

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • LEGEND

The First to Fall

Crispus Attucks and the Boston Massacre

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Persecution / Contribution Track • Prologue-ERA I • Boston, Massachusetts

Who He Is

Almost everything about Crispus Attucks's life before March 5, 1770 rests on tradition rather than documentation — including his ancestry. He is widely described as of mixed African and Natick or Wampanoag descent, but the primary record is genuinely inconsistent: a contemporary eyewitness recalled him as "a Nantucket Indian," a Pennsylvania Gazette account called him a "Mulattoe man," and no surviving document names his parents with certainty. A Boston Gazette runaway advertisement from October 1750 describes a twenty-seven-year-old "Molatto Fellow" named Crispas matching his general description and age — a strong circumstantial lead connecting him to enslavement in Framingham, Massachusetts, but not a certain one, since no record confirms it is the same man or documents his legal status by 1770.

Twenty Years at Sea

Between the 1750 runaway ad and his death two decades later, Attucks is believed to have worked mainly as a whaler and dockworker around Boston and Nantucket, possibly using the alias Michael Johnson to avoid recapture as a fugitive. By March 1770 he had reportedly just returned from a voyage to the Bahamas and was preparing, per a contemporary newspaper report, to ship out again — "in order to go for North Carolina."

The Boston Massacre

On March 5, 1770, a confrontation between a crowd and a detachment of British soldiers outside Boston's Custom House escalated into gunfire. Attucks is traditionally regarded as the first of five colonists killed, coroners recording that the shots tore through his chest and lungs. Trial testimony conflicted on his role — some witnesses said he struck a soldier with a stick moments before the volley; others said he was simply leaning on it when the muskets fired.

John Adams's Defense

John Adams served as defense counsel for the British soldiers, a choice he later called one of his proudest acts of legal principle. In his closing argument he described the crowd as "a motley rabble of saucy boys, negroes and molattoes, Irish teagues and outlandish jack tarrs," and placed primary blame on Attucks specifically, calling him a "stout Molatto fellow, whose very looks, was enough to terrify any person" and attributing the "dreadful carnage of that night" chiefly to his conduct. Six soldiers were acquitted; two were convicted of manslaughter and given reduced punishment. The man later mythologized as the first martyr of the Revolution was, in the actual trial record, blamed by a future president for his own death.

A Symbol Reclaimed

Attucks was buried with the other victims at the Granary Burying Ground on March 8, 1770. Abolitionist historian William Cooper Nell championed his memory decades before the Civil War, and in an 1898 address Booker T. Washington invoked him directly: "Crispus Attucks, a Negro, was the first to shed his blood on State Street, Boston, that the white American might enjoy liberty forever, though his race

remained in slavery." A monument on Boston Common, unveiled in 1888 over the initial objection of the Massachusetts Historical Society, bears his name alongside the four other victims.

NC Local Lens

No connection places Attucks in Fayetteville or Cumberland County. The one documented lead is indirect: a Pennsylvania Gazette report from March 22, 1770 states he was preparing to sail toward North Carolina when he was killed — evidence that coastal Carolina sat somewhere in the Atlantic maritime trade routes he worked, not evidence he ever set foot in the colony, and certainly not in Cumberland County, which in 1770 was an inland trading town rather than a port a sailor would ship to directly. This entry claims no NC connection.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Ancestry: genuinely disputed — contemporary sources variously called him Mulatto, Native American, and part of the crowd generally; no primary document names his parents.

Enslaved vs. free status in 1770: unresolved — the 1750 runaway ad is a strong circumstantial match but not certain proof of the same man.

His role in the crowd: Adams's characterization was an advocate's argument built to acquit his clients, not a neutral historical finding — present it as such.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. "Crispus Attucks," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Crispus-Attucks>.
2. "Attucks, Crispus (1723–1770)," BlackPast.org, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/attucks-crispus-1723-1770/>.
3. "Today in History – March 5: The Boston Massacre," Library of Congress, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.loc.gov/item/today-in-history/march-05/>.
4. John Adams, Argument for the Defense, Rex v. Wemms (Boston Massacre Trial, December 1770), The Legal Papers of John Adams, Founders Online, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/05-03-02-0001-0004-0016>.
5. William Cooper Nell, The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution (Boston: Robert F. Wallcut, 1855).

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