

JOHN ADAMS AND THE BOSTON MASSACRE TRIALS

by

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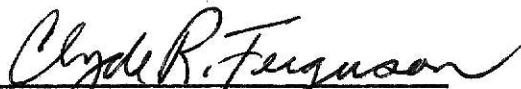
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INTRODUCTION

Let Fame to the world sound America's voice;
No intrigues can her sons from their government sever;
Her pride is her Adams; her laws are his choice,
And shall flourish, till Liberty slumbers forever.¹

Such was the mythology of John Adams among his post-presidential admirers. The mythical Adams established his credentials as a protector of liberty through the laws by serving as a defense counsel in the Boston Massacre Trials of 1770. Had Adams sunk into historical oblivion after 1770, as did Josiah Quincy, Jr., Robert Auchmuty, and Samson Salter Blowers, his trial partners, there would be little urgency to examine his trial participation more closely. But the real Adams became a founding father of the United States and was its second President. His very importance has consecrated as fact a series of fallacies about the Massacre and its aftermath. A close examination of the events surrounding the Massacre and the trials serves to dispell some of these misinterpretations.

The actual importance of the Massacre and the trials was in their contemporary propaganda effect. The Massacre was seized upon by some of the more radical Bostonians as a fulfillment of their prophecies of the inevitable consequences of the tyrannical practices of the government of Great Britain, which allowed, or indeed caused, alien troops to be used as a suppressive measure against the law-abiding citizens of the colonies. The accused soldiers became political pawns in the power struggle between the crown representatives in Boston and the leaders of the radical faction. This struggle becomes the focus of this work. It is the contention of the author that the trials of the soldiers

were more political than judicial in nature, and the verdicts were reached outside, not inside, the courtroom. In order to substantiate this thesis, it is first necessary to look at the general political background of the American colonies during the period 1763 to 1770. A glimpse of the growing disputes between the colonies and the mother country furnishes a foundation for examining the specific and political use of the Massacre trials.

Great Britain, perhaps, lost her American colonies when she won the Seven Years War. The extermination of the French as a viable military threat to the colonies erased one of the main props of British authority in America. Even the British were aware of this possibility when negotiating for the cession of Canada. Two members of the British Cabinet, the Duke of Newcastle and the Duke of Bedford, had warned the government of the possible consequences of such a course of action. "The removal of the French from Canada," they said, "would tend to encourage the continental colonies in their growing mood of 'independ-ency.'"² The American settlers confirmed this fear, for they now felt confident that they could manage the Indian threat by themselves, and felt they no longer needed the support of British troops in the colonies to balance the threat of French troops to the North and West.

Such colonial disaffection with Great Britain was becoming evident in many quarters by 1770. Colonial obligations to the home government, and colonial rights and privileges were topics of much political discussion both in the Americas and in London. A small body of men in most colonies could be discerned by this time, who were arguing that colonists had every right before parliament as did British citizens, and that