



A Newfound Empathy: British Responses to the Boston Massacre and the Massacre of St. George's Fields

Shannon Chamberlain

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

Faculty Mentor: Jon Sensbach, Department of History

Abstract

The Boston Massacre occurred on March 5, 1770. Following the death of five Bostonians, both the American colonists and the royal officials in Boston took testimonies and sent them to London. Elected colonial agents issued motions to open debate on Parliament's accountability in creating an imbalanced relationship between the military and civil authorities in the colonies. Unfortunately, the motions from these colonial agents were voted in the negative, leading to disappointment on both sides of the Atlantic. Two years prior, a similar tragedy happened in England: The Massacre of St. George's Fields. Scottish soldiers accosted a British mob that had gathered to protest the arrest of MP John Wilkes. From 1768 to 1771, Parliament rejected motions that sought to reconcile the grievances that led to the Massacre of St. George's Fields. The similarities between the course of events throughout the Boston Massacre and the Massacre of St. George's Fields drove the British public to express a newfound empathy towards the American colonies- a clear deviation from their previously-held prejudices.

Keywords: The Boston Massacre, The Massacre of St. George's Fields, John Wilkes, Parliament

Introduction

Prior to the Boston Massacre on March 5, 1770, the British public maintained a prejudice against the American colonists that viewed those outside of Britain as inferior and lowly. London alone contained a population of 700,000 individuals. Boston appeared "insignificant" to "any member of the English ruling group." As a result, "this placed [Boston's] inhabitants... in a status different from and lower than the English of England" (Zobel, 1970, p.5). In addition, the expectations of mercantilism played a role in the development of this prejudice. This economic system demanded that the colony's only purpose was to benefit the mother country, which made those in Britain maintain a sense of power over the colonies. Combined with the rebellious protests against the Stamp Act which would provide Bostonians with the label of "troublemakers," those in London continued to harbor resentment against Boston (Zobel, 1970, p.5).

Despite this prejudice, there would be a clear sentiment of approval for the American colonies following the Boston Massacre. Popular support for the American colonies had not been seen with the protest of other colonial grievances outside of military occupation during peacetime. Why had this specific event been the turning point in British attitudes towards the American colonies? The occurrence of a similar tragedy in England, the Massacre of St. George's Fields, provides an undeniable connection to the Boston Massacre. The similarities between the two events reveal that the Boston Massacre too closely represented a recent memory for the British, evoking a unique sense of empathy that had not existed prior to 1770.

To understand the transformation in Britain's attitude towards the American colonies, it becomes vital to explore the British public's initial prejudice. The extent of this prejudice can be seen in Matthew Wheelock's *Reflections Moral and Political on Great Britain and her Colonies*, printed in early 1770. Wheelock resided in London after having lived in the colonies for a period of time, which to him meant that he was acquainted with the "manners prevalent in most of our colonies" (Wheelock, 1770, p.3). In this pamphlet, Wheelock shared his perspective on the relationship between Great Britain and the American colonies. Wheelock argued that the American colonists were unreasonable and entitled, as he insisted their complaints about taxation were unfounded. Through Wheelock's pamphlet, it becomes clear that a distrust and disrespect for American colonists had emerged throughout Britain during the period leading up to the American Revolution.

Wheelock attempted to assess the implications of the recent political unrest in the colonies through his evaluation of the legitimacy of their arguments. He argued that the American colonists believed that they received inferior treatment from Parliament when compared to British locals. Wheelock raised the question "would the colonists have crossed the sea to form a settlement in America, if their quality of [sic] British citizens had not been their protection?" This question implies that the American colonists had been granted equal status as British citizens while in the colonies, as otherwise they would not have left Britain in the first place. In his address of colonial grievances against taxation, Wheelock conceded that it would have been unjust to tax the colonists before the Seven Years' War. Britain's debt was not alarming at that time; however, it made perfect sense to tax the colonists after the war. He noted that the Britons were taxed as well; therefore, it was not honorable for the colonists to claim that Britain would tax only part of its subjects and not the whole. Overall, Wheelock insisted that "reason and

morality” evaded the colonists as a result of their “ambitious designs” (Wheelock, 1770, p.47-51). He believed that they manipulated the British constitution by using the spirit of its language in order to act “against the general established law” (Wheelock, 1770, p.47-51). Thus, it becomes understandable how Wheelock, as well as many other British locals, came to harbor contempt for the colonists.

