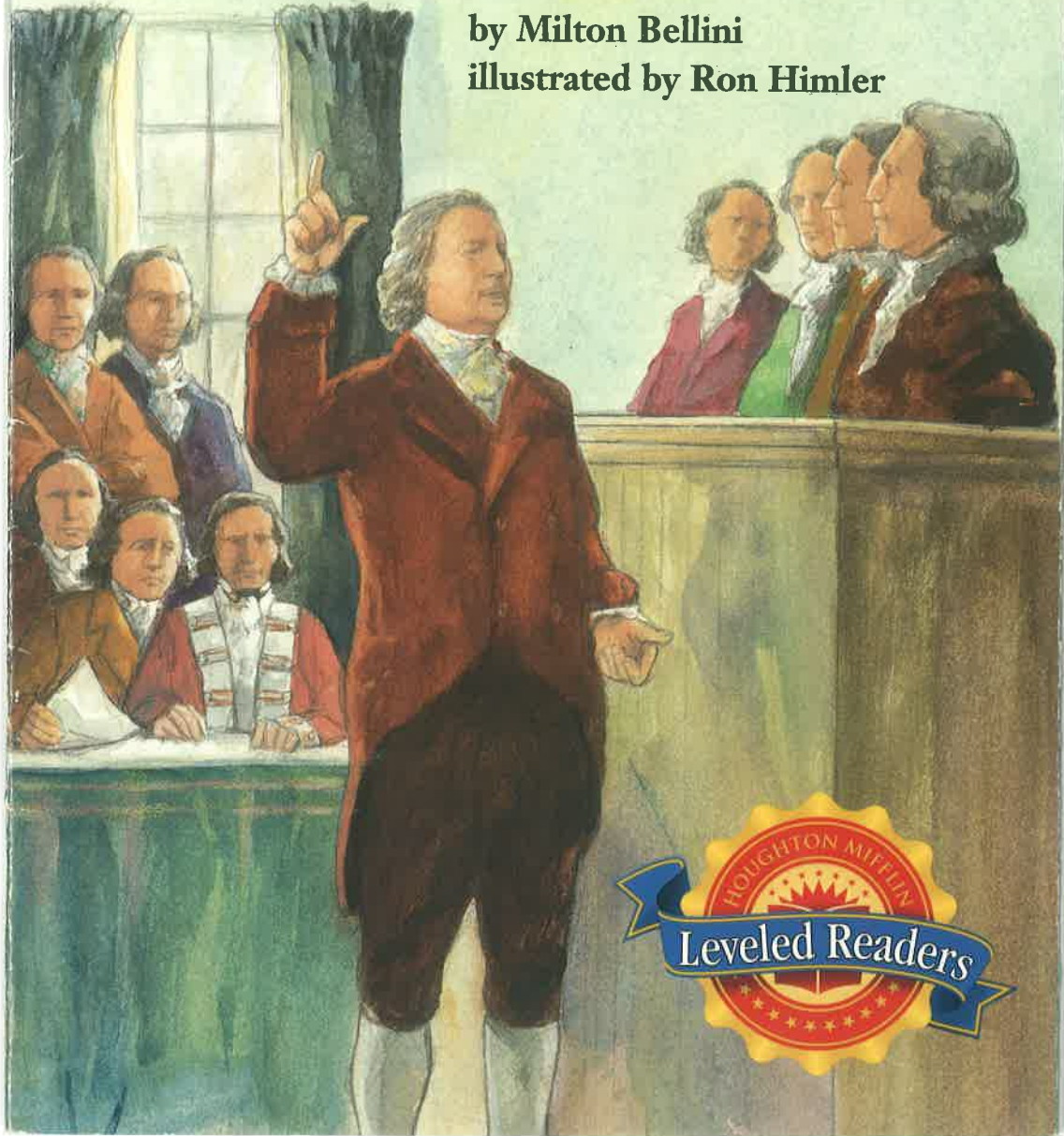


John Adams and the **Boston Massacre**

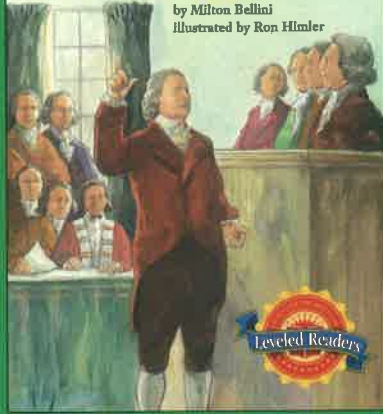
by Milton Bellini

illustrated by Ron Himler



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Strategy Focus

Does it surprise you that the famous Patriot, John Adams, represented the British soldiers charged with murder in the Boston Massacre? As you read, ask **questions** to clarify the reasons behind his actions.

