

Crispus Attucks: Part 1

First Man to Fall in the American Revolution

c. 1723 - 1770

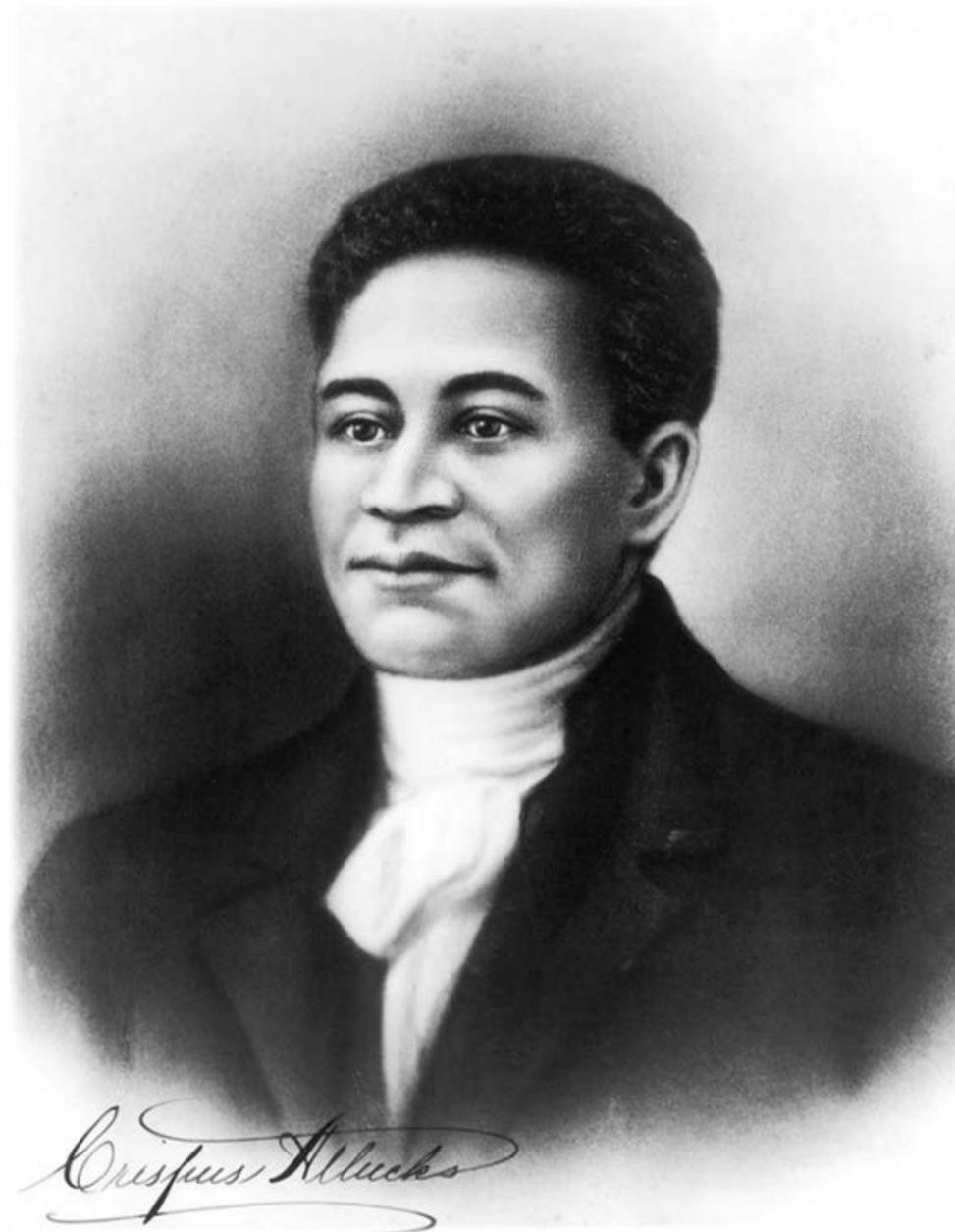
Escaped Slave

Atlantic Sailor

Revolutionary Martyr

Civil Rights Symbol

American Legend



A 19th century portrait of what Crispus Attucks might have looked like,

Making of an American Martyr

Crispus Attucks is remembered today as the first man to fall in the American Revolution, shot dead by British soldiers in the violent confrontation which became known as the “**Boston Massacre.**”

The date of this incident (March 5, 1770) was memorialized for over a decade throughout the colonies as the start of America’s struggle for independence. Parades, speeches, and solemn memorials marked the occasion, and the names of the five men killed were often recalled, though with little or no discussion of their actual lives.

