

Revere House Radio

Season 1 Episode 8

Paul Revere and the Boston Massacre

Welcome in to another edition of Revere House Radio. I am your host Robert Shimp. In today's episode we will tackle another one of our most frequently asked questions- what was Paul Revere's role in or connection to the Boston Massacre. If we can think back to the time before the corona virus disrupted life around the world, we had actually just commemorated the 250th anniversary of the Massacre on March 5th. From the commemorations, it is clear that the Massacre's legacy still lives on today, and its impact still resonates strongly with individuals from all walks of life.

By way of a brief refresher, on March 5, 1770, a group of British regular soldiers fired into a crowd outside of Boston's state house, ultimately claiming 5 lives and setting into motion a chain of events that would further deepen the divide between the port city and the powers that be back in London. It is important to keep in mind that in 1770, Boston had been occupied for 2 years by British soldiers who had been sent to keep the peace following the associated protests with the Stamp Act in 1765 and Townsend Duties in 1767. This fact was acutely felt because of how physically small Boston was at the time. Things must have felt quite claustrophobic for a town of only around 15,000 people to have 2 British regiments, over 2000 soldiers and with company in tow, placed in Boston. Paul Revere's business, like so many other craftsmen, had been negatively affected by the occupation. He was not overflowing with business at the time of the Boston Massacre, meaning he likely had some free time on his hands.

That said, it is a stretch to make any substantial claim that Revere was present at the massacre itself. It is certainly possible, given a few factors. First, for anyone that has walked the Freedom Trail- all of the sites are really close, especially when considering Boston's size at the time. The proximity of his new house, the Paul Revere House, which he had moved into only weeks before the Massacre, to the location of the event would have been less than a ten minute walk at the time. Revere was a man about town in the period, known to frequent the nearby Green Dragon Tavern, so it is not a stretch to think he would have been out in the area on that cold March night.

Keeping that in mind, there are no references that he WAS there, no reflections in any letters or after the fact ruminations that he was present, in the way he did document the Midnight Ride, for instance. Now, as historians always say, absence of evidence does not mean evidence of absence, but in this case there is no way we could say with any certainty that he was there. Further, the make-up of the crowd, amongst the lower sorts in Boston with itinerant workers, young boys, sailors, and apprentices would not have been the type of company that Revere would have typically kept. As a social striver, Revere certainly could connect with those below the so-called middling sorts, but he always aimed upwards in his life-long self-perceptions, so it would have

been an uncharacteristic step down the social ladder for Revere to have been in the quasi-mob scene.

More important than his potential presence at the scene, however, were Revere's actions after the massacre itself. One of the most famous pieces connected to Paul Revere is the engraving he produced only a few weeks after the event, "The Bloody Massacre perpetrated in King Street." The iconic image functioned as a propaganda firestorm at the time and is pretty recognizable to most people interested in Early American history today.

While Revere's publishing of the engraving obviously speaks to his desire to boost the patriot cause and stir dissent against the presence of British soldiers in Boston, it also speaks to the loose moral standings Revere, and most in colonial America, held about copyright and ownership of creative materials. Revere's famous print was actually not his own creation- or at least about 95% was not. Revere had come across the drawing by Henry Pelham, John Singleton Copley's step-brother, after Pelham loaned his work to Revere for some reason. As time passed from the event, Revere seized an opportunity with the unpublished propaganda piece and made slight modifications, then had it printed as "The Bloody Massacre perpetrated in King Street" before Pelham could do so. Revere did change up a few things in his print, to be fair, namely the location of the moon, some columns shown in the print, he made some chimney alterations, and notably changed the Custom Hall's sign to read Butchers Hall, again subtlety not Revere's forte. He also added a lengthy caption to accompany the print.

While Revere's actions were common for the time, we know Pelham was still furious. He wrote soon thereafter to Revere and charged him with unscrupulous behavior, stating he thought he had placed his work "into the hands of a person who had more regard to the dictates of Honor and Justice than to take the undue advantage you have done of the confidence and trust I reposed in you". He added "it was as if you had plundered me on the highway"- clearly he's not happy nor was he feeling generous at the time. We do not know what Revere's reaction to this retort was as no response from him exists today. Perhaps he did respond, perhaps he settled things directly in person straightaway, perhaps he simply ignored the letter as he knew there was no turning back and no reason to apologize for using his skilled medium to advance the patriot cause. Ultimately, it seems a business connection returned between the men and families before Pelham's departure to England in 1775. Regardless of how Revere felt about the Pelham situation, we do know that the engraving was not the only depiction of the event that Revere created.

Revere in fact drew a detailed diagram of the massacre scene as well, a source that was lost, or rather, undiscovered, for 117 years until it was uncovered in the Boston Public Library by librarian Mellen Chamberlain in 1887. Revere's diagram outlines a far less propagandist picture of events, showing a spatial spread to the scene and a more balanced version on the British soldiers' formation and where the bodies were located. The diagram was likely created for use in the massacre trial- it is the type of drawing done for a particular end and use, and speaks to a pretty nuanced understanding of the situation, perhaps putting a slight tally back into the 'he was there' column. If nothing else, he had a direct pipeline to sources who were and were willing to speak candidly.

Revere's diagram was also not his last connection to the Massacre. One year after the fact, Revere's solemn commemoration of the Massacre's 1st anniversary impacted "thousands" of Bostonians. While we often look back on the Revolution and see a groundswell of action from the Stamp Act through the declaration of Independence, there were of course natural ebbs and flows over the decade plus of build the United States. While 1771 is not viewed as one of the dramatic years leading to independence, on March 5th of the year Revere made sure that Bostonians would keep the memory of the massacre, and ideally anti-British agitation alive. Revere took personal expense to set up 3 illuminations in the windows of his home that captivated the city and neighborhood for one night only. No contemporary image of the scene exists, but as an aside, it is something that we at the Paul Revere House are extremely excited about recapturing in 2021 for its 250th anniversary- so stay tuned over the coming months as our plans for it continue to take shape! The illuminations from the Revere house looking outwards on that night portrayed a clear political message, one that the patriot leaders were keen to keep going in what was an interlude period- between the massacre and the Tea party. Revere's display put forth 3 scenes. First the scene of Christopher Snider's death and ghost- the 11 year old boy shot by Loyalist Ebenezer Richardson two weeks before the Massacre. Second, the troops firing on the crowd at the massacre, itself and finally a personified America resisting the British with her foot on a grenadier's head while gesturing back towards the Massacre scene. It must have been a haunting display, effective in its fleeting nature and harkening to such a bloody and dramatic moment in the confines of the city.

All of this is to say over these varying vignettes that Revere was quite connected to the Massacre, even if he was not a direct participant or witness.

That will do it for this week's episode. As always, please stay connected with us on social media and email- I'd also like to include a special shout out this week to our 2020 spring interns, Alex Bice and Laura Rockefeller- their completed projects are the subjects of the Revere Express blog posts this week- be sure to check them out and see the great work they did in of course quite challenging distance learning circumstances! Until next time, stay safe, and thanks for listening.