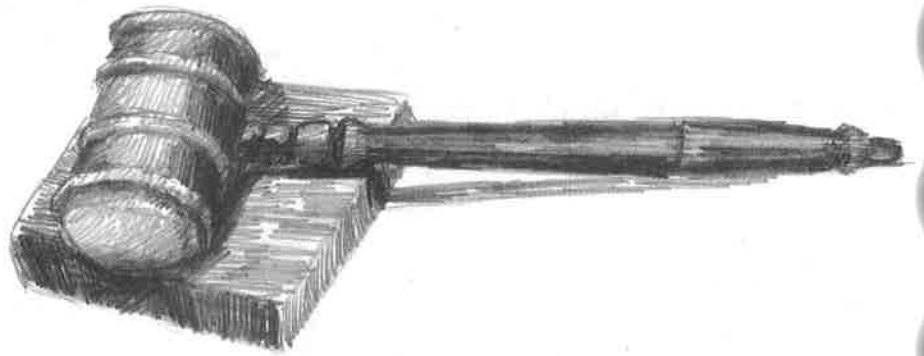
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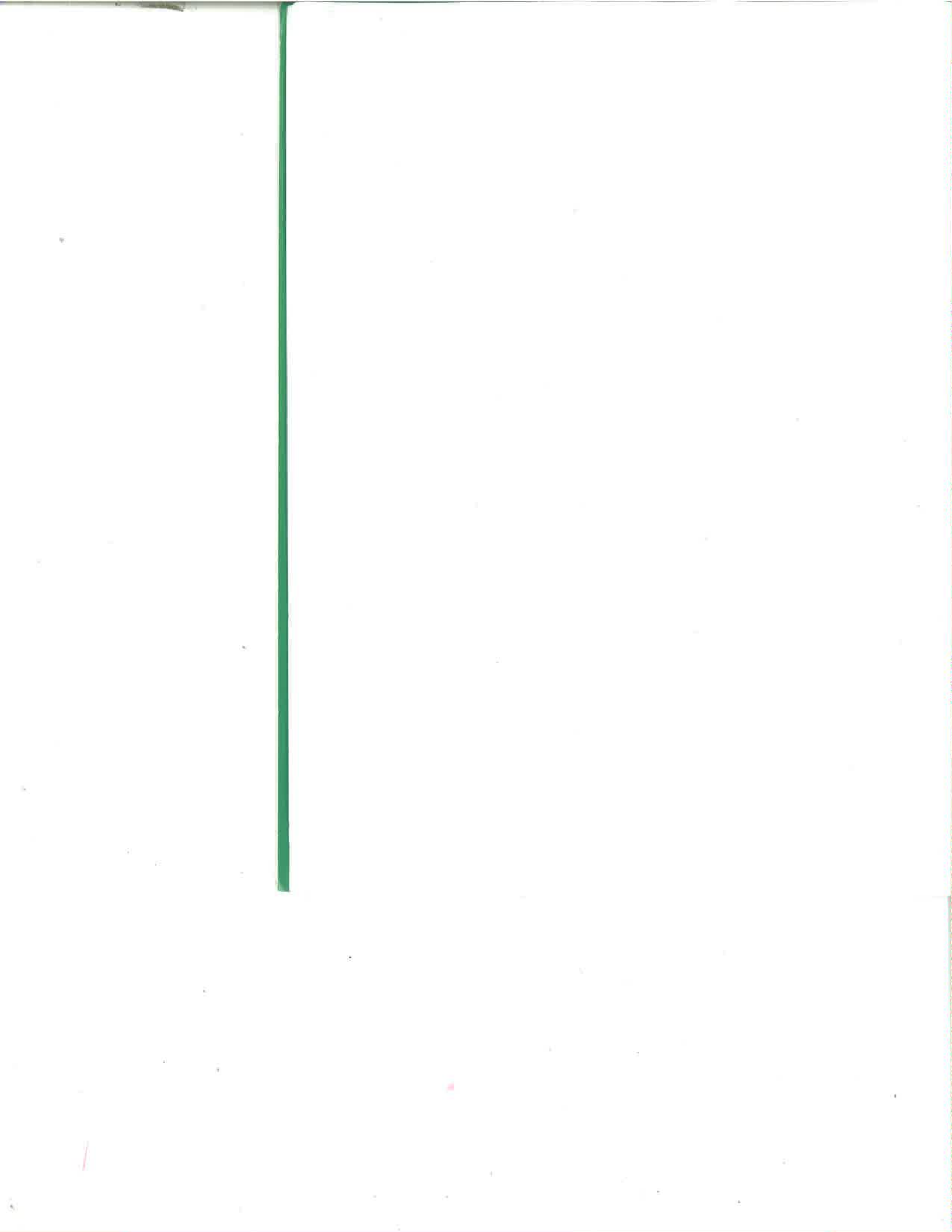
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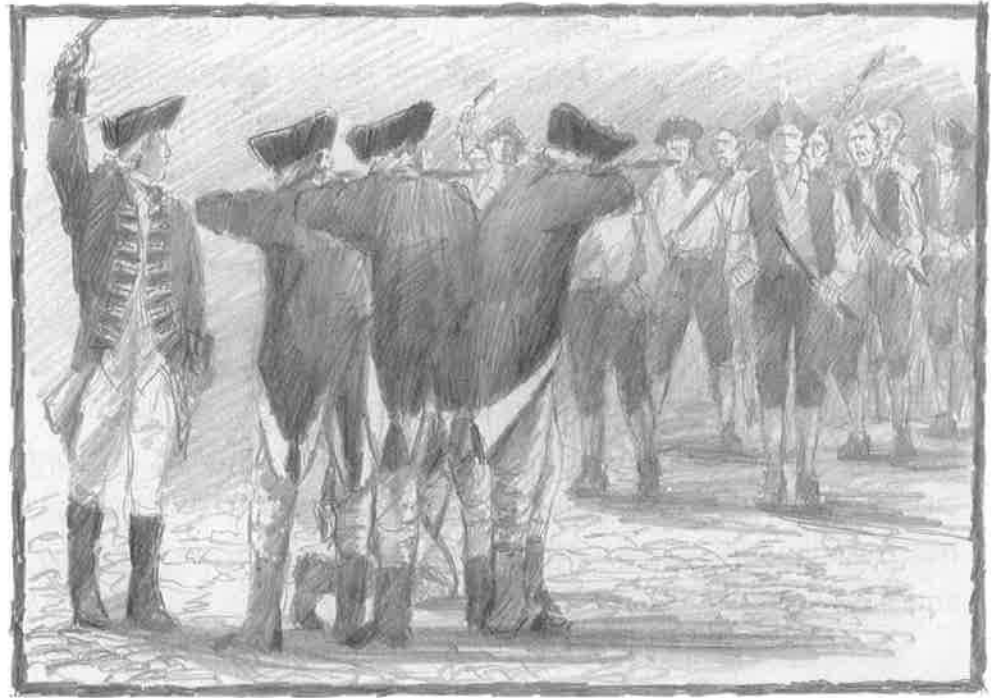
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BOSTON





It was the morning of March 6, 1770, and John Adams, a young lawyer, grieved for the city of Boston. He sat in his law office surrounded by anxious friends. Together they tried to make sense of the terrible news of the night before.