Crispus Attucks was a man of color whom historians and activists later proclaimed to be the “first **martyr** of liberty,” a profound symbol of African American contributions to a country that would take nearly 100 more years to end slavery.

The truth is, we know very little about who Attucks really was, or what he believed.

But we can establish some key facts about his life, death, and legacy.



Another portrait of Attucks, created about 1897 by the W.H. Curd Company of Chicago.

Early Life of Crispus Attucks

Most historians believe that Crispus Attucks was born to slaves in eastern Massachusetts during the **colonial** period in America. Later descriptions of Attucks identify him as “a mulatto,” a term that later came to mean “a person of mixed race” but in the 1700s likely meant Attucks had both African and Native American ancestry.



Depiction of a slave settlement prior to the American revolution.

His early home was close to Natick, a settlement of Algonquian peoples who converted to Christianity and were known to colonial settlers as “praying Indians.” The word “attucks” comes from the native language of the local Wampanoag Indians and means small, male deer.

Many later biographers of Crispus have speculated about his family life and potential relationships to other people in the historical record with similar family names, like “Auttuck” or “Peterattcuks,” but little can be proven.

Early Life of Crispus Attucks

Later writers, building on a fragmented historical record, claimed that Attucks's parents were slaves owned by Colonel Buckminster from Framingham, Massachusetts. Crispus's date of birth is estimated to have been 1723. Documents exist that describe Crispus as a man of mixed parentage. Historians believe his father may have been known as Prince, an African slave, and his mother, Nancy, was a Wampanoag or Natick Indian forced into slavery.

Attucks most likely lived with his parents, serving Colonel Buckminster, until he was 16 – when he was apparently sold to Deacon William Brown, who also resided in Framingham. Attucks's work for Brown, according to some later recollections by Brown's neighbors, involved trading cattle.



Colonial agrarian lifestyle.

Escape from Slavery

In 1750, an advertisement appeared in the *Boston Gazette* seeking the return of “Crispas,” an escaped slave, 27 years old and 6 feet 2 inches tall, to his owner, William Brown of Framingham, MA.

This was almost certainly Crispus Attucks, and helps explain why he was first identified as “Michael Johnson” after his death in Boston 20 years later – it may have been a **pseudonym** he used to avoid capture.



THE
Boston GAZETTE,
 OR
 COUNTRY JOURNAL

Containing the freshest Advices Foreign and D

MONDAY, MARCH

To the PRINTERS, &c.
 I Really think you Printers are the most mischief making Set of Men in the World!—Why can't you content yourselves with publishing Sermons, and other good Books: such as the common People may be allowed to read: But you must meddle, like Fools, with Things which only a few Folks have any Right to concern themselves about— You discover your MALIGNANCY to the Publick in dwelling upon such Subjects, as tend to give us great Pain and Disquietude— had you given us the History of true Patriots and Heroes— of well-laid Plans, of glorious Achievements and successful Campaigns— of Battles fought with Honour and Victories won, it would have been pleasant to us— but alas! you just mentioned Louisbourg, and said no more— or had you only told us some merry Tales, they would have pleased us, provided they had no Meaning— but your Subjects have been so grave and melancholy, that we are in Danger of a Fit of the Spleen— Do you pretend to find Fault with Generals? Intollerable Insolence! Besides, Do you know what Damage you do? What Honour might not be made to appear under bad Colours, if you should be so malicious as to publish all the Failings you are pleas'd to suspect of them? And consider the Hardship of condemning People upon BARE SUSPICION!

Well, you had fair Warning of all this, to my Knowledge, some Months ago— I perceiv'd you had an itch at SCRIBBLING, and I was afraid you would set our C—n P—t & N—g—a.Ex—ns in an odd Light in the World: and therefore I published in the

Who is meant by that? And so they run sing and guessing, and applying and applying fancy they hit right, and do some Folks of Harm.

