

Soldier viewpoint

Primary source #4: Continuing with Captain Preston's recollection of this event (provides an entirely different perspective on the events of March 5, 1770)

They [the mob] advanced to the points of the bayonets, struck some of them and even the muzzles [the front of the muskets] of the pieces, and seemed to be endeavoring to close with the soldiers . . . some well behaved persons asked me if the guns were charged [loaded] and I replied yes . . . they then asked if I intended to order the men to fire. I answered no, by no means, observing to them that I was advanced before the muzzles of the men's pieces [he was standing in front of their guns] and must fall a sacrifice if they fired; and my giving the word fire under those circumstances would prove me to be no officer. While I was thus speaking, one of the soldiers have received a severe blow with a stick, stepped a little on one side and instantly fired, on which turning and asking why he fired without orders, I was struck with a club on my arm, which for some time deprived me of the use of it, which blow had it been placed on my head, most probably would have destroyed me.

On this a general attack was made on the men [Redcoats] by a great number of heavy clubs and snowballs being thrown . . . by which all our lives were in imminent [immediate] danger . . . Instantly three or four soldiers fired, one after another, and directly after three more in the same confusion and hurry. The mob ran away, except three unhappy men who instantly expired . . . On my asking the soldiers why they fired without orders, they said they heard the word fire and supposed it came from me. This might be the case as many of the mob called out fire, fire, but I assured the men that I gave no such order.

Primary source #3: Testimony from [British] Captain Thomas Preston (provides an entirely different perspective on the events of March 5, 1770)

About 9, some of the guard came to and informed me the town inhabitants were assembling to attack the troops, that that the bells were ringing as the signal for that purpose . . . In my way there, I saw people in great commotion, and heard them use the most cruel and horrid threats against the troops . . . about 100 people passed . . . towards the custom house where the king's money is lodged. They immediately surrounded the sentry [British soldier] posted there, and with clubs and other weapons threatened to execute their vengeance on him. I was soon informed by a townsman their intention was to carry off the soldier from his post and probably murder him . . . he assured me he heard the mob declare they would murder him. This I feared might be a prelude to their plundering [stealing] the king's chest. I immediately sent an officer and 12 men to protect the sentry and the king's money . . . they [the soldiers] rushed through the people and by charging their bayonets in half circles, kept them [the townspeople] at a little distance . . . the unhappy affair took place without any loading in their pieces [muskets]; nor did I ever give orders for loading them. The mob still increased and were more outrageous, striking their clubs . . . and calling out, come on you rascals, you bloody backs, you lobster scoundrels, fire if you dare . . . fire . . . At this time I was between the soldiers and the mob, parleying with and endeavoring all in my power to persuade them to retire peacefully, but to no purpose.

Patriot Viewpoint

Primary source #1: Report of the Committee of the Town of Boston (patriot viewpoint)

On Friday, the 2d instant, a quarrel arose between some soldiers of the 29th, and the rope-makers journeymen and apprentices, which was carried to that length, as to become dangerous to the lives of each party, many of them being much wounded. This contentious disposition continued until the Monday evening following, [March 5th] when a party of seven or eight soldiers were detached from the main guard, under the command of Captain Preston, and by his orders fired upon the inhabitants promiscuously in King Street, without the least warning of their intention, and killed three on the spot; another has since died of his wounds, and others are dangerously, some it is feared mortally, wounded. Captain Preston and his party are now in jail. An inquiry is now making into this unhappy affair . . .

Sam Adams, John Hancock, and others,
Committee of the Town of Boston

Primary source #2: Testimony from Bostonian William Tant (providing a view much less one-sided view than the Committee's)

. . . I saw a party of soldiers come from the main guard, and draw themselves up in a line from the corner of the Customs-house to the sentry-box; the people still continued in the street, crying "Fire, fire, and be damned," and hove [throw] some more snow balls; whereupon I heard a musket go off, and in the space of two or three seconds, I heard the word "Fire" given, but by whom I do not know, and instantly the soldiers fired one after another. I then stood between the sentry-box and the Custom-house door. And further I know not.