

immersionED: American Revolution Series Conceptual Overview

The immersionED American Revolution series teaches students about the tensions leading to the American Revolution, the historical context surrounding the Boston Massacre, the details of the event itself, and its aftermath.

The game also teaches and reinforces important historical and humanities-based learning skills, including close reading; primary source analysis; analysis of historical context and perspective; and analytical writing.

Lastly, the module teaches numerous transferable skills such as creativity, decision-making, problem-solving, and self-reflection by placing students into an active learning experience where they must continually synthesize information, come to conclusions, and reflect on their choices.

We suggest that your class cover the American Revolutionary era prior to the Boston Massacre before playing this module as the game assumes background knowledge.

This document provides an overview of the historical concepts, terms, and facts that students will be exposed to in this learning module.

- Boston Massacre
- Colonialism
- Democratic/representative government
- Colonial Great Britain
- Colonial America
- Loyalism
- Colonial American Patriot (e.g. Sons of Liberty)
- James Otis
- Paul Revere
- Paul Revere's "The Bloody Massacre"
- French & Indian War
- Stamp Act, Townshend Acts, Sugar Act
- Quartering Act/Standing Army
- Proclamation of 1763
- No taxation without representation

Boston Massacre

The Boston Massacre took place on March 5, 1770 outside the colonial Custom House in the city of Boston, then part of Britain's Massachusetts Bay Colony. The term "massacre" is, of course, an appellation created by those who sought to have this event memorialized as an act of illegitimate and egregious British aggression. Factually, violence broke out between American

colonists and British soldiers, the result of which was the death of five colonists and the injury of six others. At the time of the violence, tensions had been rising between these two factions, partly the result of British colonial tax policy, mercantilism, and the growing presence of British soldiers in the colony. Months later, the soldiers who had fired upon the colonists, including Captain Thomas Preston, were tried in a court of law. Preston was acquitted by a jury who decided he did not command his soldiers to fire. Six soldiers were acquitted; two soldiers were convicted of manslaughter. The Boston Massacre has come to be considered a flashpoint in the deteriorating relationship between Colonial America and the British colonizers – a signpost on the eventual road to independence.

Historical Context of Colonial Boston, c. 1770

The historical context of colonial Boston is critical to understanding the Boston Massacre.

- **British Colonialism:** Beginning in the late 16th century, the United Kingdom held a wide swath of territories as either formal or informal territories of the empire. The Massachusetts Bay Colony was founded in 1630 by English settlers with the formal backing of a royal charter. As the colony grew and developed, a thriving community emerged of those whose families emigrated from England, the original indigenous inhabitants, and British colonial bureaucrats and soldiers who had traveled to North America to work. Boston in the mid-to-late 18th century was by no means a segregated society of colonists, on the one hand, and British officials, on the other. Rather, these communities were neighbors, friends, and they even intermarried. Despite these friendly relations, British colonial policy gradually contributed to the frayed relations.
- **“Loyalist” or British Colonial Perspectives:** It is important to recognize that the terms “loyalist” and “patriot” do not denote rigid, unflinching identities. The truth of historical person’s loyalties and allegiances was far more complicated. To be a loyalist in the 18th century did not mean that you supported Great Britain on every issue or in every way. Similarly, to be a Patriot did not mean you opposed Great Britain on every issue or in every way. Many loyalists, especially during the time of the Boston Massacre, opposed taxation without representation but still supported the King and his right to rule over the colonies.
- **“Patriot” or Colonial “American” Perspectives:** Just as with the term “loyalist,” a “patriot” in 1770 could mean many different things. At this point, a distinct “American” identity was still years away; thus, to be a Patriot was to oppose certain aspects of colonial rule. By 1776, when a set of colonist representatives signed the Declaration of Independence, the term took on a new and more robust definition. There were two strands of patriotism: the intellectual and the practical. Intellectual patriots were influenced by political ideals including republicanism, liberty, and natural rights. These political values led to the opposition of what came to be seen as despotic rule by King George III, a type of rule that ignored the consent of the governed and the people’s right to choose their own representatives. The practical strand, while still in some sense