On the previous evening, the tense city had erupted into violence. A crowd of angry Bostonians had confronted a handful of British soldiers. The details of what happened were not yet clear, but the result was known. The British soldiers, led by a Captain Preston, had fired into the crowd, killing four colonists. One more was mortally wounded. The awful event would soon be called the Boston Massacre.

The tragedy was no surprise, given all of Boston's recent troubles. New taxes had been imposed on the colonies by the British government. Angry protests had ensued, as Bostonians vented their resentment. But Britain's response only added fuel to the fire of the colonists' wrath. The British prime minister declared Boston's protesters to be "drunken ragamuffins," saying, "I can never acquiesce in the absurd opinion that all men are equal."

And in a further escalation of the trouble, the government in faraway England sent soldiers to clamp down on the agitated city. These soldiers, with their bright red uniforms and overbearing manners, were soon marching down Boston's streets and parading on Boston Common.

No step could have angered Boston more. Were the citizens of Massachusetts not free? Were they not, indeed, good British citizens themselves? How infuriating, then, to have an army occupying the city.

The result of the occupation was painful for John Adams to think about. Boston's anger, though justified, had turned ugly. For months local boys jeered at the red-clad soldiers. "Bloody backs, bloody backs!" they cried. "Lobsters for sale, who'll buy?"

At times the torment went beyond mere words. Just days before the Boston Massacre, a bloody brawl had broken out between a few soldiers and a group of toughs. It started when a Bostonian insulted a British soldier.

Now, thought John Adams, with the shooting, the worst had come. News of the Boston Massacre traveled through the city like the wind. Soon all Massachusetts would know, and there was no telling how the colony's residents would react.

The British soldiers, including Captain Preston, had been arrested and were being held under guard, charged with murder. What would happen to them? Would Boston's anger boil over? The threat of more violence hung in the air.

Boston had its share of trouble-makers, and John Adams knew them well. He even worried about his own cousin, Samuel Adams. Sam had a bitter contempt for British rule in Massachusetts, and a special talent for inciting trouble among his followers. In the coming months, John Adams would see that concerns about his cousin Samuel were justified.



