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Manuscripts and Archives Division**

**Noah Webster Papers**  
1764-1843  
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**Manuscripts and Archives Division**

**Revised by Thomas Lannon  
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## Summary

- Main entry:** Webster, Noah
- Title:** Noah Webster Papers, 1764-1843
- Size:** 3.33 plus vols linear feet (8 boxes, 15 volumes)
- Source:** Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1899.
- Abstract:** The Noah Webster papers consist of correspondence, writings by Webster on various topics, diaries, and miscellaneous papers. Correspondence, 1776-1843, and diaries, 1784-1820, relate to his career as lawyer, educator, editor of newspapers, federalist agitator, lexicographer, and etymologist. Included are his writings on banking, the history of political parties, federalism, and suffrage. Also, papers concerning his American Dictionary of the English Language, Amherst College, epidemics, etymology, legislation in Connecticut, amendments to the U.S. Constitution, and other matters.
- Access:** Microfilm must be used in lieu of originals.
- Preferred citation:** Noah Webster Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library.
- Special formats** Commonplace books, diaries.
- Alternate formats:** Microfilm, publications

### **Provenance note**

The collection of Noah Webster's manuscript material was collected by Gordon Lester Ford and his sons, Worthington Chauncey Ford and Paul Leicester Ford, between 1840 and 1898. Ford obtained the bulk of the collection through Webster's son, William, the last 'Webster' descendent. J. Pierpont Morgan presented the Ford collection, including the papers of Noah Webster, to the New York Public Library in 1899. Ford's collection included many volumes now separated from the manuscript material and held in the Rare Book Division of the New York Public Library.

### **Related materials note**

William Greenleaf Webster papers, 1820-1865. Manuscripts and Archives Division. The New York Public Library.

Emily Ellsworth Ford Skeel papers, 1871-1958. Manuscripts and Archives Division. The New York Public Library.

## Biographical note

Noah Webster (1758-1843) was an American lexicographer, educator, lawyer, and editor. His first dictionary, *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language*, was published in 1806. He is best known for the more comprehensive *American Dictionary of the English Language*, finished in 1825 and published in 1828.

Webster must be counted among the founding fathers of the United States. Historians continually note the wide sales of Webster's 'blue-back spellers,' and the monumental achievement of his *American Dictionary* published in 1828. Webster's *Grammatical Institutes of the English Language*, of which the *Speller* was the first part and originally published in 1782, followed by the *Grammar* in 1785 and the *Reader* in 1786, sold some 15,000,000 copies before his death in 1843. With these and other literary and scientific efforts, Webster stimulated the educational programs of the early American republic. He is also remembered for his participation in the fight for an American copyright law, which he personally promoted in the thirteen original states, resulting in its incorporation in the Federal constitution.

A descendent, by his father of John Webster, Governor of Connecticut in 1656, and by his mother of William Bradford, Governor of Plymouth in 1621, Webster was born in Hartford, Connecticut, Oct. 16, 1758. He entered Yale College in 1774, and, after serving in the militia raised to oppose Burgoyne, graduated in 1778. He then pursued the study of the law in the intervals of school-teaching and, in 1781, was admitted to the bar.

In 1783 he published a series of papers in the Connecticut *Courant*, signed Honorius, in vindication of the Congressional soldier's pay-bill and in the same year issued his *First Part of the Grammatical Institute of the English Language, or Webster's Spelling Book*. The profits from this publication, at less than a cent per copy, helped support Webster during the later stage of his career during which he compiled the *American Dictionary*. In 1785, he traveled the Southern States, and presented General George Washington with his "Sketches of American Policy," an early proposal for a new Constitution of the United States.

Webster resided in Philadelphia and served as superintendent of an Episcopal Academy through November of 1787. From December of that year to November of 1788, he published the *American Magazine* in New York City. Webster married Rebecca Greenleaf in 1789 and resided in Hartford, CT until 1793, when he returned to New York City to bring out a magazine on behalf of the policies of George Washington's administration. The daily paper entitled the *Minerva* was begun in November of 1793, and was later accompanied by a semi-weekly paper entitled the *Herald*. The names were later changed to the *Commercial Advertiser* and the *New York Spectator* and continued under other editors.

