

Biased Reporting/Boston Massacre, 1770

Investigation: Comparing Accounts

Two people who've been in a fist fight are likely to give very different explanations of what happened. Aroused emotions cause accounts to be biased or "slanted." Some of these differences aren't intentional. When people are angry and excited, they may remember only the things that seemed unfair. Other differences may be intentional; people may try to gain sympathy by telling their stories in a certain way.

This is also true in historical documents. Accounts of value-threatening situations or events may be given what is now called "spin"—an intentional or unintentional bias.

In Boston on the evening of March 5, 1770, an event happened that has become known as the "Boston Massacre"—a confrontation between Boston residents and British soldiers. Following are three different accounts and a drawing describing what happened.

Identify differences in the four views.

John Tudor, a Boston merchant, was an eyewitness. Here's his account:

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

This unhappy affair began when some boys and young fellows threw snowballs at the sentry placed at the customhouse door. At this, eight or nine soldiers came to his aid. Soon after, a number of people collected. The Captain commanded the soldiers to fire, which they did, and three men were killed on the spot and several mortally wounded, one of which died the next morning. The Captain soon drew off his soldiers up to the main guard, if he had not done this, the results might have been terrible, for when the guns fired, the people were alarmed and set the bells a-ringing as if for a fire, which drew many to the place of action.

Lt. Governor Hutchinson, who was commander-in-chief, was sent for and came to the Council Chamber, where some of the judges waited. The Governor desired the crowd to separate about ten o'clock and go home peaceably. He said he would do all in his power to see that justice was done. The 29th Regiment was then under arms on the south side of the Townhouse, but the people insisted that the soldiers should be ordered to their barracks first before they would separate. When this was done the people separated about one o'clock.

Captain Preston was arrested by a warrant given to the high sheriff by Justices Dana and Tudor. He was questioned at about two o'clock, and we sent him to jail soon after three, having enough evidence to commit him, because he ordered the soldiers to fire, so about four o'clock the town became quiet. The next day the eight soldiers that fired on the inhabitants were also sent to jail.

Original Material copyright ©2013 by Marion Brady and Howard Brady. This material may be downloaded and printed at no cost by teachers or mentors for use with their own students only. All other rights reserved.

Paul Revere, a Boston silversmith and engraver, made a poster soon after the incident:

The BLOODY MASSACRE perpetrated in King-Street BOSTON on March 5th 1770 by a party of the 29th REG^t



Engraved Printed & Sold by PAUL REVERE BOSTON

Unhappy Boston! see thy Sons deplore,
Thy hallow'd Walks befear'd with guiltless Gore:
While faithless P—n and his savage Bands,
With murderous Rancour stretch their bloody Hands;
Like fierce Barbarians grinning o'er their Prey,
Approve the Carnage, and enjoy the Day.

If scalding drops from Rage from Anguish Wrung,
If speechless Sorrows lab'ring for a Tongue,
Or if a weeping World can ought appease
The plaintive Ghosts of Victims such as these:
The Patriot's copious Tears for each are shed,
A glorious tribute which embalms the Dead.

But know, Fate summons to that awful Goal,
Where JUSTICE strips the Murderer of his Soul:
Should venal C—ts to the scandal of the Land,
Snatch the relentless Villain from her Hand,
Keen Execrations on this Plate infer'd,
Shall reach a JUDGE who never can be brib'd.

The unhappy Sufferers were Mess^{rs} SAM^l GRAY SAM^l MAVERICK, JAM^s CALDWELL, CRISPUS ATTUCKS & PAT^l CARE
Killed. Six wounded; two of them (CHRIST^s MONK & JOHN CLARK) Mortally

Five days after the incident, British General Gage described it in a letter to an official in England.

On the evening of March 5th, the people of Boston had a general uprising. They began by attacking several soldiers in a small street, near the barracks of the 29th Regiment. The noise of the attack caused several officers to come out of the barracks and investigate. They found some of the soldiers greatly hurt, but they took the soldiers into the barrack.

The mob followed them to the barrack door, threatening and waving clubs over the officers' heads. The officers tried to make peace, and asked the mob to leave.

Part of the mob then broke into a meetinghouse, and rang the bell as if there were a fire. This seems to have been a prearranged signal. Immediately many people assembled in the streets. Some of them were armed with guns, but most carried clubs and similar weapons.

Many people came out of their houses, thinking there was a fire. Several soldiers, thinking the same thing, headed for their duty posts as they were supposed to do. On the way they were insulted and attacked. Those who could not escape were knocked down and treated very badly.