Although Wheelock shared this perspective with many of his fellow Britons, the American colonists were not as supportive of his analysis. Benjamin Franklin annotated this pamphlet and provided his own counterargument to the claims made by Wheelock. For the most part, Franklin critiqued the manner in which Wheelock presented his case. When Wheelock stated that the colonists held “extravagant and unjust demands” for exemption from taxation, Franklin noted that Wheelock “decides before he examines” based on the biased language he uses (Franklin, 1770). Furthermore, in his attack on the character of the colonists, Wheelock commented that “the character of a gentleman is rare to be met with in [sic] these provinces.” Franklin then stated that “no gentleman that knew the Country would say this” (Franklin, 1770). It is important to note that there is bias in both of these accounts because the two men clearly present their own localities in a favorable manner; however, Wheelock’s account presents additional concerns for its accuracy. Wheelock admitted that he had not been well-read on current affairs due to his distance from the main hubs of communication in London. Furthermore, he stated that he wrote the pamphlet with the purpose to preserve the goodness of the British Empire through a presentation of his case prior to Parliament’s convening. He also admitted that he wrote the document in haste (Wheelock, 1770, p.1-5).

Considering that most of the British public and government were woefully ignorant to the affairs of the American colonies, it is no surprise that colonial agents were frustrated with the inaccurate descriptions provided by British commentators such as Wheelock. Franklin’s response emphasizes the points made by Zobel, one being that “thoughtful Americans” were consciously aware of this British-held prejudice (Zobel, 1770, p.5). Those who were as well-versed as Franklin sought to disprove the notions that Americans were entitled, selfish, and unruly. On the other hand, certain colonists believed that this prejudice had been too ingrained into Britons, past the point of any attempt from the colonists for redemption. John Adams viewed the placement of troops in Boston as an extension of that prejudice which places mistrust and unruliness upon the colonists. He was not alone in his belief, as many Bostonians saw the placement of British troops

in Boston as a police force rather than a protective army. This led to the suspicion that Bostonians had been viewed as “an enemy people” (Archer, 2010, p.545). In his autobiography, Adams, reflected upon the following:

their very Appearance in Boston was a strong proof to me, that the determination in Great Britain to subjugate Us, was too deep and inveterate ever to be altered by Us: For every thing [sic] We could do, was misrepresent [ed], and Nothing We could say was credited (Lemisch, 1970, p.493).

Adams suggested that it would be nearly impossible to change Britain’s views of the American colonists. Adams believed that the longstanding prejudice had not been successfully challenged, even as colonial agents such as Franklin had attempted valiantly to dismiss such prejudiced notions. Nevertheless, this pessimistic stance held by Adams would prove to be too skeptical of the potential for change. The Boston Massacre represented a pivotal turning point in altering the outlook that the British held towards the American colonies, as the Bostonians would finally be ‘credited’ amongst the British public. In the transcripts from the “Debates of a Political Club,” published within the *London Magazine*, the language used to speak about the colonies after the Boston Massacre is vastly different from the language used by Wheelock in his pamphlet. Horatio Cibus, one of the debaters, spoke on the validity of the colonies’ concerns. He revealed that the British views towards the American colonies may have become more sympathetic:

I am not surprised that the Americans should think themselves oppressively treated, when members on this side of the Atlantic are heartily of the same opinion; nor am I surprised as the excesses they run to in defence [sic] of privileges, which so many, even of their British fellow subjects, pronounce to be their birth-right and exhort them to assert with their blood (Baldwin, 1770, p.441).

In his sentiments, Cibus presented an entirely different perspective to Wheelock. Cibus argued that the majority of British opinion is in favor of the Bostonians. This popular sentiment is completely antithetical to Wheelock’s harsh condemnation of the colonies. Both Wheelock’s pamphlet and the debate in *The London Magazine* appeared the same year, yet they express two contrasting understandings of public opinion. The difference between the two publications can be accounted for in the occurrence of the Boston Massacre, which Cibus noted was a payment that Bostonians made “with their blood” (Baldwin, 1770, p.441).

