed to rule, and by

<sup>80</sup>Zobel, *The Boston Massacre*, 267–95, 301; Gustafson, *Eloquence is Power*, 184–95.

<sup>81</sup>On the economic grievances and interpretations of liberty and tyranny, see Smith, *The Freedoms We Have Lost*, 134–82.

extension, who could be welcomed into the corridors of power and who would be left out in the political cold.

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