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Date: _____

The Trial of John Peter Zenger

Instructions: Read the article to answer the questions below.

On November 5, 1733, John Peter Zenger published the first issue of the *New York Weekly Journal*—the political journal of a group of residents who opposed the policies of colonial governor William Cosby. In articles, jokes, and mocking pieces, Cosby's critics accused his administration of being tyrannical and violating people's rights. Many articles were written by his colleagues, but as publisher, Zenger was legally responsible for the content.

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John Peter Zenger celebrating his acquittal after trial for libel, colonial New York City, 1735.

For a year, the paper continued to criticize Cosby until, on November 17, 1734, Zenger was arrested for **libel**, or the act of publishing a false statement that causes people to have a bad opinion of someone. He was imprisoned for nearly 10 months before he faced trial in August 1735. Zenger's defense attorney, Andrew Hamilton, addressed the colonial jury, famously making the following statement:

"The question before the Court and you, Gentlemen of the jury, is not of small or private concern. It is not the cause of one poor printer, nor of New York alone, which you are now trying. No! It may in its consequence affect every free man that lives under a British government on the main of America. It is the best cause. It is the cause of liberty."

To the acclaim of courtroom spectators and the general public, the jury **acquitted**, or decided that he was not guilty of a crime. Zenger's trial shaped how people viewed free press issues and, decades later, helped inspire the free speech protections found in the U.S. Constitution's Bill of Rights.

1. Why did Governor William Cosby see the *New York Weekly Journal* as a threat?

2. How might Zenger's arrest have contributed to growing resentment toward colonial governors appointed by the Crown?
3. In what ways did Zenger's acquittal encourage colonists to challenge British authority and support the idea of freedom of the press?

The Trial of John Peter Zenger Answer Key

1. Why did Governor William Cosby see the *New York Weekly Journal* as a threat?

Governor William Cosby saw the New York Weekly Journal as a threat because it publicly criticized his policies and made fun of him. He was accused of being tyrannical and violating colonists' rights. Cosby may have felt that people would lose respect for him and question his leadership.

2. How might Zenger's arrest have contributed to growing resentment toward colonial governors appointed by the Crown?

Zenger's arrest may have contributed to growing resentment toward colonial governors appointed by the Crown because people saw that a royal governor could jail someone just for expressing their opinion. This may have made colonists feel like royal governors had too much power and didn't care about colonists' rights.

3. In what ways did Zenger's acquittal encourage colonists to challenge British authority and support the idea of freedom of the press?

Zenger's acquittal encouraged colonists to challenge British authority and supported the idea of freedom of the press because it showed that the press could express and publish their opinions without being punished. Colonists could then speak up about fairness and freedom and help keep the people in power accountable.