

## The Father of American Copyright

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Noah Webster (1758–1843) is perhaps best known for his 1838 dictionary, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, which is still published in revised editions as Merriam-Webster Dictionaries. Webster is also, however, considered the father of American copyright.

Webster was a teacher, a lawyer, and a prolific author. In 1783, he published his first book—a spelling manual. He also traveled the country lobbying states to enact copyright laws under the Articles of Confederation. He was quite successful; of the original thirteen states, only Delaware did not pass such an act.

Webster began to lobby for the passage of a national copyright law after the Constitution was ratified in 1789. By that time, he had published five books of his own, and he encouraged fellow authors George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison to protect their rights as well. Webster's efforts were as successful as his campaign in the states.

When President Washington addressed a joint session of the first Congress in January 1790, he stated that “there is nothing which can better deserve your patronage than the promotion of science and literature.” The bill that would become the first national copyright law was introduced in the House on February 25, and signed into law on May 31, 1790. Intended to encourage learning, the act granted authors exclusive rights to their works for 14 years with an optional 14-year renewal term. Webster, however, wanted a longer period of protection and again lobbied for it.

On January 3, 1831, the 72-year-old Webster, by now well-known for his dictionaries that codified our uniquely “American” form of English, lectured the U.S. House of Representatives for an hour. One month later, Congress passed the Copyright Act of 1831, which extended the initial term of copyright to 28 years. Although Webster undoubtedly influenced the legislators, the new act was introduced and supported in the House by his son-in-law, William Ellsworth, and in the Senate by his cousin, Daniel Webster, which certainly assisted its passage.

By the time of his death in 1843 at age 83, Webster had published five dictionaries, six textbooks, an American English version of the Bible, six other books, and had edited one magazine and two newspapers. It is fitting that this father of American copyright was himself an author, teacher, lawyer, and patriot who championed this country's uniquely American language, grammar, and thought. ©

