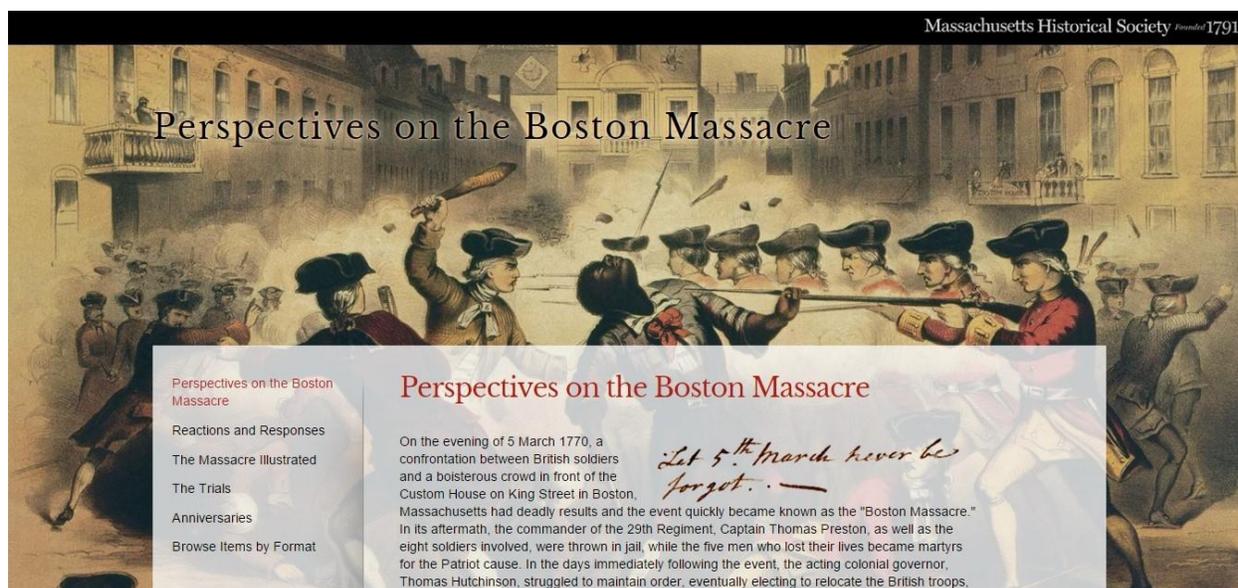


Emotion Versus Facts: The Mystification of the Boston Massacre

The Massachusetts Historical Society, having been founded in 1791, boasts the title of “first historical society.” According to the “[History of the MHS](#),” founder Reverend Jeremy Belknap, along with nine other Boston citizens, envisioned a historical society that would collect and preserve primary sources to facilitate the study of American history. Today, the Massachusetts Historical Society has a similar goal and functions as an accessible, independent research library with both a physical and digital presence (Massachusetts Historical Society). The society’s website is www.masshist.org and features an extensive collection on the American Revolution, a topic of persistent interest to me. The two documents chosen to be analyzed can be found in a “[Perspectives on the Boston Massacre](#)” feature (pictured below) that is incredibly easy



to access and offers plenty of contextualizing background information. In fact, the entirety of the MHS’ site is user-friendly, compared to many other digital archives that are riddled with dead links, search errors, disorganization, and have little to no background information. My only complaint about the MHS digital archive is that it is difficult to read the transcriptions included; they are formatted in small font and the actual text runs together. The two documents chosen are

part of the “[Reactions and Responses](#)” section of the Boston Massacre feature. Documents in this section include diary entries, letters, articles, and poetry, among others. Along with general information at the top of the “Reactions and Responses” section, each document has contextualizing background information about the author and/ or a summary of what the document entails. I chose to look at two different document types, a diary entry and a newspaper article, and compare how they recorded the event of the Boston Massacre.

The Boston Massacre is a fascinating event due to the simple fact that war propaganda alone transformed it from an unfortunate confrontation into a “massacre.” While the event certainly resulted in several patriot deaths, the term “massacre” is traditionally deemed an overdramatic one. A large aspect of the massacre is a historical mystery.