From 1798 to 1812, Webster lived in New Haven, CT, pursued philological studies, and, in 1807, began the preparation of his *American Dictionary of the English Language* (first edition, 1828, 2 vol.) the improvement of which was his great endeavor and occupied the rest of his life. From 1812 to 1822, he resided at Amherst, MA, and played an instrumental role in the establishment of a new college there. In 1822 he returned to New Haven, and, with the exception of a visit to Europe from June 1824 to June 1825, remained there until his death on May 28, 1843, his 85th year.

## Scope and content note

The Noah Webster Papers include accounts, correspondence, diaries, and manuscript writings. The diary, many of the letters, and some miscellaneous writings were published in Emily Ellsworth Fowler Ford, *Notes on the Life of Noah Webster* (1912, New York) to which reference should be made for a further description of the Webster manuscripts. A bibliography of Webster's publications was later completed by Emily Ellsworth Ford Skeel, edited by Edwin H. Carpenter, and published as *Bibliography of the Writings of Noah Webster* in 1958 by The New York Public Library. In 1953, Harry Warfel edited and published the *Letters of Noah Webster* which added to the letters already published in Ford's 1912 edition. Richard M. Rollins' *Autobiographies of Noah Webster* in 1989 includes excerpts of Webster letters, publications, manuscripts, the unpublished Memoir of Noah Webster, LLD held in Yale's Sterling Library, as well as the diaries held in the Webster manuscripts of the New York Public Library.

## Arrangement note

The Noah Webster Papers are organized in the following series:

- Series I. Correspondence, 1776-1843
- Series II. Writings, 1797-1844
- Series III. Subject files, 1782-1844
- Series IV. Personal miscellany, 1784-1842
- Series V. Websteriana, 1836-1880

## Series descriptions and container list

Reel   Box   Fol

### Series I. Correspondence, 1776-1843

Webster presented himself in his correspondence as a prophetic civil servant speaking for his nation's highest ideals: God and the American people. Through his correspondence one gains a sense of his involvement with political and religious concerns. Much of the correspondence from his later years is addressed to members of his family, especially to his brother Abraham, son William, and members of his daughter Julia Webster Goodrich's family. Letters to and from Webster's wife, Rebecca Greenleaf Webster, are arranged separately in subseries C.

Notable correspondents include: Nathaniel Appleton, Jeremiah Atwater, Moses Atwood, Simeon Baldwin, Jeremy Belknap, Frederick J. Bradley, Charles Chauncey, Henry Clay, Harriet W. Cobb, Thomas Dawes, Thomas Dawes, Jr., C.D. Ebeling, Edward Everett, William Fowler, Benjamin Franklin, James Greenleaf, Eunice W. Hubbard, Henry Hudson, John Jay, William Jay, Thomas Jefferson, James Kent, Rufus King, John Lathrop, Joseph Lyman., Jared Mansfield, Josiah Meigs, William Montgomery, Jedidiah Morse, George Ord, Seth P. Staples, Timothy Pickering, Edward Pope, Joseph Priestley, Josiah Quincy, David Ramsay, Benjamin Rush, Richard Rush, Benjamin Silliman, Samuel Smith, Horatio Southgate, Ezra Stiles, Caleb Strong, Jonathan Trumbull, Benjamin West, John Wheelock, and Oliver Wolcott.

Some of the important letters from Webster's distinguished correspondents have been removed from the collection. A letter from George Washington, from Mount Vernon, July 31, 1788, on the subject of military operations, is held in the Morgan Library, New York. Other letters from the Webster manuscripts have been filed with separate collections, such as the Thomas Jefferson papers and the Benjamin Franklin papers. These letters appear on the last reel of the microfilm. As the collection was heavily used by the Fords, their notations and transcriptions can be found on documents within the correspondence series.

