

Crispus Attucks

First Man to Fall in the American Revolution

c. 1723 - 1770

Escaped Slave

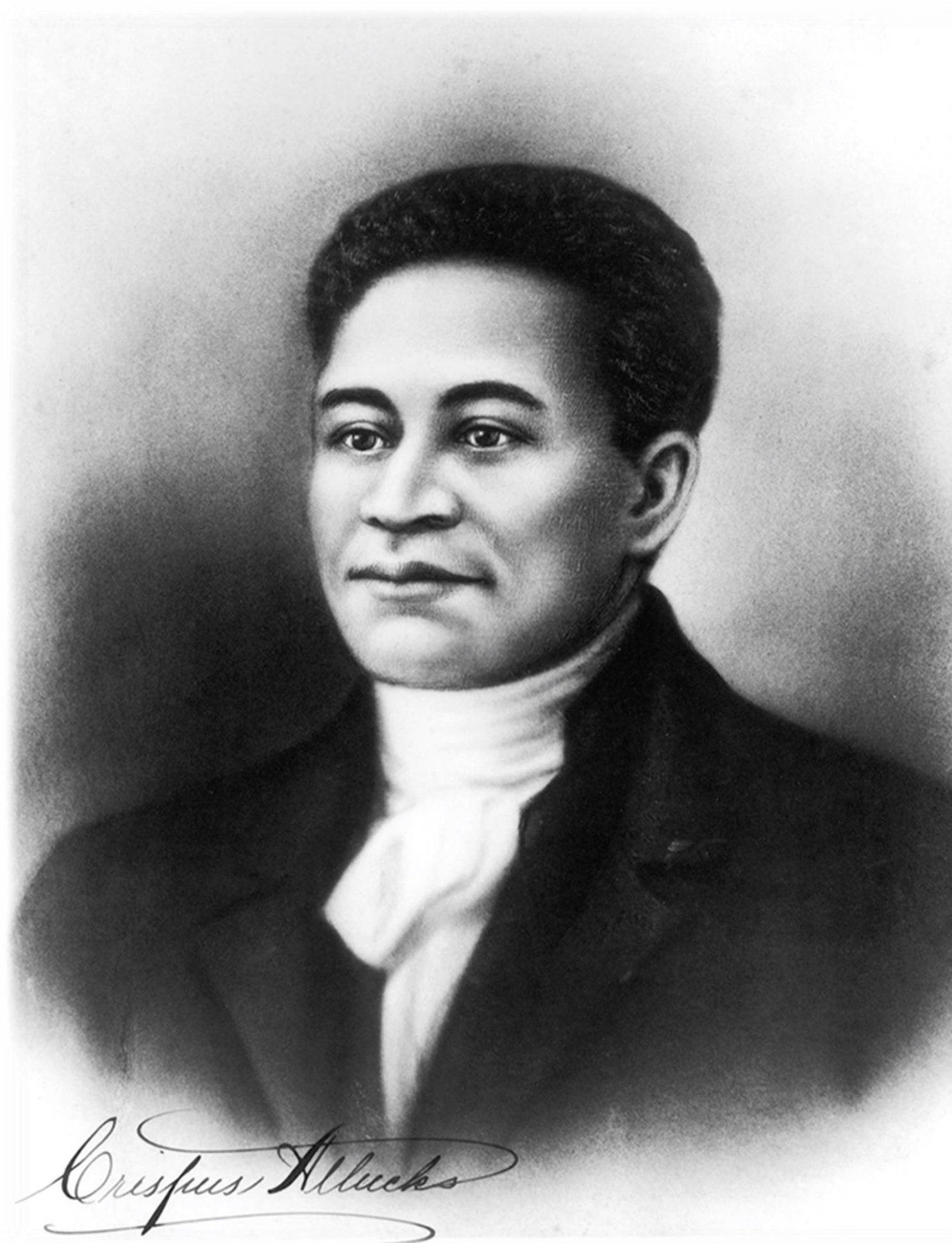
Atlantic Sailor

Revolutionary Martyr

Civil Rights Symbol

American Legend

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



Making of an American Martyr



Crispus Attucks

Crispus Attucks is remembered today as the first man to die in the American Revolution. He was shot by British soldiers in what became known as the “**Boston Massacre.**”

This incident on March 5, 1770, was remembered as the start of America’s struggle for independence throughout the original colonies.

