

How to Use the Digital History Reader

Context

No historical event takes place in a vacuum. Understanding the larger contexts in which particular events occur gives us clues on why situations unfold the way they do. The Context section of each module in the Digital History Reader places events central to that module within the larger historical context out of which they arose. The context might include deep-seated states of mind that the historical actors took for granted, as well as more recent events that may have influenced their thoughts and actions.

In keeping with our example of the Boston Massacre, we might expect to find within the Context section of such a module information pertaining to the following:

- Massachusetts's long history of conflict with the English crown;
- English and Anglo-American opposition to standing armies;
- the history of conflict between the people of Boston and the Royal Navy, the latter of which at times coerced local men into service;
- the years of tension and protest in Boston arising from the enforcement of tariffs and taxes levied by Parliament;
- popular response to the 1768 St. George's Field "massacre," in which British troops killed seven civilians involved in a London political protest; and
- anger among Boston workers in 1770 that off-duty soldiers were taking jobs that should have gone to them.

None of the above in itself directly caused the Boston Massacre, although, taken together, they help explain why the events described in the Evidence component of our example module unfolded the way they did.