

Early American Made Living from Copyright

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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 school master, 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... states secured very largely by reason of Mr. Webster's personal efforts; but the first Federal Copyright Act of May 31, 1790 was undoubtedly a direct outcome of his endeavors for literary property protection," wrote Thorvald Solberg, the first Register of Copyrights, in a 1925 issue of the *Yale Law Journal*.

On August 14, 1783, Webster obtained a Connecticut copyright, and began publishing his 120-page speller. Schools closed during the war were reopening and needed books. The first 5,000-copy print run sold out within nine months. The following year, the book sold 500 to 1,000 copies a day. By 1875, total sales reportedly exceeded 75 million copies.

Initially titled *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language*, the book became known to a century of American schoolchildren as the "blue-backed speller."

Thanks to dishonest printers, not all royalties reached Webster. Still, the popular book netted a fortune, allowing Webster to support his large family and develop his famous dictionary. ©

A portrait of Noah Webster superimposed on editions of his famous dictionary. A copy of his speller stands to the right.



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