Crispus Attucks has become a 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 do have 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

Attucks' parents are believed to have been slaves owned by Colonel Buckminster from Framingham, Massachusetts. Crispus' date of birth is estimated to have been 1723. His father may have been known as Prince, an African slave, and his mother, Nancy, was a Wampanoag or Natick Indian forced into slavery.



Depiction of a slave settlement prior to the American revolution.

His early home was close to 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.

Escape from Slavery

In 1750, an advertisement appeared in the *Boston Gazette* seeking the return of “Crispas,” an escaped slave to his owner, William Brown of Framingham, Massachusetts.

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 false name 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 MALIGANCY 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? Intolerable Insolence! Besides, Do you know what Damage you do? What Sort 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 put our C—n P—t & N—g—a Ex—us in an odd Light to 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 strain'd.—Great Mischief may be done by of Speaking, as they call it—I was in Company, where a Gentleman took talk of Generals. He told us that Br. 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 tho' he had encountered Mountains untro had not the Advantage of Water-Car particularly observed, that this General took to get a Supply of Provisions for his Army was never without a Sufficiency of the be he gave it as his Opinion, that BRADDO honest Man, and hoped that other Gener as honest as he.—He led us from D Oswego, and told us the exact Distance to Albany; and from thence to Lake-G then began to enlarge upon some Mat Importance, with so much Warmth and I was even frightened—I was disturb'd in whole Night after: and could not help self, and fearing lest I should incur the of my Friends for being present in such C

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.

Sailors during this time often came from all races, ages and backgrounds and frequently took part in the unrest and rebellions of that era.

Why do you think sailors were likely to be a part of rebellions? What effect do you think working with so many different types of people had on the way sailors thought about society?



Painting by George Gaadt depicting Crispus Attucks as a sailor.

The Death of Crispus Attucks



Not much more is known about the life of Crispus Attucks.

The truth is, we know much more about the moments leading up to Attucks's death than we do about his life before that point.

Though not an accurate representation of the event, this engraving by Paul Revere, "The Bloody Massacre Perpetrated in King Street Boston on March 5th, 1770," captures the public's outrage.

Events that Led to the Boston Massacre

For over a decade, there was opposition in Boston to what many believed was unjust rule by England. The 1765 Stamp Act and the 1767 Townshend Acts, both new tax laws, provoked protests not only in Boston, but throughout the colonies.



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

Some Boston merchants were smuggling items to avoid British taxes. British efforts to crack down on smuggling in the colonies only led to further boycotts and riots, some of them led by patriots like Samuel Adams and Paul Revere.

British Troops in Boston

In 1768, to handle the protests, Great Britain sent four army regiments to Boston. The army drilled and patrolled in the city, sometimes stopping and questioning Bostonians without cause, which the colonists resented.

Colonists often had to house British troops because there weren't enough 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

How do you think you would feel to be forced to let soldiers stay in your house? Would it matter whether you were loyal to British rule or opposed it?

Tensions Rise

In February 1770, a Bostonian named Ebenezer Richardson, who was considered a **Tory** (British loyalist) informer was harassed by a mob of patriots. When the mob followed Richardson home and continued to attack his house, he fired his rifle into the crowd. An 11-year old boy was killed.

The boy, Christopher Seider (or Snider), was buried on February 26, 1770, in a huge, politicized funeral that stirred up public anger. For 11 days, the streets were filled with public outrage, arguments, and even brawls.

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 incident spread, Boston civilians took to the streets and chased White to the King Street custom house, where he sought the help of its guards.

Depiction of Christopher Seider
By Jessalyn Perry



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.

Attucks heard the bells and left 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 9:00 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 the soldiers.



"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, daring the soldiers to shoot, crying “Fire! Fire!” Some, but not all, eyewitness accounts 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 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, the single most famous picture from colonial America, the memory of the Boston Massacre would be very different. But the famed engraver and silversmith's print spread throughout Boston, titled "The BLOODY MASSACRE" and featuring a short poem and the names of the dead below the scene. Revere's engraving was, in fact, based on an original painting by rival engraver Henry Pelham.

Outrage over the actions of the British Army, stirred up 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.