Different mobs moved through the streets, passing the different barracks. These mobs tried to make the soldiers angry and urged them to come outside. One group went to the main guard and tried to stir up trouble, but they failed. The guard soldiers stood their positions quietly.

From there the mob moved to the customhouse, and attacked a single soldier on guard there. He defended himself as well as he could, and called for help. Several people ran to the main guard to tell of the danger to the soldier.

Captain Preston, who was in charge of the guard that day, was at the main guard station. When he heard of the attack on the soldier, he sent a sergeant and 12 men to aid him. The Captain soon followed to help prevent the troops from starting unnecessary trouble.

The mob attacked the group of soldiers. Some of the mob threw bricks, stones, pieces of ice, and snowballs at the soldiers. Others moved up to the soldiers' bayonets, trying to use their clubs. People in the mob called out to the soldiers to fire their guns, and used insulting language.

Captain Preston stood between the soldiers and the mob and tried to make peace by talking to them, asking them to leave. Some of the mob asked if he intended to order the soldiers to shoot at them. He answered, "Of course not. I am between you and the troops."

His words had no effect. One of the soldiers, receiving a violent blow, fired his gun. Captain Preston turned around to see who had fired. He received a blow that was aimed at his head but missed and hit his arm.

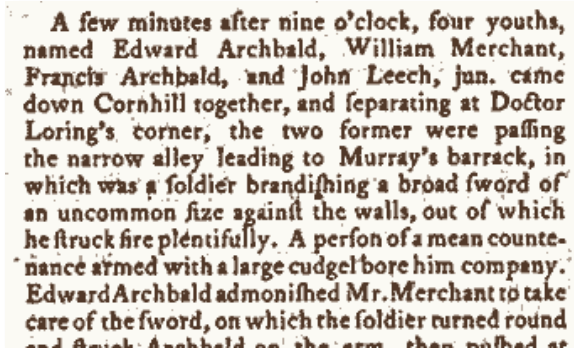
(Continued)

The mob did not see any damage done by the first shot, so they supposed that the soldiers had loaded only with powder and no shot to scare them. They grew bolder and attacked the soldiers with more force, continually striking the soldiers, throwing objects at them, and daring them to fire. The soldiers soon saw that their lives were in danger, and hearing the word “fire” all around them, three or four fired one after another. These shots were followed by three more in the same hurry and confusion. Four or five persons were unfortunately killed, and several wounded.

Captain Preston and the soldiers were soon afterward delivered into the hands of the judges, who committed them to prison.

This account is from the newspaper *Boston Gazette and Country Journal*, March 12, 1770:

On the evening of Monday, being the fifth current, several soldiers of the 29th Regiment were seen parading the streets with their drawn cutlasses and bayonets, abusing and wounding numbers of the inhabitants.



A few minutes after nine o'clock, four youths, named Edward Archbald, William Merchant, Francis Archbald, and John Leech, jun. came down Cornhill together, and separating at Doctor Loring's corner, the two former were passing the narrow alley leading to Murray's barrack, in which was a soldier brandishing a broad sword of an uncommon size against the walls, out of which he struck fire plentifully. A person of a mean countenance armed with a large cudgel bore him company. Edward Archbald admonished Mr. Merchant to take care of the sword, on which the soldier turned round and struck Archbald on the arm, then pushed at Merchant and pierced through his clothes inside the arm close to the armpit and grazed the skin. Merchant then struck the soldier with a short stick he had; and the other person ran to the barrack and brought with him two soldiers, one armed with a pair of tongs, the other with a shovel. He with the tongs pursued Archbald back through the alley, collared and laid him over the head with the tongs. The noise brought people together; and John Hicks, a young lad, coming up, knocked the soldier down but let him get up again; and more lads gathering, drove them back to the barrack where the boys stood some time as it were to keep them in. In less than a minute 10 or 12 of them came out with drawn cutlasses, clubs, and bayonets and set upon the unarmed boys and young folk who stood them a little while but, finding the inequality of their equipment, dispersed.

