

Document 3: John Adams and the Boston Massacre

On the cold night of March 5, 1770, a large group of colonists began taunting a small group of British soldiers stationed in Boston to guard the Boston Customs House. The number of British soldiers stationed in the colonies had steadily increased over the previous years to enforce British laws, especially the hated tax laws passed by Parliament in the aftermath of the French and Indian War. The colonists jeered at the soldiers, shouting at them, “bloody lobster backs!”. Some of the colonists lobbed snowballs at the soldiers, with some colonists packing the snow around rocks and throwing those.

As tensions reached a fever pitch, the soldiers fired into the crowd, killing five colonists and injuring several others. The incident quickly became a rallying point for anti-British sentiment in the American colonies and helped to fuel the growing movement for independence. Sons of Liberty leader Samuel Adams

had Boston engraver Paul Revere quickly produce an image known as The Bloody Massacre to be spread up and down the colony depicting the British as cold-blooded killers. In the court of Colonial public opinion, the event in Boston that night was murder. History still calls this event “the Boston Massacre”.

The soldiers were arrested and charged with murder. There was some doubt that these soldiers would get a fair trial due to the colonists' anger.

Local attorney- and cousin of Samuel Adams- John Adams played a key role in the aftermath. Despite his own strong opposition to British rule, Adams agreed to defend the soldiers who were charged with murder in the incident.

Adams argued that the soldiers had acted in self-defense, and he was successful in securing acquittals for all but two of the soldiers, who were found guilty of manslaughter and were punished by having their thumbs branded.

Although Adams faced criticism and even verbal abuse from some of his fellow colonists for defending the soldiers, he believed it necessary to uphold the rule of law and prevent mob justice and believed everyone deserved a fair trial.

Adams' role in the Boston Massacre trial helped to establish the principle of due process and the right to a fair trial, which would later become enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. It also helped to cement Adams'



reputation as a champion of the rule of law and individual rights, both of which would later play a key role in his role as a Founding Father of the United States.

Years later, Adams would write:

The Part I took in Defence of Cptn. Preston and the Soldiers procured me Anxiety and Obloquy [strong public criticism or verbal abuse] enough. It was, however, one of the most gallant, generous, manly, and disinterested Actions of my whole Life and one of the best Pieces of Service I ever rendered my Country. Judgment of Death against those Soldiers would have been as foul a Stain upon this Country as the Executions of the Quakers or Witches, anciently. As the Evidence was, the Verdict of the Jury was exactly right. This, however, is no Reason why the Town should not call the Action of that Night a Massacre, nor is it any Argument in favour of the Governor or Minister who caused them to be sent here. But it is the strongest Proofs of the Danger of Standing Armies.

Adapted From: <https://billofrightsinstitute.org/activities/john-adams-and-the-boston-massacre-trial-handout-a-narrative>

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