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Fact, Fiction: Document B

Document B: Excerpt from *A Household History for All Readers* by Benson J. Lossing (New York: Johnson and Miles, 1877)

“What was the Boston Massacre?”

This event was a forerunner of a more serious one a few days afterward. John Gray had an extensive ropewalk in Boston, where a number of patriotic men were employed. They often bandied coarse taunts with the soldiers as they passed by. On Friday, the 2nd of March (1770), a soldier who applied for work at the ropewalk was rudely ordered away. He challenged the men to a boxing-match, when he was severely beaten. Full of wrath he hastened to the barracks, and soon returned with several companions, when they beat the rope-makers and chased them through the streets. The citizens naturally espoused the cause of the rope-makers, and many of them assembled in the afternoon with a determination to avenge the wrongs of the workmen. Mr. Gray and the military authorities interfered, and prevented any further disturbance then. But vengeance only slumbered. It was resolved, by some of the more excitable of the inhabitants, to renew the contest; and at the barracks the soldiers inflamed each other's passions, and prepared bludgeons. They warned their particular friends in the city not to be abroad on Monday night, for there would be serious trouble.

Fresh wet snow had fallen, and on Monday evening, the 5th of March, frost had covered the streets of Boston with a coat of ice. The moon was in its first quarter and shed a pale light over the town, when, at twilight, both citizens and soldiers began to assemble in the streets. By seven o'clock full seven hundred persons, armed with clubs and other weapons, were on King (now State) street, and, provoked by the insolence and brutality of the lawless soldiery, shouted: “Let us drive out these rascals! They have no business here—drive them out!” At the same time parties of soldiers (whom Dalrymple had doubtless released from the barracks for the purpose of provoking the people to commit some act of violence, and so give an excuse for letting loose the dogs of war) were going about the streets boasting of their valor, insulting citizens with coarse words, and striking many of them with sticks and sheathed swords. Meanwhile the populace in the street were increasing in numbers every moment, and at about nine o'clock in the evening, they attacked some soldiers in Dock Square, and shouted: “Town-born, turn out! Down with the bloody-backs!”

They tore up the stalls of a market, and used the timber for bludgeons. The soldiers scattered and ran about the streets, knocking people down and raising the fearful cry of Fire! At the barracks on Brattle Street, a subaltern at the gate cried out, as the populace gathered there, “Turn out! I will stand by you; knock them down? kill them! run your bayonets through them!” The soldiers rushed out, and, leveling their muskets, threatened to make a lane paved with dead men through the crowd. Just then an officer was crossing the street, when a barber's boy cried out: “There goes a mean fellow, who will not pay my master for shaving him.” A sentinel standing near the corner of the Customhouse ran out and knocked the boy down with his musket.

The cry of fire and the riotous behavior of the soldiers caused an alarm-bell to be rung. The whole city was aroused. Many men came out with canes and clubs for self-defense, to learn the occasion of the uproar. Many of the more excitable citizens formed a mob. Some of the leading citizens present tried to persuade them to disperse, and had in a degree gained their respectful attention, when a tall man, covered with a long scarlet cloak and wearing a white wig, suddenly appeared among them, and began a violent harangue against the government officers and the troops. He concluded his inflammatory speech by boldly shouting: “To the main-guard! to the main-guard! There is the nest!” It is believed that the orator in the scarlet cloak was Samuel Adams.

The populace immediately echoed the shout—“To the main-guard!” with fearful vehemence, and separating into three ranks, took different routes toward the quarters of the main-guard. While one division was passing the Custom-house, the barber's boy cried out: “There's the scoundrel who knocked me down!” A score of voices shouted, “Let us knock him down! Down with the bloody-backs! Kill him! kill him!” The crowd instantly began pelting him with snow-balls and bits of ice, and pressed toward him. He raised his musket and pulled the trigger. Fortunately for him it missed fire, when the crowd tried to seize him. He ran up the Customhouse steps, but, unable to enter the building, he called to the main-guard for help. Captain Preston, the officer of the day, sent eight men, with unloaded muskets but with ball-cartridges in their cartouch boxes, to help their beleaguered comrade. At that moment the stout Boston bookseller, Henry Knox (who married the daughter of General Gage's secretary and was a major-general of artillery in the army of the Revolution), holding Preston by the coat, begged him to call the soldiers back. “If they fire,” said Knox, “your life must answer for the consequences.” Preston nervously answered: “I know what I am about,” and followed his men. When this detachment approached, they, too, were pelted with snow-balls and ice; and Crispus Attucks, a brawny Indian from Nantucket, at the head of some sailors, like himself (who had led the mob in the attack on the soldiers in Dock Square), gave a loud war-whoop and shouted: “Let us fall upon the nest! the main-guard! the main-guard!” The soldiers instantly loaded their guns. Then some of the multitude pressed on them with clubs, struck their muskets and cried out, “You are cowardly rascals for bringing arms against naked men.” Attuck shouted: “You dare not fire!” and called upon the mob behind him: “Come on! don't be afraid! They daren't fire! Knock them down! Kill 'em!” Captain Preston came up at that moment and tried to appease the multitude. Attucks aimed a blow at his head with a club, which Preston parried with his arm. It fell upon the musket of one of the soldiers and knocked it to the ground. Attucks seized the bayonet, and a struggle between the Indian and the soldier for the possession of the gun ensued. Voices behind Preston cried out, “Why don't you fire! why don't you fire?” The struggling soldier hearing the word fire, just as he gained possession of his musket, drew up his piece and shot Attucks dead. Five other soldiers fired at short intervals, without being restrained by Preston. Three of the populace were killed, five were severely wounded (two of them mortally), and three were slightly hurt. Of the eleven, only one (Attucks) had actually taken part in the disturbance. The crowd dispersed; and when citizens came to pick up the dead, the infuriated soldiers would have shot them, if the captain had not restrained them.