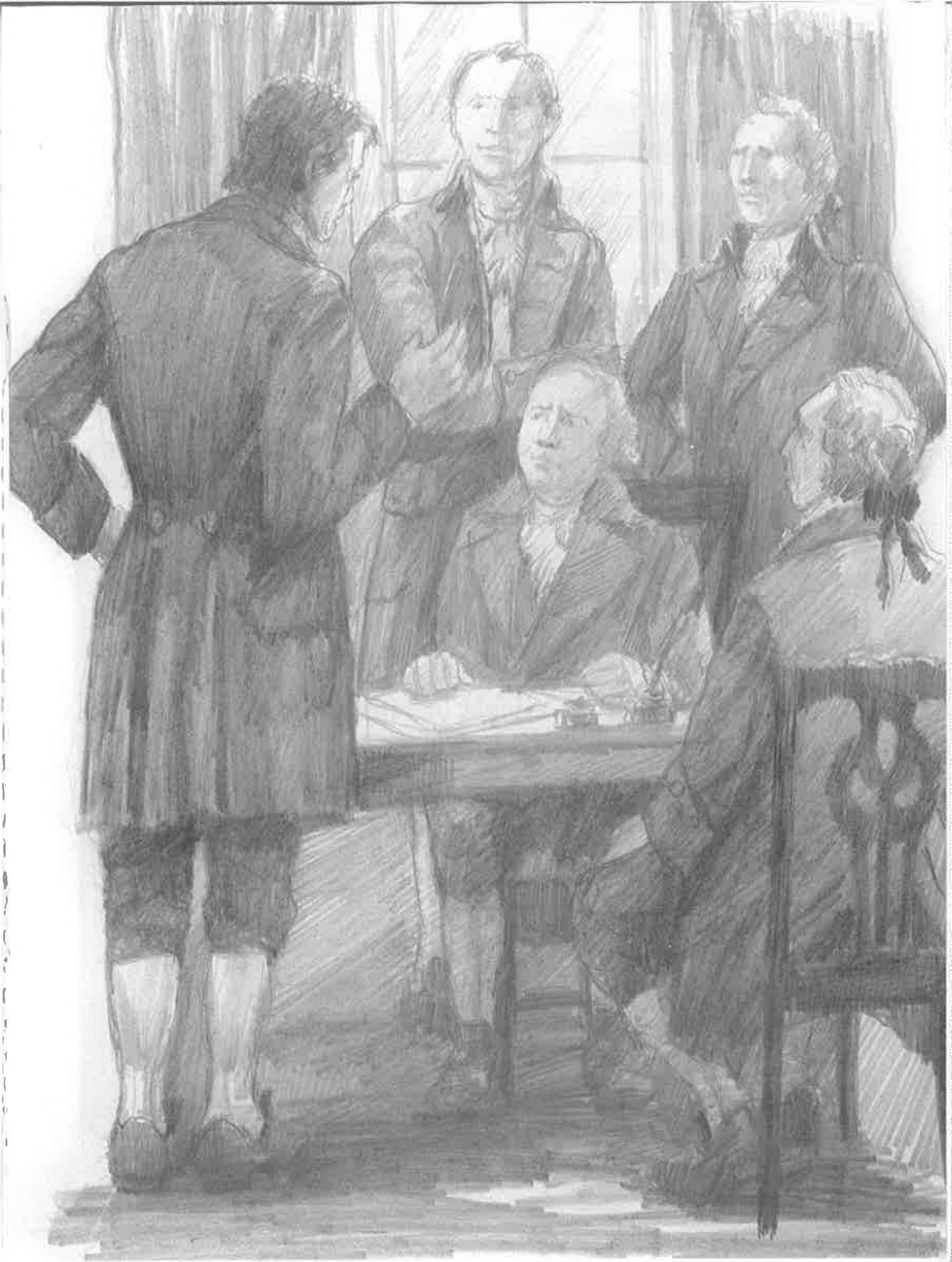
In John Adams's law office on the morning after the shooting, Adams and his friends traded the latest news. It was natural to gather there. Though he was still a young man, Adams was one of the city's most influential leaders. For years he had used his vast knowledge of the law to help the Patriot cause. He believed strongly in the rights of the colonies. And he resented the presence of British soldiers as much as any Bostonian.

Still, Adams was troubled by the unruliness of some of his fellow Patriots. Britain's policies were wrong, but that couldn't excuse the disorder that seemed to be sweeping parts of Boston.

As Adams and his Patriot friends talked over these matters, someone knocked at his office door. In tumbled a distressed and exhausted man.

It was a Mr. Forester, known around town as the "Irish Infant." He was an easygoing fellow who sometimes ate meals with the British soldiers. On this morning, though, he looked terrified and haggard. He sank into a chair and struggled to compose himself. Finally he was able to speak to Adams.

"Preston is innocent!" he said. "His soldiers were defending their lives from the mob!" Forester rested a moment, then made clear his purpose in coming. "He has no one to defend him. Mr. Adams, will you take his case?"



Adams was struck dumb as he listened to the man. It turned out that Forester had spent the morning asking other lawyers to take the case — lawyers who were powerful, and sympathetic to the British. Yet none dared to represent Captain Preston. They feared the Boston mob.

Adams felt his anger grow as he listened to Forester's words. He was shocked that his city had come to this. He knew that the soldiers deserved a fair trial. That was one of the foundations of law, in both Britain and America. Yet what kind of a trial could they get, if no lawyer was willing to take their side in the case? Surely they would not be denied such a basic right in Boston!

Almost overcome, John Adams took Forester by the hand. "If Captain Preston thinks he cannot have a fair trial without my help, he shall have it."

So began a long and difficult struggle for John Adams. He defended not only Captain Preston, but the other soldiers as well. Adams had help from two other lawyers. Yet it was a lonely path.

