

# Crispus Attucks: Part 2

## Rediscovered and Reimagined by Later Generations

c. 1723 - 1770

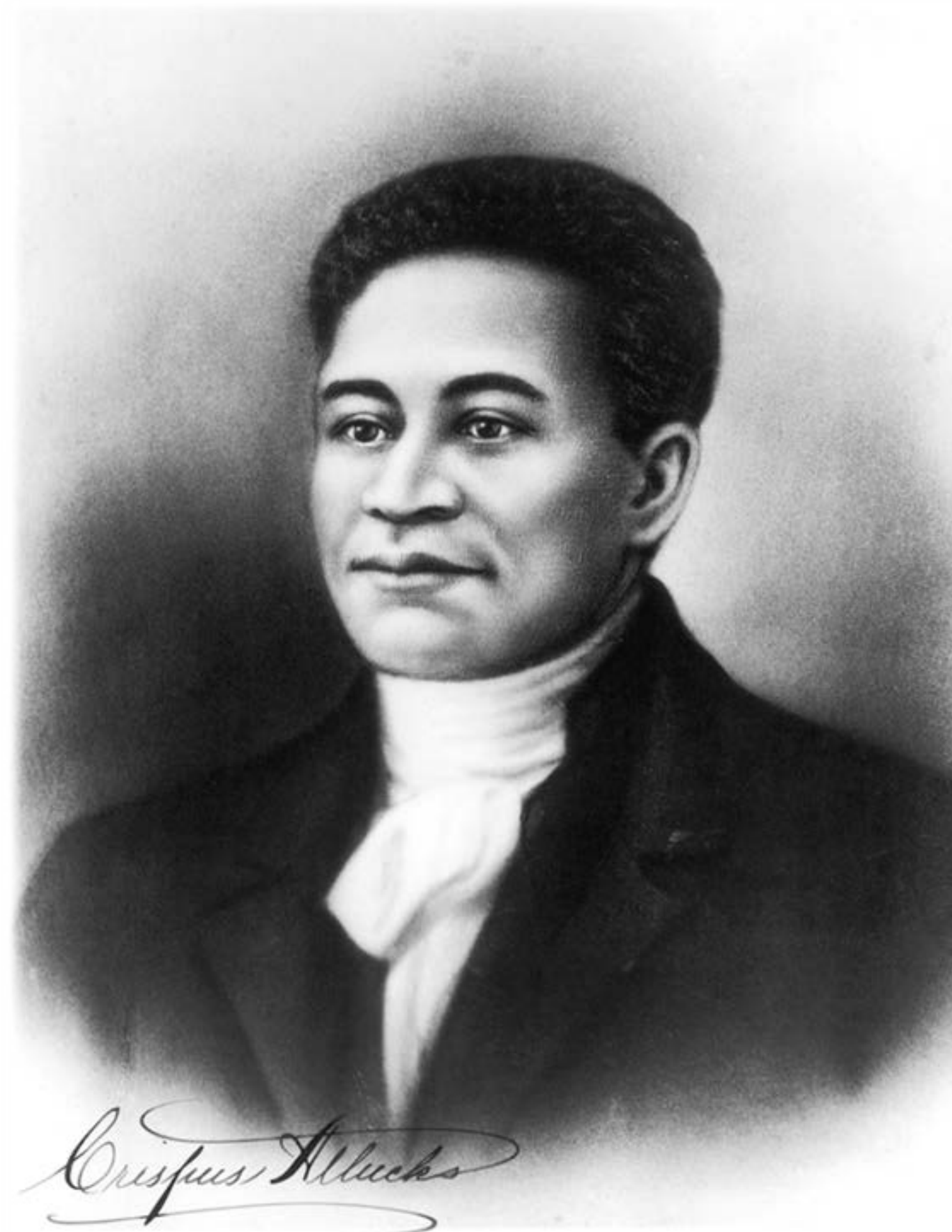
Escaped Slave

Atlantic Sailor

Revolutionary Martyr

Civil Rights Symbol

American Legend



*A portrait of what  
Crispus Attucks might  
have looked like.*





# History vs. Memory

In the first half of this presentation, we examined the best available evidence to establish a plausible picture of Crispus Attucks's life and his participation in the civil unrest that led to him being killed.

Now we'll look at the different ways in which Attucks has been re-discovered and reimagined by later generations, and how the facts we know about his life were embellished as he was elevated to a major symbol of African-American identity in a struggle for emancipation, equal citizenship, and civil rights.

*The Boston Massacre Monument  
(aka "Victory" or the "Crispus Attucks Monument")  
by Adolph Robert Kraus, 1888. (photo by James Walsh)*







# History vs. Memory

**History** is what we determine about the past through disinterested analysis of the artifacts of a previous era to reconstruct a plausible story about what actually happened. The story might be incomplete or imperfect, but it's the closest we can get to the truth.



**Memory** is the way that real people, both during and after any historical moment, interpret and apply the significance of that event for their own purposes. In doing so, they might highlight certain facts at the expense of others, or attribute certain motives to people involved, with or without evidence.

*To commemorate the 275<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Crispus Attucks' birth, and to honor African American Revolutionaries, the US Mint issued a silver dollar coin on February 13, 1998. The obverse side of the coin (heads) shows Crispus Attucks and was designed by John Mercanti.*



# History vs. Memory

**History** is often incomplete. Records are fragmented and open to misinterpretation, and the prejudices and agendas of historians inevitably shape how those records are presented to the public. Both supporters and opponents of a British military presence in Boston began shaping the facts about Attucks's death to fit their own politics almost immediately!



