

# Noah Webster

1758–1843



**WHY HE MADE HISTORY** Noah Webster helped ensure that Americans' written works would be protected by copyright laws. He also helped standardize American spelling. Webster's dictionary remains popular today.



*As you read the biography below, think about how Webster's devotion to education made an impact in the early days of America.*



Library of Congress

Think about all the times you have used a dictionary. Did you know that Noah Webster wrote the very first American dictionary? Webster believed in the value of an educated society.

Webster served in the American Revolution and then worked as a lawyer and a teacher. While teaching Webster became unhappy with the American schools. The classrooms were overcrowded—sometimes with more than 70 children in one room. There were no desks and few teachers were properly trained. More importantly, schoolbooks were of poor quality.

Webster believed that Americans should have a uniform way of spelling words. He also believed Americans should spell some words differently than the British did. In 1783 Webster wrote *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language*. It was the first spelling book written in the United States. It became the standard spelling book in American schools. Pioneer parents on the frontier also taught their children to read from this book.

During this time, Webster argued strongly for **copyright** laws to be passed. Webster believed that the things people create should remain their

## VOCABULARY

**copyright** legal right to publish and sell printed matter

property and they should be able to profit from their work. As a result of Webster's tireless efforts, Article 1, Section 8 of the Constitution was written to provide copyright protection.

In 1806 Webster published *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language*, the very first American dictionary. Immediately following the publication of this book, Webster began work on a more comprehensive dictionary. He learned 26 languages so that he could figure out the simplest and most accurate spellings and pronunciations. In 1828 *An American Dictionary of the English Language* was published. It contained more than 70,000 entries. Many American words, such as "squash" and "skunk," were listed for the first time.

Webster devoted the rest of his life to education. Many years after his death in 1843, Webster's impact on American language is still apparent. A version of his dictionary published by the Merriam-Webster Company is still the most widely recognized authority on the American English language today.

### WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

- 1. Draw Conclusions** Why do you think Noah Webster fought so hard for copyright laws?

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- 2. Evaluate** Why do you think Webster thought it was important that Americans have their own way of spelling and speaking?

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### ACTIVITY

Look through a British and an American dictionary for some words that are spelled differently. Make a list of those words. Share your list with your classmates.