

The Evolving Legacy of Crispus Attucks, 1770-1863: Historical Context

Written by Ben Remillard, PhD

Crispus Attucks is most often remembered for being the American Revolution's ["first martyr"](#) after he was killed during the Boston Massacre. Since his death, Attucks has become a symbol for Black Americans' ongoing sacrifices and contributions to American history. But beyond his death the night of the Massacre, we know little about him for certain.

While Attucks is often referred to in colonial reports as a mixed-race "molatto" man (an outdated and racist term describing someone descended from white and Black parents), he was most likely a mixed-race man of African and Indigenous descent. This rationale is based on [a few scattered facts](#). It is likely he was a formerly enslaved man whose enslaver placed an ad for "a Molatto fellow, about 27 Years of Age, named Crispas," who "ran away from his Master, *William Brown, of Framingham*." Historians have generally come to the conclusion that Attucks's mother was a Native American woman from nearby Natick, which was founded by colonists as a "praying town" for converted Christian Indians. Filling in some of the sparse details of Attucks's life, we have one source that describes him as [a sailor](#) (*March 12, 1770 newspaper account, Source 1*). Perhaps he made his living contributing to Britain's mercantile empire. His life as a sailor, however, might have brought him into conflict with British soldiers, whose numbers in Boston increased dramatically after the Seven Years' War. The redcoats' presence at times caused tensions with the local populace, especially with Boston's laborers, whom the soldiers sometimes undercut in their search for off-hours work. John Adams noted that the relationship between sailors and soldiers was defined by hostility, ["that they fight as naturally when they meet, as the elephant and the Rhinoceros."](#) One such fight broke out just a few days before the Massacre, where a group of soldiers brawled with workers at a ropewalk (where men wound fibers together to make the ropes needed to sail ships). These ongoing tensions might explain why Attucks and other ["jack tars," a.k.a., sailors](#), rushed to the conflict the night of the Massacre, though even this is circumstantial speculation.

What we know of Attucks's involvement in the Boston Massacre comes from [witness testimony given during the ensuing trial](#), where the British soldiers were accused by Boston's colonists of murder. But this is where things get tricky for historians, as the available primary sources give us multiple vantage points from which we can view the Massacre. While some Bostonians claimed Attucks was removed from the front lines and that he did not do anything to antagonize the soldiers, other witnesses placed the mixed-race man at the head of the conflict (*testimony of Brewer and Bailey, Sources 2 and 3*).

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As a defense lawyer for the accused soldiers, John Adams took advantage of these differing accounts, picking out the testimony that best helped him frame Attucks as one of the key perpetrators of the Massacre. One tactic the lawyer used was to draw attention to Attucks's status as a stranger, or as an outsider not belonging in Boston. Given that Attucks fled from slavery in nearby Framingham, and because he had not obtained a residence in Boston, it was easy for Adams to alienate Attucks and portray him as a foreign interloper. Adams then drew specific attention to Attucks's race as a way of further vilifying the slain man in the eyes of Boston's predominantly white populace.

It is important to remember, however, that Attucks was not the only person of color at the Massacre, and that people of color in Boston experienced the Massacre and the Revolution in different ways. As a vital part of Britain's trans-Atlantic empire, Boston reflected the multi-ethnic nature of Massachusetts's busy capital. This included a combination of [over 1,500 enslaved and free Black people](#) who comprised about ten percent of the port's population in the middle of the eighteenth century. Two of these Black men were called by Adams to serve as [defense witnesses](#) during the trial. One of them was an emancipated man named [Newton Prince](#). As a free and active member of Boston's growing community, Prince made his living as a lemon merchant and pastry chef, and was a member of Boston's Old South Meeting House—a Congregational church that served as an important site for the Patriots in the years prior to the War for Independence. When called to give [his testimony](#) at the trial, Prince agreed with other witnesses who described the crowd as aggressive, with some civilians getting close enough "with sticks striking on their [the soldiers] guns." The colonists, Prince said, taunted the soldiers, saying "[fire, fire damn you fire, fire you lobsters, fire, you dare not fire.](#)"

Andrew, an enslaved man, was similarly summoned to [give testimony](#) regarding the crowd's taunts, their encroachment on the soldiers, and the crowd's throwing of "snow balls, and other things, which then flew pretty thick." Andrew asserted that Attucks struck at the soldiers, saying that Attucks, "a stout man with a long cord wood stick, threw himself in, and made a blow at the officer." According to Andrew's testimony, Attucks "then turned round, and struck the Grenadier's gun at the Captains right hand, and immediately fell in with his club, and knocked his gun away, and struck him over the head," and cried out, "kill the dogs," enticing the crowd in closer. Despite the claim by another witness, James Bailey, that "It was not the Mollato [Attucks] that struck Montgomery," it was Andrew's account that Adams used to portray Attucks as the malicious instigator of the Massacre.

Detailing Attucks's supposed role at the head of a group who approached the soldiers, Adams described his defendants as having little choice but to act in self-defense against such an

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imposing force: “to have this reinforcement coming down under the command of a stout Molatto fellow, whose very looks, was enough to terrify any person, what had not the soldiers then to fear?” Drawing attention to Attucks’s race and alleged “mad behaviour,” Adams pinned the blame for the Massacre squarely on the self-emancipated man, whom the future president argued, “in all probability, the dreadful carnage of that night, is chiefly to be ascribed.” ([Adams blames Crispus Attucks for Boston Massacre, Source 4](#)) Adams’s defense worked, and he prevented the soldiers from being sentenced for murder. Although two of the defendants were convicted of manslaughter given the evidence that they fired into the crowd, [even those sentences were eventually reduced from hanging to a simple branding on the thumb](#).