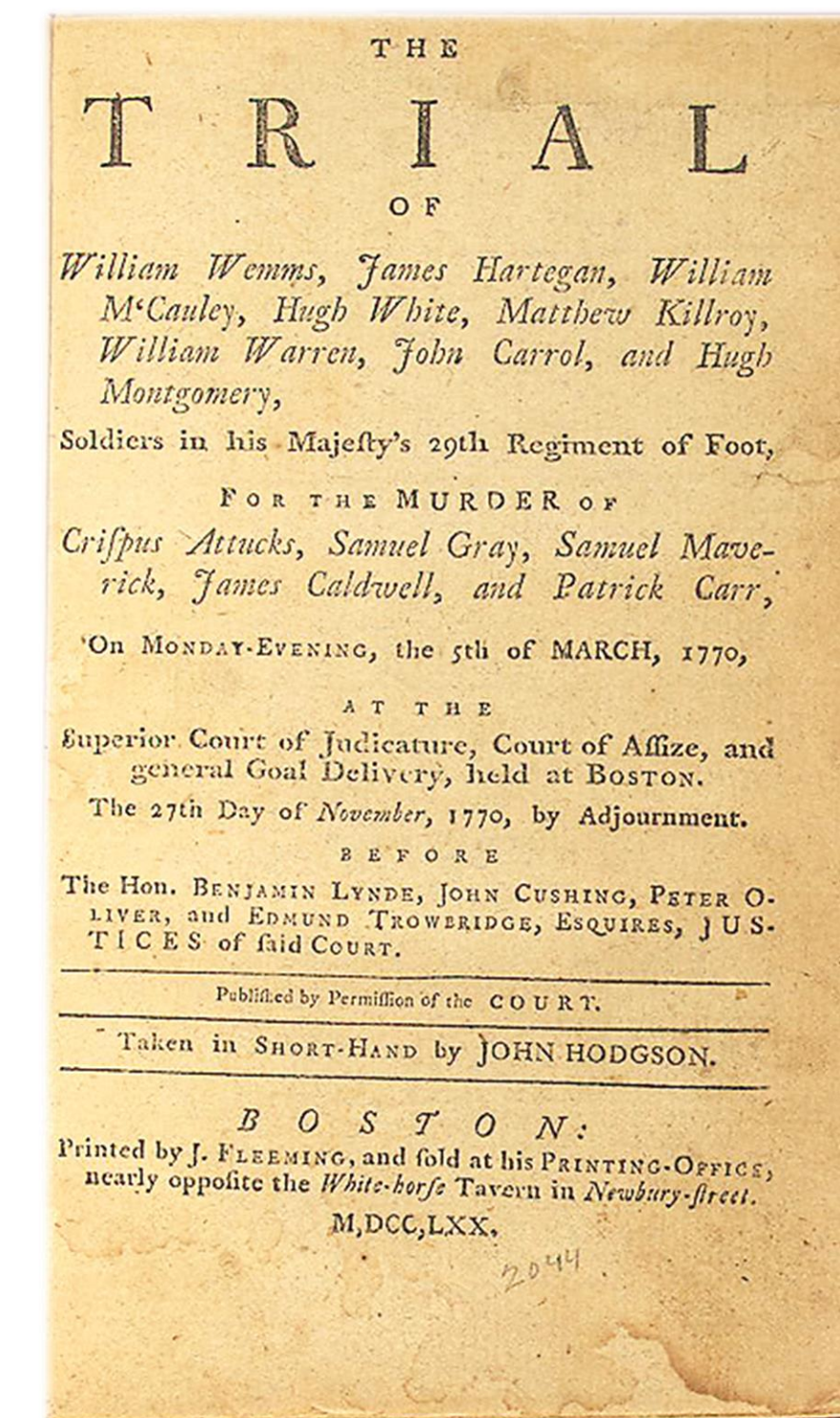


Paul Revere essentially stole
Henry Pelham's image and
beat Pelham to print.

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.

