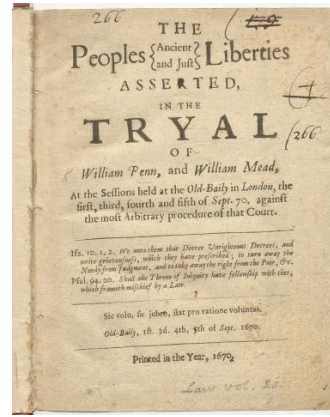


0. William Penn: Tried for Sedition - Story Preface

1. JURY GOES TO PRISON



The British Library maintains a [copy of the trial proceedings](#) against William Penn which Penn published in 1670, after the ordeal was over. This image depicts the cover of that record.

Juries today listen to a phrase they don't believe:

*You shall deliberate this case,
without food and water,
until you reach a verdict.*

One can imagine the average juror's reaction:

Right! I don't think so!!

That would be a typical response from a modern juror. In today's world, who would actually think a judge could order people not to eat or drink until they decided a case?

In years past, however, that is exactly what was expected. And it is what happened to a London jury summoned to try William Penn. That and much, much more.

It was September 8, 1670. [William Penn](#) was still an Englishman, living in London. He was a young man - 26 years old. He had not-yet become an American. He had not-yet founded the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (Penn's Woods) or the [City of Philadelphia](#) (Brotherly Love). Penn was on trial for his life, charged with sedition against the Crown.

If found guilty, Penn would be executed.

In one of the most famous, magisterial courthouses in the world, the [Old Bailey](#), Penn defended himself. It was a time when defendants charged with a crime were not ALLOWED to have a lawyer. Perhaps that is why so many defendants who stood trial at the Old Bailey ended-up dead. For most, the "fix was in" long before the trial started.

And so it appeared for William Penn.

A Quaker, Penn was upset with a law that made the Church of England the only place where people could worship. Called the "[Coventicle Act](#)," the law prohibited any "tumultuous assembly" from meeting outside the Church of England. Challenging the law, Penn called a meeting at Grace Church in London. He preached a sermon which resulted in a "tumultuous assembly."

He was promptly arrested.

Twelve men from the City of London were selected as jurors. Ten judges, including the Lord Mayor of London, made up the court. Because Penn published the trial transcript, in 1670, we have a good record of events. Things did not go as the court planned.

The judges thought trial would be a simple, one-issue case: Did William Penn preach at Grace Church? If the answer was yes (and the facts were clear - he did), the case was over. The "Coventicle Act" proscribed the rest of the story. If he had preached, then he CAUSED a "tumultuous assembly" by application of the law.

As it happened, though, Penn's jury didn't like the law.

It's pretty clear they also didn't like how the court treated Penn during the trial. Upset with Penn's deft ability at questioning the judges on points of common law, the court locked Penn in the "bale dock." The jury could hear, but no longer see, Penn during the trial.

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](#)

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/William-Penn-Tried-for-Sedition>

See [Learning Tasks for this story online at:](#)

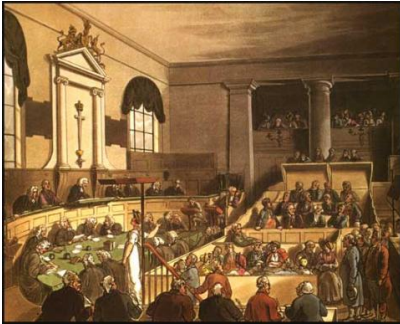
<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/William-Penn-Tried-for-Sedition>



William Penn

Image online, courtesy the U.S. Library of Congress.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/William-Penn>



The Old Bailey

Public-domain image, described above, online courtesy [Old Bailey Online](#).

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