



COLONIAL COURTROOM CHAOS!

No Jury, No Justice: The Economic Fallout of Unfair Trials

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Lesson Overview

In this lesson, students will understand how unjust legal systems impacted economies, using a mock-trial activity. Students will explore why the colonists believed fair legal rights were the key to protecting both their freedom and their finances and why they felt jury trials helped protect these. Students will learn about three important trials leading up to the American Revolution and consider why the 5th through 8th Amendments were enshrined in the Bill of



Rights to help protect Americans from losing their homes, land, businesses, and future. They will analyze primary source documents, explore connections to the U.S. Bill of Rights, and discuss modern parallels to legal inequality and economic impacts.

Lesson Objectives

By the end of this lesson students will be able to:

- Describe the rights given in the 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th Amendments.
- Identify the connection between legal rights and economic freedoms.
- Understand how unfair legal systems impact individuals and economies.
- Analyze scenarios where lack of fair trials or harsh punishments could hurt a person's ability to work, own property, or stay out of debt.

Core Principles

- Equality
- Liberty
- Purpose of government to secure rights

Core Grievance

- Jury Trials

Primary Source Documents

- Magna Carta (1215)
- The Trial of William Penn (1670)
- Crown v. John Peter Zenger (1735)
- Boston Massacre Trial (1770)
- 5th Amendment
- 6th Amendment
- 7th Amendment
- 8th Amendment

Essential Questions

- How do fair trials protect people's ability to work, own property, and support their families?
- What are the economic risks when the government can take property or imprison someone without a jury trial?
- Why did colonists believe that legal rights were essential to both freedom and financial stability?

- How can unfair court systems harm not just individuals, but entire communities or local economies?

Core Lesson Vocabulary

- COLONIAL COURTROOM CHAOS! Vocabulary

Background Knowledge

Before the American Revolution, colonists lived under British rule. Although they were British citizens, they were forced to follow laws made by a king and Parliament far away in England. Many colonists felt these laws were unfair, especially when it came to the court system. Trials were often held without juries, and judges were loyal to the king, not the people. Colonists could be fined, lose their property, or even go to jail without a fair chance to defend themselves. These unfair court practices hurt their ability to work, provide for their families, and protect their businesses. That's why many colonists began to demand legal rights like jury trials, fair judges, and protection from harsh punishment. These rights would later become a significant part of the U.S. Constitution.

The Magna Carta and English Bill of Rights laid the foundation for how jury trials would be established within the English legal system. Several court cases established the important role of jury trials including: The Trial of William Penn (1670), Crown v. John Peter Zenger (1735) and even the Boston Massacre Trial (1770) which featured future American President John Adams as the defense attorney for the British soldiers who were involved in the event.

When the colonists wrote the Bill of Rights, they weren't just thinking about freedom; they were thinking about money, property, and fairness too. They believed they were protected under long-standing English traditions of justice, but the King and Parliament were treating them differently. British laws allowed officials to seize property, jail colonists without a fair trial, and impose heavy fines. That wasn't just unfair, it was costly and damaging to both families and communities.

Lesson Introduction (10–25 minutes)

OPENING PROMPT - “UNFAIR”

Ask students to describe why something might be considered “unfair.”

Have students provide examples of ways that they might have felt they were treated unfairly by an individual and explain briefly why they felt it was unfair.

Ask students to consider if they would have felt differently if the action they felt they were treated unfairly about was decided by the people around them and not just a single individual.

PRIMARY DOCUMENTS ANALYSIS

Before the next activity, students should consider the following primary document quotes.

- #1 - Read the following quote from the [Magna Carta](#).

"No free man shall be seized or imprisoned, or stripped of his rights or possessions... except by the lawful judgment of his equals or by the law of the land."

- #2 - Read the following quote by William Penn from the [Trial of William Penn and William Mead \(1670\)](#).

"If Not guilty be not a Verdict, then you make of the Jury and Magna Charta but a meer Nose of Wax."

***Special Note:** The phrase "nose of wax" refers to someone who is easily influenced or manipulated, like a piece of wax that can be easily reshaped.*

- #3 - Read the following quote by Andrew Hamilton from the trial of [Crown v. John Peter Zenger \(1735\)](#).

"Jurymen are to see with their own eyes, hear with their own ears, and to make use of their own consciences and understandings, in judging the lives, liberties, or estates of their fellow subjects."

- #4 - Read the following quote by John Adams (2nd President of the United States) from the [Boston Massacre Trial](#).

"The Part I took in Defence of Cptn. Preston and the Soldiers, procured me Anxiety, and Obloquy enough. It was, however, one of the most gallant, generous, manly and disinterested Actions of my whole Life, and one of the best Pieces of Service I ever rendered my Country. Judgment of Death against those Soldiers would have been as foul a Stain upon this Country as the Executions of the Quakers or Witches, anciently. As the Evidence was, the Verdict of the Jury was exactly right."

