

# Circular.

## TO THE FRIENDS OF LITERATURE IN THE UNITED STATES:

WHEN I first contemplated the publication of an English Dictionary, my design was chiefly limited to the correction of a few palpable errors in orthography and definition, and the insertion of a great number of legitimate words and significations, not found in any British work of the kind. Being led gradually and almost insensibly, to investigate the origin of our own language, I was surprised to discover that this field of inquiry had never been explored with due attention and success; and that the origin and history, not only of the English, but of the Greek, Latin, and other European languages, are yet involved in no small degree of obscurity. The learned men on the continent of Europe, Vossius, Scaliger and others, who diligently studied the elegant languages of Greece and Italy, neglected to resort, for the radical words, to some of the best sources of correct knowledge, the Celtic and Teutonic dialects, which, next to the Hebrew, are the purest remains of the primitive language. Hence much of their labor was spent in vain. They wandered into the field of conjecture, venturing to substitute opinions for evidence, and their mistakes have led subsequent writers into error. Some English investigators of the subject have been more successful; but they have left no small part of the field unexplored. In consequence of these ill-directed and imperfect researches, the English Dictionary of Johnson, the Latin Dictionary of Ainsworth, and the Greek Lexicons, now in use, which are deemed the highest authorities, and which are books of instruction in our seminaries of learning, contain material errors in the deduction of words from their originals. Were these errors a few mistakes only, "quas incuria fudit," the imperfections incident to every human production, the evil might be permitted to exist, without essential injury to literature. But they are very numerous and important. In our own language, the primitive senses of words are, in some cases, totally lost or greatly obscured, which renders the definitions imperfect; and some of its idioms are scarcely explicable, without resorting to the original ideas of the words. To this ill consequence it may be added, that the origin and progress of language, one of the noblest gifts of God to man, the instrument of most of his social enjoyments and all his improvements, lie covered with darkness.

This state of our language has long been lamented by men of erudition in Great Britain; tho none of them appear, from their writings, to have known the extent of the evil; much less has any man manifested the courage to attempt an effectual reformation.

From an examination of all the radical words in the Hebrew, and a great part of those in the Celtic and Teutonic languages. I can assure the friends of learning, that much new light may be thrown on this subject. The wonderful structure of language, and its progress from a few simple terms, expressive of natural objects, which supplied the wants or affected the senses of unlettered men, thro a series of ingenious combinations, to express new ideas, growing with the growth of the human mind, to its highest state of refinement, are yet to be developed and elucidated; numerous facts respecting the origin, migration and intermixture of nations, are to be unfolded or illustrated; and the common origin of all the nations of Europe, and those of Asia, at least on the west of the Ganges, may be confirmed beyond the possibility of a reasonable doubt, by the affinity of their languages. Equally useful are these inquiries in disentangling the difficulties of the heathen mythology, which have perplexed and confounded the ablest writers.

Having devoted some years to the investigation of this subject, and made discoveries which are deemed interesting to literature, I purpose to compile a complete Dictionary of the English Language, inviting to my assistance the instructors of the principal seminaries of learning, with whom I can most conveniently correspond. At the same time, I would exhibit correct etymologies of many Greek and Latin words, which, if it should be thought advisable by good judges of the subject, might be inserted in new editions of the lexicons of those languages. A few corrections of the same kind would also be noted in the Hebrew Lexicon of Parkhurst. As I make a practice of noting the affinities of other languages, a Dictionary of the German, of the Dutch, French, Spanish and Italian languages, in which these affinities are noted, will be deposited in some public library for the use of future inquirers.

Having advanced far in this design, and amassed a large part of the materials for its execution; materials which no other person could use to advantage—I consider it my duty, as it is my wish, to proceed to the accomplishment of the work. This is also the wish of the gentlemen of literary eminence, who best know my views, and the progress I have made, and who, from their own knowledge of the nature of this subject, are best qualified to appreciate the merit of the undertaking. Whatever differences of opinion on particular points of practice, may exist among men of letters, there seems to be but one opinion on the utility and importance of my general design.

But this work has enlarged so much upon my hands, that the state of my own property will not justify the prosecution of it, entirely at my own expense. The incessant labor of eight or ten years, including the time already devoted to the subject, is of itself a great sacrifice; but to this are to be added the expences of a numerous family, and the cost of many books. My own property is not adequate to these expenditures. Similar undertakings in Great Britain have been supported by contributions; and can there be a question, whether the lovers of learning in the United States, will aid, by like means, any design which promises to enlarge the sphere of knowledge. It is judged proper to make the experiment.—There are two modes in which the friends of this undertaking may assist me; by contributions in money, and by extending the use of the books which I have published for the use of schools, which would augment my own resources. The certificates and communications annexed have reference to both these modes. The contributions of individuals and of societies will be gratefully received, and faithfully applied to the proposed object.

