

AN ORGANIZED INCIDENT: THE BOSTON MASSACRE RE-EXAMINED

Amanda Standerfer

Amanda Standerfer completed her B.A. in history in 1995 and is currently working on her M.A. in American history. This study was originally written for an undergraduate independent study and subsequently won the Eastern Illinois University Social Science Writing Award for 1995-96. The author argues that Sam Adams's role in the Boston Massacre was perhaps larger than has been understood by historians.

On the evening of March 5, 1770, the people of Boston were called out of their homes by church bells ringing throughout town. There was no fire, nor church service. Tensions had been mounting for several months between the British soldiers stationed in Boston and the citizens. As people gathered in the streets on March 5, 1770, a group of citizens carrying clubs claimed that some soldiers attacked them. There were also several parties of soldiers in the streets looking for trouble. Two large groups gathered: one in front of the Customs House where they pelted the Main Guard with snowballs filled with rocks, and the other gathered at Dock Square where a "mysterious gentleman in a red cloak and white wig harangued" the people to go towards the Main Guard.¹ Finally, after being insulted and pelted enough, a soldier who was knocked down regained his footing and fired into the crowd at the Custom House. The other soldiers present followed his example, killing five and wounding several others. Propagandists quickly turned the event into the "Bloody Work in King's Street" or "The Boston Massacre," and that evening would go down in history as one of the key events in the coming of the American Revolution.

Hiller Zobel, the leading historian on the event, has described the situation surrounding the Boston Massacre as well as the night itself. Zobel emphasized the general context and the long-standing grievances that sparked the event. Zobel's book is so thorough that there has been little recent work on the subject.²

1 John C. Miller, *Sam Adams: Pioneer in Propaganda* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1936), 179.

2 Hiller B. Zobel, *The Boston Massacre* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1970), 180-105.

John Miller, in his book on Sam Adams, has described the same events on the night of March 5, 1770, but added his suspicions about Sam Adams's motivation behind the event.³ Certainly, Sam Adams was the most radical of the Patriots. As early as 1768, Adams had advocated separation from Great Britain.⁴ This was only several years after the formation of the Sons of Liberty. Did Sam Adams have a significant role in instigating the Boston Massacre? By looking into Adams's past, his political ideas and his view of the army, as well as his role the night of the massacre and at the trial of the soldiers involved, this paper will argue that Sam Adams had a significant part in planning the event, more significant than has been argued before. By looking at transcripts and legal papers surrounding the trial, Sam Adams's writings, Boston newspapers, and several secondary sources the role of Adams in instigating the massacre becomes evident.

Sam Adams felt strongly about liberty and freedom in the colonies. In his eyes, the British were posing the ultimate threat to his ideals by imposing measures on the colonies and maintaining a permanent army after 1763. Adams had been interested in politics since his days at Harvard. His father had been involved in politics in Boston, and also owned a brewery, which he wished his son to take over. After his father's death, Sam Adams was free to pursue his political career. He became a tax collector in Boston, but he was unreliable and constantly in financial trouble. Still, he never missed an opportunity to talk about his views on liberty and freedom. Adams had a close connection with a group in Boston called the Loyal Nine, who would later, with Adams as their leader, become the guiding force of the Boston Sons of Liberty. In 1766, Adams was elected clerk of the House of Representatives in Boston, a post which he would hold for the next ten years.⁵

With the passage of the Stamp Act in 1765, Adams stepped up his political propaganda by writing for the *Boston Gazette* under a pseudonym calling for the repeal of the Act. Because of the Stamp Act, there were many riots in Boston, and the mob was, for the most part, controlled by Sam Adams. The Stamp Act was repealed in 1766, but it was replaced by the Declaratory Act, in 1766, and the Townsend Duty Act, in 1767. The Townsend Duty Act generated

3 Miller, 166-192.

4 Philip Davidson, *Propaganda and the American Revolution, 1763-1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941), 39.

5 Miller, 22-130.

great opposition in the colonies. Sam Adams wrote a series of letters to the King that were adopted by the Massachusetts legislature in opposition to the new act. The Boston Sons of Liberty, led by Adams, advocated using violence against the British.⁶ Boston had not yet erupted in violence when the British Cabinet decided to move troops there. They would not yet know about the Cabinet's decision when they would resort to violence. By July of 1768, the mobs had virtually taken over the town.

