

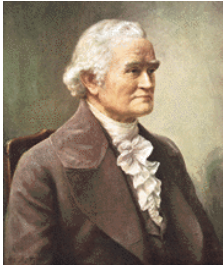
Noah Webster: Educator and Lexicographer

Born 16 October 1758

Died 28 May 1843

An immense effect may be produced by small powers wisely and steadily directed.

Noah Webster, 1821



Why would a man spend 27 years working alone on an American dictionary? Painstakingly writing out definitions, originations, and pronunciation of words from A to Zygomatic, Noah Webster gathered a collection of 70,000 words. Of these 70,000 words over 12,000 of them were words that had not been detailed in any English dictionary up to that time. Words such as *skunk*, *squash*, *hickory*, and *chowder*—uniquely American words—found their way into Webster’s dictionary. Not only did new colorful words reflect the *American English* language, but also new definitions. For Noah Webster witnessed the birth of a nation—a new nation founded, as Webster wrote, on the “principles of republican government having their origin in the Scriptures.”

An American could not relate to the word “govern” if it were defined using the word “monarch” or “king.” Words such as “government,” “constitution,” “republic,” “democracy,” and others all needed definitions reflecting the American Christian philosophy of government.

Noah Webster felt strongly that if America was to do well as a nation her citizens must have consistency in their language—consistent spelling, pronunciation, and usage—as well as a uniqueness which would distinguish them from England. His desire was that children would be taught in the schools proper spelling, pronunciation and grammar, and in the midst of this he also sprinkled lessons of Christian morality and patriotism.

Webster wrote several textbooks, the most famous of which was the *American Spelling Book*, which gained the nickname “blue-backed speller” because of its binding. Over a period of one hundred years following its initial publication more than one hundred million copies of the *American Spelling Book* were used by school children across the country.

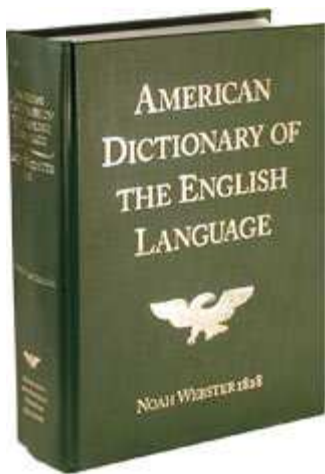
Prior to Webster’s publication of the *American Spelling Book*, the popular sentiment toward spelling might have best been summed up by Benjamin Franklin who said that he “*had no use for a man with but one spelling for a word.*” Noah Webster obviously did not agree with this, although he was interested in making spelling simpler and more phonetic. Thanks to Webster then we have “honor” instead of “honour,” “music” instead of “musick,” and “plow” instead of “plough.” He also changed “theatre” to “theater,” and “centre” was changed to the more common-sense spelling of “center.” There are other changes in spelling Webster



recommended which we follow today, however he rejected Benjamin Franklin's suggestion that "tongue" be changed to "tung" and "women" to "wimmen."

In the process of compiling the *American Dictionary* Noah Webster learned more than twenty different languages: Chaldaic, Syriac, Arabic, Samaritan, Hebrew, Ethiopic, Persian, Irish (Hyberne, Celtic), Amoric, Anglo-Saxon, German, Dutch, Swedish, Danish, Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish, French, Russian, Portuguese, Welsh, Gothic, and early dialects of English and German. Mastery of all these languages allowed him to thoroughly examine a word's origin, pronunciation and definition. His scholarly research significantly contributed to the fields of philology and lexicography.

At the age of 66 Noah Webster penned the last word of his *American Dictionary* in January 1825 in Cambridge, England where he had gone to research in their vast libraries. In describing that day he wrote, "When I had come to the last word, I was seized with a trembling which made it somewhat difficult to hold my pen steady for writing. The cause seems to have been the thought that I might not then live to finish the work, or the thought that I was so near the end of my labors. But I summoned strength to finish the last word, and then walking about the room a few minutes I recovered."