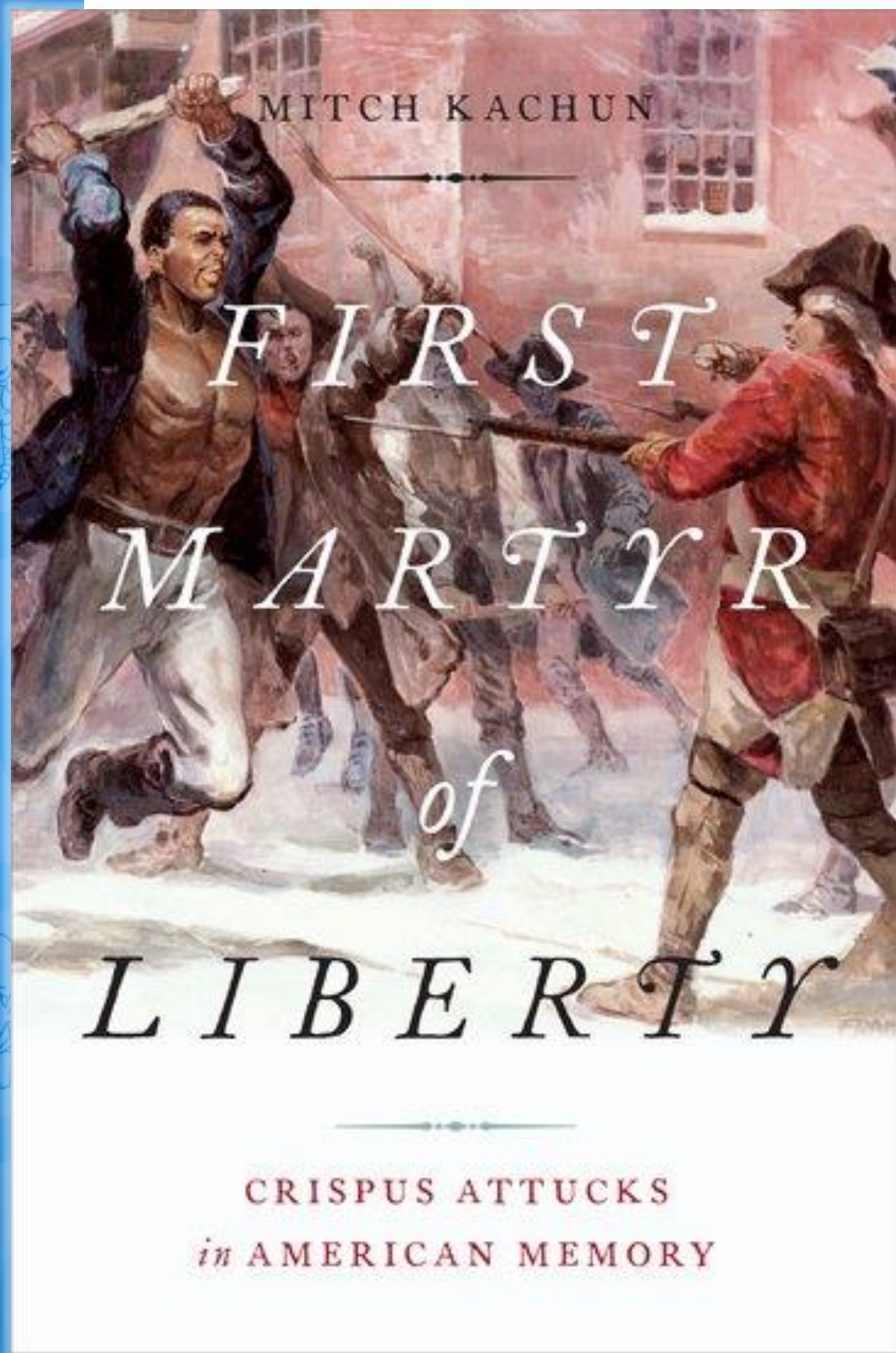
The body of young Christopher Seider, who had been killed two weeks earlier, is also buried in the same grave. They share one headstone.

The funeral for the 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' death in the Boston Massacre led to his achieving mythic significance.

While the other victims of the Boston 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 symbol of Black American patriotism and citizenship.

History vs. Memory

How did someone we know so little about become such an **icon**?

To understand that, we have to look at the difference between *history* and *memory*.

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 can know about the past by studying the artifacts of a previous era. History tells a story that might be incomplete or imperfect, but it's the closest we can get to the truth.



Memory is the way that real people, understand and use an event for their own purposes. They might focus on some facts and leave out of others, or make statements about what people involved were thinking or why they acted the way they did, with or without evidence.

To commemorate the 275th anniversary of Crispus Attucks' birth, and to honor Black revolutionaries, the US Mint issued a silver dollar coin on February 13, 1998. The "heads" side of the coin shows Attucks and was designed by John Mercanti.

