

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS: THE PETER ZENGER CASE

An important right for which the colonists fought was freedom of the press. One thing this means is that newspapers and books have the right to criticize public officials. In the colonial period, however, the governor of a colony had the power to censor the press. This meant that he could regulate the newspapers of the colony. Often governors punished and put into prison the people who published articles that criticized the government. The governors feared the power of the newspapers. Newspapers might unite the people and encourage them to rebel against the king's government.

In 1733 there was only one newspaper in the entire colony of New York, and it was controlled by the governor. This meant that the people could read only what the governor wanted them to read. This bothered Peter Zenger, the son of an immigrant from Germany. Zenger and a group of his friends decided to publish a newspaper that would print the truth, no matter what the consequences to themselves might be. They called their paper the *New York Weekly Journal*.

As might be guessed, not long after Zenger printed criticisms of the governor, he was arrested and put in jail. His newspapers were burned by the order of the governor. Zenger did not let being in jail stop him. Even while he was there waiting for his trial, he smuggled articles out of jail to be published in his paper.

Most people thought that Zenger would be given a jail sentence because he had criticized the government. But Zenger obtained the help of the most able and most famous lawyer in the colonies—Andrew Hamilton of Philadelphia. Hamilton was eighty years old at the time. But, he agreed to work for Zenger when he learned that many other lawyers in the colonies had refused to help him. This was because of their fear of the governor.

Hamilton's body was weak from old age, but his mind was keen and sharp. In defending Zenger, Hamilton argued that what Zenger had done was not a crime. Hamilton said that the articles Zenger wrote were true. No man should be punished for writing the truth. In a stirring speech to the jury, he said "... the question before ... you, gentlemen of the jury, is not of small nor private concern, it is not the cause of a poor printer, nor of New York alone. . . . No! It may . . . affect every freeman that lives under a British government . . . It is the cause of liberty . . . the liberty of speaking and writing truth."

What was the decision of the jury? Let Zenger himself tell it: "The jury withdrew and in a small time returned, and being asked . . . their verdict . . . answered . . . *Not Guilty*. Upon which there were three huzzas [cheers] in the hall which was crowded with people, and the next day I was discharged from my imprisonment."

The Zenger case was important in the history of freedom for several reasons. For one thing, it showed how one determined freeman could stand up against the power of an unjust government and win. It encouraged other newspaper publishers to print the truth as they saw it. When people can read different points of view about an issue, they can make more-informed decisions.

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THE New-York Weekly JOURNAL

Containing the *(freshest)* Advices, Foreign, and Domestick.

MUNDAY November 25th. 1734.

To all my Subscribers and Benefactors
who take my weekly Journall.

Line

Gentlemen, Ladies and Others;

A

S you last week were Dis-
appointed of my Journall,
I think it Incumbent up-
on me, to publish my
Apology which is this.

On the Lords Day, the Seventeenth
of this Instant, I was Arrested, taken
and Imprisoned in the common Goal
of this City, by Virtue of a Warrant
from the Governour, and the Hono-
rable Francis Harrison, Esq; and others
in Council, of which (God willing)
yo'll have a Coppy, whereupon I was
put under such Restraint that I had
not the Liberty of Pen, Ink, or Paper,
or to see, or speak with People, till
upon my Complaint to the Honourable
the Chief Justice, at my appearing
before him upon my *Habias Corpus* on
the Wednesday following, Who dis-
countenanced that Proceeding, and
therefore I have had since that Time,
the Liberty of Speaking through the
Hole of the Door, to my Wife and
Servants by which I doubt not yo'll
think me sufficiently Excused for not
sending my last weeks Journall, and
I hope for the future by the Liberty of
Speaking to my Servants thro' the
Hole of the Door of the Prison, to
entertain you with my weekly Journall
as formerly.

And am your obliged
Humble Servant,

J. Peter Zenger.

Study this photograph of one of Peter Zenger's newspapers. Do not allow the spelling of some of the words or the formation of some of the letters to confuse you. For example, notice how the S is formed in the word *freshest* at the top of the paper. **Note:** The numbers in the left margin are not part of his original paper; they were put there to help you complete this activity.

1. In the first nine lines of the column Zenger explains why his paper wasn't published the previous week. What was his excuse?

