

The Myth of Crispus Attucks and His So-Called “Patriotic” Death

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Fortunately or unfortunately, much of American history is riddled with a myriad of myths and half-truths. “*False historical beliefs are so essential to our culture that if they did not exist, like Voltaire’s God, they would have to be invented*” (Bailey, pg. 5, 1968). Some of these tales are benign and seemingly innocent, such as the Parson Weems one about George Washington cutting down the cherry tree and telling no lie (Weems, 1806). Others are more complex and nuanced, like equating chattel slavery—the kind that existed in the U.S.—with biblical slavery (Kidd, p. 2021). While many American myths sometimes have a sliver of truth attached to them, most educators flat out get it wrong regarding Crispus Attucks and the **Revolutionary War**. Indeed, Michael Neiberg (1997) states, “*Perhaps no episode in American history has been subjected to myth and iconography as often as the American revolution,*” (p. 981).

Students are taught in elementary school about Attucks, learning that he was an escaped slave who was the first to die for freedom. Most importantly, they learn that his death helped to spark the flames of liberty. However, reality is far different. Attucks didn’t die for freedom—as the myth is commonly promulgated—he died because he was angry that the British soldiers were cutting into his income. (Since that statement probably received a lot of attention, the proper background surrounding Attucks and the **Boston Massacre** should probably be given before going any further).

The **French and Indian War** lasted from 1754 to 1763 and was called such in North America but was part of a wider, global campaign known as the **Seven Years’ War**. Battles were fought primarily between England and France. Though England eventually won, the war was costly for both countries. Parliament looked to its colonies to help with the debt, which was logical since the British had protected the colonists from the French. Seeking to garnish its share, parliament passed a series of taxation measures. Just as expected, the colonists reacted like the Ku Klux Klan would have after the sudden appearance of Barrack Obama in their midst. They were infuriated!

“Americans living in the thirteen colonies had grown increasingly disgruntled with British rule during the 1760s. From 1763 to 1767, the British Parliament passed a series of laws such as the Sugar Act, the Stamp Act, and the Townshend Act which imposed taxes and trade restrictions on everyday goods in the American colonies. They also passed the Currency Act, which prevented the colonies from making new paper money and kept them reliant on British currency” (McDermott, para. 4, 2025).

For their part, the British soldiers were starting to become intolerant as to how the colonists behaved toward them. It was one thing to be silently despised but to be openly taunted and harassed was quite another. “*The civilians were constantly robbing or fighting the soldiers or enticing them to be deserters. Many soldiers did indeed choose to desert because of the constant taunting and violence; however, many made their decision based on the courts*” (Diemand, p. 29, 2015). Even the courts were not in the British soldiers’ corner. They, too, like the colonists, appeared to be against them. With both sides madder than a stepped-on rattlesnake, it’s easy to see where things were headed. Conditions for the perfect storm of maleficence and violence had been established. Preceding the **Boston Massacre**, several events could have then—as is said in the parlances of the streets— “*jumped things off*”—but didn’t.

“In February, just a little over a month before the Massacre, a much-despised Tory had fired into a crowd of black and white boys who were teasing him. A twelve-year-old, Christopher Snyder, was killed in that confrontation and the town turned out for a dramatic funeral procession led by the city’s children. On the Saturday before the fateful Monday night, groups of soldiers made several forays to one of Boston’s rope factories to engage in fights with the workers. By Monday a number of people told of soldiers boasting that they planned an attack on the citizens again that night” (Belton, pp. 151-152, 1972).

Enter Attucks.

Not much is known about his life (Danker, 2008), which is ironic and underwhelming. For a man whose role in history was supposedly so pivotal to the **Revolutionary War**, one would think that

more would be known about him. Born around 1723 in Framingham, Massachusetts, what IS known about Attucks is that he was probably an escaped slave of mixed heritage: an amalgamation of African and Wampanoag Native American ancestry (Kiger, 2025). Additionally, Attucks was a big “*stout*” man, standing over six feet tall and broad at the shoulders. Evidence points to him working as a seaman, which makes sense because the sea was “...*one of the few trades open to a non-white person. (Around the time of the American Revolution, one-fifth of the 100,000 sailors employed on American ships were African American.) Attucks worked on whaling ships, and when he wasn’t at sea, he found work as a rope-maker. On the night that he died, Attucks had just returned from the Bahamas, and was on his way to North Carolina*” (Kiger, para. 6, 2025).

Yet, as a seaman, Attucks would have viewed British soldiers as competitors and adversaries. Many soldiers moonlighted because they weren’t paid well, and some worked part-time on the docks. According to historian Douglas R. Egerton (2009), on the night of the Boston Massacre, Attucks was engaging in adult libations with several colleagues at a tavern, “...*a ‘victualling house’ kept by Thomas Simmons*” (Schenawolf, para. 7, 2016). When a British soldier came to inquire about part-time work, Attucks and some others who had been drinking began yelling obscenities at the soldier. He finally left because of their pillorying (Egerton, 2009). Attucks and the others continued discussing their shared abhorrence for the interlopers.