History vs. Memory

History doesn't tell the whole story. Records are incomplete and can be misunderstood or misused. The beliefs of those telling the story always affects how the story is told. In fact, the story of Crispus Attucks was influenced by whether the story-teller was for or against the British military being in Boston, right from the start.

Memory can be a useful part of history, giving a voice to people that historians might 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.

History vs. Memory Exercise

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

Even the stories about recent events can be changed as they are reported on the news 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?

Forgotten Memories

On July 4, 1826, the 50-year anniversary of the signing of the **Declaration of Independence**, two historic figures died within hours of each other, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. With those who had lived through the Revolution now dead, the desire to study the history of this era grew.

In the decades after independence, Crispus Attucks and the Boston Massacre were 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 would have seized upon this fact while condemning the hypocrisy of American slavery.



“The Boston Tea Party”

A Good Question!

The 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 Black intellectuals who not only wanted to abolish slavery, but to secure equal rights of citizenship for their people.

In their minds, one very important question lingered:

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



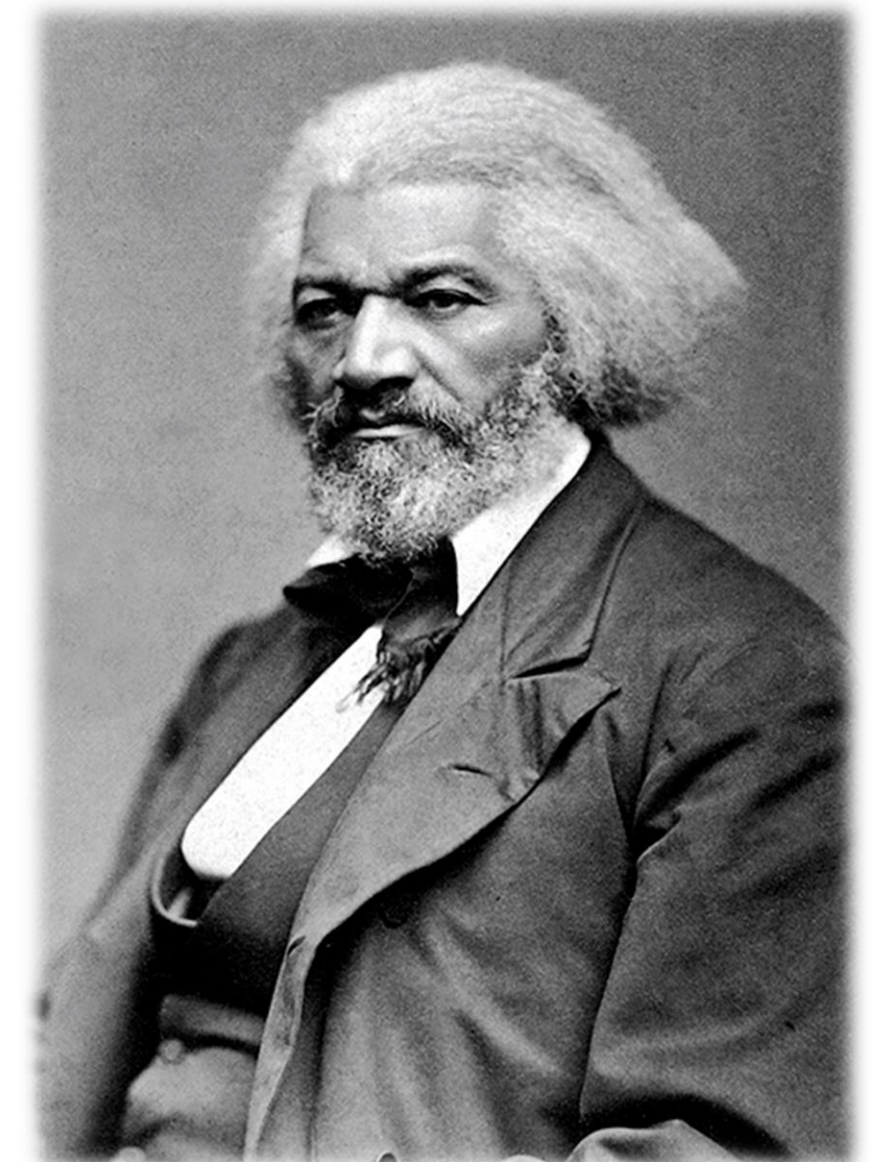
Abolitionism in America



After the Revolutionary War, northern states began to gradually abolish slavery and all had done so by 1804. Among Whites, 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. William Lloyd Garrison was a prominent publisher who became an abolitionist.

