Today, Noah Webster is most famous for the dictionaries he compiled. But two centuries ago, he was a well-known political thinker, educator, and author. One of his early writings, a spelling book, became America’s first bestseller and earned him the title “father of copyright.”

When Webster wrote the speller, he was a schoolmaster, work he took up after graduating from Yale University in 1778. Webster’s family had a distinguished history in Connecticut, his home state, but little money. With the economy in chaos from the Revolutionary War, Webster chose one of the few kinds of work available to him.

Dissatisfied by the British spelling and grammar text then used in schools, Webster set out to write a new one. But his interest went beyond spelling and grammar. He believed the new nation needed a distinctive “federal” language to achieve cultural unity.

Webster completed his speller in summer 1782. By then, the United States was independent of British laws, including copyright law. But America had not yet enacted any copyright laws of its own.

So Webster, with letters of endorsement from well-connected friends, set off to persuade states in the union to pass copyright legislation. He visited George Washington, who gave him a letter of introduction to Virginia’s governor; he traveled to New York, where Congress was sitting; and he went to cities from New England to the South.

“America must be as independent in literature as she is in politics, as famous for arts as for arms,” he wrote Connecticut assemblyman John Canfield.

Connecticut was first to pass a copyright statute; it enacted “An Act for the Encouragement of Literature and Genius” in January 1783. All the other states except Delaware followed suit. In 1790, the federal government incorporated copyright protection in the Constitution.

“Not only were these copyright laws of the...