

Deposition of Captain Thomas Preston, March 12, 1770

Background:

On March 5, 1770, British soldiers fired on a crowd of Bostonians who were throwing ice and other objects at the soldiers. Five civilians died. The leader of the British soldiers, Captain Thomas Preston, and several soldiers were arrested. The trial that followed attempted to determine whether Preston ordered his troops to fire, or whether they fired without the order in the confusion of events. The following quote is an excerpt from Preston's deposition before the trial.

Excerpt from the Deposition of Captain Thomas Preston, March 12, 1770.

“On this a general attack was made on the men by a great number of heavy clubs and snowballs being thrown at them, by which all our lives were in imminent danger, some persons at the same time from behind calling out, damn your bloods-why don't you fire. Instantly three or four of the soldiers fired, one after another, and directly after three more in the same confusion and hurry. The mob then ran away, except three unhappy men who instantly expired, in which number was Mr. Gray at whose rope-walk the prior quarrels took place; one more is since dead, three others are dangerously, and four slightly wounded. The whole of this melancholy affair was transacted in almost 20 minutes. On my asking the soldiers why they fired without orders, they said they heard the word fire and supposed it came from me. This might be the case as many of the mob called out fire, fire, but I assured the men that I gave no such order; that my words were, don't fire, stop your firing. In short, it was scarcely possible for the soldiers to know who said fire, or don't fire, or stop your firing. On the people's assembling again to take away the dead bodies, the soldiers supposing them coming to attack them, were making ready to fire again, which I prevented by striking up their firelocks with my hand.”

Source: The Trial of Captain Preston: Key Evidence

<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/bostonmassacre/prestontrialexcerpts.html>