Later during the evening, a group of adolescents—because they, too, viewed the British soldiers as despicable—began harassing a British sentry, Private Hugh White, at the Custom House by throwing snowballs, clamshells, and assorted items at him. Next came the expletives and insults. “*They started shouting at him, calling him a ‘son of a bitch’ and a ‘lobster’ and screaming to each other (hilariously), ‘Who buys lobster?’ They made a game of pitching snowballs and debris at him and joked about picking up the sentry box and lobbing it into Boston Harbor. When White took his musket off his shoulder, a Bostonian night watchman came to stand with him and urged him not to be afraid. But the young man was afraid, and he called loudly for reinforcements, backing up until he could bang on the door of the Custom House*” (Peterson, para. 6, 2018).

After being informed of what was going on, Attucks and some of the others from the tavern spilled out into the streets to get closer to the growing confrontation. “*His party made its way to the fracas at the Custom House, where another little boy was busy accusing the sentry of having ‘knocked him down with the butt-end of his gun.’ One witness watching the streets from his second-story window described seeing men ‘flying here and there like pigeons.’ By the time the men led by Attucks had arrived at the Custom House, eight soldiers had emerged to defend the frightened sentry*” (Peterson, para. 8, 2018).

Of course, as everyone knows, Attucks was at the front of the “*mob*” when it rushed the British soldiers. Grabbing two sticks—one of which he gave to someone—he swung at Captain Thomas Preston and knocked a gun out of another soldier’s hands, striking him in the process before being shot and succumbing to two musket balls that had been discharged into his chest. Before being shot, Attucks had allegedly incited the crowd by yelling something akin to “...*do not be afraid of them, they dare not fire, kill them! kill them! knock them over! And he tried to knock their brains out* (The trial of William Wemms et al., 1770, p. 785).

What happened next is one BIG thing that is NOT taught in many secondary school classrooms. All eight of the British soldiers who participated in the **Boston Massacre**—Captain Thomas Preston and Privates Matthew Kilroy, William Wemms, William McCauley, Hugh Montgomery, John Carroll, and James Hartigan, and Hugh White—were put on trial. John Adams, who was at that time a lawyer with some renown and would later become the second president of the U.S. in 1797, stepped up to defend them to prove that the soldiers could receive fair representation (Turner, 2021). Though he received some public backlash for this, his efforts were quite successful. All of the men, except two—Montgomery and Kilroy—were found not guilty. Montgomery had been the first to fire, killing Attucks, and Kilroy had killed a white man who had been in the crowd at the front, Samuel Grey (York, 2009). Their thumbs were branded with an “M” with a hot iron for manslaughter (Boston Massacre Historical Society, n.d.).

However, one of the reasons that Adams was so persuasive in his argument to the jurors was because he blamed the massacre on Attucks and used the spectrum of the fear of his race to win them over. This was the first time a lawyer used such a tactic in American history (Revolutionary Spaces, n.d.), but unfortunately, it would not be the last. Adams talked about how big and menacing Attucks was. Though the prosecution believed that the law required the soldiers to retreat if they could, Adams argued that they had a right to “*stand their ground*” (The trial of William Wemms et al., 1770).

Adams stated, “*It is plain the soldiers did not leave their station, but cried to the people, stand off: now 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? He had hardiness enough to fall in upon them, and with one hand took hold of a bayonet, and with the other knocked the man down: This was the behavior of Attucks; – to whose mad behavior, in all probability, the dreadful carnage of that night, is chiefly to be ascribed*” (The trial of William Wemms et al., 1770, p. 785).

Contemporarily, although Attucks is frequently talked about and celebrated for his “*role*” in U.S. history, this was not always the universally accepted case. “*The view frequently accepted seemed to depend on one’s race or political proclivities. Because so little could be verified about Attucks’s life, both white and black commentators constructed the Crispus Attucks that suited their respective agendas. Between the 1880s and 1950s, most whites tended either to ignore Attucks or vilify him, echoing John Adams’s characterization of Attucks as an unsavory firebrand of disorder. African-Americans continued to commemorate him, fabricating a set of convenient fictions that highlighted his patriotism and burning desire for freedom. At times whites and blacks came together to laud Attucks, as when a monument was erected in Boston in 1888 and when Massachusetts designated March 5 as Crispus Attucks Day, an official state holiday, in 1932. But more often Attucks’s memory was segregated*” (Kachun, para. 5, 2018).

Once one comprehends Attucks’s background and history, one overstands that he was neither patriotic nor attempting to spark the flames of liberty. Despite what the sands and winds of time now say, the assertion of him being a patriot does not make sense! Attucks was an escaped slave of mixed ancestry. The DNA of both races he was intertwined with was not viewed favorably during his era. He was just another person of color attempting to blend in and prosper, not trying to make a statement.

Nevertheless, Peterson (2018) may have said it best. “*Perhaps a more serious problem, however, is the way we remember the well-heralded protagonists of these stories, their intentions, and their accomplishments. As a moral fable about the rule of law, the Boston Massacre trial is a story in need of revision*” (para. 31).

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