Gentlemen, who receive several copies of this address, are respectfully desired to give them an extensive circulation, in the towns in which they reside and the vicinity, and to take such measures to promote the general object, as they shall deem most expedient,

NOAH WEBSTER, jun.

New-Haven, February 25, 1807.

YALE-COLLEGE, February 23, 1807.

NOAH WEBSTER, Esq.

SIR,

THE Faculty of Yale College coincide with you in the opinion, that the improvement of the Lexicography of our language, by tracing its etymological connection with the Teutonic and Celtic tongues, is a

desideratum of no small importance to literature. That this may be accomplished to a great extent, we have not a doubt. The existing dialects of the Teutonic, and the remains of the ancient Saxon and the Celtic, furnish sufficient means to a careful, patient, and judicious investigator, to assure him of extensive success; and the efforts already made, small as they have been, have yet served to shew what more vigorous and persevering attempts might effectuate. Why this field of literature remains to this day so imperfectly explored, it is not easy for us to explain. The ardent and inquisitive spirit of the British nation has made frequent and extensive excursions in almost every path of human knowledge; but for reasons which we cannot assign, has left the origin of a great part of the English language in doubt and obscurity. With no small pleasure do we find this object engaging attention and inquiry in our own country, and already pursued by you to a considerable extent. That serious discouragements flowing from many sources, must, at this early period of our national existence, be incident to a literary effort of this magnitude, we are fully aware. Still we believe them not insuperable. Different as the views of our countrymen may be concerning some things, pertaining to our language; devoted, as many of them may be thought to the acquisition of wealth; and unaided, as they plainly are, to encourage liberally the researches of learning; we believe there is still sufficient public spirit among them to assure to a meritorious work, of the kind which you propose, a respectable patronage. We ourselves most cordially wish you success in this important design; and shall most cheerfully give it every reasonable encouragement in our power.

While we thus express our unqualified approbation of this design, and our disposition cheerfully to encourage it; permit us also to say, that in our opinion, a regard to the taste, judgment, and habits of the public will be indispensable to its success. It is well known that considerable differences of opinion exist with respect to the orthography, and the pronunciation of our language; the classical legitimacy of some of its words, and the propriety of giving to words, to which this is denied, and even to some, to which it is allowed, a place in a Dictionary. Wherever the orthography is settled, it should in our view, remain unaltered. Wherever it is unsettled or disputed, we should incline to that, which can plead most extensively, respectable usage in its behalf. Innovation we should wholly disapprove; considering the fluctuation of language as a serious evil, and believing that it ought never, voluntarily to be increased. The pronunciation, which prevailed in England, universally, or almost universally, during the first two thirds of the last century; which, we are well assured, still prevails among much the greater part of the learned and polished inhabitants of that country; and to which we think we see strong marks of a general disposition to return; is the pronunciation, which we should willingly encourage. But amid the present controversies on this subject it will probably be the least troublesome course, to leave all peculiarities to their own progress. Differences on this subject are, in our view, only increased by contest and collision.

The insertion of local terms in your small Dictionary, we approve. No good reason can be given, why a person who meets with words of this kind, should not be able to find their meaning in a Dictionary; the only place where it can usually be found at all. Nor can we see, why a liberty granted to other Lexicographers, should be denied to you. We are also pleased with your insertion of chemical, botanical, and some other scientific words; and wish the list in these cases, to be increased rather than lessened. In these and several other particulars, we think, that the Dictionary which you have already published, is, what you justly style it, a Dictionary with considerable improvements.

We are respectfully, Sir,  
Your obedient servants,

TIMOTHY DWIGHT, *President.*  
ELIZUR GOODRICH, *Professor of Law.*  
JEREMIAH DAY, *Prof. Math. and Phil.*  
BENJAMIN SILLIMAN, *Chem. Prof.*  
JAMES L. KINGSLEY, *Prof. of Languages.*  
NOYES DARLING,  
JOHN HALL,  
DAVID A. SHERMAN,  
SERENO E. DWIGHT,  
MILLS DAY, } *Tut. s.*

NASSAU-HALL, Princeton, New-Jersey, February 2, 1807.

NOAH WEBSTER, Esq.