I am of the Mind, that not only the SPEECH of People too, at this juncture of Strain'd.— Great Mischiefs may be done by of Speaking, as they call it— I was in Company, where a Gentleman took the talk of Generals. He told us that BRADDOCK an experienced and brave Commander— indeed unfortunate, but no Blame could be put to Him or his Officers.— He took Progress he made to Du-Quefne, and the culter that attended his March— had within a few Miles of the Fort, by the thro' he had encountered Mountains untrodden had not the Advantage of Water-Carriage particularly observed, that this General took to get a Supply of Provisions for his Army was never without a Sufficiency of the best he gave it as his Opinion, that BRADDOCK honest Man, and hoped that other Generals as honest as he.— He led us from Du-Oswego, and told us the exact Distance from to Albany; and from thence to Lake-Ge then began to enlarge upon some Matter of Importance, with so much Warmth and Force I was even frighted— I was disturb'd in whole Night after; and could not help myself, and fearing lest I should incur the of my Friends for being present in such Co

Life as a Sailor

In his twenty years of freedom from slavery, Crispus Attucks seems to have mostly worked as a sailor, spending at least some of that time in and around Boston harbor. Early newspaper reports, after he was killed in 1770, stated that Attucks was “born in Framingham, but lately belonging New-Providence” (what is now The Bahamas), and was on his way to North Carolina.

Painting by George Gaadt depicting Crispus Attucks as a sailor.



Who gave the Boston papers this information about him?
Which of these places, if any, did Crispus consider his home?
Or was the sea his home now?

Life as a Sailor

Eighteenth-century sailors, whether on merchant or military ships, were often disdained by others in major port cities as a “motley crew,” diverse in age, race, language, and nationality. Given the harsh maritime environment in which they worked, and the variety of people and places they typically encountered, sailors were also a fixture in the unrest and rebellions of that era.



Painting by George Gaadt depicting Crispus Attucks as a sailor.

Was Crispus Attucks involved in these political movements? Was he, as later historians speculated, an active member of patriot groups like the **Sons of Liberty**, organized opponents of British policy in the colonies?

The Death of Crispus Attucks

Historians have been seeking more information on the life of Crispus Attucks since at least the 1850s, but little has emerged. The truth is, we know much more about the moments leading up to Attucks’s death than we do about the 40-plus years of his life before that point.



On the evening of March 5, 1770, Crispus Attucks was shot to death by a British soldier. He was the first of five men who were killed in the event now known as the “*Boston Massacre.*”

Though not an accurate representation of the event, this engraving by Paul Revere is titled “*The Bloody Massacre Perpetrated in King Street Boston on March 5th, 1770.*”

Events that Led to the Boston Massacre

For over a decade, Boston was a hotbed of political opposition to what many perceived as tyrannical rule by England. The *1765 Stamp Act* and the *1767 Townshend Act* were met with protests not only in Boston, but throughout the colonies.



Depiction of smugglers unloading goods from a ship and loading them onto wagons.

Because the taxes levied by Parliament were widely regarded as unjust, few Americans had qualms about dodging taxes on imported goods. Many Boston merchants were secretly engaged in smuggling.

But British efforts to crack down on smugglers in the colonies only led to further boycotts and civil unrest, sometimes coordinated under the leadership of patriot activists like Samuel Adams and Paul Revere.



British Troops in Boston

In 1768, to quell the unrest, Great Britain deployed four army regiments in Boston. This standing army drilled and patrolled in the city, sometimes stopping and questioning Bostonians without cause, stoking resentment among all the city's social classes.

These soldiers lived and worked among the people of Boston. Colonists often had to house British troops because there were insufficient military barracks. “**Red Coats**” rented spare rooms and bought goods from locals. They socialized in taverns and sometimes courted and married the city's young women.

Some Bostonians got along fine with the British troops. But in general, their presence in the city only made an already tense situation worse.



British Troops in Boston

Tories Reviled

Patriot attacks on troops, merchants, government officials, and others perceived as “**Tories**” increased. Then, in February 1770, an eleven-year-old boy was killed by a Bostonian named Ebenezer Richardson, widely reviled by the patriot movement as a Tory informer.

