



Memoranda and Documents

NOAH WEBSTER AND THE INVENTION OF IMMIGRATION

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IN 1806, Noah Webster (1758–1843), the oldest son of a poor Connecticut farmer, a sometime schoolteacher and sometime lawyer, sometimes said to be a distant cousin of the great Massachusetts senator Daniel Webster and sometimes said to be unrelated, published *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language*. Despite widespread belief, Webster was not the first American to compile a dictionary, nor was the *Compendious Dictionary* the first book about language that Webster wrote. He had previously addressed English grammar, pronunciation, and reading, and when he issued his dictionary, he was already renowned as author of *The American Spelling Book*. Originally published as *The First Part of the Grammatical Institute of the English Language*, the speller remained in print, under various titles, from 1783 until well into the twentieth century, and, in its countless editions, it is thought to have sold between 70 and 100 million copies in the United States, outstripped by the Bible alone.¹

¹ See Harry R. Warfel, *Noah Webster, Schoolmaster to America* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1936), pp. 1, 5; Emily Ellsworth Fowler Ford, comp., and Emily Ellsworth Ford Skeel, ed., *Notes on the Life of Noah Webster*, 2 vols. (1912; reprinted New York: Burt Franklin, 1971), 2:197; Noah Webster, *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language* (Hartford, Conn.: Hudson & Goodwin, 1806); Noah Webster, *The American Spelling Book . . .* (1783; Albany, N.Y.: Charles R. and George Webster, 1804); Noah Webster, *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language . . .* (Hartford, Conn.: Hudson & Goodwin, 1796); Noah Webster, *An American Selection of Lessons in Reading and Speaking . . .* (Albany, N.Y.: Charles R. and George Webster, 1804); Thomas Sheridan, *A Complete Dictionary of the English Language . . .* (Philadelphia: Sheridan–William Young, 1789); Robert Keith Leavitt, *Noah's Ark: New England Yankees and the Endless Quest* (Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1947), p. 6; Donald J. Lloyd and Harry R. Warfel, *American English in Its Cultural Setting* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), p. 461; David Micklethwait, *Noah Webster and the American Dictionary* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2000), p. 10.

TABLE 1

Migrate and Its Derivatives in Webster's *Compendious Dictionary*

	Commigrate (v.)	Commigration (n.)
	Emigrate (v.)	Emigrant (n. & adj.); Emigration (n.)
	Immigrate (v.)	Immigrant (n.); Immigration (n.)
	Remigrate (v.)	Remigration (n.)
Migrate (v.)	Transmigrate (v.)	Transmigrant (n.); Transmigration (n.)
	Migration (n.)	
	Migratory (adj.)	

The *Compendious Dictionary* was not comprehensive: it defined only about 37,000 words; in comparison, the most well-known and highly regarded dictionary of the time, Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), contained more than 42,000 words. Moreover, Webster's work omitted many of the features now expected of dictionaries—information about pronunciation and etymology, for example; it was simply a list of words arranged alphabetically, each entry spelled properly (according to Webster), defined, and its part of speech identified.

Even though Webster's first dictionary is almost unknown to everyone except students of American English and is not regarded as the first edition of Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828), it is the important starting point for an exploration of Webster's evolution as a lexicographer. Like all lexicographers, Webster built upon the work of his predecessors, but he also made some significant modifications in usage, even his own understanding of usage, as reflected in a comparison of the dictionaries of 1806 and 1828. One notable word, or set of words, whose significance in American history can hardly be overestimated, is *migrate*, including its many derivatives, especially *immigrate*. *Migrate* and the variant forms of the word that Webster includes in the *Compendious Dictionary* can be listed as above (see table 1).

When the variants are thus arrayed, several interesting points emerge. First, each of the verb forms has an associated noun form that signifies "the process of —ing." Second, only three of the verb forms engender a noun form signifying "one who —s." However, the most surprising feature about the five verbal variants of *migrate* is that Webster defined them in almost indistinguishable ways (see table 2).

TABLE 2
 Definitions of *Migrate* and Its Derivatives (v.) in Webster's
Compendious Dictionary

Commigrate	To remove or to go away in a body
Emigrate	To remove from place to place
Immigrate	To remove into a country
Migrate	To change place to remove
Remigrate	To remove or rove back again
Transmigrate	To pass from place to place

All the words involve “removing” from place to place, with the qualification that those “commigrating” do so in a group and those “remigrating” retrace their steps. Webster seems to have attempted to explain the prefix *trans-* by substituting the verb *to pass* for the verb *to remove*. With the prefix *im-*, or *in-*, he appears to have wanted to answer the question “into where?”²

In compiling his *Compendious Dictionary*, Webster relied on the work of previous lexicographers, including John Ash, Nathan Bailey, John Entick, and Samuel Johnson.³ In his “Noah Webster’s Debt to Samuel Johnson,” Joseph W. Reed Jr. estimated, based on a limited sample of words, that Webster drew about one-third of his definitions from Johnson.⁴ Webster’s personal copy of Johnson’s *Dictionary*, now housed in the New York Public Library, is replete with marginal emendations, including several relating to the *migrate* family. In fact, Webster’s definitions for the word and its variants read almost like abbreviations of Johnson’s. The only substantive difference between them is that Johnson has used the word *country* in defining *commigrate* and *transmigrate* and Webster has built a regional distinction into *immigrate* only (see table 3).

