



## BIOGRAPHY

## Noah Webster



Federalist spokesman Noah Webster exhibited amazing knowledge and versatility. During his long lifetime he was a lawyer, schoolmaster, statesman, journalist, dictionary compiler, and textbook writer.

*As you read the passage below, think about what motivated Noah Webster to produce his many works.*

The original “Webster’s Dictionary,” entitled *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, consisted of two volumes containing 70,000 words and their definitions. Published in 1828, it had taken its author, writing every entry by hand, 25 years to complete. The most comprehensive dictionary of its day, and the last ever to be compiled by a single individual, it was Noah Webster’s crowning achievement. He later explained why he thought such a dictionary was necessary for the young nation: “It’s obvious to my mind, that popular errors proceeding from a misunderstanding of words are among the . . . causes of our political disorders.”

Noah Webster was born on a Connecticut farm in 1758. He was about 6 when he first saw the alphabet, printed out on the front page of *The Connecticut Courant*, a newspaper to which his family subscribed. The newspaper printed this display so that parents could teach their children from it. Young Noah needed no encouragement to learn. He soon became an avid reader, and was often caught reading in the shade when he should have been doing farm chores.

In 1774, at age 16, Webster went off to study at Yale College. There he became caught up in the idea of a distinctly American nationality and came

to believe that the colonies should become a nation independent of Britain. Much of what he did later in life was devoted to championing the development of a distinct American culture.

After graduation from college in 1778, he studied law and was admitted to the bar. Jobs for lawyers were hard to find, however, so he became a schoolmaster instead. Dissatisfied with both the quality and quantity of learning aids available to his students, Webster began to write textbooks. Just as he wanted to standardize the definitions of American English words, so he wanted to standardize their spelling. His famous “Blue-backed Speller” sold millions of copies—there was one in nearly every American home. Webster’s speller became the unquestioned source for a favorite American entertainment of the time—the spelling bee.

As he was writing textbooks and compiling his dictionary, Webster was also lecturing and writing on matters of national importance. In the 1790s, he was especially active in defending the Federalists’ cause, producing pamphlets defending their plans for the country’s future. He stated his primary object for all his publications very simply: “to diffuse some useful truths.” Shortly before his death in 1843, he said, “I’m ready to go; my work is all done.”

### Questions to Think About

1. How is Noah Webster best remembered today? What were some of his other achievements?
2. **Determining Relevance** How might an American speller, an American dictionary, and an American history textbook have reinforced a sense of national identity in early nineteenth-century America?