Richardson had barricaded himself in his own home while fleeing an angry mob, but when they continued to attack his house, he fired his rifle into the crowd. The boy, **Christopher Seider** (or Snider), was buried on February 26, 1770, in a huge, politicized funeral that only heightened public anger just prior to the Boston Massacre.

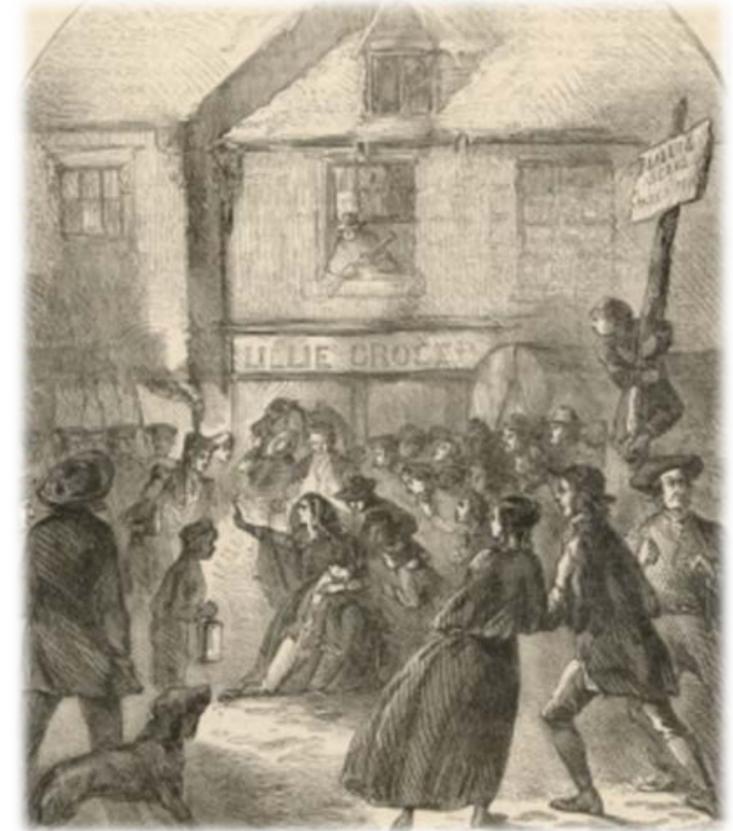
*Depiction of Christopher Seider
By Jessalyn Perry*



The Tension Rises

Christopher Seider's killing and large public funeral fueled public outrage, arguments, and even brawls over the course of the following 11 days.

On March 5, a young wigmaker's apprentice mocked a British infantry captain and, in return, was struck with a rifle butt by a sentry named Hugh White. When news of this altercation spread, Boston civilians took to the streets and chased White to the King Street custom house, where he sought the help of its guards.



Illustrated depiction of the death of Christopher Seider



A Fateful Decision

Bostonians were ringing church bells, bringing patriots out to the streets. Meanwhile, White was joined by Captain Thomas Preston and seven soldiers of the 29th infantry, with rifles loaded and bayonets fixed. Many of these men had already fought with patriots days earlier in another altercation.

Attucks heard the bells and made the fateful decision to rise from his supper at a restaurant near Murray's Barracks, where Bostonians were berating officers for their soldiers' behavior. Attucks got two big sticks, and by 9 P.M. was trudging through the snow down to King Street. He handed one stick to a man named Patrick Keaton, who later testified that Attucks was "cursing and swearing at the soldiers," but also claimed not to witness any physical assault on them by the civilian crowd.



"Crispus Attucks," by Herschel Levit, mural at the Recorder of Deeds building, 515 D Street, NW, Washington, D.C.

Shots Fired

The crowd threw rocks, snowballs, and ice, damning the soldiers and daring them to shoot, crying “Fire! Fire!” Some, but not all, eyewitness testimony claimed that Attucks and other protestors threatened the soldiers to their faces. Someone struck the head of a young private, Edward Montgomery, and knocked him to the ground.

In the ensuing struggle, Montgomery fired, and his fellow soldiers followed. Attucks, James Caldwell (also a sailor), Samuel Gray (a rope maker), and Samuel Maverick (a seventeen-year-old apprentice ivory worker) died that night, while Patrick Carr (a leatherworker) died several days later.



