The Boston Massacre

On March 5, 1770, a large crowd gathered in Boston around a detachment of the 29th British Regiment. The crowd yelled insults and threw snowballs. Such outbursts had occurred many times before. The previous week a British customs official had fired into a crowd of young boys outside his home killing two of them. He had been pardoned by the king and had snuck out of the country to Britain. Now a crowd had gathered outside the customs house where soldiers guarded the British customs officials. This time matters got out of hand. As the crown of protesters grew, someone gave an order to fire. Three civilians were killed and two others would die later from wounds they received from the gunfire. In all, 10 people were shot by the redcoats.

The first civilian killed was Crispus Attucks, a former slave, who had escaped 20 years earlier from his master. As a fugitive slave, he did not share the same degree of freedom as his fellow townsmen. Yet Crispus Attucks became the first person to die in the struggle fro freedom between Great Britain and the colonies.

As news of the shooting spread, the citizens of Boston went wild with anger. A massacre they called the affair, and demanded that the British withdraw all troops from the city. Later, when passions had cooled somewhat, the soldiers were tried for murder. They were defended by Josiah Quincy, Jr. and John Adams. Neither of these men had any sympathy for the British but they insisted that every individual was entitled to a fair trial. All except two of the soldiers were acquitted. These two were convicted of manslaughter but were soon released.

The Prime Minister urged Parliament to repeal the Townshend Acts which had first angered the people of Boston. In 1770, the British repealed the Townshend Acts and allowed the Quartering of troops to expire. These changes brought a temporary end to the unrest.