According to an [article by PBS](#) about the Boston Massacre, there were growing tensions between colonists and British soldiers around 1770. They had been sent to America to



“keep the peace” and dispel the street protests that had become commonplace methods for colonists to rebel against various taxes. In 1768 alone, British soldiers made up a quarter of Boston’s population. Patriots saw the redcoats as unwanted intruders, distrusted their activity in America, and were bitter that the soldiers were feeding off of Boston’s economy (and dating American women). Facing this constant distrust, British soldiers were also tense in America (Public Broadcasting Service). On March 5, 1770, tensions came to a historic head. After a fight between a British soldier and a colonist, a mob of Americans formed around eight British soldiers. The soldiers were unable to quell the crowd which began to throw various objects at them. It is unclear, even today, whether or not Captain Thomas Preston had ordered his men to

fire into the crowd; the soldiers, however, shot and killed five colonists ([Massachusetts Court System](#)). The event was a public one; many scrambled to document the confrontation in the form of diaries, letters, articles, pamphlets, and an extremely famous engraving created by Paul Revere (pictured right). These initial reactions were significant in inspiring revolutionary sentiments in increased amounts of American people; the Boston Massacre is regarded as one of the major events leading to the beginning of the American Revolution. The documents reflect the anger and tension that boiled within the colonists. However, each lies on a different end of the “emotion-to-factual” spectrum and this is the cause of mystification of the Boston Massacre

Revere's "Boston Massacre"

John Rowe's Diary Entry

The first document that I will discuss is a diary entry that records the incident on March 5, 1770. On the MHS database, it is called “[John Rowe diary 7, 5-6 March 1770, pages 1073, 1076-1077](#)” and was written by Boston merchant, John Rowe. This particular diary entry, although succinct, includes reports from the 4th to the 6th of March. The Massachusetts Historical Society includes a digital image of the [actual document](#) (pictured left). Rowe’s diary entry is on yellowed, but otherwise pristine, paper; there are no tears, stains, or imperfections.

His writing is similarly pristine and he records the bloody events of the Boston Massacre in disjunctively clean and beautiful cursive. An interesting observation about Rowe’s diary entry is

that the pages are misnumbered: there is no page 1074 or 1075. I chose a diary entry as the first document to examine because it was written before the existence of the war propaganda that came out of the Boston Massacre. In order to inspire patriotism and revolutionary sentiment, Samuel Adams immediately deemed the event the “Boston Massacre” and Paul Revere immortalized the conflict in the previously mentioned engraving that depicted the soldiers firing on a crowd of poor, cowering colonists (Public Broadcasting Service). Rowe’s diary, having been written before such propagandist acts, should be devoid of this rhetoric.

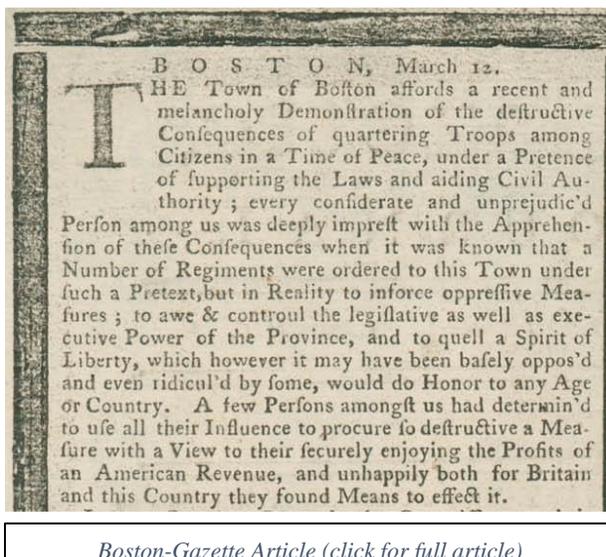
John Rowe’s diary entry begins with a modest log of his day on the 4th in which he attends dinner and church. The next day, March 5th, Rowe documents a small portion of his personal life, but mostly focuses on the event that came to be known as the Boston Massacre. Finally, his documentation of the 6th of March continues to focus on the massacre and the trials that took place immediately after the event. Diary entries, because of their personal nature, are often thought to be subjective and emotional; however, Rowe displays a certain objectivity that allows him to present the facts in an unemotional manner. Even his personal life is recorded with a factual, stoic tone: “[sic] dined at home with Mr. Saml Cabt Mrs Rowe-- Sucky & G Speakman -- after Dinner I went to Church Mr Walter Read prayers & preached from the 5th. Chapter of St. Matthew & the 8th” (Rowe 1073). Here, the Boston merchant writes a sequence of events using plain verbs to describe his own actions, such as “dined,” “went.” The actions of others are similarly plain; Pastor Walter “read” and “preached.” These verbs do not indicate an underlying opinion and Rowe also does not include such an opinion in an explicit sense. The reader is unsure whether or not Rowe enjoyed dinner, argued with the company, disagreed with the preacher’s message, etc. Instead, the reader is only aware of what happened; Rowe uses language without emotional connotations and simply presents facts.

When discussing the events of the Boston Massacre, John Rowe maintains an objective voice. He refrains from violent or bloody descriptions and does not condemn the British soldiers in any way; in fact, he commends Captain Preston for his character. Rowe writes, “[sic] A Party of the 29th under the Command of Capt Preston fired on the People they killed five -- wounded Several Others... Capt Preston Bears a good Character – he was taken in the night & Committed also Seven more of the 29th” (1076). It is interesting to note the verbs used to describe the actions of the British soldiers; they “fired,” “killed,” and “wounded.” These words are not kind in any sense and they still depict the grave reality of the situation. However, they *only* depict the reality. Rowe does not say that the soldiers “maimed” or “murdered” citizens of Boston. Fired, killed, and wounded are straightforward and absolute; devoid of an emotional opinion. Additionally, there is no condemning adjective associated with the British soldiers, such as “evil” or “cruel.” In fact, Rowe takes a moment to say that Captain Preston “bears a good character – he was taken in the night,” indicating either that the writer finds Preston to be noble or that the Captain accepted his arrest without resistance. If Rowe meant the first, this is the first indication of any sort of opinion that John Rowe might have had of the situation—and it traverses into a viewpoint opposite of what is expected. However, if Rowe is simply making an observation of how Preston handled arrest then the author has continued to resist the inclusion of his opinion in his diary entry. Either way, Rowe’s diary entry is in no way emotional.

When John Rowe describes the reaction of Boston’s citizens, his opinion seems to be revealed. However, even this does not have any passion or emotion. John Rowe writes: “the Inhabitants are greatly enraged and not without Reason --” (1076). The word “enraged” is the strongest adjective that we have encountered, finally indicating a hint of that tension that was felt in Boston in 1770. The focus here is *still* not on Rowe himself; he writes about the “inhabitants”

of Boston. While this phrase obviously includes the author, he writes in a way that removes him from the text. However, when Rowe says “and not without Reason” he finally makes a subjective judgment, validating the citizens’ anger. Despite the reader *finally* getting something possibly emotional out of Rowe, it is important to also note that he frames his judgements in terms of other people’s emotions. John Rowe’s diary entry about the Boston Massacre never explicitly includes the author’s emotional reaction; in terms of the “emotional-to-factual” spectrum, it lies very much toward the side of objectivity. This further indicates that Rowe did not have personal, ulterior motives when documenting the events of March 5th.

The second document is a newspaper article entitled “[Boston, March 12. The Town of Boston affords a recent a melancholy Demonstration...](#)” that originally appeared in pages two through three in *The Boston-Gazette* on March 12, 1770. The scan of the [original article](#) featured on the MHS site (pictured right) is as immaculate as John Rowe’s diary. I



have seen a quite a few newspaper articles on databases that have written notes on them but this is not one of them. Both the font and paper type look to be typical of the average newspaper and there is a printed border around the text. There are no pictures included in this section of the newspaper but apparently, according to Massachusetts Historical Society, the front page of the Boston Gazette that day included an artist’s depiction of four coffins sporting some somber skull and crossbones. I chose to look at a newspaper article because I was curious about their depiction of the Boston Massacre in terms of objectivity and subjectivity. Did *The Boston-Gazette* reflect

revolutionary sentiments or did they simply express a factual documentation of what they knew about the confrontation? The article from *The Boston-Gazette* on March 12 begins with evidence as to why British soldiers should not inhabit Boston during times of peace; they use the Boston Massacre as their main argument for this. The author includes a “circumstantial account” of the events of March 5th in which soldiers abused citizens with cutlasses and bayonets, Bostonians came to the aid of their peers, and snowballs were thrown at redcoats which prompted them to fire on the crowd. The article then discusses the dead and wounded, as well as the subsequent demands made by the town to remove all British soldiers.

A modern expectation of newspaper articles is that they present facts and various perspectives without including the author’s opinion. However, *The Boston-Gazette* seems to present a combination of facts and opinions galore—it certainly would not be able to boast the motto of fair and balanced. The article lands somewhere in the middle of the “emotional-to-factual” spectrum. The beginning of the article, in which the author sets out to prove that British soldiers do not belong in Boston, utilizes emotional rhetoric. Acting much like a thesis that the article sets out to prove, the first line of the article reads:

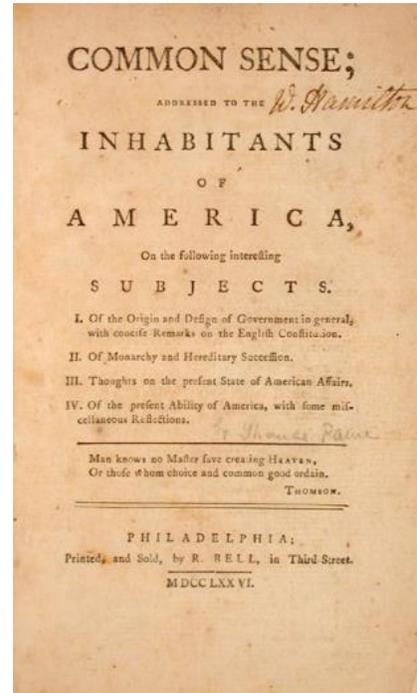
[sic] The Town of Boston affords a recent and melancholy Demonstration of the destructive Consequences of quartering Troops among Citizens in a Time of Peace, under a Pretence of supporting the Laws and aiding Civil Authority; every considerate and unprejudic'd Person among us was deeply imprest with the Apprehension of these Consequences when it was known that a Number of Regiments were ordered to this Town under such a Pretext, but in Reality to inforce oppressive Measures... We have known a Party of Soldiers in the face of Day fire off a loaden Musket upon the Inhabitants, others have been prick'd with

Bayonets, and even our Magistrates assaulted and put in Danger of their Lives
(The Boston-Gazette 2).

It is obvious that the goal of this article is completely different than that of John Rowe's diary. As a first line, it is immediately clear that this article's primary goal is not to simply document the massacre, but to convince the audience that the massacre is a "demonstration of the destructive consequences of quartering troops among citizens in a time of peace." In this passage, the author uses language to evoke an emotional reaction within the reader; this is a stark contrast to Rowe's diary. While Rowe uses simple verbs and little to no adjectives, this excerpt alone utilizes highly descriptive and connotative vocabulary. The Boston Massacre is described as "melancholy" and the actions of the redcoats are "destructive" and "oppressive." These words depict an unjust tragedy. Rowe's language depicted an unfortunate confrontation. Further, in the newspaper article, the British soldiers acted violently: they "assaulted" and "prick'd" citizens with bayonets. The redcoats' very existence in Boston is under the false "pretense" of protection. These words drip with negative connotations and it becomes immediately obvious that the author believes the British soldiers to be at fault for the Boston Massacre. While John Rowe's diary is plainspoken and does not set out to speculate or convince, this article immediately makes those very same intentions known to the reader in the first line. This type of war time propaganda that used emotion to turn American citizens against the British was pervasive amongst colonial writers.

Some of the emotional sentiments in *The Boston-Gazette's* article are also echoed in the famous pamphlet *Common Sense*, written by Thomas Paine five years later (pictured below).

Paine wanted to convince the American people that the British were a tyrannical force that should be revolted against. He uses emotion to inspire revolutionary sentiment in the common folk of America. For example, the enlightenment figure wrote: “But Britain is the parent country, say some. Then the more shame upon her conduct. Even brutes do not devour their young, nor savages make war upon their families” (Paine). In this quote,



Common Sense

“savages” who “devour their young.” To liken the nation to uncivilized animals is bad enough, but Paine goes so far as to liken them to *cannibals who eat their children*. Highly connotative language serves a purpose in rhetorical arguments: it inspires a visceral reaction within the reader and grants more persuasive power to the text. Paine’s harsh language sounds a lot like the language previously observed in *The Boston-Gazette's* article.

However, an argument simply based off emotion is weak; there needs to be a balance between passion and logic.

The Boston-Gazette is heavy on its usage of emotion; this has already been observed in its language. However, the article also strives to present detailed facts about the Boston Massacre so that the reader can make their own determinations. *The Boston-Gazette* describes the sequence of events which led to the overall massacre in a thorough manner. Although it remains to be seen

whether or not their report is completely accurate, the newspaper strove to present the facts for the confused, angry citizens of Boston:

[sic] Thirty or forty persons, mostly lads, being by this means gathered in Kingstreet, Capt. Preston, with a party of men with charged bayonets, came from the main guard to the Commissioners 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 ! (The Boston-Gazette 2).

Where John Rowe's diary only included the bare minimum of what happened— probably because the author himself wasn't present— specific details abound in this recounting of the Boston Massacre. The article includes an estimate of how many Bostonians gathered around the British soldiers, “thirty or forty persons;” the movements of the redcoats, “they took place by the custom-house;” the exact locations involved, “[they] gathered in Kingstreet;” and quotes from various people, “[the Captain] said, Damn you, Fire, be the consequence what it will.” This continues throughout the entire article and the reader gets an exact report about the casualties, conditions of the wounded, and the city councils which took place after the event. By including such details, The Boston Massacre acts as evidence as to why soldiers simply do not belong in America during times of peace. With the information provided, this is a logical argument; the event would not have taken place without British soldiers. Not only does *The Boston-Gazette* use depictions of violence to enrage their American readers, they also use it to make them think critically about the situation at hand. In *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine also uses a similar logical

argument to convince the American people to go to war with Britain. He presents evidence of violence and uses it to prove that the British have lost control: “Thousands are already ruined by British barbarity; (thousands more will probably suffer the same fate)... And a government which cannot preserve the peace, is no government at all...” (Paine).

John Rowe’s diary is not angry by any means. Rowe did not have the ulterior motive to convince the American people to revolt or go to war; he was simply documenting an interesting event in the town in which he lived. However, the article by *The Boston-Gazette* is teeming with passion. The author was angry at the redcoats and the British government that sent them. They mourned the loss of their fellow Bostonians and took the opportunity to write an argument that would inspire revolutionary sentiments in the already tense citizens. Much like Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*, the newspaper article used emotions and facts to appeal to their readers. Today, the Boston Massacre is an enigma; sources completely clash on their beliefs of what caused the British soldiers to shoot. [Some sources](#) say that a British soldier slipped and fell, causing his rifle to discharge into the crowd of colonists, while [other sources](#) say that the redcoats were enraged by the crowd’s mocking and flying debris. Although not contemporary, *The Boston-Gazette* article claimed that Captain Preston commanded open fire. All these differing stories came out of war time rhetoric. Most people weren’t objective like John Rowe, simply documenting the events for their own or posterity’s interest. Most had an ulterior motive—to take the confusion and tension already boiling within colonists in 1770 and build upon it. Facts and fiction flew amongst writers and revolutionary leaders. Thomas Paine, Samuel Adams, Paul Revere, and *The Boston-Gazette* took the events of March 5, 1770 and crafted them into a mysterious massacre; whether they manipulated or inspired depends upon the opinion of the reader.

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