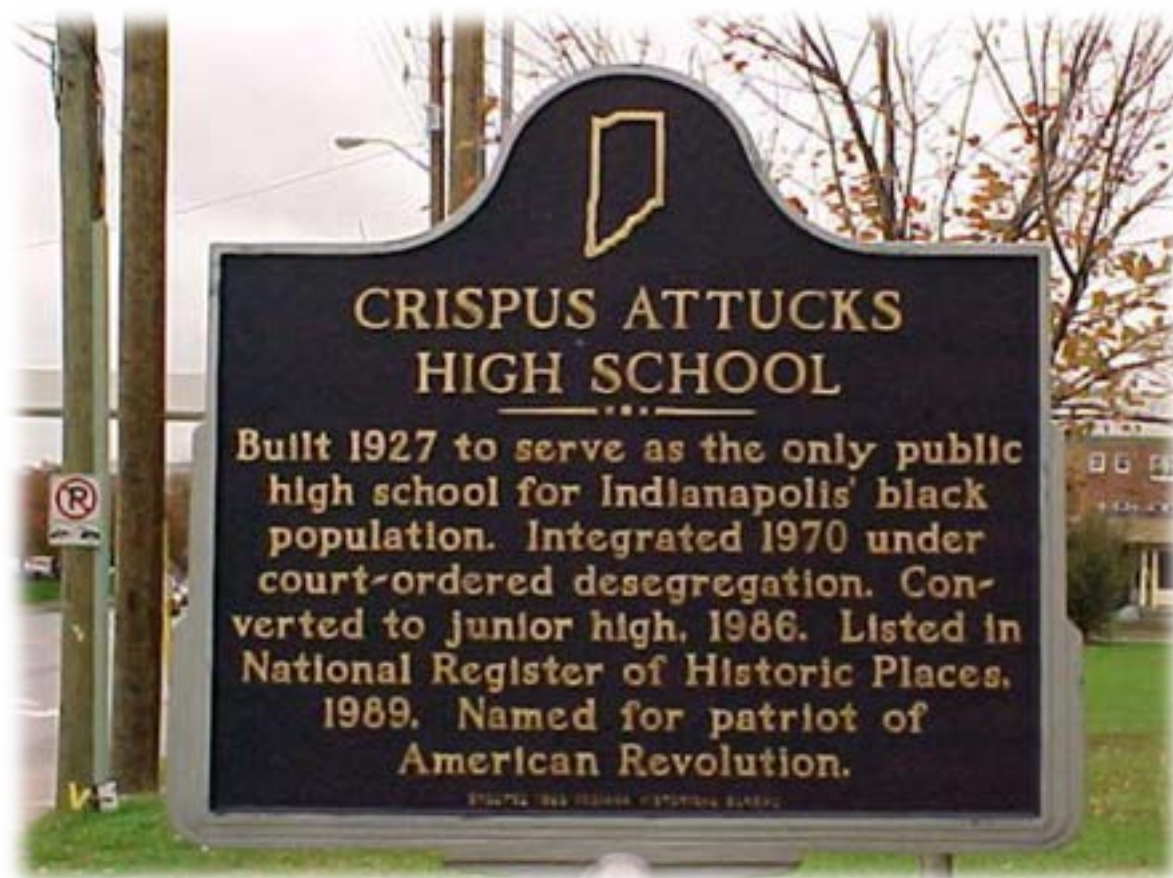
**Memory** often provides a necessary supplement to history, giving a voice to people and positions that mainstream historians often ignore. After independence was won, White historians largely forgot about Crispus Attucks (along with other Black contributions to the revolution), but his memory became very important to later generations of African Americans seeking to find their place in the national story.

*Pins like this and other memorabilia were produced by the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission (formed by the U.S. Congress in 1966) as part of the American Bicentennial celebrations of 1976.*



# Crispus Attucks Memorialized

In the twenty-first century, many schools, parks, theaters, childcare and community centers, awards, scholarships, and at least one bridge are named for Crispus Attucks.



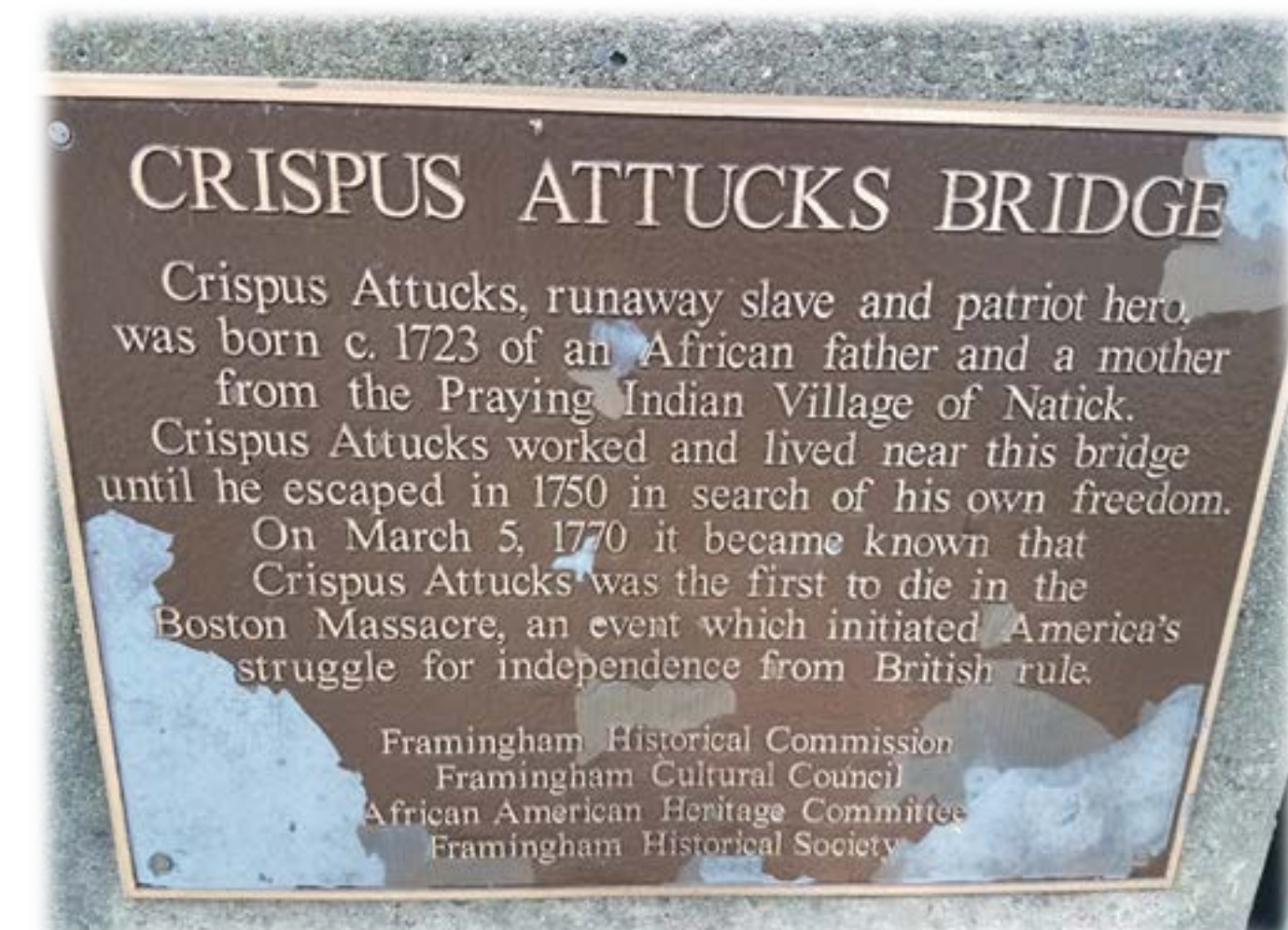


# Controversy

In 2000 (230 years after Attucks' death), Framingham, MA named a bridge for him. The ceremony included the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts honor guard and members of the Natick Praying Indians (to which Attucks' ancestors likely belonged.)

