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## **The Crispus Attucks**

### **Monument Dedication**

**By**

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On November 14, 1888, a monument to the victims of the Boston Massacre was unveiled on the Boston Common among a large crowd of cheering Bostonians who had braved the cold temperatures and windy conditions of that day. Known as the Crispus Attucks Monument, its dedication would bring together for the day the local politicians, Bostonian Brahmin and Irish alike, members of Boston's African-American community, as well as many citizens of Boston in a celebration and remembrance of Boston's Revolutionary past. "It teaches us equality, fraternity and good fellowship,"<sup>1</sup> Boston's Mayor Hugh O'Brien said about the monument's dedication. For the African-American community, it was at long last the successful result of repeated attempts to have a monument erected to the first martyr of the revolution, the former slave Crispus Attucks who was killed in the Boston Massacre of March 5, 1770. The monument would have its critics as well. One organization disagreed on the location of the monument, espousing the Old Granary Burying Ground as a better site; others questioned if such a monument was necessary at all, perhaps revealing weakly hidden racist feelings; and some judged the monument quite harshly, claiming its complete failure as an object of art.

In the spring of 1887, a petition was presented to the Massachusetts Legislature requesting that a "suitable memorial or monument to the memory of Crispus Attucks, Samuel Gray, James

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<sup>1</sup> *Boston Herald*, November 15, 1888, p.3.

Caldwell, Samuel Maverick, and Patrick Carr to be erected in some public place in the city of Boston."<sup>2</sup> Passing the House of Representatives on May 6, and the Senate on May 11, the adopted Resolve was signed by Governor Oliver Ames on May 17, 1887. The Resolve also stated that "the amount to be expended under this resolve shall not exceed the sum of ten thousand dollars."<sup>3</sup> The Governor's Council reviewed several submitted designs for the monument and eventually settled on a design by the artist Robert Kraus, a new immigrant from Germany and a resident of Boston. In July of 1888, Governor Ames, realizing there was no "provision for anything beyond the cost of its [the monument] being constructed,"<sup>4</sup> prepared a letter to a number of "public-spirited" gentlemen, stating:

I take the liberty of suggesting to you that you confer a favor upon all the people of the Commonwealth if you will become one of a voluntary committee, whose duty it shall be to arrange for an appropriate dedication of the monument, such arrangement to include the collection and disbursement of the money which may be needed to carry out the plan that may be determined upon by those who will form the committee.<sup>5</sup>

Several well-known Bostonians formed a committee within weeks to make arrangements for the unveiling and dedication of the monument. In addition, the City of Boston, through Mayor Hugh O'Brien, donated three thousand dollars for the building of a foundation of the monument. The memory of the Boston Massacre would now stand in granite on the Boston Common.

By the nineteenth century, the annual celebration of the Boston Massacre had been slowly eclipsed by the celebration of Independence Day. The *Boston Herald* declared that, "the Fourth of July became the anniversary to be observed and celebrated all over the country, so that even the centennial of the Boston Massacre in 1870 passed without any special

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<sup>2</sup> Boston City Council, *A Memorial of Crispus Attucks, Samuel Maverick, James Caldwell, Samuel Gray, and Patrick Carr* (Boston, 1889), p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15

observance other than that by the public press."<sup>6</sup> Although noted by several orations and newspapers yearly from 1770 to 1776, the massacre didn't receive any formal public observance until 1777. These public celebrations would continue until 1783, when perhaps the end of the war brought people to focus more on a national celebration in connection with the victory over the English. Eventually in 1886, the Bostonian Society attached a plaque to a building on the corner of State and Exchange Streets, with the brief inscription, "Opposite this spot was shed the first blood of the American Revolution, March 5, 1770." It would be the following year, 1887, that much would be done to remember the massacre of Boston's revolutionary past. It would also significantly involve Boston's small African-American community.

Previously, several attempts for a monument to honor Crispus Attucks, by the African-Americans of Boston, had been turned down. After one of the attempts failed in 1852, one of Boston's most prominent African-American leaders in the early nineteenth century, William Cooper Nell, wrote, "the rejection of this petition was to be expected, for blacks would never receive justice or proper consideration in America except by mistake."<sup>7</sup> On March 5 of 1860, Dr. John Rock of Boston and other African-Americans had gathered to honor Crispus Attucks. Rock characterized the recently executed John Brown as the Crispus Attucks of the second American Revolution.<sup>8</sup> According to James and Lois Horton in *Black Bostonians*:

the 1850s were for Boston's black community a period of increased pride in black heroes and leaders. Beginning in 1851, blacks made continuous attempts to have the city erect a monument in the name of Crispus Attucks, the first martyr in the Boston Massacre. These efforts did not culminate in success until 1888.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Boston Sunday Herald*, November 11, 1888, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North* (New York, 1979), p. 118.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.118.