The British army in North America had been an increasing problem since the decision to leave 10,000 permanent troops for the first time in 1763. After the French and Indian War, Great Britain was faced with the problem of how to defend the vast territory gained in North America, including the area west of the Alleghenies to the Mississippi River, most of Canada, and Florida.

There were several reasons why the British decided, for the first time, to maintain a permanent standing army in North America. First, there was the Proclamation Line of 1763, an effort by the British government to prevent further westward settlement. The British suggested that by using the army to enforce the line, it would confine the colonists to the seaboard, and thus, make it easier to control those "unruly Americans."⁷ Another reason given to justify a military presence in North America was Pontiac's rebellion, and other minor Indian rebellions. The British gave the excuse that they needed to police the area west of the mountains to the Mississippi River. The third major reason for the occupation of this new territory was the presence of the French and Spanish. The St. Lawrence River Valley in Canada as well as areas around the Great Lakes and New Orleans had substantial French settlements, plus Florida had a small Spanish population.

Of course, there also was the fear that the French and Spanish would form an alliance to restore their empire in North America. Another suggestion on the stationing of permanent forces in North America was outlined in an anonymous "Plan" included in a report on postwar policy. This "Plan" included the possibility of the "use of regulars to control the Americans."⁸ It was this possibility which caused the American colonists, including Sam Adams, to be suspicious of

6 John C. Miller, *Origins of the American Revolution* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1943), 236.

7 John Shy, *Toward Lexington: The Role of the British Army in the Coming of the American Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 53.

8 *Ibid.*, 87-88.

the true motives for permanently stationing troops in North America.

There was no major opposition to this new policy until the British wanted the Americans to help pay for the maintenance of the troops through the Stamp Act. The money collected by the Stamp Act was to go "towards further defraying the necessary expenses of defending, protecting, and securing" the colonies.⁹ The British thought that the Americans would not oppose a tax, the revenue from which would stay in the colonies. However, the Americans saw no need for the army to be there at all, and would not give any money to support them.

Physical pressure was put on the tax collectors by the Sons of Liberty, who ransacked their houses and threatened them. In opposition to the Stamp Act there was "serious rioting in Boston," which was quickly becoming the hotbed for revolutionary activities under the direction of Sam Adams.¹⁰ As a result of the violence, Prime Minister Grenville suggested using force to subdue the colonists. Even though the Stamp Act had been repealed, there was a general feeling of mistrust between the colonists and the British.

The Townsend Duty Acts were also passed to help pay for the maintenance of the army in North America. As with the Stamp Act, there was widespread opposition to this measure, with Boston being the first of many to stop importing British goods. By early 1768, when the mobs had taken over Boston, General Gage, the British commander in North America, received a letter telling him to move at least one regiment into Boston, or more if he saw fit, for the "preservation of public peace."¹¹ By mid-1768, the mobs became so unruly that the British decided to send two more regiments from Ireland into Boston.¹²

In late September and early November, the troops arrived quietly in Boston along with several ships to patrol Boston Harbor. At first the mobs settled down, perhaps because they were unsure of what to expect from the troops, but it was clear that the troops were there to "maintain law and order, entirely by threat of physical force," and it was this threat that would cause friction with the citizens

9 Edmund S. Morgan, *Prologue to Revolution: Sources and Documents on the Stamp Act Crisis, 1764-1766* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 41.

10 Davidson, 69.

11 Peter D. Thomas, *The Townshend Duty Crisis: The Second Phase of the American Revolution, 1767-1773* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 82.

12 *Ibid.*, 87-88.

of Boston.¹³ The town remained tranquil for several months after the arrival of the troops despite the daily annoyance of the troops exercising on public land. Sam Adams, of course, found the troops to be the ultimate threat to liberty and used every minor incident as evidence that the troops were abusing their authority over the people of Boston. Adams published the Journal of the Times, with the help of the publishers of the Boston Gazette, describing the harsh treatment of the citizens by the soldiers.

Adams had a "conspiracy" theory that the British officials did not want the troops in Boston to maintain law and order, but rather they "secretly intended to introduce a general massacre" to teach the citizens a lesson.¹⁴ This "theory" shaped Adams's overall plan of revolution, which he constantly stirred up in the newspapers. He never failed to remind the citizens of the evil of having troops quartered in the town.