DEAR SIR,

WE, whose names are undersigned, do most cheerfully express our approbation of your design of investigating the origin of our language, as far as it can be traced in the ancient languages of northern Europe. And it is with additional pleasure we learn that you hope to make this work subservient to an examination in to the primitive roots of the Greek and Latin tongues. From the history which Moses has given us of the early dispersion of mankind after the deluge, and of the settlements formed by the several branches of the first post-diluvian family, we might naturally expect to find many roots of a primitive language in the different dialects of Europe as well as of Asia. The changes indeed, which these radical words must have suffered in the course of time, from caprice, from ignorance, and many other causes, must, undoubtedly have been great: and the various sounds which have been given to the same combinations of letters in the progress of refinement, and the mixture of nations, and the consequent alterations which have taken place in the orthography of languages, must often render it difficult, under these disguises, to detect the roots from which words, that have departed so far from their originals, have sprung. And the vast multitude of words which the refinements of civilization, the progress of science, and the changes of government, society and manners, have in every country, added to the primitive stock, must greatly increase the labor of discovering, in this mass, the radicals which have formed the basis of so many different languages. But it is a labor well bestowed: and the difficulty only enuances the merit of the execution. The force of many terms it may help to explain. Many idiomatic phrases it may elucidate. It is besides both pleasing and instructive to trace the progress of language from its simplest elements to its highest state of improvement, and to point out the changes which it undergoes at length in different nations. It is, indeed, to trace the progress of the mind, the turn of thinking, and the state of manners among them, which always impress themselves in a less or greater degree, on the language of a people. It has been often said, that the Greek and Latin tongues, in their early state, bear strong marks of affinity with those of the first barbarians who inhabited Europe; but that

\* KVB  
(1807, Feb. 25)  
Webster

affinity has hitherto been pointed out in the resemblance of only a few terms. The illustration of their analogy, as far as that is now possible, is certainly a subject well worthy the attention of the learned. And it is not a little curious to see how such highly polished dialects, in which the powers of speech have been carried almost to perfection, have gradually risen from such a rude original. Perhaps a greater service cannot be rendered to language, than to trace the roots from which it has sprung, and the manner in which its idioms have been combined. On this subject the celebrated Horne Tooke, has thrown new and interesting lights, in his most ingenious analysis of the connective parts of speech.

As we do not doubt your ability for the learned work in which you are now engaged, nor the pains and research you will bestow upon it, we most sincerely wish you success; and hope you will meet from your countrymen with that liberal encouragement, which an undertaking so curious and useful, and so arduous in the execution, well deserves.

Signed.

SAM. S. SMITH, *President of the College of New-Jersey.*  
 JOHN MACLEAN, *Professor of Natural Philosophy and Chemistry.*  
 WILLIAM THOMSON, *Professor of Languages.*  
 ANDW. HUNTER, *Professor of Mathematics and Astronomy.*

*Extract of a Letter to the author, from the Rev. Dr. Samuel S. Smith, President of Nassau-Hall, in New-Jersey, dated Princeton, March 23, 1806.*

DEAR SIR,

I HAVE been much gratified by the perusal of your Compendious Dictionary. It gives me great pleasure to see our countrymen beginning to enter into such accurate literary researches as those which you have been making into the principles of our language. It is evident that a knowledge of the radical languages from which the English has been derived, or out of which it has been compounded, must contribute greatly to the explanation of many of our idiomatic phrases, the true meaning, and the reasons of which have been little understood. Every attempt to analyze language, to trace it to its sources, and then to follow it in its progress towards improvement, affords me a singular delight. You see the human mind in its infancy, and in its gradual advances to maturity. You perceive the modifications, the combinations and infinite relations of its ideas, and that refined and subtle logic which pervades all its operations, exhibited in these visible and audible symbols of its thoughts, and in the various mutations, which, in a course of years they undergo. The national character, is, in some measure, expressed in its language, with its improvement or decline in arts and in manners.

Your criticisms I have read with pleasure for their justness, their candor, and, some of them for their novelty. I have remarked however on the subject of pronunciation, that there is not so wide a difference in the sounds which many of our Dictionaries would give to words, as would appear to be from the letters or characters by which those sounds are attempted to be expressed. For instance in the word *nature*, giving the *u* its long sound of *eu* or *ew*, there will be only very slight shades of difference in the sound when pronounced quickly, as in ordinary conversation, whether we write it *nachure*, *natehure* or *natūre*.