But one local historian objected, labeling Attucks a "hard-drinking bully" who provoked an unnecessary riot that got people killed – including himself. Many other men of color fought bravely for the American revolution: why not honor one of them?

Professional historians suggested honoring Peter Salem, an African American soldier and hero of the Battle of Bunker Hill, as a suitable alternative. Why should Attucks, who died in the confusion of a riot, and about whom little is truly known, get all the glory?





# History vs. Memory Exercise

Can you think of some examples of historical stories that have changed over time?

Even recent events can be changed as stories are reported on the media and then retold or reinterpreted on social media.

It also happens in our personal lives. Have you ever been part of a situation that you remember one way, but over time, the story changes, as people talk about it?



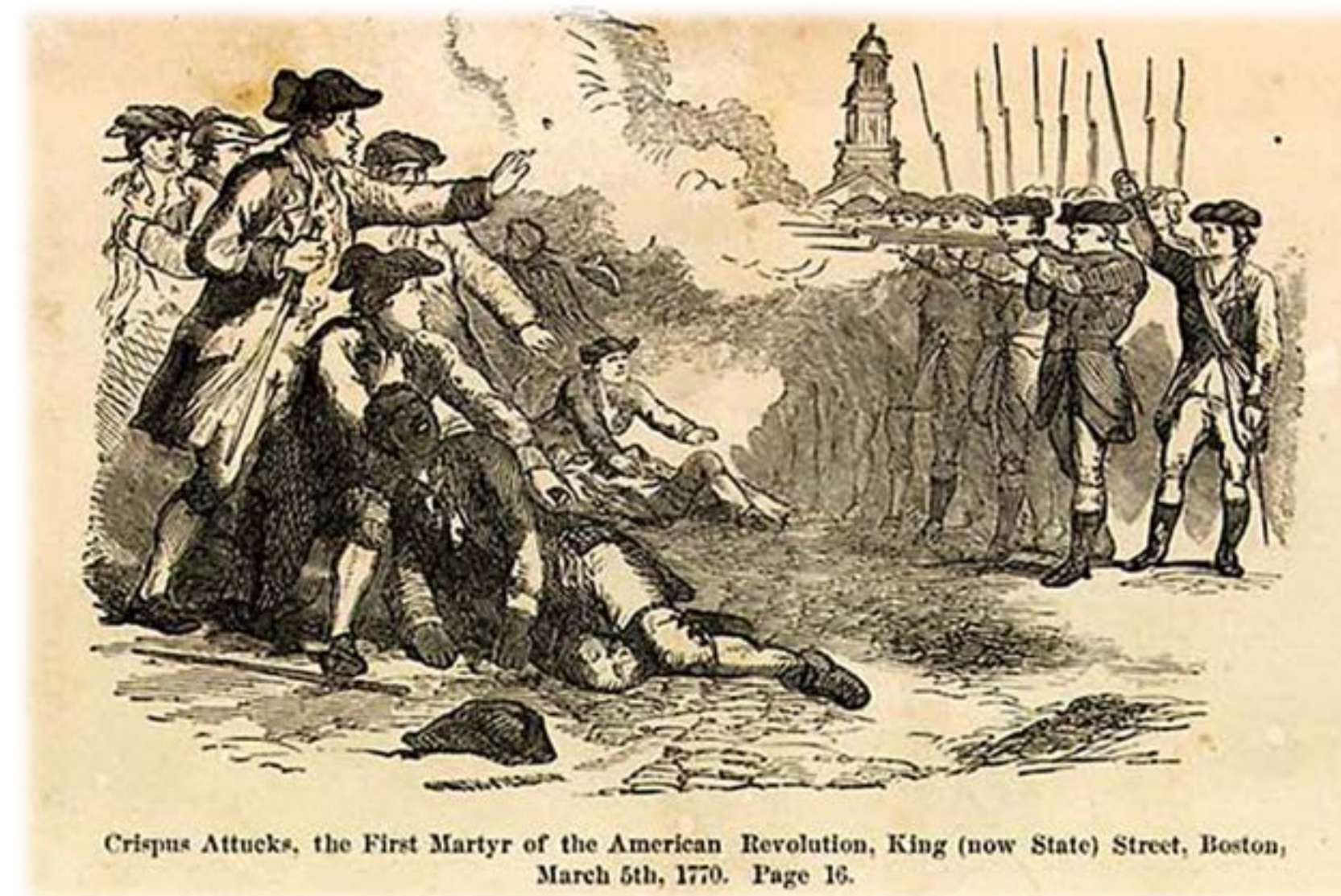
*What is the meaning of the idiom “to hear it through the grapevine”? Does it suggest that stories can change?*



# July 4, 1826: End of an Era

In 1786, after the Revolutionary War was won, and July 4 began to be celebrated as the new nation's birthday, John Adams still wrote: "5th of March, 1770... the foundation of American independence was laid."

Crispus Attucks was a crucial part of that foundation, one that future generations of abolitionists and civil rights activists would build upon – even if that meant resurrecting Attucks and remaking him in their own image.