#### I.A. Letters by Noah Webster, 1783-1843

1	1	1	1783-1784
		2	1785-1786
		3	1787-1788
		4	1789-1792
		5	1793-1794
		6	1795-1796
		7	1797-1798
		8	1800-1802
		9	1803-1804
		10	1806-1807
		11	1808-1809
		12	1810
		13	1811-1813
		14	1815-1819
		15	1820-1822
		16	1824-1825
		17	1826-1831
		18	1832-1835
		19	1836-1837
		20	1838-1840

<u>Reel</u>	<u>Box</u>	<u>Fol</u>	
1	1	21	1841-1842
		22	1843

**I.B. Letters to Noah Webster, 1776-1844**

1	2	1	1776-1782		
		2	1783-1785		
		3	1786-1788		
2	2	4	1789		
		5	1790		
		6	1791-1792		
		7	1793		
		8	1794		
		9	1795		
		10	1796		
		11	1797		
		12	1798		
		13	1799-1800		
		14	1801		
		3	3	1	1802-1804
				2	1805
		3	3	3	1806
4	1807-1808				
5	1809				
6	1810-1811				
7	1812-1813				
8	1814-1815				
9	1816-1817				
10	1818-1819				
11	1820				
12	1821-1823				
13	1824				
14	1825				
4	4			1	1826-1827
				2	1828-1829
		3	1830		
4	4	4	1831		
		5	1832-1833		
		6	1834		
		7	1835		
		8	1836		
		9	1837		
		5	5	1	1838
				2	1839-1840
				3	1841
		5	5	4	1842-1843, n.d.

**I.C. Rebecca Greenleaf Webster correspondence, 1789-1845**

Letters sent and received by Rebecca Greenleaf Webster. Her most frequent correspondents are her husband and her son William.



Reel   Box   Fol

## Series II. Writings, 1797-1844

The writings of Noah Webster are divided by topic and arranged alphabetically within each topic. The series includes manuscript drafts of writings on assorted topics including etymology and orthography, legislative matters, and politics and history. Items of note among the writings of Noah Webster include Webster's manuscript draft of the printed circular of February 25 1807, addressed "To the Friends of Literature in the United States." This advertisement described Webster's work in gathering material for the dictionary and also the financial burden it entailed. He asks for contributions from individuals and learned societies to continue his work. The series also includes Webster's etymological research, the "synopsis of words." Around 1810, Webster began work comparing words having the same or cognate radical letter, in about twenty languages, for the purpose of obtaining a more correct knowledge of the primary sense of original words, and of the affinities between English and other others languages. He spent ten years in this comparison of radical words, and arranged them in classes under their primary letters. The synopsis was never published, but in the preface to the unabridged *An American Dictionary of the English Language* he refers to its role in the Dictionary's final form.

Legislative writings include drafts and propositions to the Connecticut and Massachusetts legislatures.

The miscellaneous writings cover a wide range of topics including scientific research. The newsclippings contain a collection of Webster's editorials from Connecticut newspapers from 1836-1842. Writings on politics and history include unpublished manuscripts on governance.

### II.A. Etymology and orthography, c. 1797-1828

5	5	7	Analysis of Richardson's Etymology
		8	Brief sketch of the errors contained in certain elementary books. (A study of vowels and consonants.)
		9	Criticism by Webster of the Practical Spelling Book, compiled by Gallaudet and Hooker. A draft of a letter to the Visitors of Public Schools in Hartford.
		10	Defense of the orthographical accuracy of his dictionary
		11	Discrepancies, etc. in Webster's High School Dictionary
		12	Draft of etymology of words Adonists through Adore
		13	Draft of etymology of words Barter through Basalt
		14	Draft of etymology of words Brach through Bracket (Positive photostat.)
		15	Errors, inconsistencies or discrepancies in the orthography of British dictionaries.
		16	Examination of Lee's Spelling Book
		17	Extracts from various authors, and notes on the derivation and evolution of certain words.
9	5	18	Facts, the safest foundation of Opinion; or, Plagiarisms detected. A collated study of the Grammars of Lowth and Lindley Murray.
5	5	19	Investigation into the Origins and Principles of the English Language and how this investigation throws light on our ancestors
		20	Miscellaneous notes, extracts and quotations
		21	Notes for a lecture
		22	Orthographical study of the letter W
		23	Philology No. 2, On orthography and pronunciation.
		24	Philosophical and Practical Grammar of the English Language, and advertisement. (Printed section of Webster's work .)