William Lloyd Garrison

Black abolitionists played an undeniably large role in shaping the movement. Some of the most prominent leaders of the movement were 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 in antislavery media and on the abolitionist speaking circuit for activists and ex-slaves like Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth.



Frederick Douglass

William Cooper Nell (1816 -1874)

In the 1850s, Black author and historian, William Cooper 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.

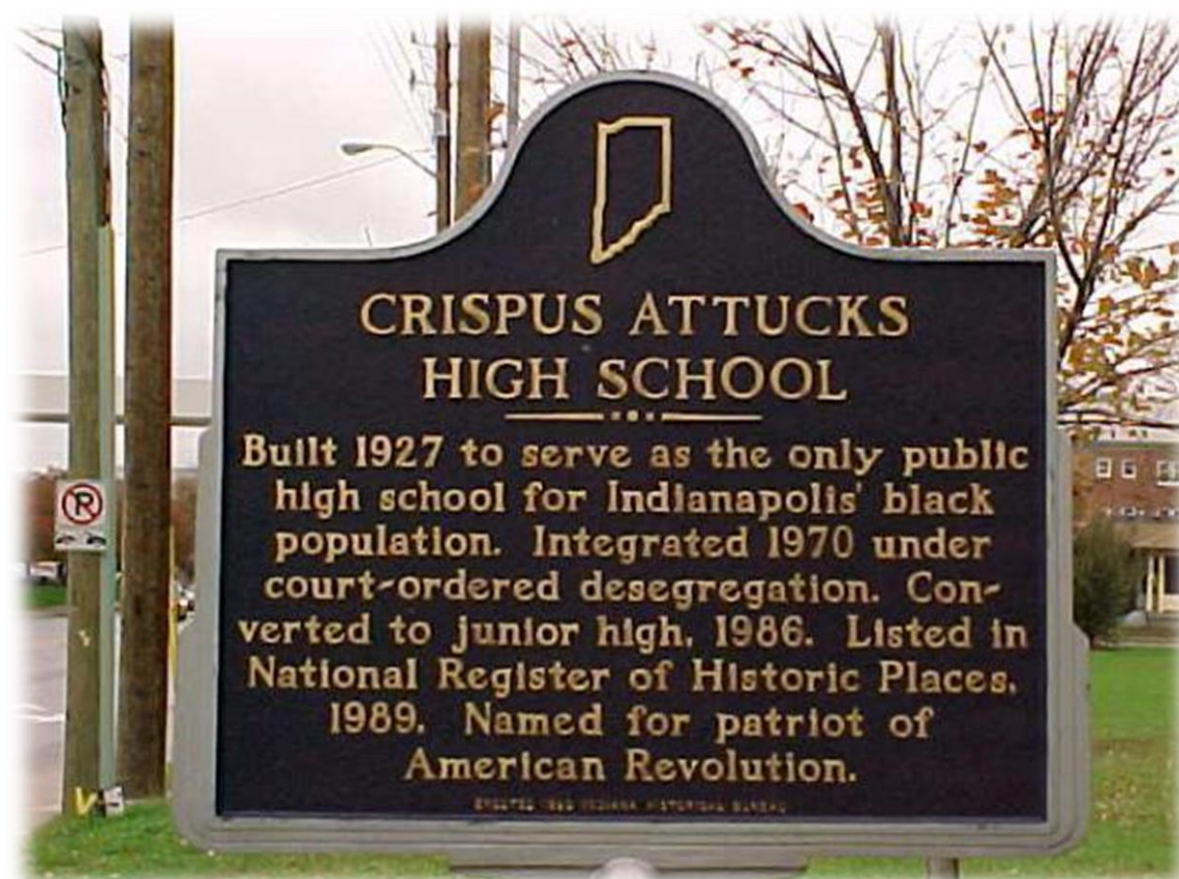


Without the efforts of Nell, Crispus Attucks might have faded into total obscurity. But Nell, born free to a family of fervent Boston abolitionists, saw in Attucks a powerful icon of Black American belonging.

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.

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.