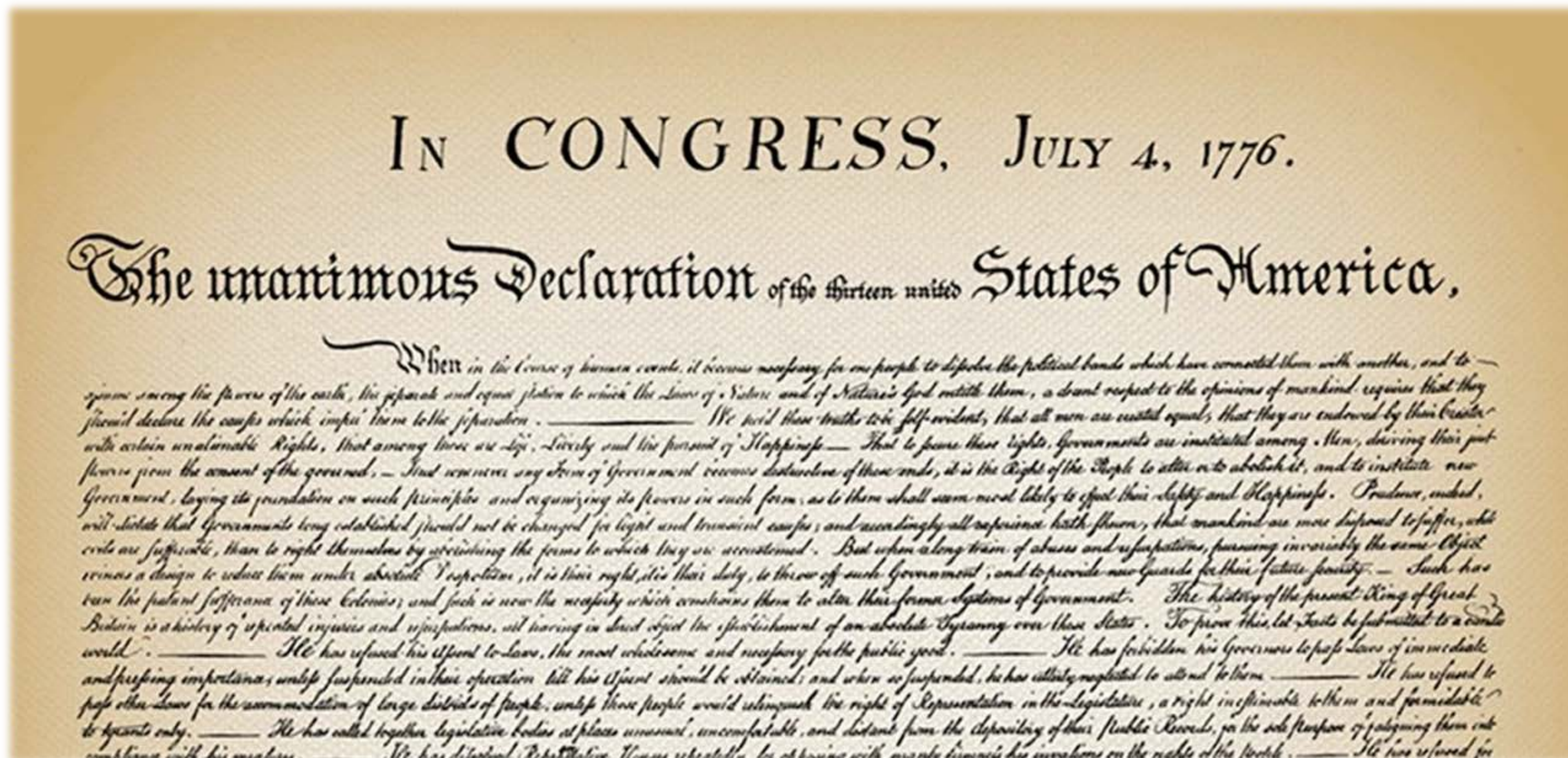


*"Crispus Attucks, the First Martyr of the American Revolution, King (now State) Street, Boston, March 5th, 1770."  
From p.16 of book by William C. Nell*



# July 4, 1826: End of an Era

Incredible as it seems, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams both died on the same day, just several hours apart: July 4, 1826, the 50-year anniversary of the signing of the **Declaration of Independence**. The revolutionary generation was dying, and the young republic was gripped by a rising desire to study its own past.







# A Good Question!

This renewed interest in America's founding generation – not just official leaders like Adams and Jefferson, but ordinary people – led to the re-examination of the Boston massacre and rediscovery of Crispus Attucks by African-American intellectuals who not only wanted to abolish slavery but secure the equal rights of citizenship for their people.

In their minds, one very important question lingered:

**If a Black man had been the first to die for American freedom, how then could America continue to deny freedom to Black men nearly half a century later?**





# Forgotten Memories

In the decades after independence, Crispus Attucks, and the Boston Massacre, was widely forgotten. By the 1820s, the fact that Attucks was a man of color seems to have been completely unknown, even among early abolitionists who otherwise surely would have seized upon this fact while condemning the hypocrisy of American slavery.

One man who witnessed the Boston Massacre, George R.T. Hewes, was still alive to dictate his memoirs in the 1830s. A shoemaker, he had been influenced by what he witnessed the night of March 5, 1770. He went on to participate in the **Boston Tea Party** of 1773 and then fight in the revolution. Even in his 90's, he still remembered the names of the massacre's victims, and knew Attucks to be a "mulatto," a fact omitted from many accounts told by others.