<u>Reel</u>	<u>Box</u>	<u>Fol</u>	
5	5	25	Response to Charles Richardson's negative criticism of his dictionary. Review by an anonymous writer of Webster's last article of his collection of papers lately published. (Copy in Webster's handwriting.)
		26	
<u>Reel</u>	<u>Vol</u>		
6	1		Synopsis of words, BD, BR, BZ. (Brown buckram slipcase.)
	2		Synopsis of words, BL, BN, D, S, BG. (Brown buckram slipcase.)
8	3		Synopsis of words G and N. (Brown buckram slipcase.)
7	4		Synopsis of words, L and M. (Brown buckram slipcase.)
8	5-6		Notebooks on words. (Two volumes, bound in tan buckram.)

## II.B. Legislative, 1797-1816

<u>Reel</u>	<u>Box</u>	<u>Fol</u>	
9	5	27	An act for Incorporating the Subscribers to the Bank of Connecticut
		28	An act to incorporate the Trustees of the Ministerial Fund in the First Parish in Amherst, MA, Feb, 1816
		29	Draft of a circular letter dated 1811, draft of resolution, and draft of letter from the New Haven Chamber of Commerce, all related to the Embargo Laws, 1811
		30	Draft of form to be used for appointment to a committee to revise the Statutes of the State of Connecticut, May 1806 Session of the Assembly of the State of Connecticut {May, 1806,}
		31	Draft of the report of the committee on banking to the Massachusetts House of Representatives
		32	Draft of a report to the Legislature of Massachusetts concerning expected reductions in revenue to that state after the separation from Commonwealth of Maine.
		33	Draft of Resolution by "this Assembly" concerning a Statistical History of the State.
		34	Proposed amendments to the U. S. Constitution
		35	Proposed amendments to the U. S. Constitution to be resolved by the October 1797 Session, Connecticut Assembly
		36	Remarks intended as a report on the Petition of Darrow and others, May, 1802
		37	Resolution by the October Session, 1806, Connecticut Assembly, against the secret appropriation of money.
		38	Results of voting in the 1st and 2nd Parishes of Amherst, MA on their proposed union, 1819
		39	To the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Feb, 1815

## II.C. Miscellaneous, 1797-1836

9	6	1	An account of an eruption at Derby, Feb, 1764
		2	Agricultural and demographical statistics
		3	Appraisal of books on sale, cash on hand, bills receivable, etc.
		4	Author's proof with corrections of printed advertisement by Webster in which he comments on a critical pamphlet written by Lyman Cobb, Nov 15, 1831
		5	Autobiographical notes
10	6	6	Circular letter soliciting geographical, topographical, agricultural, and demographical information, May 7, 1798 Response by Rev. Hotchkiss of Saybrook, CT on verso.
		7	Copies of advertisements for the American Magazine, and the Universal Register.
		8	Cure for corns.

<u>Reel</u>	<u>Box</u>	<u>Fol</u>	
10	6	9	Extracts from Jefferson's works.
<u>Reel</u>	<u>Vol</u>		
11	7		Extracts from a variety of authors (Volume containing reading notes by Webster.)
<u>Reel</u>	<u>Box</u>	<u>Fol</u>	
11	6	10	Extracts made by Webster from the Aurora concerning Washington's retirement from the Presidency, Mar 6, 1797
		11	Form of Association for Young Men.
		12	Formal acknowledgment of notification of election to membership in the Societatis Adelphorum in Collegio Concordiae
		13	Index to the Volumes of Pamphlets
		14	Notes relative to Webster's edition of the Bible.
		15	Observations on weather
		16	On Thermotension
		17	Page of notes identified by Mrs. E. E. F. Skeel as having formed Webster's Elements of Useful Knowledge, and History of the United States, although differently phrased.
		18	Petition advertisement for Daboll's Schoolmaster's Assistant, 1826 (Contains an endorsement by Webster.)
		19	Prayer before sailing to Europe
		20	Printed dedication which accompanied the copy of Webster's Quarto Dictionary presented to Queen Victoria, Dec, 1848
		21	Rain and Evaporation from Value of the Bible, 1834
		22	Testimony on prizes taken from a privateer in Boston, 1793
9	6	23	A Word to an Old Fashioned Churchman