Many of Adams's fellow Bostonians couldn't understand why he took the case. They had thought of Adams as a Patriot, even as a leader of the Patriot movement in Boston. Now, they wondered if he had switched loyalties.

They jeered at him in the street. Some even threw stones through the windows of his home. One evening, when Adams returned home after a long day spent preparing for the trial, he found a window broken. Inside, his wife Abigail presented him with two stones. Full of courage, she told her husband, "You must not fear for me; I am the equal of any three rowdy boys." Nor did the taunting and rock-throwing deter John Adams from working on the case. Combative almost to a fault, he hurled himself into the case with added energy.



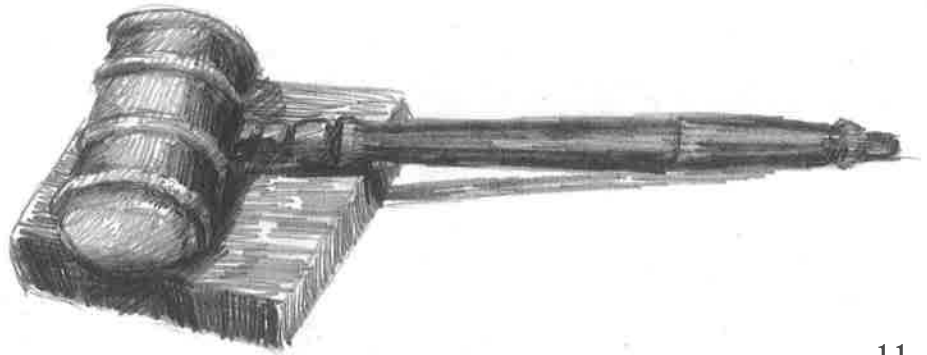


The governor of Massachusetts delayed the trial from the spring of 1770 to the fall of that year. He too wanted a fair trial for the soldiers and hoped that the delay would allow Boston to cool down.

But some people did not want things to cool down, including John's cousin Samuel Adams, and the Sons of Liberty, a group that aimed at throwing off British rule. Throughout the months before the court proceedings began, Sam Adams and the Sons of Liberty made speeches and wrote pamphlets that had one goal: to remind people of the tyranny and violence of British rule. They used the story of the Boston Massacre to fuel the fires of Boston's resentment.

During the delay in the trial, John Adams prepared his case for Captain Preston and the other British soldiers. He spoke with witnesses to the Boston Massacre and collected their stories. He consulted with the partners who assisted him on the case. Above all, he reread all the laws concerning murder, manslaughter, and self-defense. As he assembled his evidence, Adams became convinced that Preston and his men were innocent of the charges against them.

Adams knew how the case against the soldiers would be presented to the court. The lawyers presenting the case against Preston and his men would call witnesses before the jury. These witnesses would surely claim that the soldiers were at fault. They would say that the soldiers were out to teach Boston a lesson. The witnesses would claim that the soldiers were unprovoked and had fired on the crowd out of contempt for the upstart colonists and their bid for political freedom. And those witnesses would not admit that the soldiers were threatened. Even worse, from John Adams' point of view, this was a tale that many Bostonians were all too pleased to hear.



Adams knew he must prove otherwise. According to law, the soldiers were within their rights to fire if they were threatened with serious harm. The right to self-defense had been established for hundreds of years.

If he could prove the crowd had threatened the soldiers, perhaps the men would be set free. Yet proving this to a jury would be difficult in a city inflamed against the British.

The trial was to unfold in two parts. First, Captain Preston would be tried alone. Later, the other British soldiers would stand trial together. Each trial was an exhausting struggle for Adams. But having two trials might help, Adams thought. As angry as they were, Bostonians didn't harbor much hatred for Captain Preston. He was well known on the streets of the city, and well liked by many. And everyone agreed that he had not fired on the crowd on the evening of March 5. Indeed, he was not even armed with a gun.

