

A free press was important to President James Madison

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James Madison, one of the Founding Fathers and the fourth president of the United States. Public domain

James Madison was the fourth president of the United States. He helped the young United States become its own country. He is known as one of the Founding Fathers. George Washington was also a Founding Father.

Madison helped to write the U.S. Constitution. The Constitution explains how the government works. Then, Madison added a rule protecting the freedom of the press.

Freedom of the press means that television, newspapers, magazines and now websites can write what they want. They are supposed to make sure they tell the truth.

American Press Was Going To Be Different

Let's take a closer look at the freedom of the press. Why did Madison include it in the Constitution?

Newspapers could not always print whatever they wanted.

The American colonies were controlled by the king of England. British law made it a crime to print something bad about the king's government. Newspapers could be punished even when they printed the truth.

Newspapers began to get more freedom in the American colonies.

Newspaper Wins In Court

In 1735, a governor tried to punish a newspaper for writing bad things about him. The case went to court. A judge said the newspaper was right. The newspaper won because what it wrote was true.

It was a victory for the freedom of the press.

Years later, there was the Revolutionary War. The American colonies became free from England. Now, they had to make their own government. Madison helped write the Constitution.

Madison Writes The Bill Of Rights

Soon after, it was decided that a Bill of Rights should be added. The Bill of Rights would list the rights of citizens. It was Madison's job to write it.

The freedom of the press is found in the first section or amendment. It says people have the right to say or print anything. Lawmakers cannot write laws to limit the press freedoms.

The Bill of Rights were approved by lawmakers in Congress in 1791. Freedom of the press was now part of American law.

Information And Knowledge Are Important

Some lawmakers did not like the free press. They did not want bad things written about them.

In 1798, they made a law called the Sedition Act. It limited what could be printed about the government. As a result, more than a dozen newspaper editors were put in jail or had to pay fines.

The law did not last long. It went away in 1801. But it made Madison even more sure that the free press needed to be protected.

Madison believed that people needed knowledge. To have knowledge, they needed information. Newspapers give information. The press is an important part of a democracy. Madison believed it had to be free.