There were increased incidents between troops and citizens after a night at the local tavern. The troops took advantage of the chap rum in Boston, but then often got into fights with other soldiers, sailors, or citizens. Some even attributed the rise in petty theft to the alcohol habit of the soldiers. The conflict between the troops and the citizens began emerging in the summer of 1769 after it was decided to remove two regiments from the town. The citizens, now thinking that all troops would be withdrawn, put more pressure on the remaining regiments hoping to speed up their departure, but the situation rapidly deteriorated when the citizens realized that the remaining troops were not leaving. Several major incidents of violence occurred, and the troops could no longer preserve "law and order." Instead they were reduced to attempting military rule. This attempt failed, and Boston, united behind Sam Adams, was completely out of their control.

With the escalation in tension and increasing violence, the shooting on the night of March 5, 1770, seemed like the confrontation for which everyone had been waiting. However, after close examination of the trial of the British soldiers accused of firing at the citizens, there seemed to be an element of organization in the event. Sam Adams's role in the Boston Sons of Liberty, as well as his writings and newspaper, demonstrated his devotion to the revolution

ary cause. This would make him a clear suspect if one were attempting to prove that the Boston Massacre had been planned. There was also the unidentified man in the red cloak at Dock Square the night of the massacre, and the unusual pair of John Adams and Josiah Quincy as the lawyers who defended the soldiers. By looking into these circumstances, Sam Adams's role in instigating the Boston Massacre becomes clear.

British officials in Boston postponed the trial of the British soldiers until late November and early December of 1770. They hoped that the citizens would not be as agitated, and that the soldiers could receive a fair trial. Sam Adams did his best to keep the massacre in the newspapers, but the situation in Boston was somewhat relaxed by the removal of the troops.

John Adams and Josiah Quincy were the lawyers defending the soldiers, which seemed odd since they were both involved in revolutionary activities in Boston. However, John Adams was none other than Sam Adams's cousin, and Sam had impressed the idea of defending the troops onto John. The lawyers interviewed over a hundred people, but there were seven who were of particular interest when trying to establish the identity of the man in the red cloak. On the night of March 5, 1770, these men were at the home of William Hunter, who had a balcony that overlooked Dock Square where the man was spotted. The men were in the house when David Mitchelson came in and asked why everyone was inside when there was such a disturbance in the street. Everyone went to the balcony to see what all the excitement was about, and they found a large gathering in the street.

At the trial, the seven men gave mostly the same story, but five of them saw something unusual. Archibald Wilson was the first of the group to be called to the stand by the defense. He made no mention of a man in a red cloak stirring up the crowd. William Hunter, when called to the stand by Josiah Quincy, brought up the gentleman in the red cloak. Hunter said that the people "gathered round him, and he stood in the middle of them, and they were all very quiet; he spoke to them a little while and then he went off, and they took off their hats and gave three cheers for the Main Guard."¹⁵

¹⁵ The Trial of the British Soldiers of the 29th Regiment of Foot, for the Murder of Crispus Attacks, Samuel Gray, Samuel Mervick, James Caldwell, and Patrick Carr, on Monday Evening, March 5, 1770, before the Honorable Benjamin Lynde, John Cushing, Peter Oliver, and Edmund Ironsbridge, Esquires, Justices of the Superior Court of Judicature, Court of Assize, and General Goal Delivery, Held at Boston, by Adjournment, November 27, 1770 (Miami: Mnemosyne Publishing, 1969), 47.

¹³ Zobel, 94.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 111.

After Hunter volunteered this information, Josiah Quincy asked if the man was short or tall, and about how he was dressed. Hunter said that he was "pretty tall," and that he had on a "white wig and red cloak, and after his talking a few minutes to them, they made huzzas for the Main Guard."¹⁶ This was the end of his testimony, and David Mitchelson took the witness stand next. After Mitchelson explained the events in the street that he saw from Hunter's balcony, Josiah Quincy asked Mitchelson if he saw a man in a red cloak and white wig. Mitchelson said that he did, and "he made a considerable figure there."¹⁷ Quincy asked if the people were paying attention to what the man said. Mitchelson said yes, but that he could not hear what the man said however "after he had harangued them about three minutes, they huzzad for the Main Guard."¹⁸

The next person of the group called was James Selkrig, and he included the man in the red cloak in his explanation of the events in the street. He gave the same version as the other two witnesses, saying that the people gathered around a "large man, with a red cloak and white wig," and that after he spoke "they gave some different cheers for the Main Guard." Josiah Quincy did not ask him any questions about the man.¹⁹ Archibald Bowman also described the man in the red cloak and white wig in his recollection of the events. Josiah Quincy asked him how many people were talking to the man, and Bowman said that he did not know how many, but that "there was a great number."²⁰

William Dixon was the last of the group to testify, but he did not mention the man in the red cloak. Nor did Quincy ask him about whom he saw.²¹ David Michaelson was the other person to see the man in the red cloak, but for some reason he did not testify even though he was interviewed by John Adams.²² The evidence that these men gave about the man in the red cloak went no further than their testimony. None of the men revealed what the man in the red cloak said or who he was. It seemed as though whatever the man said provoked the crowd into attacking the Main Guard where the massacre occurred, and if this man had such an influence on creating this feeling in the crowd then John

16 *Ibid.*, 47.