The Massacre of St. George’s Fields

Historians Hiller Zobel and Pauline Maier have hinted that both the patriot support for MP John Wilkes and the inspiration that the colonists took from him perhaps led to more than just positive support for the British politician. Zobel suggestively notes that “the Massacre of St. George’s Fields, as his supporters on both sides of the ocean called the incident, had no Massachusetts parallel.” In this statement, Zobel implies that a parallel should be expected (Zobel, 1770, p.94). Furthermore, Maier emphasizes the popular zeal that surrounded the admiration of Wilkes in her inclusion of a patriot creed that had been printed in Boston, which states that ‘I believe in Wilkes, the firm patriot, maker of number 45’ (Maier, 1963, p.373-375). This ‘maker of number 45’ references Wilke’s newspaper *The North Briton*, in which issue number 45 includes an attack on King George III and his Prime Minister. Maier also notes that within the colonies, chants of “Wilkes and Liberty” sounded from taverns, which were the same chants that echoed throughout the British mob on the day of the Massacre of St. George’s Fields. Furthermore, colonial streets and even children were given the honor of being named after Wilkes (Maier, 1963, p.373-375). This near-worship of Wilkes and the multiple parallels drawn between the two events lead to a compelling interpretation that perhaps the Boston Massacre had been slightly influenced by the course of events during that English tragedy from 1768.

After he composed his forty-fifth issue of *The North Briton*, which openly criticized the King and the prime minister, Wilkes was charged with seditious libel. Wilkes fled to France in 1763, but he was tried and found guilty during his absence. He returned from France in 1768, only to face his postponed imprisonment. On May 10, 1768, a group of “lower people” developed the notion that “Mr. Wilkes would be permitted to go to Westminster to take his seat in Parliament” (Anonymous, 1769, p. 8-11). Approximately 300 people assembled outside the King’s Bench Prison. The group was reported to have been peaceful, as they gathered with chants of “*Wilkes and Liberty*” alongside various “*huzzahs*” (Anonymous, 1769, p. 8-11). Scottish troops were stationed outside the prison for some days, and upon this crowd’s arrival, were worried about the mass gathering and its intentions. They secured four or five justices, who came out alongside a series of troops to announce the Riot Act, which ordered the crowd to disperse or else face legal punishment (Anonymous, 1769, p. 8-11).

According to certain testimonies, the soldiers began to strike out at the crowd before the reading of the Riot Act had finished. Once the proclamation concluded, more soldiers began to quit their post and accost the mob. Several individuals were murdered or maimed (Anonymous,

1769, p. 8-11). Young William Allen's death would be the most noticeable loss as he had been an innocent bystander. At some point during the outbreak of violence, an unknown member of the mob had thrown a stone at the Scottish soldiers. Once he had been chased in retaliation, the man fled into a cowhouse as the soldiers ran in after him. William Allen, the innkeeper of an inn that was next to the cowhouse, had just entered. Since the other man had already made his escape, the soldiers suspected Allen to have been the man who threw the stone. Scottish soldier Donald Maclean fired his bayonet and hit Allen above the breast. Allen died a few moments later (Harris, 2016). With the death of innocent bystanders, especially at the hands of military authority, the similarities between this event and the later occurrence of the Boston Massacre become clear.

Donald Maclean was charged with wilful [sic] murder, while Donald Maclauray and Alexander Murray were charged as accomplices. Maclean was acquitted and the other two soldiers were discharged (Harris, 2016). Disappointed with the results, William Allen's father began a private prosecution of the soldiers through help from a friend, MP John Glynn. Glynn had been a supporter of Wilkes, especially since he had served as Wilkes' legal counsel (Harris, 2016). As a result, he was happy to help Mr. Allen, who gave Glynn a petition to present in front of the House of Commons. Although delayed, on April 25, 1771, John Glynn "begged leave to bring up the petition (Harris, 2016). The petition led to a debate on the floor, in which Lord North and his supporters opposed the entry of the petition into the House of Commons. Edmund Burke, a constant "critic of North's ministry," suggested for a Parliamentary inquiry into the matter. Despite Burke and Glynn's efforts, the motion to bring up the petition would be voted in the negative, 158 votes to 33 votes (Harris, 2016). The motion had failed, once again silencing debate on the mishandled administration of military affairs underneath King George III. This scenario reflects the same underlying pattern that was seen in the House of Common debates in regard to the Boston Massacre the previous year: Parliament consistently refused to take on accountability or offer reconciliation after grave tragedies that resulted from Parliament's misdoings. Rather than allow for an open exchange of debate, Parliament overwhelmingly dismissed motions that would force the government to address its own role in causing such disturbances. As a whole, the responses to both the Boston Massacre and the Massacre of St. George's Fields reveal Parliament's pattern of neglect to address the grievances of those it