Despite the attention Adams drew to Attucks’s race during the trial, the Patriots quickly obscured the participation of men of color at the Boston Massacre. While the earliest reports told of Attucks as a “mulatto” man, the Whig press soon after stopped mentioning Attucks’s race. Instead, they grouped him in with the rest of the victims by referring to each as “mister.” This, the historian Mitch Kachun argues, would have suggested to contemporary readers that all the dead men “were both respectable and white.” The most well-known example of this racial whitewashing can be seen in [Paul Revere’s famous engraving](#) of the Massacre, which shows a sea of defenseless white gentlemen being victimized by an organized line of British soldiers. While some later reprints included Attucks with darker physical features than the rest of the crowd, the majority of the surviving images we have depict him as a white man. (*For copies of Revere’s engraving that show Attucks as a person of color see the Additional Resources tab in the [source set](#)*) By portraying the Massacre in this way, Revere and others erased Attucks and other people of color from the evening. Doing so reframed one of the earliest events of the Revolution as an entirely white affair. Similarly, at Boston’s [annual commemorations](#) in the years after the Massacre, Attucks’s heritage was never mentioned, creating a tradition whereby his race was obscured from popular memory ([John Hancock Remembers the Boston Massacre, Source 5](#)). This plays into a larger trend during and after the Revolution, when the contributions of Attucks and other people of color were quickly forgotten by many white Americans despite the roles played by roughly 6,000 Patriots of color who took part in the War for Independence. Attucks, however, would not remain in the shadows.

In 1855, eighty-five years after the Massacre, Attucks’s role in the event was brought to new, widespread attention in [William Cooper Nell’s *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution*](#) (*Source 6*). The following year, [a lithograph](#) presented a new depiction of the Boston Massacre, putting Attucks front and center in the image (*Source 7*). Nell and other Black, Civil War-era abolitionists and activists wanted to show audiences that Black Americans had always been a part of American history, and that they had always been ready to lay down their lives for liberty.

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One of Nell's primary sources for his account of the Massacre came from the Italian historian [Charles Botta's *History of the War of the Independence of the United States of America*](#). Botta's work, in turn, took much from Adams's defense arguments regarding the rowdy crowd "under the command of *Attucks*," who the lawyer argued, had "undertaken to be the hero of the night." Botta—and by extension, Nell and later writers—prioritized the testimony describing how Attucks took an active role in the lead-up to the Massacre. Nell even borrowed directly from [Botta's description of the evening](#):

a band of the populace, led by a mulatto named ATTUCKS, who brandished their clubs, and pelted them [the soldiers] with snowballs [...] at length, the mulatto and twelve of his companions, pressing forward, environed the soldiers, and striking their muskets with their clubs, cried to the multitude: 'Be not afraid; they dare not fire: why do you hesitate, why do you not kill them, why not crush them at once?' The mulatto lifted his arm against Capt. Preston, and having turned one of the muskets, he seized the bayonet with his left hand, as if he intended to execute his threat. At this moment, confused cries were heard: 'The wretches dare not fire!' Firing succeeds. ATTUCKS is slain.

While [Adams's account](#) of the Massacre vilified Attucks, whose 'mad behavior' was to blame for the deaths of the five men during the Massacre, Botta and Nell interpreted the slain man's actions differently. Although Nell also argued that Attucks led the protest against the British soldiers, he describes Attucks as a hero who was "[of and with the people](#)" in their act of rebellion against oppressive British rule. In so doing, Nell highlighted Attucks as the first in a long, documented line of patriotic Black Americans. With Attucks's martyrdom at the forefront of these new histories, Black writers hoped to show the nation that Black Americans were deserving not only of freedom from slavery, but also of equal rights. Another one of these Black, Civil War-era activists, William Wells Brown, asserted that "[Whenever the rights of the nation have been assailed, the negro has always responded to his country's call, at once, and with every pulsation of his heart beating for freedom.](#)"

These lessons were built upon in public events that highlighted the lives and deaths of men like Attucks. This included, for example, during the Civil War, when a Boston Massacre commemoration was held on March 5, 1863, highlighting the "[Martyrdom of the Colored American Crispus Attucks](#)." (Source 8) The event promised to feature the white Colonel, Robert Gould Shaw, and members of the [Massachusetts 54th Regiment](#), which had become famous for being the first Union regiment to include Black recruits.

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So while the earliest commemorations of the Massacre in the 1770s overlooked Attucks and his race, nineteenth century audiences and commentators were more than willing to highlight his life and death. In doing so, they connected his sacrifice with their own contemporary struggles to better the lives of Black Americans.

These calls for equality were repeated following America's participation in the World Wars, when Black Americans argued that equal rights were deserved given their ongoing service and sacrifices in the nation's wars. Attucks was frequently cited in these discussions, serving once more as a beacon for Black American patriotism. These writers and activists were rebuffed along the way by whites who denounced and mocked Attucks during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as "a rowdyish person," "a drunken and disreputable half-caste," and as a "transient visitor" who was "itching for a fight" and was "not a very useful member of society." Despite these insults, Attucks's legacy continued to grow. As the civil rights movement gained momentum in the middle of the twentieth century, Attucks appeared more often in popular publications like books and magazines, where his story was shared with wider audiences. Today, Attucks's memorialization on everything from a bridge in Framingham to schools across the country testify that he has not been forgotten, and serve as public reminders that people of color have always been important contributors to America's history.

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For more on how Attucks was remembered over time, see Kachun, *First Martyr of Liberty*, Chapters 4-9 in particular.