17 *Ibid.*, 48.

18 *Ibid.*, 48.

19 *Ibid.*, 50.

20 *Ibid.*, 51.

21 *Ibid.*, 51.

22 L. Kinvin Wroth and Hillier B. Zobel, eds., *Legal Papers of John Adams, Cases 63 & 64: The Boston Massacre Trials* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1965), 174.

Adams and Josiah Quincy should have used this to prove that the soldiers were only defending themselves against an angry provoked mob. They did not even mention the man in their closing arguments, but one of the judges, Peter Oliver, did make special mention of this mysterious man in his message to the jury. He said:

James Selkrig, with three others, say, that before the bells rang they saw, not far from Murray's barracks, a large number armed with different weapons; some of them say nigh two hundred; that some of the people had been repulsed from the barracks, and after that, a tall man with a red cloak and white wig talked to these people, who listened to him and then huzzad for the Main Guard. I cannot but make this observation on the tall man with a red cloak and white wig, that whoever he was, if the huzzaing for the Main Guard and then attacking the soldiers, was the consequence of his speech to the people, that tall man is guilty in the sight of God, of the murder of the five persons mentioned in the indictment, and although he may never be brought to a court of justice here, yet, unless he speedily flies to the city of refuge, the Supreme Avenger of innocent blood will surely overtake him.²³

The judge seems to have thought that this man was extremely important to the case since he felt that God would punish him for his supposed inflammatory words. After hearing all of the arguments, the jury found six of the soldiers to be not guilty and two guilty of manslaughter because it had been proven that they had actually fired.

The speculation about the man in the red cloak went beyond the trial, though, and into Sam Adam's favorite outlet of propaganda, the newspaper. A Tory writer in the *Evening Post*, published by Loyalist Mr. Draper, claimed to have proof that the man in the red cloak was Sam Adams. During the trial, the newspaper threatened to publish the evidence of Adams's guilt.²⁴ Sam Adams replied to this statement in the *Boston Gazette* with an article signed "Vindex." Adams denied the charge, and desired the Tory writer "would explain himself." He said that for the sake of "truth" the identity of the person in the red cloak should be revealed if Mr. Draper knew it. Vindex said that "whether he (the man in the red cloak) gave them good or ill advice, or any advice at all, we may possibly form some conjecture concerning it, when his person is ascertained. The sooner it is done the better."²⁵ Mr. Draper hinted that the man in the red cloak was a person in public office because of his dress. The red cloak and

23 *The Trial of the British Soldiers*, 117.

24 William V. Wells, ed., *The Life and Public Services of Samuel Adams, Being a Narrative of His Acts and Opinions, and of His Agency in Producing and Forwarding the American Revolution*, vol. 1 (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1865), 312.

25 *Boston Gazette*, 24 December 1770.

white wig were frequently worn by men at the time, and there were many men in and out of public office that would have liked to have seen the soldiers removed from Boston.

Many of the witnesses also said that the man in the red cloak was a tall man. Sam Adams, however, was not a tall man, so if Mr. Draper was looking for a tall man who held public office in Boston who wore a white wig and red cloak, he should have considered John Hancock. There was no mention of Hancock at the trial or in the newspapers. Hancock, who was tall, would have just as much reason to entice revolutionary actions as Sam Adams.²⁶ Hancock, regarding the incident with his ship the Liberty, had just as much reason to hate the British, and he was in town the night of March 5, 1770. Perhaps Adams asked Hancock to go to Dock Square because Hancock would better manipulate the mob into attacking the Main Guard. It would seem more likely that the two were acting together since planning a massacre was no easy task.

There was also an anonymous letter in the Boston News-Letter that said that the "person in a red Cloak declared by some of the Witnesses to have been very busy at the Beginning of the Tragedy will be ascertained, if Vindex and his Adherents desire it."²⁷ This suggests that Vindex, one of Sam Adams's many pseudonyms, knew the identity of the person in the red cloak, and could reveal it if he chose.