*"The Boston Tea Party"*



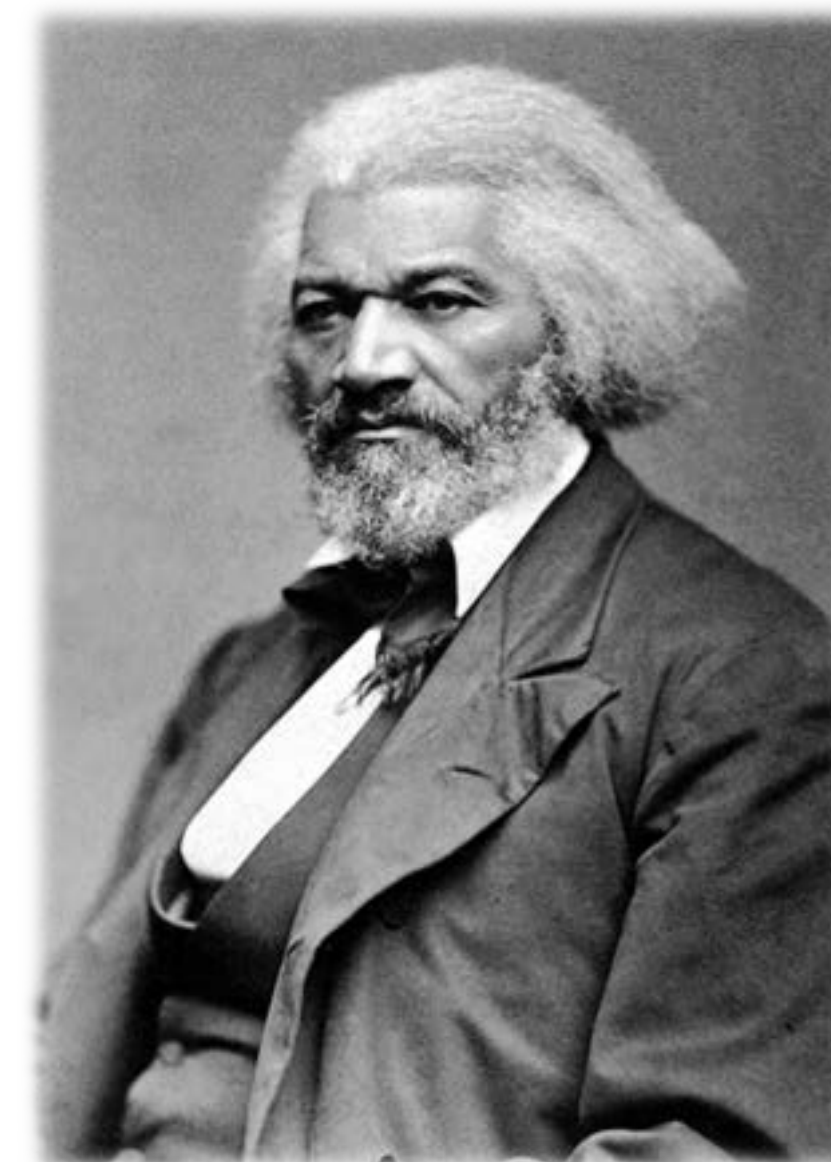
# Abolitionism in America



*William Lloyd Garrison*

After the Revolutionary War, northern states began to gradually abolish slavery and all had done so by 1804. Among Whites, abolitionism became a popular expression of moralism and it was primarily Christian activists who initiated and organized an anti-slavery movement. Many early leaders were Quakers and there were also many women (such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Susan B. Anthony) who played crucial roles as abolitionists. William Lloyd Garrison was a prominent publisher who became an abolitionist.

Black abolitionists also played an undeniably large role in shaping the movement. Some of the most prominent leaders of the movement were also Black men and women who had escaped from bondage, like Frederick Douglass. **Garrison and Douglass formed an alliance** for several years, helping to provide a platform for activists and ex-slaves like Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth in antislavery media and on the abolitionist speaking circuit.



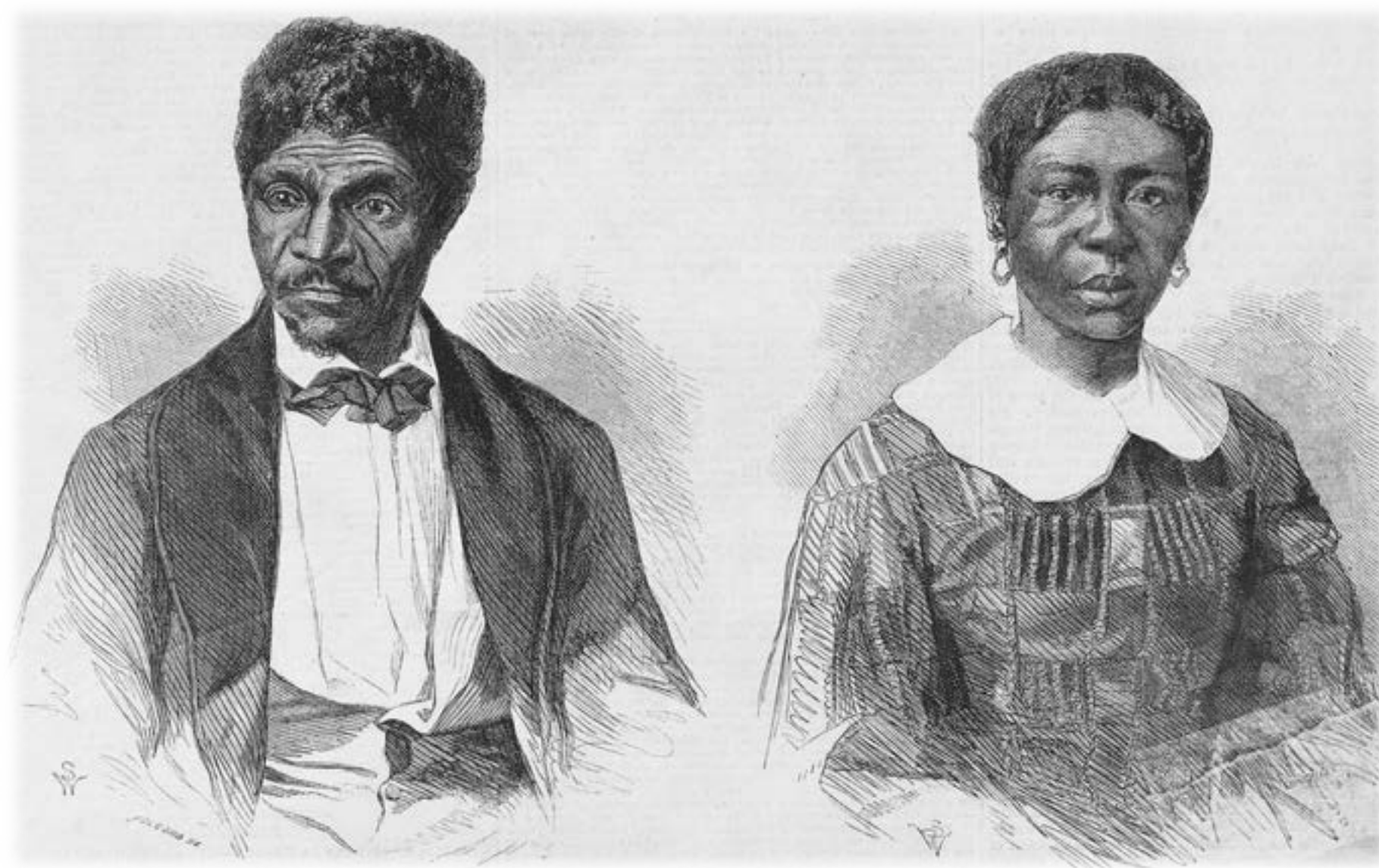
*Frederick Douglass*





# The Dred Scott Case

Dred Scott was an enslaved African-American man in the United States who unsuccessfully sued for his freedom and that of his wife, Harriet Robinson Scott, and their two daughters. On March 6, 1857, the Supreme Court issued its infamous decision in the **Dred Scott case**. One abolitionist wrote that the ruling was “the annihilation of the citizenship of Colored Americans.”



*A wood engraving of Dred Scott and Harriet Scott (1857).*

But a dedicated abolitionist named William Cooper Nell, an African-American historian from Boston, developed a strategy that he could use to attack the Scott ruling. He had rediscovered a powerful symbolic figure, once lost to history: Crispus Attucks, “first martyr of liberty.”



# William Cooper Nell (1816-1874)

In the 1850s, Nell published two books on the service of “Colored Americans” in the Revolution and the War of 1812. These works examined American history from a specifically Black perspective. They also helped renew interest in Attucks, which helped unearth the notice about “Crispas,” the escaped slave, in the *Boston Gazette*.



Without the efforts of Nell, Crispus Attucks might have faded into total obscurity. But Nell, born free to a family of fervent Boston abolitionists, saw in Attucks a powerful icon of Black American belonging.

It was during this decade before emancipation, largely because of Nell’s writing, that Crispus Attucks suddenly rose from obscurity to become “the first martyr” of the American cause, *the* symbol of Black American civic identity.