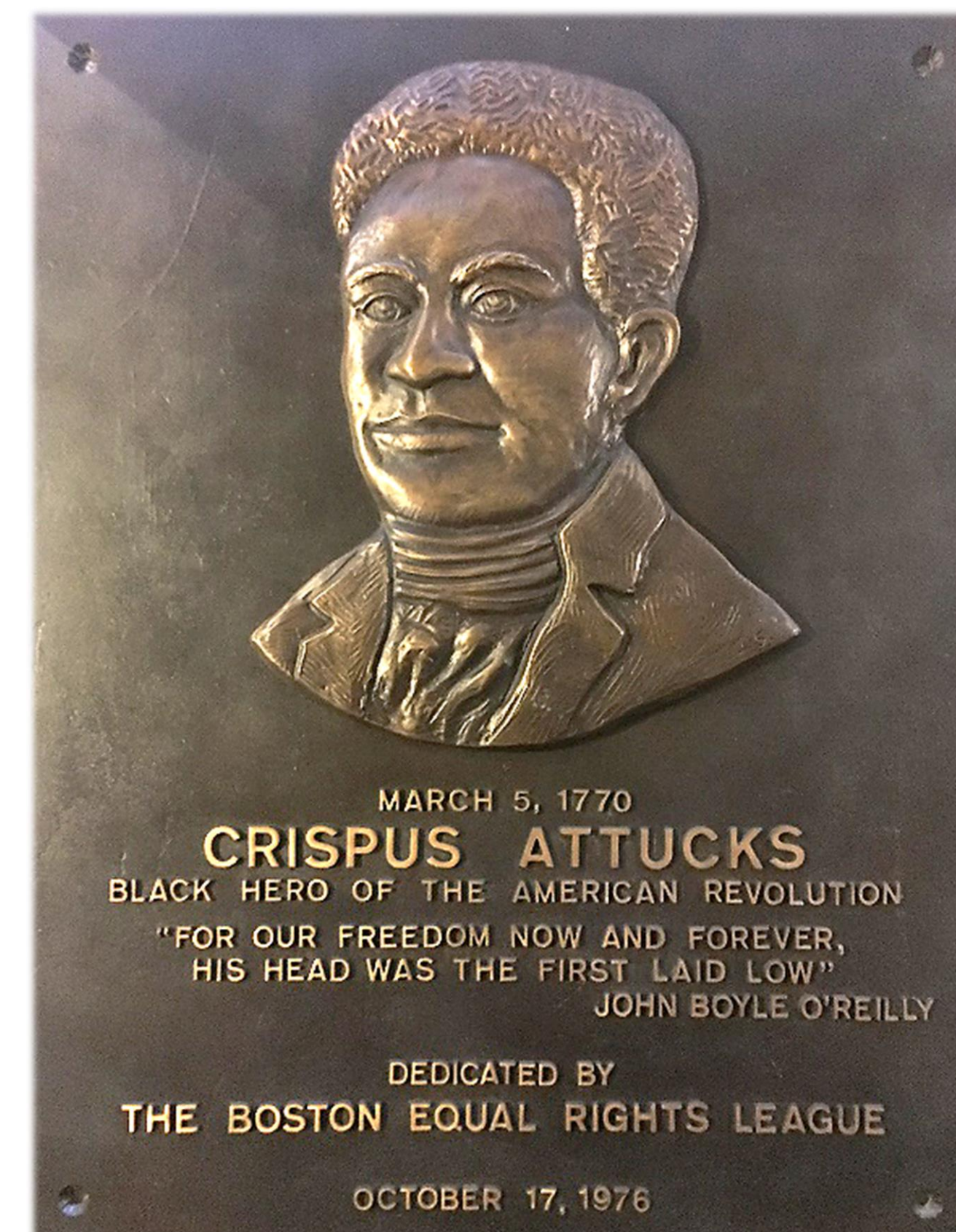


Crispus Attucks' Name Invoked

Crispus Attucks' 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.