American Dictionary was published in 1828 and has been revised many times since then, unfortunately losing much of the original wording over time. Webster's philosophy toward language, education, and Scripture can perhaps be best illustrated by looking at his definition of the word "love."

LOVE, v.t. luv. [L. libeo, lubeo. See Lief. The sense is probably to be prompt, free, willing, from leaning, advancing, or drawing forward.]

1. In a general sense to be pleased with; to regard with affection, on account of some qualities which excite pleasing sensations or desire of gratification. We love a friend, on account of some qualities which give us pleasure in his society. We love a man who has done us a favor; in which case, gratitude enters into the composition of our affection. We love our parents and our children, on account of their connection with us, and on account of many qualities which please us. We love to retire to a cool shade in summer. We love a warm room in winter. we love to hear an eloquent advocate. The christian loves his Bible. In short, we love whatever gives us pleasure and delight, whether animal or intellectual; and if our hearts are right, we love God above all things, as the sum of all excellence and all the attributes which can communicate happiness to intelligent beings. In other words, the christian loves God with the love of complacency in his attributes, the love of benevolence towards the interest of his kingdom, and the love of gratitude for favors received.

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind - Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. Matt. 22.

2. To have benevolence or good will for. John 3.

LOVE, n.

1. An affection of the mind excited by beauty and worth of any kind, or by the qualities of an object which communicate pleasure, sensual or intellectual. It is opposed to hatred. Love between the sexes, is a compound affection, consisting of esteem, benevolence, and animal desire. Love is excited by pleasing qualities of any kind, as by kindness, benevolence, charity, and by the qualities which render social intercourse agreeable. In the latter case, love is ardent friendship, or a strong attachment springing from good will and esteem, and the pleasure derived from the company, civilities and kindness of others.

Between certain natural relatives, love seems to be in some cases instinctive. Such is the love of a mother for her child, which manifests itself toward an infant, before any particular qualities in the child are unfolded. This affection is apparently as strong in irrational animals as in human beings.

We speak of the love of amusements, the love of books, the love of money, and the love of whatever contributes to our pleasure or supposed profit.

The love of God is the first duty of man, and this springs from just views of his attributes or excellencies of character, which afford the highest delight to the sanctified heart. Esteem and reverence constitute ingredients in this affection, and a fear of offending him is its inseparable effect. [Emphasis added]

2. Courtship; chiefly in the phrase, to make love, that is, to court; to woo; to solicit union in marriage.

3. Patriotism; the attachment one has to his native land; as the love of country.

4. Benevolence; good will.

God is love. 1 John 4.

[Other minor definitions have not been included here.]

In thinking about Noah Webster's *American Dictionary* it is startling to realize that every word was penned by his own hand over a course of 27 years. His dedication to Christ and country resulted in a work that has influenced generations of students. Noah realized that it was God Who made it all possible. He wrote in the preface of the 1828 *American Dictionary*,



To that great and benevolent Being, who, during the preparation of this work, has sustained a feeble constitution, amidst obstacles and toils, disappointments, infirmities, and depression; who has borne me and my manuscripts in safety across the Atlantic, and given me strength and resolution to bring this work to a close, I would present the tribute of my most grateful acknowledgements. And if the talent which he intrusted to my care, has not been put to the most profitable use in his service, I hope it has not been 'kept laid up in a napkin,' and that any misapplication of it may be graciously forgiven.

References:

On-line Webster's 1828 Dictionary: <http://www.wealth4freedom.com/wns/Webster.htm>

Noah Webster, by Steve T. Bett at www.owled.com/webster/html

Great American Statesmen and Heroes by Catherine Millard, Horizon Books, 1995, pp. 157-163. This book is available in the GSBC library.

Noah Webster—Founding Father of American Scholarship and Education by Rosalie J. Slater, pp 11-27. This article prefaces *Noah Webster's First Edition of an American Dictionary of the English Language*. This facsimile edition was published by the Foundation for American Christian Education in San Francisco, California in 1980.