- #5 - Read the following quote from the [Declaration of Independence](#).

"For depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury: For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences..."

- #6 - Read the following quote from the Sixth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

"In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, by an impartial jury..."

Have students define what they think a "trial by jury" is and why they think the colonists might feel this was crucial to their everyday lives. Have students consider the following questions:

- Civic Considerations:

- Do we expect fairness from leaders, teachers, and rules? Why?
- Who decides what's fair? A person, group, or community? Why?

- Economic Considerations:

- What happens when someone in power takes something from you unfairly (like your phone or a job opportunity)?

- If a person (or group of people) controls everything, e.g., money, jobs, types of punishment, what happens to the people who disagree with them?

Student Activity (25-30 minutes)

This role-play activity introduces students to the political and economic consequences of unjust laws and legal systems during colonial times. Through interactive gameplay, students will experience how arbitrary laws and unfair trials can disrupt communities and economies.

- Guilty Until Proven Loyal? Mock Trial Activity
- Guilty Until Proven Loyal? Mock Trial Activity Cards

Closing (10-15 minutes)

Students should split into groups and play the Peers or Power Sorting Card Game as a wrap-up. *Note: The cards should be printed double-sided (preferably on card stock) and cut prior to using this activity. It is recommended to laminate the cards if possible and keep them sorted using a ziploc bag for reusability. *

- Peers or Power Sorting Card Game

If teachers want to complete this activity in a digital format they can use the [Peers or Powers Sorting Card Game Words/Definition List](#) to upload in a digital game format such as [Nearpod](#), [Quizlet](#), [WayGround \(Formerly Quizizz\)](#), [Gimkit](#), [Kahoot](#), or [Blooket](#).

Teacher should debrief as a class which system (Peer or Power) seems fair. Which protects people's property and livelihoods the most?

Extension Activities

- **Justice or Jobs? The Boston Massacre on Trial:** Students can analyze how jury decisions in the Boston Massacre trial were not just about fairness, but also about protecting the colony's fragile economy and trade.
- Students can read both the [Trial by Jury](#), [The American Revolution & Our Bill of Rights](#) and [A Forgotten History: Trial by Jury](#) and the American Revolution and pretend they are a reporter covering the John Peter Zenger trial and also reporting on the trial by jury restrictions found in both the 1765 Stamp Act and the Intolerable Acts of 1774.

Teacher Considerations

- While the 5th-8th Amendments are discussed, little effort is often made to understand the reason why four out of the first 10 Amendments deal with legal matters, specifically in regard

to jury trials. Although there are considerable injustice concerns involved, there are also tremendous economic considerations that need to be addressed in the classroom.

- Teachers should make sure they are familiar with the impact of the Magna Carta (1215) on the legal system.
 - The Magna Carta was one of the first documents to limit the power of kings in England. It promised that no free person could be imprisoned or punished except "by the lawful judgment of his equals or by the law of the land." Colonists believed this meant they had the right to a trial by jury. When Britain denied them that right, it felt like the Crown was breaking its own promise of justice.
- Teachers should be familiar with the Trial of William Penn (1670).
 - In London, William Penn (later founder of Pennsylvania) was arrested for preaching without permission. At his trial, the judge ordered the jury to convict him. The jury refused, declaring Penn not guilty. The angry judge jailed the jurors for going against his orders. This case showed how important it was for juries to be independent from judges, and it inspired colonists to fight for the same protection.
- Teachers should be familiar with the court case Crown v. John Peter Zenger (1735).
 - In New York, newspaper printer John Peter Zenger was accused of criticizing the royal governor. According to British law, speaking against the government was a crime, even if it was true. But Zenger's lawyer argued that juries had the power to decide not just the facts, but whether the law itself was fair. The jury found Zenger not guilty, a victory for freedom of the press and jury independence. Colonists remembered this case as proof that juries could stand up for ordinary people.
- Teachers should be familiar with the Boston Massacre Trial (1770).
 - After British soldiers killed five colonists during the Boston Massacre, the soldiers were put on trial. To ensure fairness, John Adams (who would later become president) defended them, even though most colonists did not like the soldiers. A local jury listened to the evidence and acquitted most of the soldiers, showing that jury trials could bring justice even in the most emotional and difficult cases. Colonists saw this as proof that justice should come from local communities, not distant rulers.

Additional Resources for Consideration

- Why Americans Have a Right to Trial by Jury
- The Jury System
- Originalism and Jury Nullification in America: A Legal Basis for the Restoration of a Lost Right
- Boston Massacre and the Trial
- John Adams' Defense of Eight British Soldiers Involved in the Boston Massacre
- Boston Massacre Trial

- Trial of John Peter Zenger
- Argument in the Zenger Trial (1735)
- Crown v. John Peter Zenger, 1735
- Quotes Related to the 1670 Trial of William Penn and William Mead and Bushel's Case
- William Penn, Criminal Justice, and the Penn-Mead Trial
- On William Penn's Trial