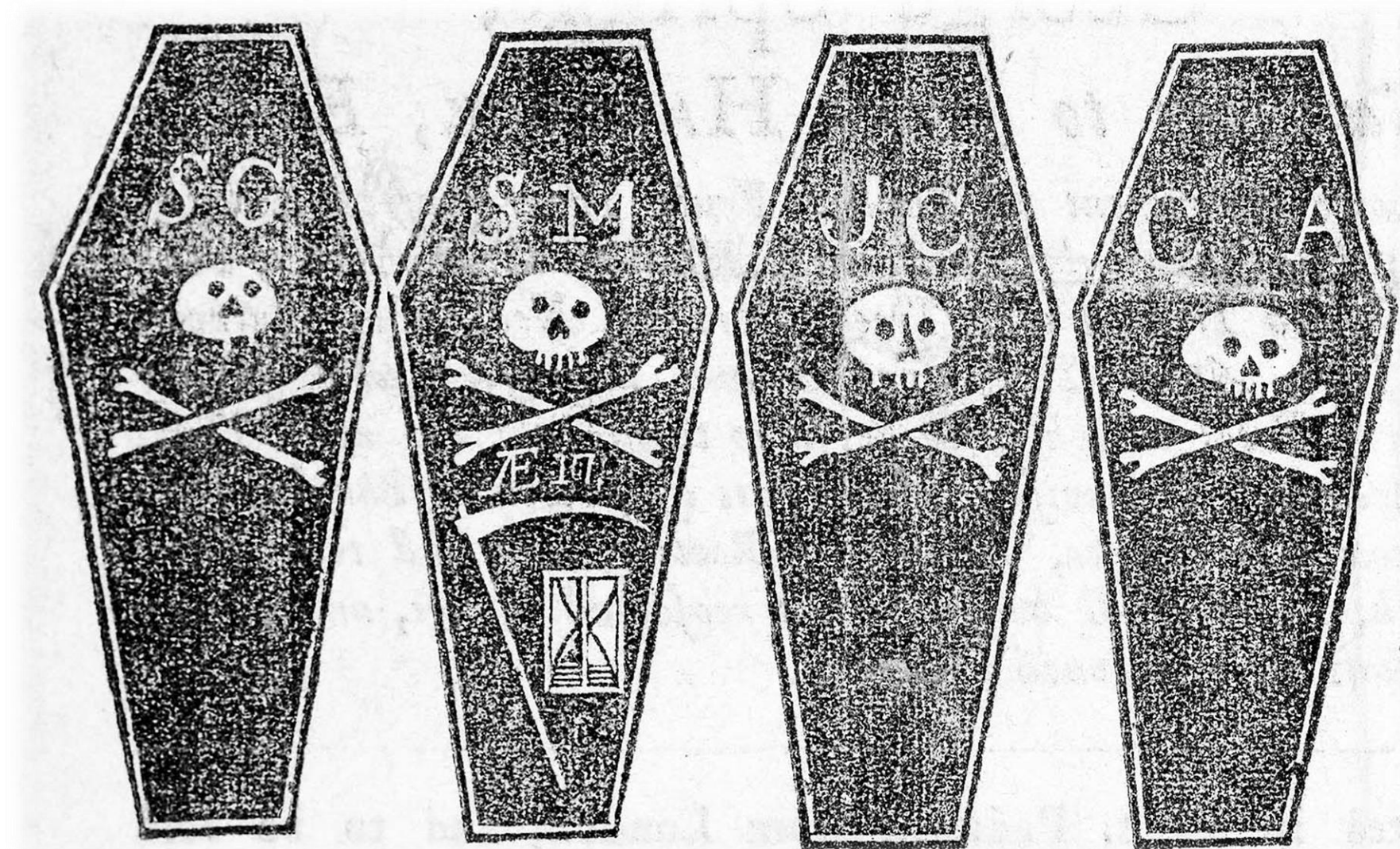


History ... and Memory

Historical evidence exists to prove that Crispus Attucks was a real person, as were hundreds of thousands of other 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 thoughts, hopes and dreams, unless those people left behind letters or diaries that could be discovered.

Without our collective memory, and the desire to understand the people who came before us, we would not do the often difficult work of finding the artifacts that help us write history.

Crispus Attucks' life and death is an example of our need for both history and memory as we interpret our past and envision our future.



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.

Vocabulary

Abolitionism
Alliance
Artifacts
Barracks
Bayonets
Berate
Emancipation
Hypocrisy
Iconic
Incite
Instigator
Invoke
Martyr
Massacre
Patriot
Red Coats
Smuggling
Tory

Bostonians, including Civil Rights activist and community organizer Melnea Cass, at the Attucks memorial. March 5, 1976.





WOODSON
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BLACK *History* *and* EXCELLENCE