Who was the man in the red cloak and white wig? Circumstantial evidence would tend to point to Sam Adams. From the beginning of the unrest, Adams had played an active role in opposing troops in Boston and British rule in general. The perfect way to force the British to remove the troops from the town was to stir up enough trouble that the British had no choice. Most certainly Adams would not have liked to see any of his fellow Bostonians killed, but if it would get the troops removed then it would have been for a just cause. Adams just might have thought that harassed troops would respond just enough so that they would have to be removed from Boston.

The evening of March 5, 1770, was the perfect opportunity to cause trouble. There were many people in the streets, and a public figure like Adams would have no trouble taking control of the situation and motivating the mob. Conveniently, there was a large gathering away from where the troops were so that the people could be organized without any British official noticing. The

²⁶ Wells, 313.

²⁷ Boston News-Letter, 12 December 1770.

massacre might not have happened if the Main Guard had not been overwhelmed by the mob that was in front of them and the mob coming from Dock Square.

Also, the church bells were calling out patriots not only in Boston that evening but in nearby Charlestown and Roxbury at the same time.²⁸ Sam Adams could have called upon the Sons of Liberty in these towns to show their support for the people in Boston by ringing the church bells. Clearly, Sam Adams was in the position to have this sort of influence in Boston and the surrounding area.

The speculation of who the man in the red cloak was and what his motives were goes beyond the night of the massacre and into the trial later that year. At the trial, several witnesses mentioned the man in the red cloak. But the lawyers never followed up on the identity of the man. In fact, they never even asked the witnesses if they recognized the man. This seemed extremely odd considering that even one of the judges found the man in the red cloak important enough to mention in his message to the jury. If the man in the red cloak organized the people to attack the Main Guard, then the lawyers should have used this information to prove that the soldiers were merely defending themselves.

Someone must have recognized the man, especially since his dress was that of a public figure, but perhaps they had reason to conceal his identity. John David Michaelson saw the man in the red cloak, but did not testify. John Adams and Josiah Quincy might not have wanted Michaelson to reveal the identity of the man.

Furthermore, Sam Adams had first approached John Adams and Josiah Quincy about defending the soldiers. Perhaps Sam Adams knew that the two lawyers would help him hide the fact that he was in Dock Square trying to influence the mob there.²⁹ There would be few other reasons for Sam Adams to be interested in providing a superior defense for the soldiers unless he had something personal at stake. John Adams knew that the town's witnesses should and would not be thoroughly questioned because what they said could prove that the Bostonians were responsible for the massacre.³⁰ At stake was

²⁸ Miller, Sam Adams, 186.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 184-185.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 185.

not only the reputation of the city in general, but that of Sam Adams and the Boston Whigs in particular. John Adams did not press the witnesses during questioning. Of course, none of the citizens interviewed were actually in Dock Square and heard what the man in the red cloak said. Had any of these witnesses been called to the stand, they could have testified to the nature of the speech and possibly the man's identity.

Why did Judge Oliver rhetorically denounce the man in the red cloak, saying he was guilty in the eyes of God for the murder of five men on March 5, 1770? Sam Adams was seldom absent from the courtroom during the trial. Perhaps the judge's message was not intended for the jury, but for certain spectators in the courtroom.

The reaction of Sam Adams to the articles printed in a Tory newspaper showed his concern with the issue of the identity of the man in the red cloak. Perhaps Sam Adams was so concerned because the information that the Tory writer would reveal was something that Adams did not want the public to know. A later writer claimed that the identity of the man in the red cloak would be revealed if Sam Adams and his followers would allow it. This suggested that Adams knew the identity of the man even if it were not he. Adams was doing everything that he could in the courtroom and in the newspapers to keep secret the identity of the man in the red cloak.

Clearly, the Boston Massacre was much more complicated than some British soldiers firing at innocent Bostonians. An abundance of evidence suggests that the event was planned, including the ringing of the church bells, the man in Dock Square at the perfect moment, and even the selection of the lawyers. Sam Adams can be connected to most of that evidence. Most importantly, his past political views suggested that he had motive. He was one of the very first to suggest that the Bostonians rid themselves of the troops, and he was one of the first to suggest the use of force. A massacre was exactly what Sam Adams needed to get the troops out of Boston. If the man in the red cloak were not Sam Adams, the evidence suggested that it was someone close to him. Sam Adams remains the prime suspect for instigating the Boston Massacre.