#### **II.D. Newsclippings, 1822-1880**

11	6	24	Editorials from Connecticut newspapers , 1829-1842 Connecticut Herald, New Haven Daily Herald, Norwalk Gazette and, Middlesex Gazette, Hartford Courant
		25	Articles and letters to editors signed by Webster pseudonymously as Sidney, Rutledge, and, the Unknown, 1837, n.d.

#### **II.E. Politics and history, 1784-1837**

9	6	26	Association of American Patriots for the Purpose of forming a National Character, Asserting the rights, securing the interests and maintaining the honor, the dignity, and the Independence of the United States
		27	Copies of letters from Thomas Jefferson to Philip Mazzei, 1789 (With comments by Webster)
		28	Copy of inserted in the Courant, No. 1002, after "the long answer.", April 6, 1784
		29	Criticism by Webster of Jefferson's ideas on inheritance
		30	Discourse pronounced before the Connecticut Assembly of Arts and Sciences, 1808 (85 p. )
		31	First draft of memorial of citizens of New Haven, Connecticut, to President Jefferson protesting against his embargo policies., Aug, 1808
		32	First draft of a resolution of a meeting of the citizens of New Haven, Connecticut, for repeal of the Embargo Laws, Jan, 1809
		33	History of Political Parties: Origin of Parties
		34	History of Political Parties: Ch. XVIII, Origin of the Hartford Convention in 1814
		35	History of Political Parties, notes.
		36	Miscellany, fragments, or incomplete.
		37	On banking

<u>Reel</u>	<u>Box</u>	<u>Fol</u>	
9	6	38	On equality and rule of government
		39	On the necessity of checks and balances in the U. S. Constitution
		40	On the necessity of the independence of public officers.
		41	On suffrage
		42	On various defects in the Constitution
		43	Postscript to Essays on Rights of Neutrals.
		44	Reflections on the dispute over which year John Cabot and his sons were commissioned by Henry VIII.
		45	Reflections on Federalism, and Presidents Washington and Adams.
		46	Thoughts on Political Affairs
		47	To the Abolitionists, So called. A letter by Webster to John L. Boswell, and signed "John."

<u>Reel</u>	<u>Box</u>	<u>Fol</u>	
			<b>Series III. Subject files, 1782-1844</b>
			The subject files are made of correspondence, accounts, legal papers, printed material, and other documents arranged by topics of interest to Webster, including his <i>American Dictionary</i> and <i>Speller</i> , Amherst College, copyright law, Webster family genealogy, and pestilent disease.
			<b>III. A. American Dictionary of the English Language, 1807-1844</b>
5	7	1	Circular to the Friends of Literature in the U.S., 1807 (Outlining the scope of his proposed Dictionary.)
		2	Clippings from newspapers and periodicals relative to the dictionary.
		3	A denial by Webster that he borrowed from Todd's Johnson Dictionary in compiling his American Dictionary, July, 1844
		4	Endorsements of the dictionary
		5	Miscellany
		6	Notes by E.H. Barker, the editor of the British edition
<u>Reel</u>	<u>Vol</u>		
5	8		Proof sheets of dictionary
			<b>III. B. Amherst College, 1818-1836</b>
<u>Reel</u>	<u>Box</u>	<u>Fol</u>	
9	7	8	Board of Trustees, 1818
		9	Clippings from the Hampshire Gazette, 1818-1842
		10	Correspondence, 1819-1836
11	7	11	Lists of books to be given to Amherst College, Middlebury College and various persons.
			<b>III. C. Copyright laws, 1782-1828</b>
9	7	12	Copyright applications for Webster's American Instructor before the General Assembly of the State of Connecticut, 24 Oct 1782, 16 Jan 1783
		13	Transcripts of Webster's copyright applications.
		14	House Resolution 140. A Bill to amend the act for the encouragement of learning., Feb, 1848
9	7	15	<b>III. D. Genealogy, 1824-1839</b>
<u>Reel</u>	<u>Vol</u>		
11	9		<b>III. E. Pestilent disease, 1789-1806</b>
<u>Reel</u>	<u>Box</u>	<u>Fol</u>	
5	7	16	<b>III. F. Speller, 1789-1843</b>