²Webster also gave another meaning for the verb *transmigrate*, referring to the migration of the soul from one body to another.

³John Ash, *The New and Complete Dictionary of the English Language* . . . (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1775); Nathan Bailey, *An Universal Etymological Dictionary* . . . (London: E. Bell et al., 1721); John Entick, *Entick’s New Spelling Dictionary* (New York: Ming and Young, 1802); Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* . . . (London: Printed by W. Strahan, 1755).

⁴Joseph W. Reed Jr., “Noah Webster’s Debt to Samuel Johnson,” *American Speech* 37 (May 1962): 97–98. In copying from Johnson, Webster was neither unusual nor unethical. It is generally recognized that only an entire dictionary, not the definition of a single word, can be copyrighted. Given the historic nature of language and the

TABLE 3
 Definitions of *Migrate* and Its Derivatives in Webster's
A Compendious Dictionary and Johnson's *A Dictionary of
 the English Language*

Word	Webster's Definition	Johnson's Definition
Commigrate	To remove or to go away in a body	To remove in a body, or by consent from one country to another
Emigrate	To remove from place to place	To remove from one place to another
Immigrate	To remove into a country	WORD NOT INCLUDED
Migrate	To change place, to remove	WORD NOT INCLUDED, ALTHOUGH <i>MIGRATION</i> IS DEFINED AS AN "ACT OF CHANGING PLACE"
Remigrate	To remove or rove back again	To remove back again
Transmigrate	To pass from place to place	To pass from one place or country into another

The *Compendious Dictionary* was less than a year off the presses when Webster circulated his intentions to produce a larger dictionary.⁵ A few years into the project, he became convinced that speech had had its origins in a single language. He delved into study, ultimately claiming proficiency in more than twenty languages, to trace etymologies as a way of ascertaining the historically correct meaning of English words.⁶ Only after he felt that he had completed this colossal task did Webster deem himself ready to complete his larger

prescriptive function of dictionaries, one would not want one's lexicographer to be too creative.

⁵Warfel, *Webster, Schoolmaster to America*, pp. 309, 316.

⁶The result of these efforts was a work that Webster referred to as the "Synopsis." Never published, it resides in the manuscripts section of the New York Public Library and is all but incomprehensible. Webster seems to have associated what he thought were similar sounds, such as "M" and "N" or "T" and "D" or "V" and "F," to create various lists of words from different ancient languages. When I was doing research at the NYPL, Thomas Lannon, a manuscript librarian who has worked extensively with the Webster Papers, gave me a strange look when I asked to see the "Synopsis." Only after I had spent the better part of a day going through it did I understand his bemusement. The most complete description of the "Synopsis" can be found in Micklethwait, *Noah Webster*, pp. 167–68.

TABLE 4
 Definitions of *Migrate* and Its Derivatives in Webster's
American Dictionary of the English Language

Commigrate	To migrate together; to move in a body from one country or place to another for permanent residence
Emigrate	To quit one country, state or region and settle in another; to remove from one country or state to another for the purpose of residence
Immigrate	To remove into a country for the purpose of permanent residence
Migrate	To pass or remove from one country or from one state to another, with a view to permanent residence, or residence of some continuance*
Remigrate	To remove back again to a former place or state; to return
Transmigrate	To migrate; to pass from one country or jurisdiction to another for the purpose of residing in it; as men or families†

*Offering a second definition of *migrate*, Webster acknowledged that the word has an alternative, and opposite, usage—"to pass or remove from one region or district to another for a temporary residence: as the Tartars *migrate* for the sake of finding pasturage."

†Webster also recognized the second usage of *transmigrate* that he had included in the *Compendious Dictionary*—"to pass from one body into another. "Their souls may pass from one body into another."

dictionary, which finally appeared in 1828 as *An American Dictionary of the English Language*.

The *American Dictionary* contained nearly twice as many words, about 70,000, as the *Compendious*. Like Johnson had, Webster frequently provided quotations in his new work to illustrate the correct meaning and usage of various words. And, based on his linguistic studies and on previous dictionaries, he prepared many new definitions and etymologies.⁷ Among those newly defined words were *migrate* and its derivatives. Making space, time, and purpose fundamental characteristics of migration, Webster created definitions that had never before appeared in a dictionary of the English language. As he defined it, *to migrate* meant to cross an international border or boundary; the movement was "permanent," and its purpose was "residence" (see table 4).

