

## Learning Activity

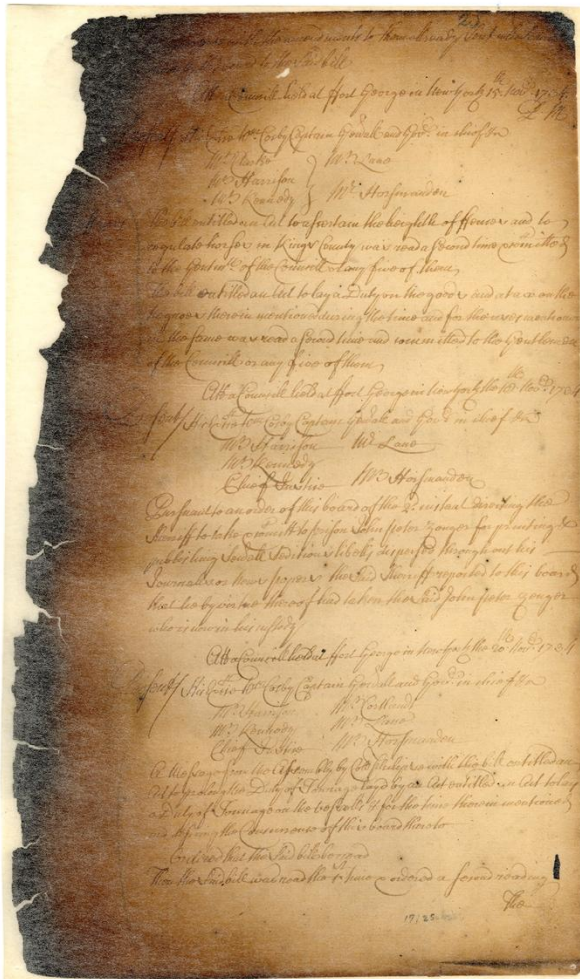


Name: \_\_\_\_\_

### Online Extra – John Peter Zenger Longer Version

The New York State Freedom Train wanted to use primary source documents to show how New York State has worked over time to secure the rights of citizens.

John Peter Zenger was a printer who published a newspaper called the *New York Weekly Journal* in the early 1700s. He was arrested in 1734 for printing stories that criticized the governor of New York. At the time, the government thought it was a crime to speak badly about leaders, even if the stories were true. A jury found Zenger not guilty, which helped people believe that telling the truth should not be punished. This idea later became part of the First Amendment, which protects freedom of speech and the press in the United States.



The document pictured to the left is a page from the New York Colony Council Minutes. Minutes are the notes kept at a meeting. These minutes are one of the documents that was chosen to travel on the New York Freedom Train. An excerpt is transcribed below.

Pursuant to an order of this board of the 2<sup>nd</sup> instant directing the sherriff to take & comitt to prison John Peter Zenger for printing & publishing severall Seditions libels disposed throughout his Journals or News papers the said Sherriff reported to this board that he by virtue thereof had taken the said John Peter Zenger who is now in his custody Att a Councill held at ffort George in New York the 20th Novr 1734

#### Words to Know:

Seditions – speech or writing that encourages people to fight against or oppose the government.

Libels – published statements that say something untrue about a person.

On the lines below rewrite the excerpt from the Council Minutes in modern language.

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From the text at the top of the previous page, and the excerpt from the Council’s minutes, what did New York’s colonial government believe about people publishing criticism of the government?

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Why do you think a governor would not want the newspapers to publish criticisms about him?

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After the Revolutionary War, the new United States worked to create its plan for government. This plan is called the Constitution. Later, the Bill of Rights was added to make it clear what rights the government would protect. John Peter Zenger’s court case was one reason for the First Amendment’s protection of the freedom of the press. Below is an excerpt from the Bill of Rights.

Excerpt from the First Amendment (ratified in 1791)  
“Congress shall make no law... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press...”

If the First Amendment had been in place when John Peter Zenger was publishing his criticism of the governor of New York, could he have been legally arrested? Why or why not?

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Why you think freedom of the press is an important freedom that is protected?

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