This success, was due to the tenacious resolve of one man, Lewis Hayden, a veteran and a Boston African-American. In 1861 he headed a petition for a simple stone to mark the spot where the massacre victims had fallen. This was rejected, but

not at all discouraged with the result of his former petition, Hayden set earnestly to work to procure another. He secured the signatures of all the ex-Governors and leading men of the state, and presented to the Legislature the strongest petition that was ever submitted to that body.<sup>10</sup>

It was this petition that was signed by members of both houses of the Massachusetts Legislature and Governor Oliver Ames, twenty-six years after Hayden had begun his original quest for a monument.

The date for the unveiling and dedication was set for November 14, 1888, and a program was planned by the volunteer committee. There would be parades, speeches, and the unveiling, followed by a parade from the Boston Common to Faneuil Hall, where a formal program would take place. Once at Faneuil Hall an historical reading would be given by John Fiske, followed by a poem about the massacre written by John Boyle O'Reilly. Afterwards the committee and dignitaries would attend a dinner at the Parker House. Frederick Douglass, who was asked to speak at the day's celebrations by the monument committee, was unable to attend due to his involvement in the National Republican Committee, but he sent a letter praising Massachusetts. He wrote:

...I am happy in the thought that the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is about to commemorate an act of heroism on the part of one of a race seldom credited with heroic qualities. I believe that Massachusetts is first in this recognition as she has been first in much else that is noble, magnanimous and brave.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Boston Herald*, November 15, 1888, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> *New York Age*, October 27, 1888, p. 1.

On the day of the monument's dedication, large crowds began to congregate at the corner of Charles and Beacon Streets. There was a platoon of police and many military groups well represented, as well as several drum corps and a band. Some African-American notables included the R. G. Shaw Veteran Association, delegations from Crispus Attucks Lodge, and the Knights of Pythias. It was reported that "the colored population of the West End [was] especially well represented."<sup>12</sup> The music-accompanied procession began moving at eleven o'clock in the morning and traveled up to the State House where Governor Ames and his staff were "taken under escort" and brought down to the Tremont Street side of the common. Mayor O'Brien arrived from City Hall in a carriage and all moved to the object draped in American flags on the Boston Common. The *Boston Daily Globe* reported the scene:

large crowds greeted the procession throughout the march. The raw and unpleasant winds that swept across the Common did not prevent the assembling of a big crowd of spectators. A V-shaped enclosure surrounding the monument had been roped off, and to one side of the stone pillar was a wooden platform upon which stood the Governor and Mayor and other notables.<sup>13</sup>

Patriotic musical numbers filled the air around the Common, and after a short prayer from Springfield's Reverend Eli Smith, the chairman of the Monument Committee, William H. Dupree, formally opened the dedication. In his patriotic speech, he noted, "in the occurrence which we commemorate, the colored race has a profound interest, for one of that race was a principal figure in it. From the sacrifice of that day the people rose with new inspiration."<sup>14</sup> The chairman then turned to Governor Ames and several cheers went up as he was introduced. Lillian E. Chapelle, the nine-year old daughter of the Senate President Julius C. Chapelle, stood next to the Governor, prepared to unveil the monument. The Governor briefly spoke:

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<sup>12</sup> *Boston Daily Globe*, November 14, 1888, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *New York Age*, November 17, 1888, p. 1.

we meet here today to unveil a memorial of no common deed. We are about to show in all its significance a tribute to those who first gave their lives to that struggle which led to our birth as a nation, and which gave us a chance to develop as a people.<sup>15</sup>

He continued with words for the Mayor, "the ready response of his honor the mayor to my suggestion that it be placed here insures for it that care which we all desire."<sup>16</sup> Then, nine year-old Lillian Chapelle pulled the cord which unveiled the monument, as cheers went up from the crowd. The monument stands twenty-four feet two inches in height and measures six by ten at the base. The pedestal is round except where a rectangular projection is made to support the statue. The statue is eight feet high and weighs 127 pounds and measures three by four feet. The *New York Age* described it in glowing detail:

the classic draperies, which leave bare the arm and one breast of Free America, cling close to her showing the body under them in a most artistic manner, with ends floating behind the air.... There is energy in her every movement as she lifts aloft in her right hand the piece of chain with its broken links; as she crushes under her bare left foot the royal crown, which twisted and torn, is falling off the plinth.... In unison with the fiery spirit of its mistress is the pose of the eagle on the right. Its wings are raised, its beak is open, and it has apparently just lit, and it clings to the edge of the plinth with its claws as if on the branch of a tree.<sup>17</sup>

The Governor concluded his remarks with, "I show to you all, and I speak for it careful inspection, the tribute in stone and bronze that Massachusetts erects to not the least of its heroes."<sup>18</sup> Mayor Hugh O'Brien

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Boston Daily Globe*, November 14, 1888, p. 4.

was next and he spoke quite briefly, noting the forthcoming exercises at Faneuil Hall:

on account of the already extended exercises and in view of the Faneuil Hall ceremony, I will only say at this time that I accept in the name of the city of Boston this magnificent memorial. I congratulate you, Mr. Governor, that during your administration the Commonwealth of Massachusetts has had the loyalty to erect a monument to the memory of Crispus Attucks.<sup>19</sup>

The line reformed and the procession traveled through Tremont, Court, and State Streets, through the site of the massacre in front of the Old State House, to Faneuil Hall.

