Our Debt to Noah Webster

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Men are never tired of extolling the virtues of military heroes who won their glory, it may be, by a single act. The name of Washington will ever be a name to be revered. The future historian will place General Grant among the select few of the great Generals of the world. The earnest, continuous work of Clay and Calhoun, in the Senate, for nearly a quarter of a century, was entirely eclipsed, in the eyes of the people, by General Taylor's campaign of a few months on the fields of Mexico. Accordingly these men, who had so well fitted themselves for, and had looked forward to the Residency with such eager hope, were thrust aside for a man who had never taken enough interest in politics to vote. While giving to the military hero all the praise that is due him, let us remember that
there are others whose claim to greatness is quite as strong as his.

Of the truly great men of America Noah Webster stands out as a shining example. Born in the midst of the French and Indian war, which was the training school for the veterans of the Revolution, he freely absorbed the martial spirit of the times. At the beginning of the Revolution, he shouldered his musket and took his place in the ranks. Concerning his career as a soldier, biography and history are silent. In truth, it was not on the field of battle that he won distinction, but rather while chained to the desk—working away in the quiet of his study. He was educated at Yale College and was successively a lawyer, teacher, journalist, author, judge, legislator, lecturer and lexicographer. His fame, however, mainly rests upon his work as an author and philologist.
He early turned his attention to literary work and at the age of twenty-four published his Grammatical Institutes of the English Language, in three parts—Grammar, Reader, and Speller.

To fully appreciate this work we must remember that no schoolbooks had yet been published in this country—the colonists looking to the mother country for all such things, and that the system of Education then in vogue was very crude although as early as 1647 the General Court of Massachusetts declared that every town or district of fifty families should support a grammar school to fit young men for Harvard. This was the foundation of our American public school system for the above regulation gradually found its way among the other Colonies, and is the first instance in the world’s history where the State taxed all for the support of the public schools. The common schools were rude.
indeed. The few young men who became students were
generally fitted for college by the Minister who was in
variably a scholar. Yale and Harvard at that time gradu-
ated their students on an easier examination than they
will admit there at the present time. We are prone to
think that those were the days of great scholars but this
we find is not true. Yet there were some remarkably fine
scholars and among them was Noah Webster.

So, it seems, plainly foresaw the outcome of the
Revolution. That we were destined to become a nation:
that as a nation we must build upon the foundation
of intelligence; that this intelligence must be fostered
in the common public schools; that as books are the
vehicles of intelligence, books must be had suited to the
condition of the people that ever to use them. Of his
three books the grammar, he admitted was a failure
and suppressed its publication. Different, indeed, was the
career of the other two, especially the spellers. Webster's Elementary! How familiar that sounds to readers of middle and mature age! That book taught a whole generation to spell. Over seventy million copies of it have been sold and it is used to this day to the extent that its annual sales reach nearly a million. Though modest in form and unpretentious, yet it has taught, at least, three generations the art of spelling.

The origin of our copy right system rests upon, and is contemporaneous with this book. While yet in manuscript, the author, taking it with him, rode on horseback from one State to another showed it to influential men, and petitioned the Colonial Legislatures to pass Copy Right laws. He was successful, and sent his little book forth on its wonderful career. In this connection we cannot but remark how far into the future of spelling, that great pioneer of education saw.
Some six or seven years ago there was a great cry among educational people about "reformed spelling." Societies were formed in the colleges and the members were pledged to use it. Weekly papers of wide distribution adopted rules for leaving off useless letters at the end of words, also to use "f" instead of "ph" and other rules. Many thought they had discovered something new; but hear what Noah Webster said more than a hundred years ago. "The spelling of such words as publick, favour, neighbour, head, prove, phlegm, debt, well, instead of the more natural and easy method public, favor, neighbor, heed, proove, flesh, det, evil, has the plea of antiquity in its favor: and yet, I am convinced that common sense and convenience will sooner or later get the better of the present absurd practice. So we a hundred years behind in regard to our spelling or did Noah Webster live a hundred years ahead of his time?"
About 1785 the Continental Congress expressed this sentiment. Knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall be forever encouraged, and ordered that section sixteen of every township should be set apart for the maintenance of public schools. Thus was our public school system placed upon an enduring foundation. Five years later Congress passed Copy Right laws, thus making it worth while for men of genius and talent to secure the right to themselves of their work. Of this law Webster at once took advantage, and his little blue backed spelling book began at once to be used everywhere in the country. The country merchant as regularly laid in a supply of these books as he did of other staple goods. But though they are largely sold yet, still they have run their course. Other and improved spellers are taking their place; but
it is not too much to say that twenty-five million people owe their knowledge of spelling mainly to Webster. A man of his rank and talents, of his knowledge of public affairs, living in the time in which he did if he had wanted to, could not have kept out of politics. So in 1784 we find him writing political articles for the Hartford Courant. At this time we must remember, the Articles of Confederation were in force and remained so until 1789, when the Constitution was adopted. That they were defective was plain to everybody.