1856 print by William Champney and John Bufford, depicting Attucks being killed in the Boston Massacre.

The Immediate Aftermath of the Incident

Some witnesses identified Attucks as an instigator of the violence; still others saw nothing aggressive about his behavior. The facts of what happened were lost almost immediately, in the hours and days after the shootings, as patriot leaders like Samuel Adams and Paul Revere, and British officials like Governor Hutchinson, scrambled to control how the story of the bloody King Street incident would be told.



The Sons of Liberty used the incident to further incite people against British rule by telling a largely false story about British soldiers deliberately attacking peaceful, unarmed people, massacring them.

The shots fired by British soldiers in the streets of Boston in 1770 sparked the American Revolution. Bettmann Archive/Getty Images

The BLOODY MASSACRE

Without patriot Paul Revere's iconic image, perhaps the single most famous picture to emerge from colonial America, the memory of the Boston Massacre would be very different. But the famed engraver and silversmith's print spread throughout Boston, entitled "The BLOODY MASSACRE" and featuring a short poem and the names of the dead below the scene. However, Revere's engraving was, in fact, based on an original painting by rival engraver Henry Pelham.

Outrage over the actions of the British Army, fomented by patriot activists like Paul Revere and Samuel Adams, helped spark a rebellion in Massachusetts that spread to the other 12 colonies. The blood of Boston's martyrs became the seeds of a new nation: the United States of America.



Paul Revere essentially stole Henry Pelham's image and beat Pelham to print.

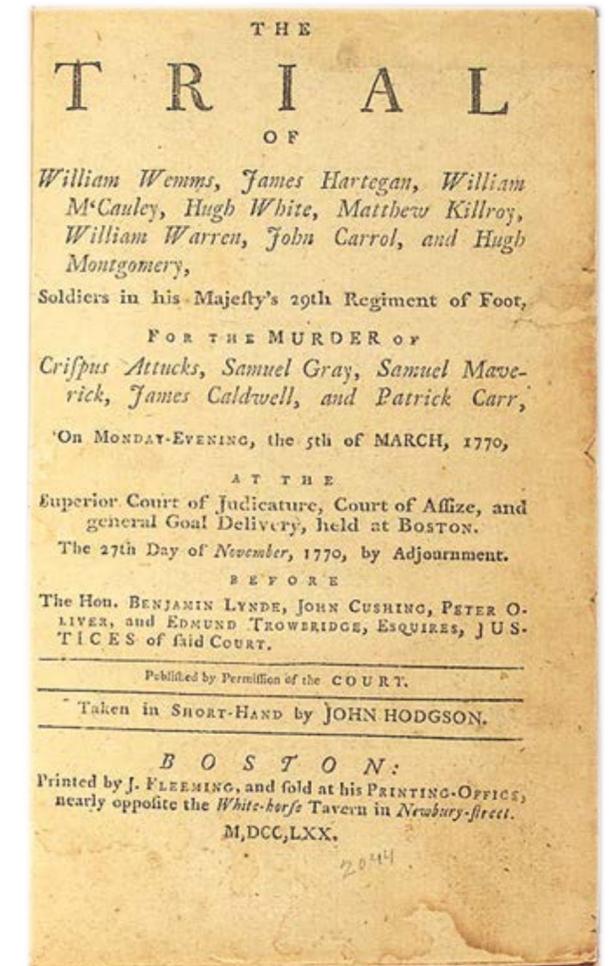
The Trial

Captain Preston, Private Montgomery, and the other soldiers were arrested and put on trial for murder.

One of their defense attorneys was future President of the United States, John Adams. To shift attention away from ordinary Bostonians, John Adams blamed the two outsiders – “a Carr from Ireland, and an Attucks from Framingham” – for provoking the bloodshed. According to Adams, Attucks in particular had threatened and assaulted soldiers who were only doing their jobs – and suffered the consequences.



The defense argued that the soldiers fired in self defense and the jury acquitted six of the soldiers on all charges. The two soldiers proven to have fired without orders were convicted of manslaughter, branded on their hands as punishment, and kicked out of the army.



Legacy

Crispus Attucks was the first patriot to fall when he was shot by a British soldier during the Boston Massacre in 1770.

