

*Noah Webster, Defining American*, permanent exhibition at the Noah Webster House & West Hartford Historical Society, 227 South Main Street, West Hartford, CT (860) 521-5362, admission for house tour \$7/adults, \$5 seniors and AAA Members, \$4 students aged 6-18 and college students with a valid ID, free for those 5 and younger. Hours 1 p.m.-4 p.m. Thursday-Monday; [www.noahwebsterhouse.org](http://www.noahwebsterhouse.org)

Noah Webster (1758-1843) was born in the house that now serves as the headquarters for the West Hartford Historical Society. Although the Websters were farmers, his parents realized that young Noah had a remarkable passion for learning and therefore sent him to Yale College. Upon graduation, with no money to pursue his desired career in law, Noah began working as a teacher. He published his most celebrated works, the *Blue-Backed Speller* in 1783, and the first American dictionary in 1828, yet these famous publications were only a fraction of his many contributions. Educator, author, political activist, social reformer, marketing genius: Noah Webster's extraordinary, and to some extent, unknown, legacy directly influenced our country's heritage from Revolutionary War times and continues to be relevant in the present day. This is the theme of the new permanent exhibition *Noah Webster, Defining American*, at the Noah Webster House in West Hartford. Visitors are invited to explore how Noah Webster's ideas impacted America, at a time when our nation was forging its own identity and culture as a young Republic, and serves to link his vision to our own lives today.

Bright and cheerful, the inviting, newly-constructed museum space offers visitors the opportunity to view the Museum's introductory film by stepping inside an area created to resemble a historically accurate one-room schoolhouse. As the lights dim, an old-fashioned blackboard cleverly retracts to reveal a flat-panel television. The fifteen minute film combines a mix of actors depicting historical figures, still photography from historical collections and archives, and current video of students from the local Webster Hill Elementary School. The movie moves chronologically to include biographical information and address themes such as Noah Webster's role in shaping language and culture, first as a school teacher and prolific writer, and his perhaps lesser-known roles as an often-controversial federalist leader, "nation-builder" and abolitionist. Quotes from notable historical figures are sprinkled throughout the film. "The most wonderful book I know of," remarked Hartford native Mark Twain, about Webster's most famous work, *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language*. More widely known as the familiar *Blue-Backed Speller*, Webster's ambitious goal was to standardize pronunciation and spelling of the American language, at a time when the former colonists were struggling to create a unified identity as an emerging young nation. Like the accompanying exhibition, the film seeks to link the significance of Noah Webster's contributions with our present day life, and this is nicely accomplished by ending with current students at nearby Webster Elementary using a computer spell check program for their research reports.

The new gallery housing the exhibition is effectively designed to maximize the use of a small space, placing the panels at different angles to create clearly identifiable sections and to carve out more appealing, multi-dimensional areas. Although

much of Noah Webster's legacy is his writings—books, letters, newspapers, textbooks, and political speeches—the exhibit strives to provide visitors with a more engaging experience than simply reading text, by incorporating design techniques such as colorful graphics and state-of-the-art interactive technology. For example, instead of a detailed list of the many books written by Webster, the introductory panel captures the wide range of topics he tackled with enlarged reproductions of such titles as, "Sketches of American Policy," and "Brief History of Epidemic and Pestilential Diseases." In addition, several of the exhibit sections include a clever interactive design element (called "breadboards") for the visitor to learn more about a particular topic by sliding out of a slot a hand-held panel displaying additional information and thought-provoking questions.

Each exhibition panel addresses a specific theme and the impact of Noah Webster's ideas and influence. The first, "Government," entitled "Out of Many, One" presents Webster's work to unify many small states in favor of a strong federal government, as he worked tirelessly through newspaper editorials to promote the ratification of the Constitution and creation of a Congress. The inclusion of breadboards in this section offers visitors the opportunity to read actual excerpts from "Sketching a New Form of Government," which Webster claimed was the basis for the Constitution. Flipping the board over, true/false questions challenge our actual knowledge of the Constitution. Additionally, the information about his contribution to modern copyright laws pose provocative questions about the legality of downloading images, music, or movies from the Internet, certainly a relevant topic for today's museum audience.