Washington knew this perhaps better than anyone else; for when the Congress voted men from each of the colonies it would then depend upon the colonial legislature whether or not the colony would vote its quota, of the troops. Alas! too often they failed! to the great disappointment of Washington who it may be, had planned a campaign with the expectation of their aid. Though
not in the same, not in a military point of view, but in a civil point of view. Webster also knew something from experience of the defects of the Articles of Confederation. He was going about from one colony to another endeavoring to get the Legislatures to pass Copy Right laws, he no doubt saw how much better it would be if more power was conferred upon the general government. That such a law passed by Congress would make it binding in all the colonies would be much better than to have some of the colonies pass such a law and some fail to do so. We get an idea of Washington's opinion of the government, when in arguing in favor of the Constitution he says, "We are one nation to-day, and thirteen to-morrow; who will treat with us on these terms?" In 1785, Webster set forth the idea of a "most perfect union" in a political pamphlet. Indeed, it became a disputed point afterward whether he or Hamilton deserve the honor of first con-
coming of our present Constitution. The truth about the
matter is that it belongs to no one man but had grown
up in all the leading minds of the time. That Webster
was among the very first to give expression—public expres-
sion to his opinion there can be no doubt. Thus we find
him among the very first of his time in politics. A hun-
dred years ahead of his time in spelling and also a
century in advance in the field of ecclesiastical litera-
ture. For seeing the need of a revision of the Bible he set
himself to work to revise it. He gives as his reason In
the present version, the language is, in general correct
and perspicuous. The genuine popular English of Sam-
peror, peculiarly adapted to the subjects and in many
passage writing sublimity with beautiful simplicity.
In any view the general style of the version ought not
to be altered. But in the lapse of two or three centuries cha-
ges have taken place, which in particular passages in-
pair the beauty in others obscure the sense of the original language. Some words have fallen into disuse, and the signification of others, in current popular use, is not the same now as it was when they were introduced into the version. The effect of these changes is that some words are not understood by common readers, who have no access to commentaries, and who will always compose a great proportion of readers, while other words, being now used in a sense different from that which they had when the translation was made, present a wrong signification or false ideas. Whenever words are understood in a sense different from that which they had when introduced, and different from that of the original language, they do not present to the reader the Word of God. In my own view of this subject, a version of the Scriptures for popular use should consist of words expressing the sense which is most common in popular
usage, so that the first ideas suggested to the reader should be the true meaning of such words according to the original languages. After reading the above I turn to the history of the late revised version and read, "The present Translation of the Bible was made in 1611, two hundred and sixty-three years ago, and since that time, as is well known, the English Language has undergone considerable change. Many words have become obsolete, or have lost their original signification, and now convey to the mind of English readers no meaning at all, or a meaning entirely different from that which the translators intended. Though the Authorized Version is unquestionably by far the best which has ever been made, unequalled and unapproached for close conformity to the Hebrew and Greek originals, for Anglo-Saxon idiomatic force of expression, for rhythmic beauty and for majestic flow and cadence, yet like the sun, it has its
spots, which it is desirable to remove." The above is
from an address delivered February 24th, 1874, by the
Rev. D. Clarke D. D. of Boston. We see how alike the teach-
ing of the two men is, though given nearly a hun-
dred years apart.

But Webster's greatest legacy to his country is his
Unabridged Dictionary. That wonderful lexicon of the
English language. As we sometimes see the magnetic
needle, when disturbed by bodies for which it has an attrac-
tion, oscillate back and forth, until it finally comes to rest
pointing toward the object which attracts it most, so this
great student, attracted now by the study of the law, then
by journalism, and again by Biblical work, and once more
by politics, finally settle down to the great study of his life,
philology—the making of his great Dictionary. Previous to this
he had made a synopsis of words in twenty languages and
perhaps had never entirely withdrawn his attention from
the study of language.

James Parrot, in his work *Girard and His College*, says that one of the reasons why Girard succeeded so well in business was because he was not an highly educated man; that he gave the strength of his mind, his undivided attention, his whole mind and thought to business; that if he had been more of a scholar, he would have been more less interested in some branch of science or thought that would have drawn his attention somewhat from money making and consequently he would not have accumulated so much. There is sound reasoning in this. We believe it to be true.

Now, then, it might be asked, did Webster succeed in so many things? To answer such a question we must remember that the American Educational system was in its infancy. The professions were much smaller then than now. The Doctor, for example, was a physician, surgeon and dentist. It is not so now. The professions are so divided and subdivided that
he who would surpass all others now, must choose a particular line and follow it up until he goes farther in that one direction than anyone else, and not until then does the world call him great.

Though Webster was successful as a lawyer, a teacher, and a journalist, his greatest achievement was the compilation of his Dictionary. It was the work of forty years. What indomitable will power is shown in pursuing one branch of study for that length of time! Especially such a study as gathering, classifying, and finding meanings for words? Differently indeed was his study of words from that of Hamlet. When Polonius asks "what do you read my lord?" Hamlet replies "words, words, words." His mind was feasting on one thing far different from what the words actually and on the written page he only saw "words, words, words," but Webster revealed in the meaning of words.

At first we are apt to think of such work as making a Dictionary
as rather dry, but to the student of philology there is certainly a fascination about it. For he compares the meaning of a word in one language with the same or its synonymous, another he traces back the history of words, to their original, and again being familiar with the history of words he sees how they come to mean what they do.

We are not apt to fully appreciate Webster's great legacy to his country, until we consider its value. It has been said by another, in speaking of the Unabridged Dictionary: "The peasant of the Alpenines drives his goat home at evening over hills that look down on six provinces, none of whose dialects he can speak. But a journey of three thousand miles changes not the sound or meaning of a word."

It was no sooner seen that we were to be a people of one government-one nation, than the great mind of Webster conceived the idea of compiling all the words of the language and establishing a standard by which to pronounce, spell, and define them.
This he forewarn was absolutely necessary, if we would be a people of one language.

Having thus a standard of pronunciation, and a key by which to pronounce words, people of the East will have no different dialect from those of the West, people of the North will talk like those of the South.

A quarter of a century ago the people of the East had quite a perceptible difference of pronunciation from those of the West, but this like log schoolhouses has nearly passed away and our pronunciation, with better schools and a more thorough knowledge and use of the Dictionary, is becoming almost uniform throughout the length and breadth of our land.

So much do we owe the man who gathered to himself the learning of his time and left to his country the storehouse of our language, from which we and our posterity may fully take.