Unlike many of the definitions in the *Compendious Dictionary*, Webster does not seem to have appropriated these meanings from another lexicographer. They were not based on Johnson's work, nor

⁷The etymologies are often considered to be the weakest part of the *American Dictionary*. See, e.g., Micklethwait, *Noah Webster*, p. 170.

were they based on any dictionary that had been previously published in the United States. Although Webster generally followed Johnson's practice of citing an authority for the definition of a particular word and providing a quotation that demonstrated its usage and meaning, he did not do so for every word derived from *migrate*. He identified no "authority" for the words *commigrate*, *emigrate*, or *migrate*, and he provided no quotations to illustrate their proper usage.

For *remigrate*, Webster simply cited "Boyle," presumably Robert Boyle (1627–91), who used the word *remigrate* in *The Sceptical Chymist* (1661) and several other works. Boyle, however, was referring to chemical properties and not human migration; therefore, Webster's use of the word *state* in his definition can be read in two ways, as a chemical condition or a regional descriptor, although the regional aspect cannot be attributed to Boyle. Johnson, too, had cited Boyle as an authority for his definition of *remigrate*, which was much less specific than Webster's.

In his references for *transmigrate*, Webster cited an otherwise unidentified "Brown" and "Howell." Johnson had also quoted Brown, Howell, and the poet John Dryden (whom Webster disregarded). "Brown," like Boyle, was not referring to human behavior. Sir Thomas Browne (1605–82), a surgeon whose *Pseudoxia Epidemica* (1658) was a popular science manual, had considered the question of whether human souls could *transmigrate* into other animals. Nor does the quotation from the unidentified "Howell," taken word for word from Johnson's *Dictionary*, concern movement across a physical terrain: "Their souls may *transmigrate* into each other."⁸

Thus, the only word in the *American Dictionary* that might supply some insight into the origin of Webster's definitions of the *migrate* family is *immigrate*. Webster offers no quotation for the word, but he lists his authority as "Belknap," surely the Reverend Jeremy Belknap (1744–98), a Congregational minister, author of a three-volume *History of New Hampshire* (1784–92), founder of the Massachusetts Historical Society, and a frequent correspondent of Webster's. Another scholar of languages, John Pickering, gives credence to the claim that Belknap was the source of Webster's use of the word *immigrate* and also of the words *immigrant* and *immigration*. Pickering (1777–1846)

⁸Tracing the word *transmigrate* clearly shows how lexicographers expropriate each other's definitions. In almost every citation of *transmigrate* on the Internet, the quotation from Howell is given incorrectly, omitting the crucial word *souls*, without which the quotation is meaningless.

was an eminent philologist, a student of Asian languages, a founder of the American Oriental Society, and a president of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His father, Timothy Pickering (1745–1829), was a postmaster general of the United States, secretary of war, the third secretary of state (1795–1800), and one of Noah Webster’s closest friends.

In 1817, the younger Pickering published a short “Vocabulary . . . of words and phrases peculiar to the United States of America.” In it, he targeted many English words that he believed were misused in the United States. Among them he included “To Immigrate, Immigration, Immigrant,” words “first used in this country . . . by Dr. Belknap in his *History of New Hampshire*.” Webster, Pickering went on, had “inserted them in his [*Compendious*] dictionary; upon the authority, I presume, of Dr. Belknap.” Edward Augustus Kendall, an English traveler and writer, Pickering concluded, “observe[d] that ‘immigrant’ is perhaps the only new word, of which the circumstances of the United States *has* [*sic*] in any degree demanded the addition to the English language.”⁹

Neither Kendall nor Belknap, however, had used the *immigrate* cluster precisely as Webster would twenty years later in the *American Dictionary*. Kendall had mentioned the word *immigrant* only in a footnote; he had not defined it.¹⁰ In the preface to the third volume of his *History of New Hampshire* (1792), Belknap had referred to “another deviation from the strict letter of the English dictionaries, which is found extremely convenient in our discourses on population. From the [Latin] verb *migro* are derived *emigrate* and *immigrate*. . . . Accordingly, the verb *immigrate* and the nouns *immigrant* and *immigration* are used without scruple in some parts of this volume.” In one subsequent passage, Belknap referred to “emigrants from Europe” when comparing them to the native-born population of the United States. He did not, however, specify, as Webster later did, that *to immigrate* necessarily involved crossing an international border with the intention of permanent residence, for he wrote that “large emigrations have been made since the peace of 1763 [the settlement of the French and Indian War], from the neighbouring states, into

⁹John Pickering, *A Vocabulary or Collection of Words and Phrases . . . Peculiar to the United States of America . . .* (1817; reprinted, New York: Burt Franklin Reprints, 1974), pp. 107–8; Mary Orne Pickering, *Life of John Pickering* (Boston: J. Wilson and Son, 1887).

