



“Of and With the People”

an excerpt from William Cooper Nell’s *The Colored Patriot*

First published in Boston by Robert F. Wallcut, 1855, pp. 13-18

Full text here: <https://www.docsouth.unc.edu/neh/nell/nell.html>

On the 5th of March, 1851, the following petition was presented to the Massachusetts Legislature, asking an appropriation of \$1,500, for the erection of a monument to the memory of CRISPUS ATTUCKS, the first martyr in the Boston Massacre of March 5th, 1770:

To the Honorable the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of Massachusetts, in General Court assembled:

The undersigned, citizens of Boston, respectfully ask that an appropriation of fifteen hundred dollars may be made by your Honorable Body, for a monument to be erected to the memory of CRISPUS ATTUCKS, the first martyr of the American Revolution.

WILLIAM C. NELL,
CHARLES LENOX REMOND,
HENRY WEEDEN,
LEWIS HAYDEN,
FREDERICK G. BARBADOES,
JOSHUA B. SMITH,
LEMUEL BURR.

This petition was referred to the Committee on Military Affairs, who granted a bearing to the petitioners, in whose behalf appeared Wendell Phillips, Esq., and William C. Nell, but finally submitted an adverse report, on the ground that a boy, Christopher Snyder, was previously killed. Admitting this fact (which was the result of a very different scene from that in which Attucks fell), it does not offset the claims of Attucks, and those who made the 5th of March famous in our annals the day which history selects as the dawn of the American Revolution.

Botta's History, and Hewes's Reminiscences (the tea party survivor)¹, establish the fact that the colored man, ATTUCKS, was of and with the people, and was never regarded otherwise.

Botta, in speaking of the scenes of the 5th of March, says: "The people were greatly exasperated. The multitude ran towards King street, crying, 'Let us drive out these ribalds; they have no business here!' The rioters rushed furiously towards the Custom House; they approached the sentinel, crying, 'Kill him, kill him!' They assaulted him with snowballs, pieces of ice, and whatever they could lay their hands upon. The guard were then called, and, in marching to the Custom House, they encountered," continues Botta, "a band of the populace, led by a mulatto named ATTUCKS, who brandished their clubs, and pelted them with snowballs. The maledictions, the imprecations, the execrations of the multitude, were horrible. In the midst of a torrent of invective from every quarter, the military were challenged to fire. The populace advanced to the points of their bayonets. The soldiers appeared like statues; the cries, the howlings, the menaces, the violent din of bells still sounding the alarm, increased the confusion and the horrors of these moments; at length, the

¹ Carlo Botta was an Italian historian who published a major study of the American Revolution, *Storia della guerra dell' Indipendenza d'America*, in 1809. George R.T. Hewes was a working-class shoemaker who witnessed the Boston Massacre, participated in the Boston Tea Party, and fought in the revolution; his recollections were recorded by writer James Hawkes in the 1830s, when Hewes was in his 80s.

mulatto and twelve of his companions, pressing forward, environed the soldiers, and striking their muskets with their clubs, cried to the multitude: 'Be not afraid; they dare not fire: why do you hesitate, why do you not kill them, why not crush them at once?' The mulatto lifted his arm against Capt. Preston, and having turned one of the muskets, he seized the bayonet with his left hand, as if he intended to execute his threat. At this moment, confused cries were heard: 'The wretches dare not fire!' Firing succeeds. ATTUCKS is slain. The other discharges follow. Three were killed, five severely wounded, and several others slightly."

ATTUCKS had formed the patriots in Dock Square, from whence they marched up King street, passing through the street up to the main guard, in order to make the attack.

ATTUCKS was killed by Montgomery, one of Capt. Preston's soldiers. He had been foremost in resisting, and was first slain. As proof of a front engagement, he received two balls, one in each breast.

John Adams, counsel for the soldiers, admitted that Attucks appeared to have undertaken to be the hero of the night, and to lead the people. He and Caldwell, not being residents of Boston, were both buried from Faneuil Hall. The citizens generally participated in the solemnities.

The Boston Transcript of March 7, 1851, published an anonymous communication, disparaging the whole affair; denouncing CRISPUS ATTUCKS as a very firebrand of disorder and sedition, the most conspicuous, inflammatory, and uproarious of the misguided populace, and who, if he had not fallen a martyr, would richly have deserved hanging as an incendiary. If the leader, ATTUCKS, deserved the epithets above applied, is it not a legitimate inference, that the citizens who followed on are included, and hence should swing in his company on the gallows? If the leader and his patriot band were misguided, the distinguished orators who, in after days, commemorated the 5th of March, must, indeed, have been misguided, and with them, the masses who were inspired by their eloquence; for John Hancock, in 1774, invokes the injured shades of Maverick, Gray, Caldwell, ATTUCKS, Carr; and Judge Dawes, in 1775, thus alludes to the band of "misguided incendiaries ... The provocation of that night must be numbered among the master-springs which gave the first motion to a vast machinery, a noble and comprehensive system of national independence."

Ramsay's History of the American Revolution, Vol. I., p. 22, says, "The anniversary of the 5th of March was observed with great solemnity; eloquent orators were successively employed to preserve the remembrance of it fresh in the mind. On these occasions, the blessings of liberty, the horrors of slavery, and the danger of a standing army, were presented to the public view. These annual orations administered fuel to the fire of liberty, and kept it burning with an irresistible flame."

The 5th of March continued to be celebrated for the above reasons, until the Anniversary of the Declaration of American Independence was substituted in its place; and its orators were expected to honor the feelings and principles of the former as having given birth to the latter.

On the 5th of March, 1776, Washington repaired to the intrenchments. "Remember," said he, "it is the 5th of March, and avenge the death of your brethren!"

In judging, then, of the merits of those who launched the American Revolution, we should not take counsel from the Tories of that or the present day, but rather heed the approving eulogy of Lovell, Hancock, and Warren.

Welcome, then, be every taunt that such correspondents may fling at ATTUCKS and his company, as the best evidence of their merits and their strong claim upon our gratitude! Envy and the foe do not labor to traduce any but prominent champions of a cause.

The rejection of the petition was to be expected, if we accept the axiom that a colored man never gets justice done him in the United States, except by mistake. The petitioners only asked for justice, and that the name of CRISPUS ATTUCKS might be honored as a grateful country honors other gallant Americans.

And yet, let it be recorded, the same session of the Legislature which had refused the ATTUCKS monument, granted one to ISAAC DAVIS, of Concord. Both were promoters of the American Revolution, but one was white, the other was black; and this is the only solution to the problem why justice was not fairly meted out.