affiliated with the underlying political theories, was a response to deteriorating economic conditions and social conditions for the colonists. Generally speaking, patriots were those people who suffered (or believed themselves to be suffering) from colonial tax policy, while loyalists were those people who benefitted from their entrenchment in the British system. The aggrieved patriots, many of them members of the opposition group, The Sons of Liberty, organized boycotts of British goods, devised protests of British policy, and engaged in acts of violence and intimidation in order to achieve their aims.

- **British Colonial Policy:** Major points of contention between Great Britain and the Bostonian colonists existed over British colonial policy, particularly as concerned taxation. In the aftermath of the French & Indian War (1754-1763), a war which was only one theater of a much broader European war, Great Britain sought to recoup the war debt it spent defending its North American territories from the French. To that end, the British Parliament passed the Sugar Act (1764), Quartering Act (1765), Stamp Act (1765), and the Townshend Acts (1767). These laws imposed taxes on various goods imported by the colonists. The colonists protested the imposition of these taxes; Parliament responded to the resistance by sending more soldiers to enforce the taxes; the colonists responded with greater protest; and so on. The Boston Massacre was a spark of violence that resulted from this cycle of conflict.
- **No taxation without representation:** This proposition became a colonial rallying cry in opposition to the British taxes of the 1760s. Those living in the North American colonies were subjects of Great Britain and thus were subject to its laws. Despite this fact, the North Americans had no representation in Parliament. To the colonists, this fact represented a despotism and a betrayal of constitutional principles. Of course, there were those who simply resented royal taxation. Whatever the rationale, “no taxation without representation” became an important motivator for the colonists.
- **Quartering Act:** The Quartering Act of 1765 required colonial authorities to provide lodging for British soldiers stationed in the colonies. This legislation was born out of 1) practical necessity and 2) a desire to assert control over the increasingly unruly colonies. By 1765, hundreds of British soldiers were already in North America as a result of the French & Indian War (1754-1763). Even though the war was over, many soldiers remained to keep peace between settlers and indigenous tribes. As protests by the colonists became more and more vociferous, Parliament sent over more soldiers. The purpose of the Quartering Act was to ensure that these soldiers had a place to stay. As the number of soldiers exceeded available spots in military barracks, Parliament stipulated that North Americans house these soldiers in local inns, taverns, or stables. The Quartering Act legally instantiated the presence of a standing army in the colonies. This was perceived as an act of provocation by the colonists.

Responses to the Boston Massacre

- **Investigation and Trial:** The Boston Massacre was investigated by local Boston officials and British soldiers. Interestingly, the British soldiers were legally represented by John Adams, who would become the second President of the United States in 1797. Adams, along with other American officials and elites, believed it was important that, despite the inflammatory feelings of many Bostonians, the soldiers receive a fair trial. This worked to preclude further British retaliation and to keep colonial moderates from turning against the Patriot cause. Historically speaking, it also set an important precedent for America's commitment to law and order and due process. As a result of the trial, Captain Preston was acquitted by a jury who decided he did not command his soldiers to fire. Six soldiers were acquitted; two soldiers were convicted of manslaughter.
- **Paul Revere's Engraving:** Paul Revere was born in Boston in 1734. He was a successful silversmith with a penchant for politics and military matters. As the 18th century wore on, Revere became a prominent Patriot voice in the colonies. After the Boston Massacre, Revere (working from an already existing picture by Henry Pelham) created an engraving depicting the event. His engraving is characteristically pro-Patriot: it exaggerates the facts to present the British as wantonly criminal. The very name of the engraving, "The Bloody Massacre," frames the event as just that – a massacre. While it is true that the soldiers opened fire, killing and injuring several Bostonians, the engraving does not show that the soldiers were responding to the Bostonians throwing snowballs and rocks.