¹⁰Edward Augustus Kendall, *Travels through the Northern Parts of the United States, in the Years 1807 and 1808*, 2 vols. (New York: I. Riley, 1809), 2:252.

the new townships of New Hampshire.” And, in still another passage, when writing about people who moved into New Hampshire, he said that “they brought with them an affection and respect for the colony whence they emigrated.” Yet more to the point, in the appendix to the third volume of his *History*, Belknap noted, when explaining a “table of population,” that

the augmentation of numbers in New-Hampshire has undoubtedly arisen, in part, from immigration. It is impossible to determine with precision, what the amount of this immigration is. But we may give a probable conjecture. . . . For if we can ascertain the number of years, in which the inhabitants of the United States, collectively taken, have generally doubled their numbers by natural increase, we shall be furnished with data, by which we may estimate the natural increase of inhabitants in New-Hampshire from the year 1767 to the year 1790, which number being subtracted from the number taken by the census, the remainder will be immigrants.¹¹

It is highly likely, as Pickering stated and as Webster himself later noted, that in compiling his *Compendious Dictionary*, he had derived the word *immigrate* and its related forms from Belknap; he had not, we know, borrowed it from Johnson, obvious source for other words in the cluster, who had not included *immigrate* in his *Dictionary*. But although Webster had defined the word *immigrate* in the *Compendious Dictionary*—“to remove into a country”—much as Belknap had in his *History*, as Webster prepared his *American Dictionary*, he seems to have given some serious thought to his definitions of the *migrate* family. Deviating from his own, earlier usage as well as that of Belknap, Webster coined a new, more restrictive meaning for the infinitive *to immigrate*. Thus, although he could credibly recognize Belknap as an “authority,” as an original source for the term, Webster did not quote him because the historian had used the word in a form the lexicographer now chose to revise.

But whether Webster invented his definition of *immigrate* or derived it from other lexicographers or from contemporary usage, after his *American Dictionary* appeared in 1828, his definition became universally accepted in the United States.¹² As even

¹¹Jeremy Belknap, *The History of New Hampshire . . .*, 3 vols. (Boston: Bradford and Read, 1813), vol. 3, preface, 3:172–78, 192, 473.

¹²By way of contrast, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *immigrate* as “to come to settle in a country (which is not one’s own); to pass into a new habitat or place of residence,” a definition that is more ample in its options and less pointed in its purpose than Webster’s. Perhaps following Webster, the *OED* cites Belknap as an authority.

TABLE 5
Definitions of *Immigrate* in Selected Contemporary Dictionaries

Dictionary	Definition of To Immigrate
<i>American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language</i> (1978)	To enter or settle in a country or region of which one is not a native*
<i>Oxford American Dictionary and Thesaurus</i> (2003)	Come as a permanent resident to a country other than one's native land
<i>Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary</i> (1997)	To come into a country of which one is not a native, usually for permanent residence
<i>Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language</i> (1960)	To come into a new country, region, or environment, esp. in order to settle there
<i>Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary</i> (1985)	To come into a country of which one is not a native for permanent residence
<i>Webster's Third New International Dictionary</i> (1971)	To come into a country of which one is not a native for the purpose of permanent residence

*Although this definition of *immigrate* does not contain the word *permanent*, its definition of *immigrant* is "one who leaves a country to settle permanently in another."

a cursory examination of widely used, contemporary dictionaries reveals, his definition—sometimes in its exact wording, sometimes slightly modified—has dictated Americans' construction of the words *immigrate*, *immigration*, and *immigrant*, as well as their understanding of the phenomenon. Of the dictionaries surveyed, only one lacks even one of Webster's characteristics of immigration (see table 5).

Although it is probable that Webster redefined other words in his dictionary, arguably few, if any, of those new definitions have had the impact in the United States that his reworking of *immigration* has. By telling Americans that immigration involves coming from another country, Webster set up an us-versus-them opposition, foreigner against native-born. By telling Americans that immigration is permanent and involves the intent of residence, Webster encouraged them to fear that in time they might be displaced, their cities overrun and their jobs jeopardized. Writing, as he was, before the first major waves of nineteenth-century immigration to America, it is unlikely that Webster, an ardent nationalist, intended such a powerful social construction when he simply redefined a cluster of words centering on the word *to migrate*. But for more than 175 years, his definition of the

infinite *to immigrate*—“to remove into a country for the purpose of permanent residence”—has shaped the way millions of citizens have thought about a phenomenon that, perhaps more than any other, has defined (and hopefully will continue to define) America, the Land of the Free.

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