Although the soldiers who killed him were successfully defended by John Adams in the famous Boston Massacre Trial, Crispus Attucks is still remembered for playing a heroic role in the history of the United States.

There were more than 5,000 enslaved and free African Americans who fought for America's independence from the British.



The old State House in Boston, near the location of the Boston Massacre.

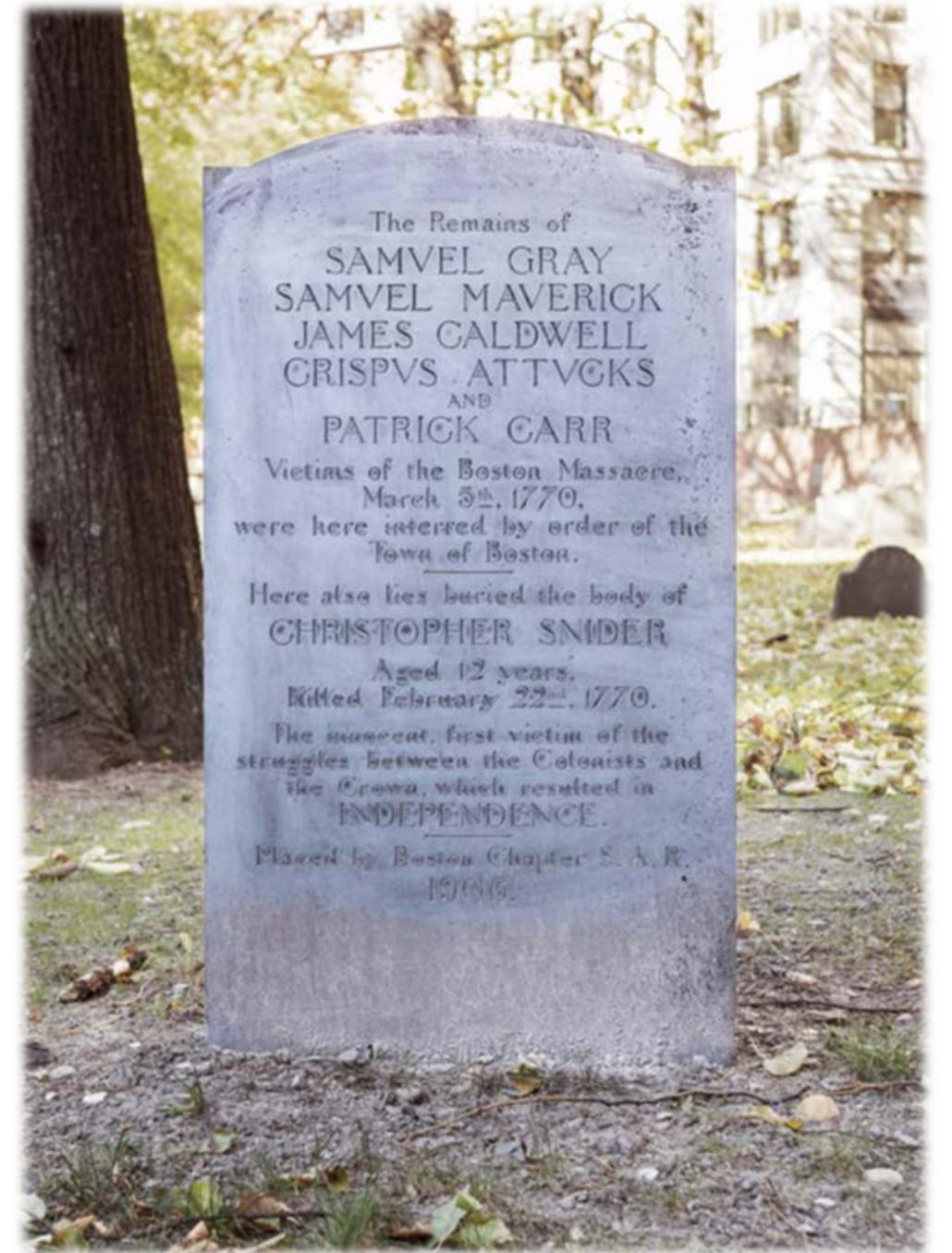
Legacy

All five victims of the Boston Massacre – Crispus Attucks, Samuel Gray, Samuel Maverick, James Caldwell and Patrick Carr – are buried together in the Granary Burial Ground in Boston, Massachusetts.