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Nell seized upon the coincidence of the date of the Supreme Court decision in the Dred Scott case (March 6, 1857) and, one year later, on **March 5, 1858**, abolitionists held a massive rally at Faneuil Hall in Boston, where Attucks' body had lain in death.







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At that rally, speeches expounded on the terrible irony that a Black man had been the first to die for a nation that was now denying their basic rights. Singers calling themselves the Attucks Glee Club premiered a new abolitionist anthem "Freedom's Battle," written for the festival by African-American poet **Frances Ellen Watkins**.



*Frances Ellen Watkins*



# Carter G. Woodson (1875-1950)

A year after Nell's death, another historian was born who would continue Nell's work. Carter G. Woodson shared Nell's passion for African American history and, in the 1920's, promoted the idea of a celebratory week that eventually expanded to become the Black History Month that we celebrate today.

Does anyone know what month is Black History Month?



Why do you think it is held in February?



Carter G. Woodson



# Carter G. Woodson – Civil Rights Pioneer

Like William Cooper Nell, Woodson celebrated the sacrifice of Attucks and expressed disappointment that Black contributions to America's origins were widely ignored, as they were at the nationwide celebrations of George Washington's 200<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1932.



*“To ignore those heroes that sacrificed their lives and dramatize the Negro as merely a servant or slave leading Washington’s horse is a distortion of history and a reflection on the intelligence of our citizenry,”* Woodson wrote.





# An Ongoing Debate

Woodson had to debunk claims of White historians that Attucks had, in fact, been a man of mixed White and Indian – not African – ancestry.

He also defended Attucks against Black charges that he has been a “fool” for sacrificing his life in the service of a country that held his people as slaves.

What they were really arguing about was how African-Americans should reconcile their racial and civic identities – whether they could, or should, be patriotic Americans.







# A Patriotic American

During World War II, when activists perceived the war effort as another opportunity to secure equal rights, that answer was an emphatic “Yes.”

On December 7, 1941, while serving aboard the USS West Virginia (BB-48), Dorie Miller distinguished himself by courageous conduct during the Japanese attack on **Pearl Harbor**. He was the first African American to be awarded the **Navy Cross**.

Miller, the Black hero of Pearl Harbor, was *compared to Crispus Attucks* in war propaganda.



*Dorie Miller, United States Navy*

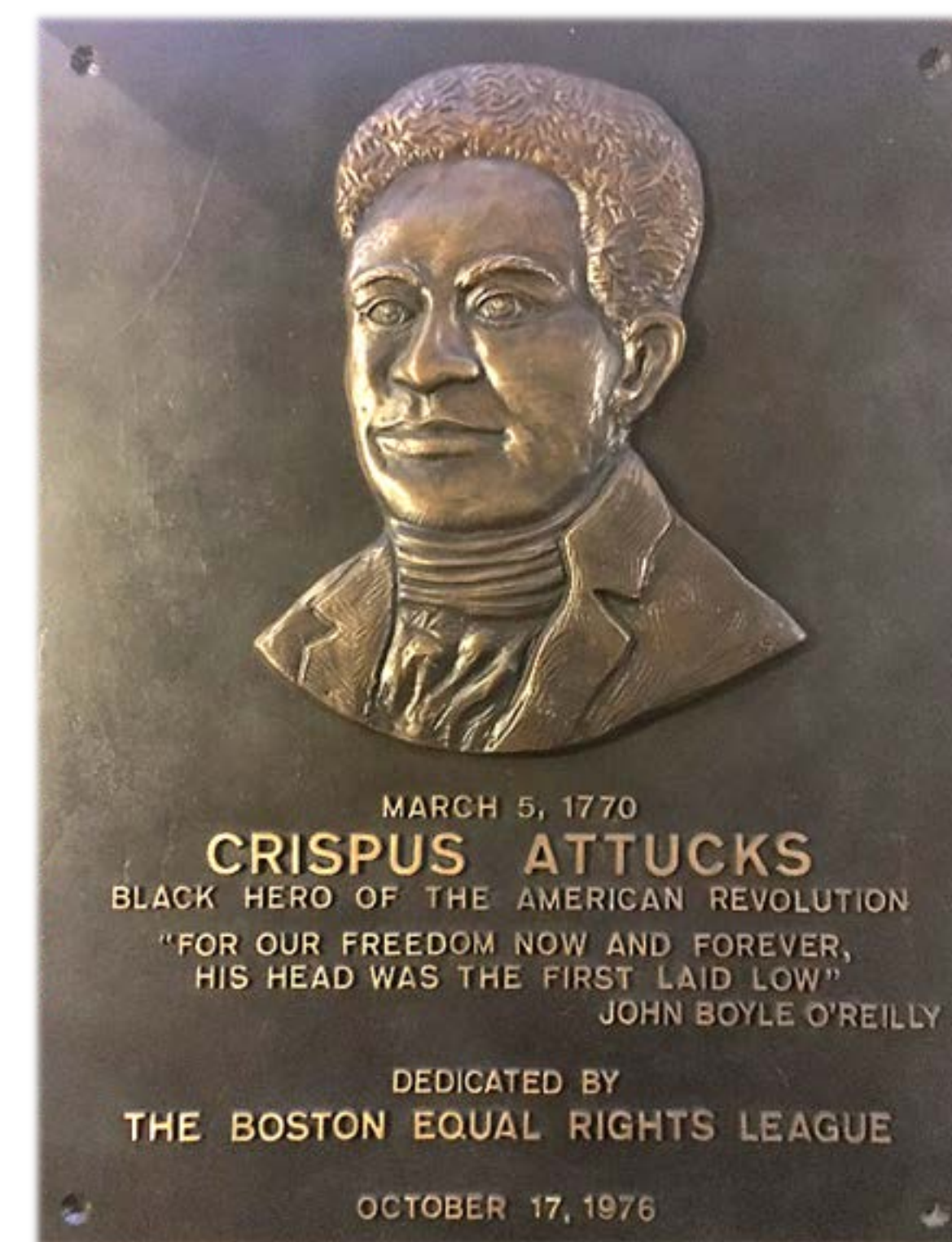


# Crispus Attucks's Name Invoked

Crispus Attucks's name has been used throughout American history to make the important point that African Americans' contributions and sacrifices have too often been overlooked.

He has been referenced by voices ranging from Dr. Martin Luther King to activist Stokely Carmichael and invoked in public discussions of events such as the 1970 Kent State campus shootings, the **American Bicentennial celebration**, and the death of George Floyd at the hands of police.

