

The Trial of John Peter Zenger



In the latter part of 1733, John Peter Zenger began publishing a newspaper in New York City. Zenger's newspaper, the **New York Weekly Journal**, began exposing corrupt practices of the British colonial government. However, in Zenger's time, criticism of the British "Crown" government was sedition, (conduct or language that stirs up rebellion or advocates the overthrow of a government) a serious crime.

In 1735, for publishing news articles and editorials critical of the Crown government, Zenger was charged with seditious libel (writing a wrongfully unfavorable opinion of another person) and thrown in jail. His bail was set so high that neither he nor his friends could pay it. Once Zenger was in jail, more British injustice delayed the start of his trial for nine months. Zenger suffered further injustice when his trial finally began. The main target of Zenger's criticism, the Crown governor William Cosby, appointed the trial judge.

Though the odds were against him, Zenger told the truth. He boldly admitted that he knew publishing articles critical of the British government was against the law, but he said he did it anyway because he thought the law itself was just one more example of the corruption of the current government. He also testified that he believed he was morally and spiritually obligated to speak out about corruption and condemn it.

The trial judge, upon hearing Zenger's admission, demanded that the jury render a verdict of guilty on the charges of sedition and libel.

History records that Zenger's jury ignored the judge's demands. They soon returned with a verdict of not guilty on both counts. This finding of not guilty established truth as a defense against libel and was a landmark victory for freedom of the press.

In 1787, when Congress began considering amendments to the United States Constitution, memory of John Peter Zenger's trial prompted Congress to structure the First Amendment so it would protect our freedom of speech, assembly, worship and the press.

Zenger Trial Questions

1. What did John Peter Zenger do for a living?
2. What did Zenger begin exposing?
3. What is sedition?
4. What was Zenger charged with?
5. Give two examples of injustices Zenger suffered while he was in jail.
 - a.
 - b.
6. According to Zenger, why did he speak out against the crown government?
7. What did the trial judge demand of the jury?
8. What verdict did the jury return?
9. What did the verdict establish?
10. What amendment to the Constitution did the Zenger verdict greatly influence?