presides over as well as its refusal to admit and remedy its own responsibility in the aggravation of tensions.

The connection between the Boston Massacre and the Massacre of St. George's Fields was further cemented after there was a skirmish in Boston between two individuals: Christopher Seider/Snider, an eleven-year old boy, and a loyalist named Ebenezer Richardson. Ebenezer Richardson, who had earned a loyalist reputation due to his previous work as an informer for customs services, lived nearby Theophilus Lillie's shop. Lillie had refused to sign a non-importation agreement and was quite outspoken with his criticism against the radicals. On February 22, 1770, a group of boys had gathered outside Lillie's shop in order to prevent the entrance of buyers into the shop. They enacted their own form of punishment for Lillie's refusal to sign the non-importation agreement. When Richardson had stepped in, the boys began to taunt him instead, since they knew his reputation as a Tory sympathizer. They pelted rocks at him and drove Richardson to retreat to his nearby house. A group of men, followed by the younger boys, approached his home. The group began to taunt Richardson with exclamations such as 'Come out, you damn son of a bitch.' Once the men tossed bricks at the house, the younger boys followed suit with stones and sticks. Richardson eventually brought a musket to the window and fired eleven slugs through Christopher Seider. While doctors hurried to treat him, it was too late: Seider would die a few hours later (Zobel, 1970, p. 173-179).

Immediately, the death of Seider was compared to the death of William Allen, the young man who had been shot and killed in the Massacre of St. George's Fields. *The Boston Gazette* reported the incident with a cry for vengeance. The newspaper stated that 'The Blood of *young Allen* may be cover'd in *Britain*: But a thorough Inquisition will be made in *America* for that of *young Snider*.' To further cement the parallels, Seider's funeral became "Adam's spectacular." The event was turned into a propagandist mass-gathering. Hutchinson commented that, if given the choice to resurrect Seider, the Boston Sons of Liberty 'would not have done it, but would have chosen the grand funeral' (Zobel, 1970, p.173-179). The same had occurred for Allen's funeral in Britain, which had also represented a grandeur event with incredibly high attendance. Considering that the Boston Massacre would follow less than two weeks after Seider's death, remembrances would remain in the minds of the mob who approached the British soldiers on March 5, 1770. The connection would once again be drawn to the Massacre of St. George's Fields, as *The Boston Gazette* reported that 'A more dreadful Tragedy has been acted by the

soldiery on Kings Street, Boston, New-England, than was sometime since exhibited in St. George's Fields, London, in Old England, which may serve as Beacons for both Counties [sic]' (Maier, 1963, p. 387).

Public Condemnation of Parliament

In a response to Parliament's failure to address the grievances expressed during both tragedies, an annual survey known as *The Annual Register* further reveals that Parliament had established a pattern as it silenced liberal, minority Parliamentarians. *The Annual Register* notes that the motion issued by Thomas Pownall on May 8 had been appropriate to examine the "present critical situation of affairs" and that it had become the duty of Parliament "to enquire how the Ministers here... have managed so unfortunately, as to kindle the present flame of dissention between the mother country and her colonies." Despite the relevance and importance of such a motion, the register laments that the motion took on "the usual fate of those made by the minority." This unpleasant result prompted the register to offer a condemnation of Parliament's fickle nature, as colonial taxes have been "imposed-repealed-imposed again," and treasons "charged, adopted by Parliament, not proved, nor attempted to be proved." The register then assesses the motion that had been passed on John Wilkes in regard to his competency as a MP. The bill initially had ruled that Wilkes was incapable to serve in Parliament, and a new motion had been issued to reverse this decision. Once again, Parliament rejected the motion (Burke & Dodsley, 1785, p.90-93). These two debates that dealt with the consequences of the Boston Massacre and the Massacre of St. George's Fields were silenced in their attempts to address the grievances that prompted both the tragedies in the first place. The budding tensions that resulted after both motions had failed was recognized by the *Annual Register*. The register's arguments contributed to the growing consensus that Parliament deserves to be criticized and held accountable for its aggravation of political unrest in both the colonies and Britain.