2. How does Zenger spell the following words in his column? Headline: Monday? _____

Line 8: Jail? _____ Line 9: City? _____

3. In lines 14–16, Zenger tells his readers there are certain things he was not allowed to do while in jail, including having pen, ink or paper. What else wasn't he allowed to do? _____

4. Complete the following sentence: On lines 17–27 of the article, Zenger explains that he was able to gain the right to speak to his _____ and _____ through a _____ in his prison door.

5. According to lines 31–32, what does Zenger plan to do about future issues of his paper? _____

BEN FRANKLIN: INVENTOR, PATRIOT, STATESMAN

- 1 Benjamin Franklin was born in Boston in 1706. His parents hoped that he would become a minister, but there was little money for his education. After only two years of school, Ben was kept at home to learn his father's trade—the making of soap and candles.
- 2 Ben had no interest in soap and candles and continued to educate himself by reading everything he could lay his hands on. At the age of twelve he went to work for his older brother, James, who was a printer. His pay was small, but he used half of it to buy books and the rest for food.
- 3 A few years later James Franklin began to publish a newspaper. Ben, who loved to write, decided to compose an essay for the paper. He knew, however, that James would not print the essay if he knew it to be the work of his young brother. So in the dark of night, Ben slipped it under the door of the printing shop. He had signed the essay "Silence Dogood." This and several more of Ben's essays were printed in the paper and received many compliments.
- 4 All his life Ben Franklin was interested in the world around him. He asked himself such questions as, "What is lightning?" At that time no one knew the answer. Ben decided to find out. In 1752 he conducted his famous experiment with a kite. He flew the kite during a thunderstorm. When sparks jumped from a metal key attached to the kite string, Ben had proved that lightning was really electricity. Also, he might easily have lost his life.

POOR RICHARD'S ALMANAC

For years Ben wrote and published this book. It became famous for wise sayings like these:

1. "Well done is better than well said."
2. "The worst wheel of the cart makes the most noise."
3. "The rotten apple spoils his companions."
4. "Don't throw stones at your neighbors if your own windows are glass."
5. "Three may keep a secret if two of them are dead."
6. "He that speaks much, is much mistaken."

- 5 This experiment led to Franklin's invention of the lightning rod. He was one of the first men in the world to experiment with electricity.
- 6 Ben was too old to fight in the Revolutionary War, but without his help the colonists might not have won. It was Ben Franklin and two other Americans who persuaded France to support the colonies.
- 7 After the war, at the age of eighty-one, Franklin played an important part in forming the Constitution for the new nation. Time after time, when arguments grew bitter and tempers wore thin, he stepped in to calm the delegates. Perhaps he told a funny story or suggested a compromise on which all could agree. He even gave in on many of his own points to win agreement.
- 8 Few men in the history of the world have been good at as many different things as Ben Franklin was. As a famous American writer said, "In any age, in any place, Franklin would have been great."

BEN FRANKLIN: INVENTOR, PATRIOT, STATESMAN

Each of the statements below can be related to one of the numbered paragraphs on the opposite page. Write the number of the paragraph on the line before the statement.

- _____ Ben was able to use the results of an experiment to invent a useful thing.
- _____ Ben was one of the world's great men.
- _____ Ben was not stubborn in his beliefs about what should be in the Constitution.
- _____ Ben represented the American colonies in France.
- _____ Ben's father was not wealthy enough to educate him.
- _____ Ben was a member of the Constitutional Convention.
- _____ Ben was curious about lightning.
- _____ Ben was an important figure in the fight for independence.
- _____ Ben did not want to follow his father's trade.
- _____ Ben was curious about nature.
- _____ Ben educated himself by reading.
- _____ Ben went to work for his brother to learn the printing trade.
- _____ Ben tricked his brother.
- _____ Ben was willing to make sacrifices for his education.

Poor Richard's Almanac

Study the sayings of Poor Richard in the box on the opposite page. On the line before each statement below, write the number of the saying that means the same thing.

- _____ Those who associate with bad people may also become bad.
- _____ If you want to keep something quiet, tell no one.
- _____ A person who talks a lot will often be wrong in what he says.
- _____ Actions mean more than words.
- _____ The poorest worker is often the worst complainer.
- _____ If you are not perfect, do not criticize others.

To go ahead. At the age of seventeen, Ben left his brother's home in Boston. After many adventures he arrived in Philadelphia. The artist who made the drawing below read Ben's own description of his arrival. See if you can put back into words what the artist drew. That is, write a careful description of what you see in the drawing. Use the reverse side of this page for your description.