*Plaque dedicated by the Boston Equal Rights League and the City of Boston in honor of Crispus Attucks on the occasion of the U.S. Bicentennial in 1976.*







# More Inclusive School Curricula

Throughout the 1960s, school boards across the nation also faced pressure to tell a more inclusive story in their American history classes. Many school systems began to update their curriculum to include more material on Black contributions to American life. By the 1970s, many high school history textbooks declared Crispus Attucks the first man to die in the revolution.

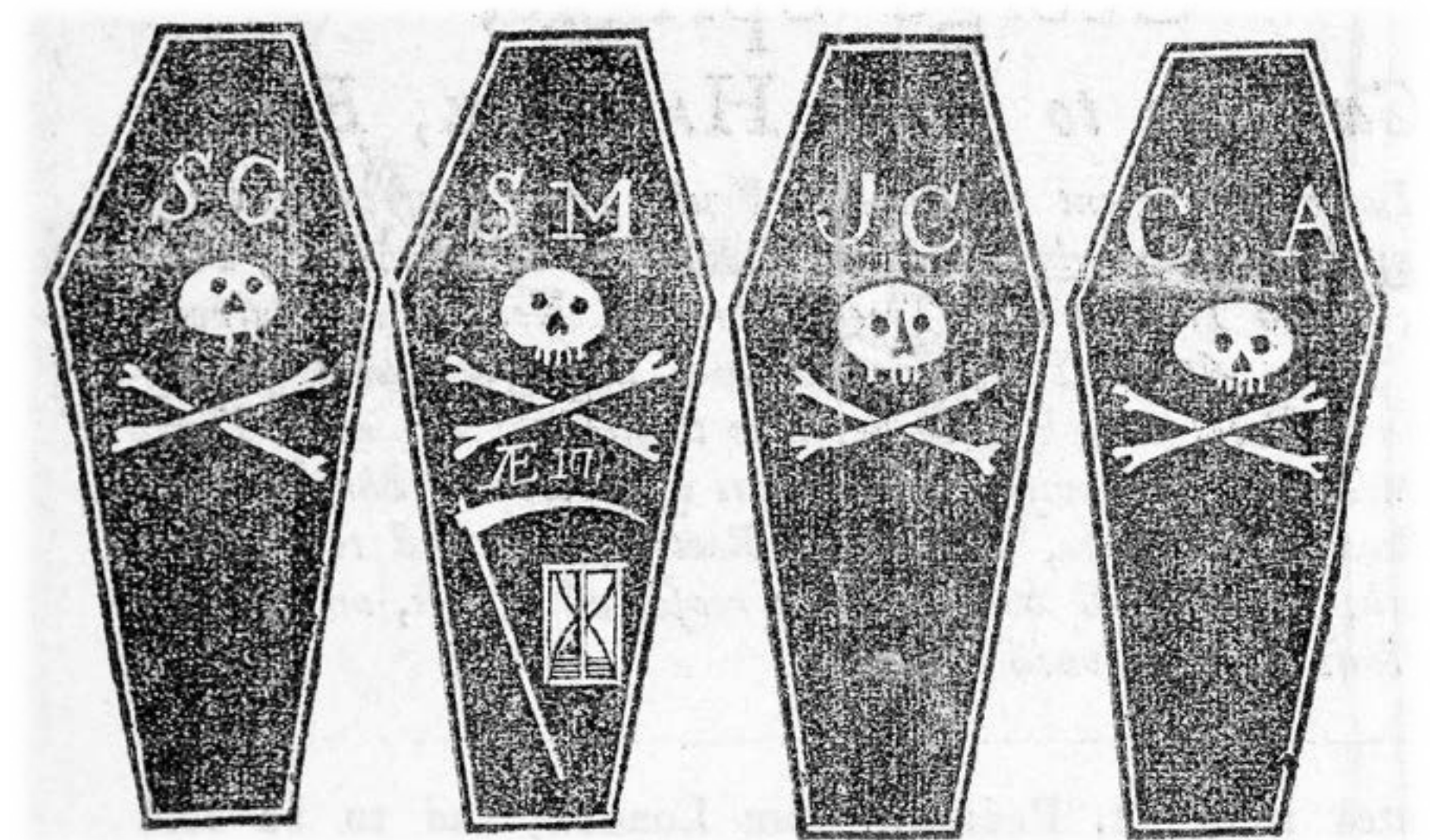




# History...

Historical **evidence** exists to prove that Crispus Attucks was a real person, as were Patrick Carr, Samuel Gray, Samuel Maverick, and James Caldwell. They all had convictions, hopes, fears, and desires; they likely had friends and family with whom they shared those feelings.

The same is true of the hundreds of thousands of men and women who participated in the American Revolution, of all races and ethnicities. We'll never know the names of most of them, or anything about their inner lives, unless those people left behind letters or diaries that escaped the ravages of time and are yet to be discovered.



*The Boston Gazette from March 12, 1770 included this drawing of four coffins bearing the initials of those first killed in the Boston Massacre: Samuel Gray, Samuel Maverick, James Caldwell, and Crispus Attucks.*



## ...and Memory

Without our collective *memory*, and the desire we all feel to understand the people who came before us, we would have little motivation to engage in the often difficult work of sifting through archives and artifacts to write *history*.

The continuing symbolic power of Crispus Attucks's life and death is a testament to America's need for both **history and memory** as we interpret our past to envision our future.