An unnamed political club voiced their dissent to Parliament's misdoings. Their debates can be found in the 1770 issue of *The London Magazine*, printed in May. One of the main concerns expressed by the debaters had been the lack of an attempt to offer reconciliation to the American colonies following the grave tragedy. Lucius Verus Paternus, a member of the club, claimed that Parliament had made reconciliation with America "a matter of the last importance" and neglected to actively address the situation in the colonies. As a result, Lucius argued that the administration was fraudulent and incapable due to its lack of attention to protect the interests of

the Empire. He demanded that “the interest of this nation must not be sacrificed to the fraud” (Baldwin, 1770, p. 395) This viewpoint is further reinforced by a debater named Tullus Aufidius, who claimed that members of Parliament put on a façade. He noted the hypocrisy with which Parliament believed Britain needed to impose law and order on the colonies yet its members refused to allow open debate on colonial affairs and oftentimes adjourned when the situation had been brought to the floor. Tullus was quite accusatory of Parliament, as he expressed his frustration that its members refused to “undergo the honest test of an examination into their conduct.” To conclude his argument with a warning, Tullus noted that it is time for Parliament to tremble and reflect while the American colonies continued to rebel. Now, Parliament must “apprehend a storm that will sweep them to destruction” (Baldwin, 1770, p. 442-443).

The main counterargument comes from Publius Varro, who specifically addressed the Boston Massacre. Varro exclaimed that “God forbid” a soldier has the right to defend himself just as any other civilian when illegally attacked. Varro believed that the townspeople were the aggressors on that night. Varro then stated that the reason as to why reconciliation has not yet been achieved was also the fault of the Bostonians. He suggested that the colonists “demand concessions which the mother country can never consistently allow.” He further argued that “fashionable soever as it may be to condemn our troops, for supporting the due execution of the laws... I trust that justice will triumph over clamor” (Baldwin, 1770, p.439-440). In this statement, Varro revealed that popular public sentiment had been to take the side of the Bostonians rather than the soldiers. Although he disagreed with this popularity, Varro’s revelations align with the emerging political stance of the British public, where public sentiment that favored the American colonies had begun to spread across London.

Concluding Thoughts: Too Close to Home

It is interesting to explore the reason as to why the Boston Massacre had specifically evoked feelings of mutual frustration and disappointment amongst the British public compared to previous colonial grievances. Prior to the Boston Massacre, many Britons found colonial grievances, mainly taxation without representation, to be selfish and entitled. On the other hand, concerns about military occupation during peacetime seemed to have struck a chord within the British public. After the Boston Massacre, however, a new perspective had emerged. Britons sought to re-evaluate the previous colonial grievances with a sense of compassion and acknowledgement. These sentiments were absent in the prejudiced views that prevailed before

the Boston Massacre. Simply put, with memories of the recent tragedy at the Massacre of St. George's Fields, the British public realized that the Boston Massacre had hit a bit too close to home. And yet, although the British public had clearly expressed its support for the concerns and grievances of the American colonies after the Boston Massacre, positive public sentiment would not be enough to curb the growing tensions between the American colonists and Parliament. Despite complaints from groups such as the political club featured in the *London Magazine*, Parliament would continue to deny opportunities to achieve reconciliation with the American colonies. Even after Lexington and Concord, the British public continued to express support for the American colonies, but as Benjamin Franklin ominously noted about the British government, "everything seems to be rejected by your mad Politicians that would lead to Healing the Breach; and everything done that can tend to make it everlasting" (Franklin, 1777).

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