Reel   Box   Fol

**Series IV. Personal miscellany, 1784-1842**

Materials in the personal miscellany series are arranged alphabetically and include documents and artifacts such as; Webster's personal accounts, accounts with printers of his books, a commonplace book, his diaries, diplomas and honorary degrees, legal documents, a notebook, and his passports and wills.

9        7        17

Accounts, 1799-1842

Account books, 1788-1842, n.d.

Reel   Vol

10       10

Account book No. 1, 1788-1838

11

Miscellaneous, 1830-1842

Four small account books; Journal of a tour, 1830, Account of towns visited, 1841; List of expenses, 1842; Manuscript book of family prayers.

12

Agreements and contracts

Slipcase containing miscellaneous photostats of Webster's contracts.

Reel   Box   Fol

10       8

1

Agreements and contracts with printers, 1793-1832

2

Commonplace book

Diaries, 1785-1820

Reel   Vol

10       13

1784, Jan 1 - 1820 Sept, 19

14

1785-1787

Reel   Box   Fol

10       8

3-4

Diplomas, certificates of membership in learned societies, 1790-1840

Legal documents, 1786-1842

5

Appointment by Webster of Edward Cranch as his attorney and agent, May, August, and October, 1836

6

Appointment by Webster of John Miller as his Attorney in Great Britain, 11 July 1828

7

Assignment by Samuel Whitman to Sarah Collins of land in Hartford County, CT. Witnessed and signed by Webster as Justice of the Peace, 1786

Copy of a grant by Webster to the Trustees of the Missionary Society of Connecticut to be funded from the royalties from three of his books, Aug 28, 1804

11       8

9

Summons signed by Webster as Justice of the Peace, 3 May 1786

10

Notebook, n.d.

11

Passports, 1824

12

Wills of Noah Webster, 1839

**Series V. Websteriana, 1836-1880**

The Websteriana series consists of materials relating to Noah Webster collected by the Ford family to augment Webster's own papers.

American Magazine and the Universal Register

Copies of advertisements from the State Gazette of South Carolina.

13

Autographs (collection of Webster signatures)

14

Bible, Webster's edition, 1879-1880

Clippings of advertisements and endorsements of Webster's edition of the Bible.

15

Biographical material, 1833-1871

16

Commercial Advertiser, 1876 (Clippings regarding the history of the paper.)

17

Daboll's Schoolmaster Assistant (Printed advertisement)

18

Elements of Useful Knowledge (Printed advertisements)

Reel   Vol

11       15

Life of Noah Webster (Manuscript volume.)

<u>Reel</u>	<u>Box</u>	<u>Fol</u>	
11	8	19	Lists of works by Webster, 1836-1853
		20	Merriam's 1848 Webster's Quarto Dictionary Printed dedication which accompanied the copy of Webster's Quarto Dictionary presented to Queen Victoria, 1838 Dec 12
		21	Miscellaneous clippings, 1840-1862
		22	Promissory notes signed by Truman Webster
		23	Tributes, resolutions and addresses upon the death of Noah Webster Includes memorial by Mrs. Sigourney published in the New World, funeral oration by Dr. Nathaniel W. Taylor, resolutions by Benjamin Silliman, President of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences.