Truth was his defense: The libel trial of John Peter Zenger

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John Peter Zenger

John Peter Zenger emigrated from Germany in 1710 with his family but his father died during the journey. Zenger served as an apprentice under William Bradford at the New York Gazette until 1726. Seven years later, he started publishing The New York Weekly Journal. Zenger quickly solidified himself as an opponent of William Cosby, the then-governor of New York. After he was arrested for seditious libel, Zenger continued to print the publication with the help of his wife, Anna Zenger.

William Cosby

King George II named William Cosby the governor of New York in 1732 but Cosby disagreed with the actions of governor Rip Van Dam and Cosby wanted to take Van Dam’s salary. Supreme Court Chief Justice Lewis Morris voted against allowing the wage confiscation. Cosby later removed Morris from office and replaced him with an ally. The saga was the first chapter of Cosby’s abuse of power in New York.

Andrew Hamilton

Philadelphia’s Andrew Hamilton came to Zenger’s rescue after Cosby has disbarred his previous two lawyers. Hamilton was already successful when he decided to take Zenger’s case. Prior to the trial, Hamilton was the attorney general of Pennsylvania from 1717-1724.

Trial of Zenger

Zenger was arrested on Nov. 17, 1734. He spent nine months in jail but continued to print by speaking to his wife through a hole in the door of his cell. The only week The New York Weekly Journal didn’t print was the week after he was arrested. Zenger issued an apology in the Nov. 25 edition. During Zenger’s incarceration, Cosby manipulated the government for his benefit several times while in office. He disbarred two of Zenger’s lawyers and even selected two judges that would help do his bidding. One of Zenger’s lawyers, James Alexander, was also the founder of The New York Weekly Journal. In those days, seditious libel only had to be printed, and it didn’t matter if the information was true or false. The jury’s instructions were to determine whether Zenger published articles about Crosby. But the jurors returned with an acquittal in favor of Zenger.

Zenger’s attorney, Andrew Hamilton, returned to Philadelphia and drafted the plans for Independence Hall. Cosby died in 1736.

References

• "Brandon’s APUSH Blog." : LAD #2: John Peter Zenger.
• "A Chronology of the Events Surrounding the Trial of John Peter Zenger." UMKC.
• "First Among Many: The Bay Psalm Book and Early Moments in American Printing Online Exhibition." Online Exhibition.
• “Key figures in the Zenger Trial.” UMKC
• "Legal History Matters” Crown v. John Peter Zenger, 1735.

Timeline

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<th>August 1732</th>
<th>November 1733</th>
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<td>• William Cosby becomes governor of New York.</td>
<td>• Zenger started publishing The New York Weekly Journal.</td>
<td>• Article against Cosby is published regarding the New York Gazette being propaganda.</td>
<td>• Zenger is arrested and spends the next nine months in jail</td>
<td>• Zenger’s attorneys, James Alexander and William Smith, are disbarred.</td>
<td>• Andrew Hamilton becomes Zenger’s attorney.</td>
<td>• Trial starts but after deliberating, the jury acquits Zenger.</td>
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