Moving on to the second panel, "Social Reform," Webster declares "no sober, reflecting man can cast his eye over the world and see the miseries of man, without a wish to alleviate them." The text outlines his fervent belief that good public schools, educated citizens, civic engagement, temperance, and the abolition of slavery were essential for the new nation to be successful. The exhibit's breadboards focus on Webster's specific discourses on temperance, the abolition of slavery, and religion. This section includes another interactive element linking Noah Webster's ideas to our own current events. Movable magnetic strips list some of the more controversial issues of his day that have continued on to our own time, such as teaching English to immigrants, fighting disease and epidemics, and equal educational opportunities for boys and girls. Visitors are encouraged to express their own opinions by rearranging the magnetic strips to rank the different issues.

The exhibition also provides an opportunity for the Museum to display the few artifacts that may have been owned or used by Noah Webster, in the next section, "Family." A desk, trunk, clock and decanter are on display, but visitors will enjoy picking up the attached magnifying glass to closely examine an interesting ring belonging to Noah or his wife of 54 years, which upon closer inspection holds locks of interwoven hair. One of the most engaging artifacts is not from Webster's era, but a marvelously detailed oil painting by a local artist, commissioned by the Museum staff specifically for this exhibition. The painting incorporates many different ele-

ments to depict Webster's significance and impact on American life in his own time as well as ours. A useful interpretive device allows visitors to press buttons to light up certain sections of the painting, each accompanied by brief descriptive audio to highlight a particular theme relating to his life. Noah Webster is seated at a desk, his beloved flute at his feet, surrounded by books, an anti-slavery illustration, a painting of Amherst College, which he helped to found, and a bust of George Washington, whose voice reminds us of Webster's contribution to modern day copyright laws.

The remaining panels in the exhibit incorporates Noah Webster's fascination with language and spelling, and offer visitors a lighter side to their museum experience. "Word Play" is a colorful display, particularly appealing to younger audiences who can sit down at a counter with stools to play with alphabet blocks. Upon closer examination, each block is actually a clever tool to disseminate information. Noah himself would have approved, as each letter is brightly illustrated to describe him in some way, such as Z for "Zealous Lexicographer," L, "Loved Languages," the amusing Q for "Quarrelsome," K stretches with "Kind to the Poor." Again, the goal of the exhibit is not to simply display two-dimensional text, but to provide layers for further exploration to engage and inform the visitor. One breadboard challenges us to define our country's current goals of public education. We are asked to choose what we think is more important, fostering a lifelong love of learning or preparing students to be productive citizens, only to discover Noah Webster was writing about the very same issues back in 1839. "Education" includes two book reproductions, exact in size and color for the visitor to pick up and thumb through. *The Elementary Primer*, printed in 1835, and the 1783 *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language* give visitors a good, hands-on sense of the lessons young schoolchildren studied in the nineteenth century. This section also contains plastic pull-out bins filled with brightly-colored binders, whose laminated pages include word games, puzzles and other activities, such as learning how certain hand gestures communicate different things among different cultures. Who knew our "thumbs-up," signaling approval, is seen as an insult in the Middle East? The more clearly delineated themes of the earlier part of the exhibition get a bit lost here, but children will certainly enjoy pouring through the bins and trying out some educational games.

In the concluding interactive panel, entitled "Language" (a heading unfortunately the visitor does not view until actually exiting past the panel) the visitor can attempt a magnetic crossword puzzle mounted on the wall, using colorful letters and a list of definitions from Webster's 1828 Dictionary. Here, the interactive element could use some tweaking, or at the very least, a "word bank," as few, if anybody, will know the word for "a quadruped of the Stag Kind" or "a plant of the genus *Curcubita* and its fruit." But this is mere quibbling, as one can also page through the large 1828 Dictionary as an interesting comparison with the Merriam-Webster versions we use today. More "Lift here to learn more" breadboards further engage and encourage participation, with Noah Webster quotes about his dictionary project, and his work on spelling reform, on words such as "gaol," "mould," "soop" and "wimmen."

The exhibition *Noah Webster, Defining American* may be small, but its professional design maximizes limited exhibit space to effectively transport the visitor into Noah Webster's world with a dynamic blend of colorful graphics, artifacts, archival reproductions, written text, and clever design techniques such as the use of breadboards. Its mission, to engage and educate visitors about Webster's many significant contributions, but with a thought-provoking exchange, successfully encourages the museum audience to make personal and relevant connections with a fascinating figure in American history. These new, lively interpretive spaces at the Noah Webster House and West Hartford Historical Society tell Noah Webster's story and accomplishments, the significance of which we can all appreciate. Letting my computer spell check my document now somehow feels like cheating.

Jean Kelly