Compiled by Rachel Michelle Gunter, Ph.D.

Accounts of the "Boston Massacre"

You've arrived at the scene after the events of March 5, 1770, which came to be known as the Boston Massacre. Here are the facts you are sure of:

- A fire alarm was sounded, leading men and boys to grab leather fire buckets and try to help.
- Several grenadiers, British soldiers trained in throwing grenades, were present along with their Captain Thomas Preston.
- The soldiers had come to help the British sentinel guarding the Boston Customs House.
- Four victims were dead of gunshot wounds and a fifth was lingering but in fatal condition. Six others were wounded.
- One of the deceased was the runaway slave, Crispus Attucks.

More than 90 people witnessed. During the soldiers' trial, many of these eyewitnesses testified as to what they saw. Use the selection of their eyewitness accounts as reported to the trial court below to answer the following questions:

1. Why was the first shot fired?
2. Did Captain Preston give the British soldiers an order to fire? If so, did he give the order before or after the first gunshot?
3. Who was primarily responsible for the "massacre?"

"Between the hours of nine and ten o'clock, being in my master's house, was alarmed with the cry of fire, I ran down as far as the town-house and then heard that the soldiers and the inhabitants were fighting in the alley… I then left them and went to King street. I then saw a party of soldiers loading their muskets about the Custom-house door, after which they all shouldered. I heard some of the inhabitants cry out, "heave no snowballs", others cried "they dare not fire".

Captain Preston was then standing by the soldiers, when a snow ball struck a grenadier, who immediately fired, Captain Preston standing close by him. The Captain then spoke distinctly, "Fire, Fire!" I was then within four feet of Capt. Preston, and know him well. The soldiers fired as fast as they could one after another. I saw the mulatto [Crispus Attucks] fall, and Samuel Gray went to look at him, one of the soldiers, at a distance of about four or five yards, pointed his piece directly for the said Gray's head and fired. Mr Gray, after struggling, turned himself right round upon his heel and fell dead."

Charles Hobby, a Boston labourer

"On the evening of the 5th, on hearing the bells ring, he supposed there was fire, but on going out he was informed there was not any fire, but a riot… The people round the sentinel were then crying out "Fire, fire, damn you, why don't you fire". Soon after, he

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perceived a number of soldiers coming down towards the sentinel, with their arms in a horizontal posture and their bayonets fixed…

The people before the Custom-house drew up before the door, the people who still remained in the street and about the soldiers continued calling out to them to fire. In this situation, they remained some minutes, when he heard a gun snap, and presently a single gun fired and soon after several others went off, one after another… at which time, a ball passed through the deponent's right arm, upon which he immediately retired to the house."

Edward Payne, a Boston merchant injured in the shootings

"Heard the Bell ring. Ran out. Came to the Chapel. Was told there was no fire but something better, there was going to be a fight. Some had buckets and bags and some clubs. I went to the west end of the Town House where [there] were a number of people. I saw some soldiers coming out of the guardhouse with their guns and running down one after another to the Custom house. Some of the people said let's attack the Main Guard, or the Centinel who is gone to King street. Some said for God's sake don't let's touch the main guard.

I went down. Saw the soldiers planted by the Custom-house two deep. The people were calling them lobsters, daring' em to fire, saying damn you why don't you fire. I saw Captain Preston out from behind the Soldiers. In the front at the right. He spoke to some people. The Captain stood between the soldiers and gutter, about two yards from the gutter. I saw two or three strike with sticks on the guns. I was going off to the west of the soldiers and heard the guns fire and saw the dead carried off.

Soon after, the guard drums beat to arms. The people, whilst striking on the guns cried fire, damn you, fire. I have heard no orders given to fire, only the people in general cried fire."

Newton Prince, an African-American civilian

"Captain Preston was within two yards of me and before the men and nearest to the right and facing the Street. I was looking at him. Did not hear any order. He faced me. I think I should have heard him. I directly heard a voice say "Damn you, why do you fire? Don't fire". I thought it was the Captain's then. I now believe it."

Daniel Cornwall, Boston citizen

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"Saw several persons, mostly young folks, gathered between the Town House and Coffee House, some of whom were talking to the sentinel at the Commissioners' or Custom-house. After some time, the boys at a distance began to throw light snow-balls at him, which he seemed much enraged at and... appeared to have charged his gun, giving it a heavy stamp upon the doorstep, as if to force down the lead... and swore to the boys if they came near him he would blow their brains out.

About ten minutes after this, the deponent saw Captain Preston leading seven or eight men from towards the Town House, and placed them between the Custom-house door, and the sentinel box. About four or five minutes after they were posted, the snowballs now and them coming towards the soldiers, the Captain commanded them to fire. Upon this, one gun quickly went off; and afterwards he said "Fire by all means!" others succeeding, and the deponent being utterly unarmed, to avoid further danger, went up round the Town House till the fray was over."

Daniel Usher, Boston citizen

"The people kept huzza-ing. Damn' em. Daring' em to fire. Threw snowballs. I think they hit 'em. As soon as the snowballs were thrown, and a club, a soldier fired. I heard the club strike upon the Gun and the corner man next the lane said fire and immediately fired. This was the first gun. As soon as he had fired he said "Damn you,

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fire". I am so sure that I thought it was he that spoke. That next gun fired and so they fired through pretty quick."

William Sawyer, Boston citizen

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