At Faneuil Hall, the upstairs gallery had already been filled to capacity with whites and blacks alike. The African-American *New York Age* commented, "while there was, of course, a very large proportion of colored people among the spectators, there were plenty of their white brethren who sat with them and listened to the extremely interesting remarks."<sup>20</sup> At about one thirty, the Governor led the speeches, again praising the monument erected to the memory of, "a noble race and noble men."<sup>21</sup> Mayor O'Brien would eventually summarize:

...the erection of the Attucks monument on Boston Common ratifies the words of that declaration, that all men are free and equal, without regard to color, creed or nationality, and that the memory of the martyrs whose blood was shed in the cause of liberty in 1770 will thus be preserved and honored for all time.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *New York Age*, November 17, 1888, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Boston Daily Globe*, November 14, 1888, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

The eminent historian, John Fiske, who in the following year would publish *The Beginning of New England*, was the speaker of the day. Fiske told of the development of tensions between the colonists and England, highlighting all important moments leading up to the Boston Massacre. He related that although the fallen men were not members of the first families of Boston, "we must look upon those men as the patriots of the war."<sup>23</sup> He described Attucks as a noble man and that, "there have been many massacres in our history, but I am inclined to believe that none other had a greater significance than this one."<sup>24</sup>

After Fiske's historical presentation, Reverend Andrew Chamberlain read the poem written by John Boyle O'Reilly. O'Reilly had been asked to participate in the monument's dedication for his great literary abilities and also his favored status with the Anglo-Bostonians, African-Americans and Irish alike. Historian Thomas O'Connor wrote, "he [O'Reilly] particularly endeared himself to the New England Yankees, who regarded the young poet as one of the great Celtic bards and also as one of those 'acceptable' Irishmen they would like to see leading in city politics."<sup>25</sup> O'Reilly was also held in high esteem by the African-American community. In the *New York Age* O'Reilly was regarded as, "...an earnest advocate of equal opportunities for colored people with the white people. He knows no color, no race and no let up in his advocacy of equal and exact justice."<sup>26</sup> O'Connor credits O'Reilly with the admiration of the Irish, yet wonders whether he represented the views of the average Irish-Catholic workingman.<sup>27</sup> His poem, read in Faneuil Hall, was well-received with cheers. The closing lines filling the crowded hall:

For this, shall his vengeance [sic] change to love, and his  
retribution burn,  
Defending the right, the weak and the poor, when each  
shall have his turn;

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Thomas H. O'Connor, *The Boston Irish: A Political History* (Boston, 1995), p. 134.

<sup>26</sup> *New York Age*, December 15, 1888, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> O'Connor, *The Boston Irish*, p. 134.



For this, shall he let his woeful past afloat on the stream  
of night;  
For this, he forgets as we all forget when darkness turns  
to light;  
For this he forgives as we all forgive when wrong has  
changed to right.  
And so must we come to learning of Boston's lesson  
today;  
The moral that Crispus Attucks taught in the old heroic  
way;  
God made mankind to be one in blood, as one in spirit and  
thought;  
And so great a boon, by a brave man's death, is never  
dearly bought!

There was clearly an appreciation for O'Reilly's words later in December of 1888, when the poet himself read the words to a meeting of the National League in New York. *The New York Age* wrote, "it came from his lips like a flame of fire, calling for equal justice, for equal rights and for liberty to all men. It is a voice that will not fail to pierce the Anglo-Saxon mail, as strong as it is made by arrogance, pride and power."<sup>28</sup>

With the final words of O'Reilly's poem, the ceremony was over and several dignitaries proceeded to the Parker House for dinner and to do more honor to the memory of Crispus Attucks. Governor Ames, Mayor O'Brien, the sculptor Robert Kraus, and several members of Boston's African-American community were there, including ex-Governor Pinchback of Louisiana, who noted the unique racial blend in his speech:

for is it not a pleasure to see opposite a Governor of Saxon  
lineage, opposite him a mayor of Celtic lineage, and  
sitting between them at the head of the table a black man?  
Here we see a sight that I shall remember all my life.<sup>29</sup>

Praises were sung for Lewis Hayden, the presenter of the petition, and also given to the sculptor, Robert Kraus, who had a Mr. J. M. L. Babcock speak