Boston reserved most of its scorn for the men who served under Preston. They, too, were well known in Boston, but roundly detested. Yet, if John Adams could swing opinion toward the British side during Captain Preston's trial, perhaps he could defuse the anger of his fellow Bostonians. If he could manage that trick, perhaps the soldiers would be freed. If not, John Adams feared for their lives. The punishment for murder was severe, and the men would surely lose their lives.

Captain Preston's trial got underway in October of 1770. With the beginning of the trial, the expected parade of witnesses began. One person after another described for the jury what happened on the fateful night of March 5. The lawyers questioned each witness closely, probing for inconsistencies. In the give and take of the questioning, Adams and his team proved powerful. Slowly, the actual events of the Boston Massacre came into focus.

Back on the evening of March 5, tension between Boston's citizens and the British soldiers had been running even higher than usual. Groups of rowdy boys were roaming freely outside the British barracks, taunting the British as usual. One boy, a young barber's assistant, managed to call out a taunt that angered a British captain. Responding to the insult, the captain chased the boy down and gave him a sharp smack with the butt of his musket.

Far from settling the score, however, this only served to bring more trouble. The barber's boy's loud wailing attracted an angry crowd to the streets near the British barracks. Then, at just the moment when the anger might have passed, an alarm bell began to toll wildly, as if there were a fire in the city.

Crowds swarmed into the street, and some made their way to the British barracks. There, a small group of soldiers came out onto the street. Minutes later, they were cornered by the crowds a short distance away.

According to witnesses, the crowd grew louder and louder as it surrounded the soldiers. Some members of the mob hurled chunks of ice, snowballs, and heavy pieces of wood at the soldiers. As the crowd taunted the soldiers, one of the Boston toughs from the recent brawl dared the British soldiers to fire on the unruly citizens. All the while, the soldiers held back, terrified, but unwilling to shoot. Then, as the anger of the crowd mounted, some people rushed forward, swinging clubs and striking the soldiers. Only then did the soldiers fire.



As this story came into focus during the trial, John Adams felt his case proceeding better than he had dared hope. With the gathering details of all the witnesses' stories, Adams knew the jury and the court were beginning to side with the soldiers. Still, it was bittersweet for Adams to see his fellow Bostonians cast in such a poor light. He told one of his partners about one gnawing fear:

"All England certainly—and perhaps all Europe—will be watching these trials. It will serve our enemies well if we publish proof that the people's cause in America is led by a mere mob, by a riotous and irresponsible water-front rabble."

Adams worried about how the Patriot cause may have suffered during the trials. Yet he had great faith in the truth and great faith in the law. And he knew that the Patriot cause would suffer all the more if the jury did not meet its responsibility to uphold the law. In a final statement to the court, he said of the soldiers:

"Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes—they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence. If an assault was made to endanger their lives, the law is clear, they had a right to kill in their own defense."

To John Adams' satisfaction, the jury upheld its responsibilities. Captain Preston was found innocent; so too were his men, though two of the soldiers were convicted of the lesser crime of manslaughter. All were set free.

After the soldiers' trial was over, John Adams went to the prisoners' room to speak to the men. They flocked to him when he arrived, and cried out their thanks. They felt sure that if John Adams had not served them so well, they would have swung from the gallows on Boston Common. "God bless you, Mr. Adams! We owe our lives to you," they said. "You are an honest man and a clever one. And by God, a brave one!"

For John Adams, the time of the trials was one of the most difficult periods of his life. But he also knew how important it was to stand up for the rule of law, however painful that might be. So, years later when he recalled the torments of that time, he could say, "It was, however, one of the most gallant, generous actions of my whole life, and one of the best pieces of service I ever rendered my Country."

Think About the Selection

- 1** What was Boston like in the weeks before the Boston Massacre?
- 2** Why did Samuel Adams try to keep Boston angry about the Boston Massacre?
- 3** Why were people mad enough at John Adams to throw stones through his windows?
- 4** Why was Adams proud of his work for the soldiers in the Boston Massacre trials?

Making Connections John Adams acted on his ideals, even though it made many people angry at him. Compare him to another person you know who has made a courageous stand.

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