A few minutes after nine o'clock four youths, named Edward Archbald, William Merchant, Francis Archbald, and John Leech, jun., came down Cornhill together, and separating at Doctor Loring's corner, the two former were passing the narrow alley leading to Murray's barrack in which was a soldier brandishing a broad sword of an uncommon size against the walls, out of which he struck fire plentifully. A person of mean countenance armed with a large cudgel bore him company. Edward Archbald admonished Mr. Merchant to take care of [watch out for] the sword, on which the soldier turned round and struck Archbald on the arm, then pushed at Merchant and pierced through his clothes inside the arm close to the armpit and grazed the skin. Merchant then struck the soldier with a short stick he had; and the other person ran to the barrack and brought with him two soldiers, one armed with a pair of tongs, the other with a shovel. He with the tongs pursued Archbald back through the alley, collared and laid him over the head with the tongs. The noise brought people together; and John Hicks, a young lad, coming up, knocked the soldier down but let him get up again; and more lads gathering, drove them back to the barrack where the boys stood some time as it were to keep them in. In less than a minute 10 or 12 of them came out with drawn cutlasses, clubs, and bayonets and set upon the unarmed boys and young folk who stood them a little while but, finding the inequality of their equipment, dispersed.

(Continued)

On hearing the noise, one Samuel Atwood came up to see what was the matter; and entering the alley from dock square, heard the latter part of the combat; and when the boys had dispersed he met the 10 or 12 soldiers aforesaid rushing down the alley towards the square and asked them if they intended to murder people? They answered Yes, by G-d, root and branch! With that one of them struck Mr. Atwood with a club which was repeated by another; and being unarmed, he turned to go off and received a wound on the left shoulder which reached the bone and gave him much pain. Retreating a few steps, Mr. Atwood met two officers and said, gentlemen, what is the matter? They answered, you'll see by and by. Immediately after, those heroes appeared in the square, asking where were the boogers? where were the cowards? But notwithstanding their fierceness to naked [*unprotected*] men, one of them advanced towards a youth who had a split of a raw stave in his hand and said, damn them, here is one of them. But the young man seeing a person near him with a drawn sword and good cane ready to support him, held up his stave in defiance; and they quietly passed by him up the little alley by Mr. Silsby's to King Street where they attacked single and unarmed persons till they raised much clamour, and then turned down Cornhill Street, insulting all they met in like manner and pursuing some to their very doors. Thirty or forty persons, mostly lads, being by this means gathered in King Street, Capt. Preston with a party of men with charged bayonets, came from the main guard to the commissioner's house, the soldiers pushing their bayonets, crying, make way! They took place by the custom house and, continuing to push to drive the people off, pricked some in several places, on which they were clamorous and, it is said, threw snow balls. On this, the Captain commanded them to fire; and more snow balls coming, he again said, damn you, fire, be the consequence what it will! One soldier then fired, and a townsman with a cudgel struck him over the hands with such force that he dropped his firelock; and, rushing forward, aimed a blow at the Captain's head which grazed his hat and fell pretty heavy upon his arm. However, the soldiers continued the fire successively till seven or eight or, as some say, eleven guns were discharged.

By this fatal manoeuvre three men were laid dead on the spot and two more struggling for life; but what showed a degree of cruelty unknown to British troops, at least since the house of Hanover has directed their operation, was an attempt to fire upon or push with their bayonets the persons who undertook to remove the slain and wounded!

Mr. Benjamin Leigh, now undertaker [*manager or investor*] in the Delph manufactory, came up and after some conversation with Capt. Preston relative to his conduct in this affair, advised him to draw off his men, with which he complied.

The dead are Mr. Samuel Gray, killed on the spot, the ball entering his head and beating off a large portion of his skull.

A mulatto man named Crispus Attucks, who was born in Framingham, but lately belonged to New-Providence and was here in order to go for North Carolina, 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.

Mr. James Caldwell, mate of Capt. Morton's vessel, in like manner killed by two balls entering his back.

(Continued)

Mr. Samuel Maverick, a promising youth of seventeen years of age, son of the widow Maverick, and an apprentice to Mr. Greenwood, ivory-turner, mortally wounded; a ball went through his belly and was cut out at his back. He died the next morning.

A lad named Christopher Monk, about seventeen years of age, an apprentice to Mr. Walker, shipwright, wounded; a ball entered his back about four inches above the left kidney near the spine and was cut out of the breast on the same side. Apprehended he will die.

A lad named David Parker, an apprentice to Mr. Eddy the Wheelwright, wounded, a ball entered in his thigh.

A lad named John Clark, about seventeen years of age, whose parents live at Medford, and an apprentice to Capt. Samuel Howard of this town, wounded; a ball entered just above his groin and came out at his hip on the opposite side. Apprehended he will die.

Mr. Edward Payne of this town, merchant, standing at his entry door received a ball in his arm which shattered some of the bones.

Mr. John Green, tailor, coming up Leverett's Lane, received a ball just under his hip and lodged in the under part of his thigh, which was extracted.

Mr. Robert Patterson, a seafaring man, who was the person that had his trousers shot through in Richardson's affair, wounded; a ball went through his right arm, and he suffered a great loss of blood.