<sup>28</sup> *New York Age*, December 22, 1888, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> *Boston Herald*, November 15, 1888, p. 3.

for him, as Kraus, "being a foreigner, was afraid he would not be understood by the gentlemen present."<sup>30</sup> Kraus's work was described as elegant and an excellent work. Governor Ames congratulated Kraus and believed the work to be, "the best work of its kind in the city of Boston."<sup>31</sup> On behalf of Robert Kraus, Mr. Babcock, said, "if the work of unveiling shall be deemed successful, Mr. Kraus feels that the success has been helped along by the assistance of Governor Ames; and that he is also under obligations to Mayor O'Brien for the sympathy and the cordial manner in which he received the suggestions of the sculptor."<sup>32</sup> With a final three cheers for the monument and those who had made it possible, the evening came to a close.

Not all would sing such praises for the monument. One art journal, in 1887, described the upcoming plans for a monument in less than pleasing terms:

plans, designs and suggestions have found their way to the select committee of State politicians, who know as much about art as an old maid's cat ... [and] ... some simple shaft, if any is needed, would be more effective, cost less, and save the sculptor of the city from total disgust.<sup>33</sup>

Interviews with passersby, a few days after the celebration on the Common, led to some interesting remarks. One man commented on the eagle at the base of the statue; "it looks as if it doesn't have a very good foothold,"<sup>34</sup> and another mentioned, "it looks as if it wasn't going to stay there, as if it was going to do something else and didn't exactly know what."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *American Art Illustrated*, Vol. 1 (1886-7): p. 287.

<sup>34</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, November 19, 1888, p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

Other critics of the monument, like the president of the Boston Memorial Association, objected not so much to the work of art, but to the location of the monument. President M. P. Kennard noted:

such a memorial does not belong upon the Common, but rather in the Granary burying ground, where the 'victims' were buried .... Our Common is a public park and should not bear the semblance of a cemetery, as it will if such ill-judged demands are allowed. It is understood that his Honor the Mayor left this matter entirely in the hands of the Governor, and thus this *mal apropos* eyesore will stand.<sup>36</sup>

Other negative comments surfaced around the dedication of the monument, some with hints of racism. One felt that the members of the massacre deserved no recognition as martyrs. Calling them "rowdies," he noted that there were clearly others who could fit the bill as martyrs of the revolution. One person, obviously quite upset about the monument, wrote in an editorial:

Crispus Attucks, who was raised a street row in Boston more than a century ago, has got his monument at last. How little he thought, when he provoked that, 'Boston Massacre,' that he would ever have a monument on the Common, and right on the Tremont mall too! He is not the only American who has made history without meaning to. Why shouldn't the others have monuments? .... There is hardly a city or town in the country that couldn't furnish an eligible candidate for monumental honors on the Crispus Attucks plan.<sup>37</sup>

One incident with perhaps racist motivation was noted in the letters to the editor in the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, with a twist of dry humor:

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<sup>36</sup> *Boston Post*, November 8, 1888, p. 8.

<sup>37</sup> *Boston Daily Globe*, November 15, 1888, p. 4.

a report prevailed some days ago that the granite shaft was found several times bespattered with mud, evidently cast upon it by malicious hands. If so, it could scarcely have been deposited there by the hands of the sympathetic rabble, and the suspicion arises that some courtly-minded sympathizers with King George's troops had a fit of temporary aberration while passing.<sup>38</sup>

The Crispus Attucks monument was a physical and quite visual example of how Boston was changing and very slowly learning how to tolerate other races. It would be a long process of acceptance, especially for the Anglo-Bostonians, but one that would take place regardless. The rise of the new Irish as Boston politicians would challenge and defeat Yankee security in the "acceptable" type of Irishman, like Patrick Collins and Hugh O'Brien. For African-Americans, their growing community would gain strength through the years in people like William Monroe Trotter and his *Guardian* newspaper. The situation was far from equal, but small gains were the African-American community's gain. The *New York Age* would comment, "the colored people of Boston are growing more independent, more intelligent and are accumulating more and more property year by year."<sup>39</sup>

The monument to Crispus Attucks and the others slain in the Boston Massacre of 1770 would stand on the Boston Common for all to see and for all, regardless of their views, to reflect upon. Some would clearly dislike it for any of numerous reasons, but perhaps a growing few would feel as Frederick Douglass did when he commented, "I rejoice and am exceeding [sic] glad that Boston is to have among her many distinctions, this noble concession to justice and patriotism in the person of one of a hitherto disparaged and despised people."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, November 14, 1888, p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> *New York Age*, December 1, 1888, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> *New York Age*, October 27, 1888, p. 1.

*Figure 1.* The Crispus Attucks Monument

*Figures 2.* Detail of the Crispus Attucks Monument

*Figure 3.* Detail of the Crispus Attucks Monument