

Name: _____

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The Trial of John Peter Zenger

No democracy has existed in the modern world without the existence of a **FREE PRESS**. Newspapers and pamphlets allow for the exchange of ideas and for the voicing of dissent. When a corrupt government holds power, the press becomes a critical weapon. It organizes opposition and can help revolutionary ideas spread. The trial of JOHN PETER ZENGER, a New York printer, was an important step toward this most precious freedom for American colonists.

John Peter Zenger was a German immigrant who printed a publication called *The **NEW YORK WEEKLY JOURNAL***. This publication harshly pointed out the actions of the corrupt royal governor, William S. Cosby. It accused the government of rigging elections and allowing the French enemy to explore New York harbor. It accused the governor of an assortment of crimes and basically labeled him an idiot. Although Zenger merely printed the articles, he was hauled into jail. The authors were anonymous, and Zenger would not name them.

In 1733, Zenger was accused of **LIBEL**, a legal term whose meaning is quite different for us today than it was for him. In his day it was libel when you published information that was opposed to the government. Truth or falsity were irrelevant. He never denied printing the pieces. The judge therefore felt that the verdict was never in question.

Something very surprising happened, however.

The first jury was packed with individuals on Cosby's payroll. Throughout this process, Zenger's wife Anna kept the presses rolling. Her reports resulted in replacing Cosby's jury with a true jury of Zenger's peers.

When the trial began and Zenger's new attorney began his defense, a stir fluttered through the courtroom. The most famous lawyer in the colonies, ANDREW HAMILTON of Philadelphia, stepped up to defend Zenger. Hamilton admitted that Zenger printed the charges and demanded the prosecution to prove them false. In a stirring appeal to the jury, Hamilton pleaded for his new client's release. "It is not the cause of one poor printer," he claimed, "but the cause of liberty." The judge ordered the jury to convict Zenger if they believed he printed the stories. But the jury returned in less than ten minutes with a verdict of not guilty.

Cheers filled the courtroom and soon spread throughout the countryside. Zenger and Hamilton were hailed as heroes. Another building block of liberty was in place. Although true freedom of the press was not known until the passage of the **FIRST AMENDMENT**, newspaper publishers felt freer to print their honest views. As the American Revolution approached, this freedom would become ever more vital.

1. Who was John Peter Zenger?

a printer in New York
German immigrant

2. Explain why he was on trial?

He published an article
showing how the governor was
corrupt and rigging the elections

3. What does libel mean?

1733 - to publish info. that opposes the
gov't.

Today - to publish false info.

4. What freedom did John Peter Zenger establish for colonists?

Freedom of the Press

5. What Amendment eventually guaranteed freedom of the press?

1st Amendment