

Crispus Attucks

c. 1723–1770



WHY HE MADE HISTORY A former slave, Crispus Attucks was the first person to be killed in the Boston Massacre.



As you read the biography below, think about the role Crispus Attucks played in American independence. Why should Attucks be remembered?



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Very little is known about the life of Crispus Attucks until the day he died. Historians are not sure whether he was African American or Native American, but many believe he was of mixed ancestry, possibly from a group of Natick Indians who converted to Christianity in the seventeenth century. It is also believed that he may have been a slave. A notice in the *Boston Gazette* in 1750 sought out a young runaway slave that may have been Attucks: “Ran away from his Master, William Brown of Framingham on the 30th of September last, a mulatto fellow about twenty-seven years of age, named Crispus, 6 feet 2 inches high, short curled hair, his knees nearer together than common.”

Other reports indicate that Attucks may have been a sailor on a whaling ship. One account puts Attucks as a crewman on a whaler from Nantucket, Massachusetts, that was docked in Boston Harbor when a group of colonists began taunting British soldiers marching the city’s streets.

The British Parliament had imposed a number of taxes on the colonies in order to raise funds and keep the colonies profitable for Britain. The Stamp Act required a stamp on nearly all paper products; the Sugar Act placed levies on sugar; and the Tea Act sought to force colonists to buy tea from British, rather than Dutch, traders. Without a voice in Parliament, the colonists felt the taxes were unfair, and as each new tax was instituted, colonial anger grew.

On the evening of March 5, 1770, a group of angry colonists started mocking and jeering at a group of British soldiers on patrol in Boston. Attucks, by then 47 years old, was probably having dinner at an inn when the scuffle broke out. Reports say that Attucks led a group of sailors, all gathering sticks along the way to use as weapons, to the commotion. John Adams described Attucks as “a stout fellow, whose very looks were enough to terrify any person.”

Some witnesses said that Attucks tried to grab a bayonet carried by one of the British soldiers, and that struggle led to the British opening fire on

The Revolutionary Era**Biography**

the colonists. Other witnesses said Attucks was innocent, killed while leaning on his cordwood stick. Whatever his role in the incident, Attucks was the first to die, struck by two bullets in the chest. Four other colonists were killed in the attack as well. Colonial leaders accused the British soldiers of firing on innocent civilians.

Attucks's body lay in state in Boston's Faneuil Hall for three days. Then it, along with the bodies of three other victims, was taken by a funeral procession of some 10,000 or more to a cemetery where they were buried.

The British soldiers who fired on the crowd were tried for murder. All except two were let off, and the two who were convicted were given light punishment. The incident fueled colonial anger toward the British. Colonial leaders began sharing with each other news of British injustices and abuses. The colonies were beginning to unite on a path that would lead to revolution.

Considered by many the first martyr of the American Revolution for his determination to stand against the British, Attucks has been memorialized with a statue on the Boston Common.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Explain** What events led up to the Boston Massacre?

2. **Draw Conclusions** Why is Attucks's contribution to the American Revolution considered significant?

ACTIVITY

Statues are erected in cities and towns all over the world to honor people who have made a significant contribution to their community or their country. Crispus Attucks has been recognized with a statue in Boston Common, one of the city's largest parks. Can you think of another statue that pays homage to someone significant? Write a short paragraph about who this statue commemorates and why.