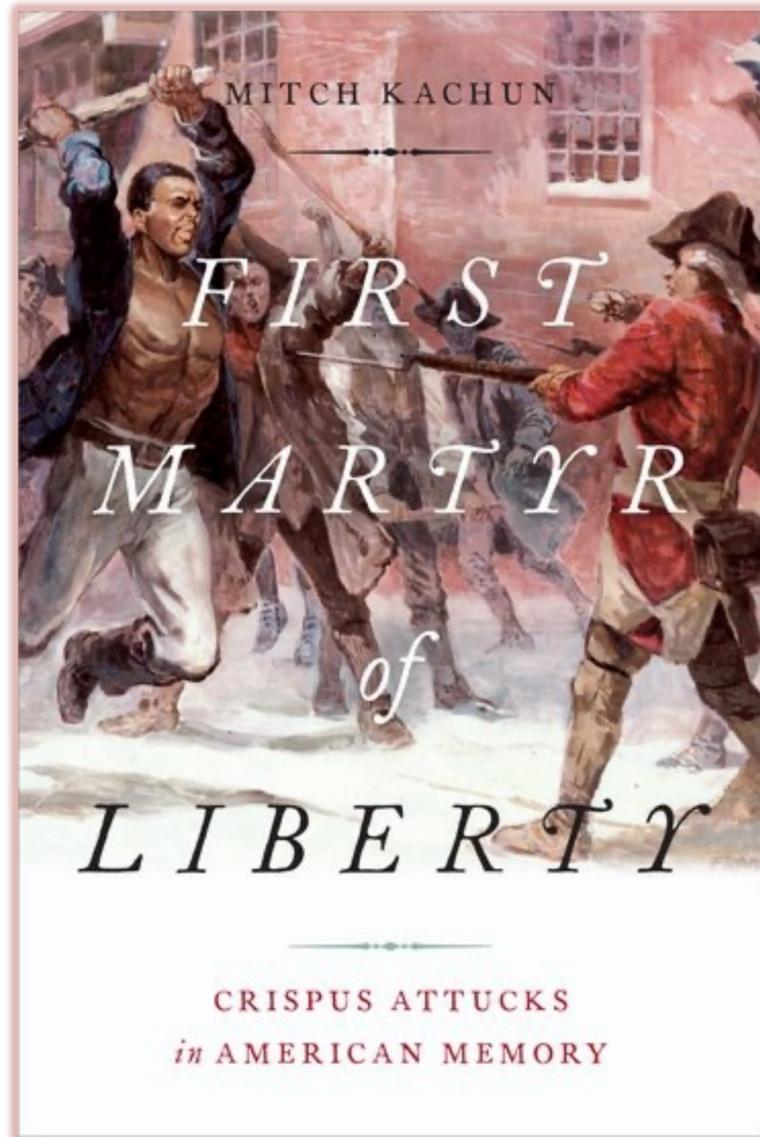
The body of young Christopher Seider, who had been killed two weeks earlier, is also buried in the same grave. They all share one headstone.

The funeral service for the massacre victims also functioned as a rally for the patriot cause. From 1771 until the end of the revolution in 1783, when Britain finally surrendered its colonies, March 5th was commemorated in Boston and elsewhere as the birth of American independence. Only in the early years of the republic was it replaced by a new day: July 4th.

Marker for the grave site of the patriotic martyrs of the revolution.



Legacy



Modern historian Mitch Kachun authored the book *First Martyr of Liberty: Crispus Attucks in American Memory*.

Published in 2017, it explores how Crispus Attucks's death in the Boston Massacre led to his achieving mythic significance. While the other victims of the Massacre have been largely ignored, Attucks is widely celebrated as the first to die in the cause of freedom during the era of the American Revolution. He has become a symbolic embodiment of Black patriotism and citizenship.



Vocabulary

Martyr
Colonial
Pseudonym
Maritime
Motley
Patriot
Sons of Liberty
Massacre
Smuggling
Tories
Civilians
Bayonets
Instigator
Fomented
Iconic



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