Historical Figure: Noah Webster

"Most evenings, when the field work was done and the loom rested silent, the common room of Noah and Mercy Webster's small Connecticut farmhouse was filled with music. Not just the music of the flute, which Mercy played expertly, or the hymns of Isaac Watts, which were vital to the family's daily devotions, but the music of words: the words of prayer, the words of the catechism, the flowing, rhythmic words of the King James Bible. It was only natural that the Webster children should become avid readers and strong writers.

Nor is it surprising, given the tenor of his childhood home, that Noah Jr. (born October 16, 1758), the most precocious of the Webster siblings, should grow up to make a living out of words. During a long and productive lifetime Webster put together an astonishing resume, meriting such epithets as "Forgotten Founding Father," "America's first great social reformer," and "the Father of American Scholarship and Education." But the theme running through the extensive list of his remarkable achievements is the power of language. Words were Webster's driving passion – the tools of his trade, the weapons of his warfare, and the means of realizing his most dearly cherished hopes for the new republic.

It was this love of language that sent him to Yale at the age of sixteen. Seeing his middle son immersed in a Latin grammar under an apple tree, the elder Webster decided that the boy's natural inclinations could only be brought to fruition in a college setting. He mortgaged the farm to finance Noah's education.

At Yale it was the words of Rousseau, Locke, and Paine that stirred his soul and fired his adolescent imagination. In the autumn of 1777, between academic terms, Webster served with the Connecticut militia in the War of Independence, witnessing firsthand the burning of Kingston and the muster of the colonial troops along the Hudson River. He would be a firm and zealous patriot for the rest of his life.

As a college graduate, a self-tutored law student, and a struggling school teacher, Webster found ways to turn words into a financial asset and a means of promoting patriotism. Appalled at the primitive conditions and lack of materials in the Connecticut Common Schools, he founded a private academy and devised a system of public education based upon books of his own composition and design, The Grammatical Institute of the English Language. His "Blue-backed Speller" (so-called because of its blue paper binding) became the nation's best-selling book next to the Bible and the basis of elementary language instruction in the United States for a hundred years. Its
aim was as simple as it was lofty and ambitious: the unification of the country through the creation of a common, standardized, "federal language."

But Webster's attempts to foster national unity through the power of words were not limited to the classroom. As a public lecturer, an attorney, a journalist, and a political essayist he hammered away at the forces of disunion in post-war America, wielding his pen as a formidable weapon in the fight for strong central government. He was the unseen mover and shaker at the Constitutional Convention of 1787, where he cultivated friendships with two-thirds of the constitutional delegates and expounded his theories on politics, literacy, and the importance of a common tongue to anyone who would listen. Washington, Franklin, and Madison were among those who took a keen interest in his views.

As a result of these efforts, a piece of Webster's own writing, Sketches of American Policy, became the unofficial prototype of the United States Constitution. It was only natural that he should also be conscripted to act as the document's official publicist when it came time to campaign for state ratification. Many historians now believe that his clearly written and widely disseminated Examination into the Leading Principles of the Federal Constitution was at least as influential as the better known Federalist Papers in gaining support for the Constitution among ordinary Americans.

In 1793, when the fledgling United States government was faced with a deadly threat in the person of rabble-rousing French ambassador Edmond-Charles-Edouard Genet, it was Webster who came to the rescue with his pen, exposing the Genet's secret revolutionary plot through a series of powerfully written articles and editorials in The American Minerva. Thanks to the clarity and persuasiveness of his writing, the Jacobin scheme to undermine President Washington's administration and extend French hegemony into the western hemisphere was foiled before it had a chance to get off the ground.

This list of goals attained and victories won through the impact of Webster's linguistic skills could be expanded at great length. It was largely with the help of words, for instance, that he carried on a tireless battle against the evils of slavery. With words he pleaded the cause of the needy, set up charitable societies, established an early system of social security, and advanced the medical community's understanding of infectious diseases. But the greatest and most widely remembered of his many language-related exploits is the one for which we know him best: his magnum opus, the great American Dictionary of the English Language – a work so profound in its scholarship, so far-reaching in scope, and of such enduring value that the name Webster has now become all but synonymous with the word dictionary.

In its earliest conception, the dictionary was intended as a companion to the Institute – a relatively small collection of words designed to reinforce Webster's spelling standardizations and provide a vocabulary for young readers of his school anthology. But once the seed of the project was planted in his mind, it began to grow of its own accord. Even before the school dictionary (A Compendious Dictionary of the American
Language, 1806) had come off the presses, Webster was already planning to expand this modest volume (408 pages, 40,600 words) into a much larger work.

He prepared for this massive undertaking by firming up his college Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, perfecting his French and German, and then moving on to tackle Danish, Italian, Anglo-Saxon, Welsh, Old Irish, Chaldaic, Syrian, Arabic, Armoric, and Persian. By the time he was finished, Webster had acquired a knowledge of more than twenty languages and alphabets, exhausted the resources of every library in America, scoured the shelves of the massive Bibliothèque du Roi in Paris, and consulted with the finest linguistic scholars in Oxford and Cambridge. When released in November 1828, his American Dictionary, the fruit of twenty years' labor, contained more than 70,000 words with extensive definitions and etymological origins. In the preface, Webster, a lifelong Congregationalist and a born again Christian who had experienced a dramatic resurgence of personal faith at a revival meeting in 1808, dedicated the volume to God and offered it as a gift to the American people.

"No author before or since has ever written a dictionary with so broad a purpose," says biographer Harlow Giles Unger:

It was not just a list of words and definitions. It was a wellspring of truths that promised his countrymen an increase in 'the wealth, learning, moral and religious elevation of character, and glory' of their country – a self-contained educative institution designed to serve as a secular companion to the Bible.1

It was also, of course, the last and greatest testimonial to its author's deep faith in the power of words – a power which, according to Webster's biblical worldview, is ultimately rooted in the "divine origin" of language.2 For Webster was above all a man who believed that the universe had been spoken into existence by the Word of God,3 – the same Word that became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ.4

Noah Webster spent his final years revising his lexicographical studies, transcribing the Bible into the language of his speller and dictionary (the last component of his "American system of education"), and enjoying the company of his wife, children, and grandchildren. He died on May 28, 1843 at the age of eighty-five.


2 Ibid., 306.

3 Genesis 1:3.