Your printers might readily dispose of several copies of your Dictionary, each session of the College, by lodging them with the Bookseller in this town. I shall cheerfully become a subscriber to your larger work, whenever you are ready to publish your proposals.

In your further labors, I wish you much success, and in due time an adequate reward.

With great respect, I am,

Dear Sir, your most obedient servant,

SAMUEL S. SMITH.

*A letter from Dr. John Wheelock, President of Dartmouth College, to the author:*

**DARTMOUTH COLLEGE, August 4, 1806.**

SIR,

HAVING carefully examined your Compendious Dictionary, I am happy to express my favorable opinion of the work, as exhibiting an extensive survey, critical researches, just conclusions and useful improvements in our native language. Every skilful endeavour to develop the principles of a science so conducive to the happiness of man, and to reduce it to correct and chaste rules of practice, is justly entitled to the approbation and encouragement of all candid and enlightened minds.

I may assure you that the professors of this institution, who have examined the performance, accord with me in their favorable opinion of its merit; and in contemplating the future advantage resulting from it to the interests of civil society, and the republic of letters.

Please to accept the assurance of my great consideration, and believe me to be,

Sir, your very respectful, and obedient servant,

JOHN WHEELOCK.

**WILLIAMS COLLEGE, December 10, 1806.**

WE the undersigned, having examined with care and attention, a Compendious Dictionary of the English Language by Noah Webster, Esq. are much pleased with the design and execution of the work. In orthography, pronunciation, etymology, and the definition of words, it corrects many errors and abuses found in the best Dictionaries now in use. It is much more copious and gives a more full and accurate definition of many words, than any other compendium; and may therefore serve very well as a substitute for an octavo Dictionary. The compiler, in his researches into the origin of the English language, and in his accurate knowledge and development of its principles, surpasses, in our opinion, the compilers of all other Dictionaries, with which we are acquainted. The work, in our view, highly merits the approbation and patronage of all the friends of literary improvement in America and England. We wish the writer success in the compilation of the larger work, in which we understand, he is assiduously engaged.

EBENEZER FITCH, *President.*

GAMAJIEL S. OLDS, *Professor of Mathematics and Natural Philosophy.*

TIMOTHY P. GILLET, } *Tutors.*

HORATIO WALDO, }

HENRY STARR, *Preceptor of the Grammar School,*

*Extract of a letter from the Rev. Jeremiah Atwater, President of Middlebury College, dated October 3, 1805.  
to the author :*

DEAR SIR,

I HIGHLY approve of your Compendious Dictionary in general, and have no hesitation in giving my opinion, that it will in time, be received into extensive use in this part of America. I have ever thought that as citizens of an independent nation, we ought not to rely servilely on the English nation for books to explain the language spoken in our country. I trust that you will persevere in your laudable pursuit, and be enabled to accomplish your principal design. An enlightened public will sooner or later do justice to your highly meritorious exertions.

I am, Sir, respectfully your obedient servant,  
JEREMIAH ATWATER.

*The recommendations of the first copy of the American Spelling Book are too numerous to be here inserted. The following, from respectable instructors, relates to the revised Copy.*

HAVING examined the revised Copy of Mr. Webster's Spelling Book, we are of opinion the work is very much improved both by the new tables and lessons, as well as in the accuracy of execution. The simplicity of the scheme of pronunciation, the classification of the several kinds of words, the arrangement of all parts, and the suitableness of the tables for teaching the youth of America what is appropriate to their country, are excellencies in this book which we have not seen in any other, and in our opinion, give it a claim to universal patronage.

DANIEL CROCKER,  
BELA KELLOGG,  
EZEKIEL W. MORSE,  
HEMAN HUMPHREY.

*New-Haven, July 5, 1805.*

WE have examined the first and second volumes of the Elements of Useful Knowledge, published by Noah Webster, jun. Esq. containing a Historical and Geographical Account of the United States. We are of opinion the work is well conceived and judiciously executed. It comprises a series of facts, important to be known and understood by American youth. The arrangement of the subjects, under distinct heads, is happily calculated to assist the memory, and render the performance peculiarly useful for Academies and Schools. We with pleasure recommend it to parents and instructors, as well adapted to the improvement of their children and pupils.

JAMES DANA, *Trustee.*  
ELIZUR GOODRICH, *Professor of Law.*  
BENJ. SILLIMAN, *Professor of Chemistry.*  
SIMEON BALDWIN, *Judge of Supr. Court.* } Yale College.

THE Third Volume of the Elements of Useful Knowledge, which completes the historical and geographical account of the globe, has recently been published.

