The Boston Massacre

In the fall of 1768, 1000 British soldiers (known as redcoats for their bright red jackets) arrived in Boston under the command of General Thomas Gage. With their arrival, tension filled the streets of Boston.

Since the soldiers were poorly paid, they hired themselves out as workers, usually at rates lower than those of American workers. Resentment against the redcoats grew. Soldiers and street youths often yelled insults at each other. “Lobsters for sale!” the youths would yell, referring to the soldier’s red coats. “Yankees!” the soldiers jeered. Yankee was supposed to be an insult, but the colonists soon took pride in the name.

On March 5, 1770, tensions finally exploded into violence. A group of youths and dockworkers – among them Crispus Attucks – started trading insults in front of the Custom House. A fight broke out, and the soldiers began firing. Attucks and four laborers were killed.

The Sons of Liberty called the shooting the Boston Massacre. They said that Attucks and the four others had given their lives for freedom. The incident became a tool for anti-British propaganda in newspaper articles, pamnphlets and posters. The people of Boston were outraged.

Meanwhile the redcoats who had fired the shots were arrested for murder. John Adams, a lawyer and cousin of Samuel Adams, defended them in court. Adams was criticized for taking the case. He replied that the law should be “deaf…to the clamors of the populace.” Adams argued the soldiers had acted in self-defence. The jury agreed. To many colonists, however, the Boston Massacre would stand as a symbol of British tyrrany.