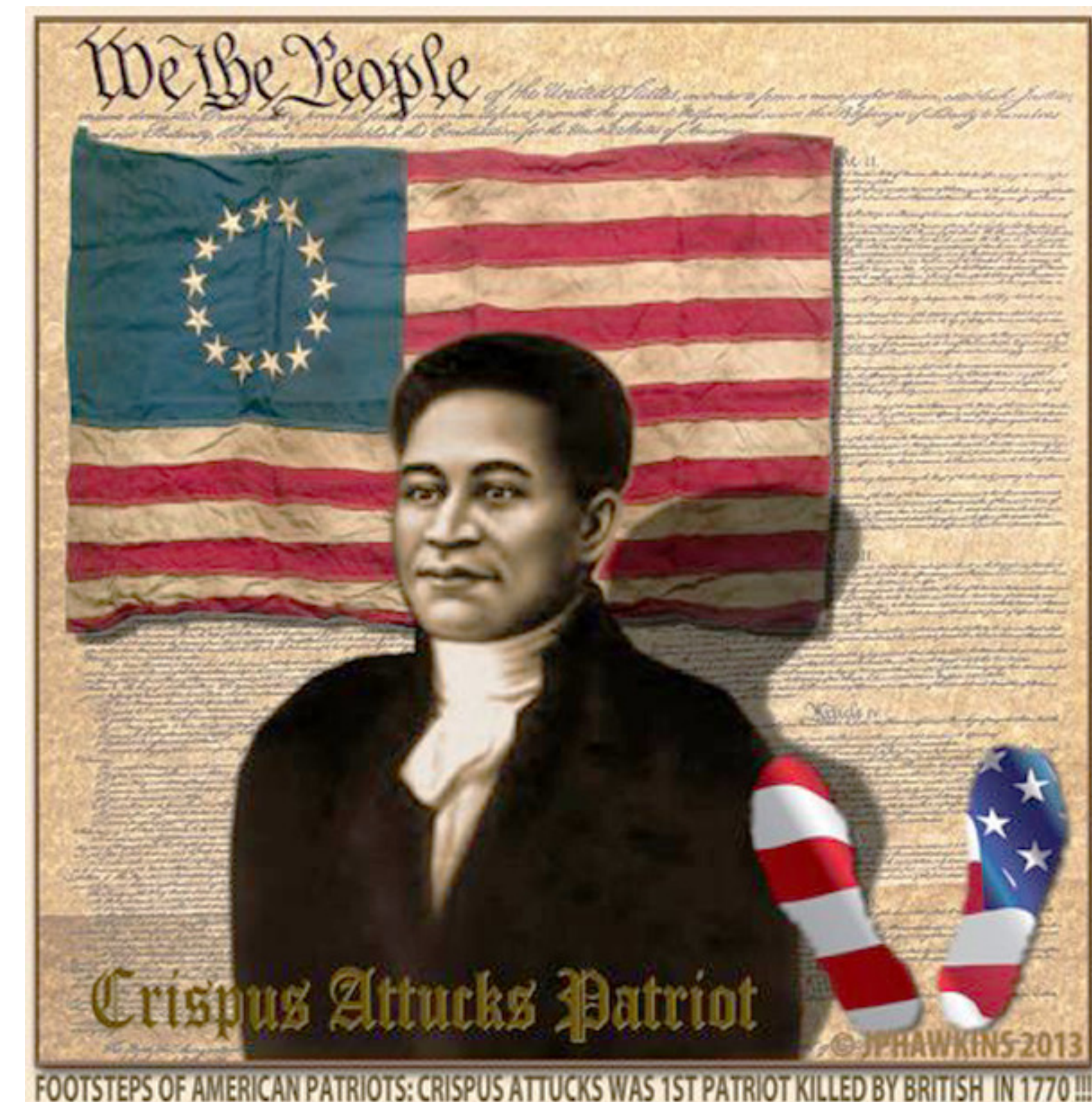


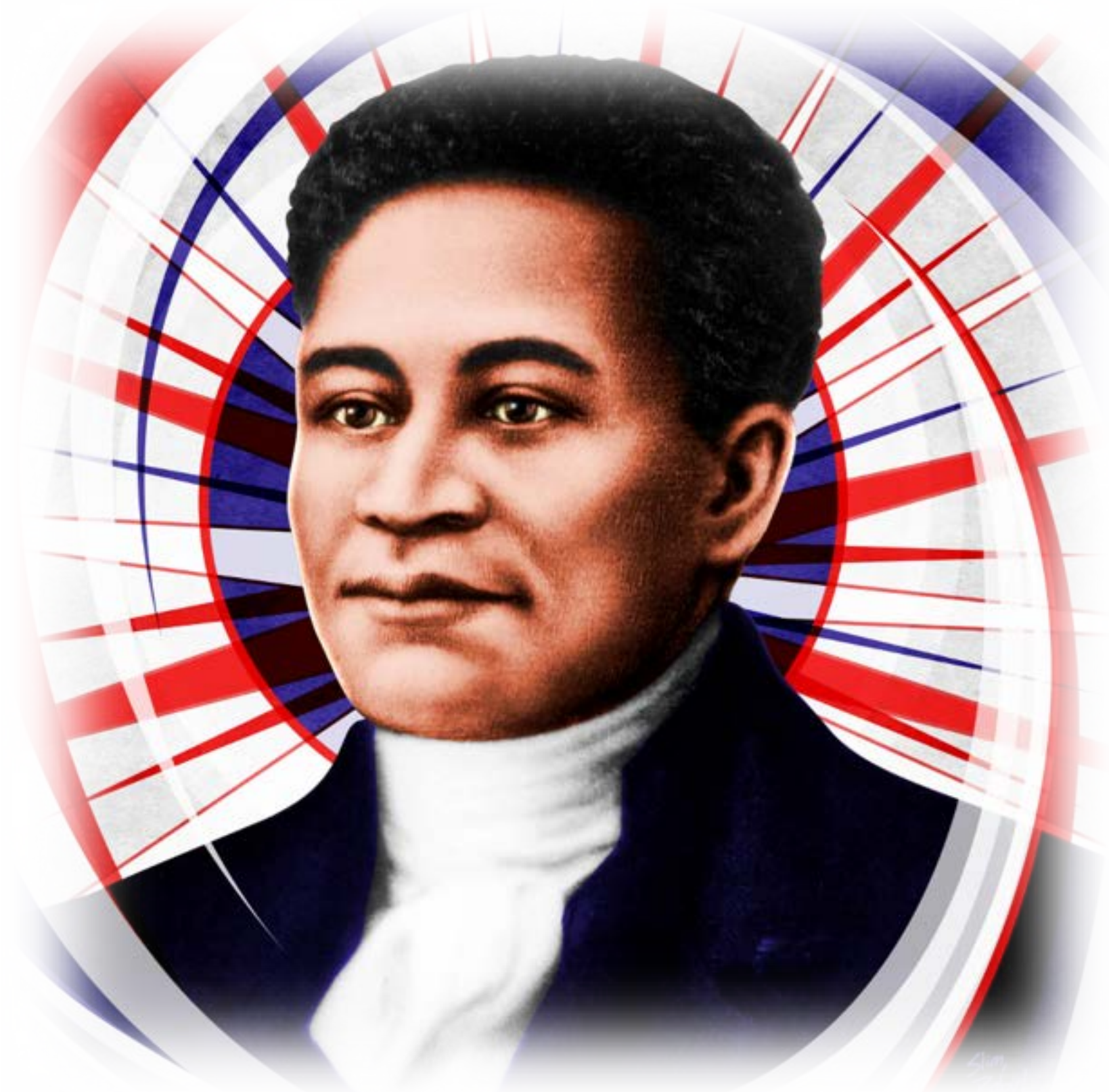
Image from the series "In the Footsteps of American Patriots" by James P. Hawkins.





# Vocabulary

Artifacts  
Plausible  
Motives  
Resurrecting  
Hypocrisy  
Abolitionism  
Alliance  
Invoke  
Debunk  
Embellish  
Emancipation  
Attribute  
Martyr  
Reconcile  
Ravages







WOODSONCENTER