Mr. Patrick Carr, about thirty years of age, who worked with Mr. Field, leather breeches-maker in Queen Street, wounded; a ball entered near his hip and went out at his side.

Which differences in the accounts do you think were intentionally created to influence opinion? Identify and list words in each account which the writer probably hoped would affect the emotions of the reader.

In your opinion, which document is most biased? Which is least biased? In your journal, explain and defend your opinions.

How might you decide about "the truth?"

Public opinion in Boston was violently hostile to the soldiers who'd been arrested, but John Adams, an important Boston lawyer and one of the leaders of the opposition to Great Britain, volunteered to act as attorney for the soldiers at their trial. He believed that they'd acted in self-defense. Captain Preston and all but two of the soldiers were found not guilty. Two soldiers were convicted of manslaughter, branded on their hands, and released.

For the next five years, some colonials celebrated "Massacre Day," on March 5th. The Sons of Liberty held parades to remind colonists of "what the British had done."

Investigation: Here and Now

How reliable is eyewitness testimony? *To find out:*

1. *With several others, plan and script an event to be staged (without previous notice) in a public place. Choose a location where there are people that you can later interview, such as the place where young people gather before school, at noon, or after school. The event could be, for example, a brief, loud and somewhat complicated confrontation between two small groups with different opinions about something (non-violent, please!). Practice the confrontation in advance and in private, to work out the details and make it believable.*
2. *Wait a day, then interview witnesses individually, asking each of them to describe in detail what that person saw and heard. If possible, record the interviews for later analysis.*
3. *Witness accounts will likely differ. List possible reasons for the differences.*

For more on this, see: http://courses.eller.arizona.edu/mgmt/delaney/p_chapter1.pdf

Acknowledgements/Sources:

Page 2: Richard B. Morris and James Woodress, eds., *The Times That Tried Men's Souls* (St. Louis, Mo.: ebster Publishing Co., 1961). **3-4t:** Letter to the Earl of Hillsborough, April 10, 1770 (Carter I). **4b-6:** *Boston Gazette and Country Journal*, March 12, 1770.

Notes for Teachers and Mentors:

This unit is intended to follow Chapter 7 of *Investigating American History*. See <https://www.marionbrady.com/AHH.asp>. Chapter 7 introduces the fourth element of the Model, shared ideas. Additional units on colonial economics and the Stamp Act are also provided to precede this unit, building understanding of some of the circumstances that led to revolution.

Emotions are clues to the type of shared ideas we usually call “values.” When values are threatened or violated, emotions of frustration or anger are aroused. These emotions underlie both unconscious selective perception (also called “confirmation bias,” which has a slightly broader meaning) and deliberate bias.

The main subject matter of this unit—the phenomenon of “selective perception”—could hardly be more important. Nowhere in the traditional curriculum is this subject described or investigated. Two or more witnesses of the same event, each attempting to be completely truthful, may (and often do) give conflicting accounts. What we see and hear is conditioned by what we expect to see and hear. Especially when emotions are involved, human perceptions are remarkably distorted and biased. Understanding this phenomenon should be part of every learner’s education.

The second element of bias—more-or-less deliberate “spin” when reporting—is particularly apparent in the choice of emotionally-loaded words; “most horrid murder,” “guiltless gore,” “mob,” “stir up trouble” and the like.

One part of this exercise is transcribing the poetic caption in Revere’s poster (converting the archaic “s” letters, expanding abbreviated words, etc.) then including it in the analysis:

Unhappy Boston! See thy Sons deplore,
Thy hallowed Walks besmeared with guiltless gore.
While faithless P—n and his savage Bands, [Preston]
With murderous Rancor stretch their bloody hands;
Like fierce Barbarians grinning o’er their Prey,
Approve the carnage and enjoy the day.

If scalding drops from Rage, from Anguish Wrung,
If speechless Sorrows laboring for a Tongue.
Or if a weeping World can ought appease
The plaintive Ghosts of Victims such as these;
The Patriots copious Tears for each are shed,
A glorious Tribute which embalms the Dead.

But know, Fate summons to that awful Goal,
Where Justice strips the Murderer of his Soul.
Should venal C—ts, the scandal of the Land, [prob. “Courts”]
Snatch the relentless Villain from her Hand.
Keen Execrations on this Plate inscribed,
Shall reach a Judge who never can be bribed.

A critical analysis of the poster’s bias is at: <http://www.bostonmassacre.net/gravure.htm>; this site also has a high-quality color depiction of the poster that could be copied and printed or projected.