

## **Curriculum Unit Introduction:**

**Title of Unit:** The Quest for an Educated Society, 1760-1820

**Vital Theme of the Unit:** The purpose of this unit of instruction is to help students in Advanced Placement U. S. History better understand all the work and planning done by our Founding Fathers as they strived to create a national culture.

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**Grade Level:** Eleventh Grade Advanced Placement U.S. History Students

**Number of Lessons in Unit:** Two **Time needed to complete unit:** Two class periods

**Curriculum standards addressed:** College Board AP US History Course Outline

**Technology Used:** N/A

### **Unit Introduction and overview of Instructional Plan:**

The students taking AP US History will be studying the American Revolution and the birth of the new nation about midway through the first six-weeks grading period. After several class lectures and reading assignments covering the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation and the struggle to create the U.S. Constitution, students should possess some insight into the problems facing the new government due to the religious and cultural differences of the population. These two lesson plans will introduce two primary source documents written by Noah Webster as he campaigned for the development of a 'national language.' The students will analyze these documents in order to better understand Webster's argument. After interpreting the meaning of the documents, the students will then form their own opinions about the necessity and practicality of Webster's plan and write a persuasive essay to support their case. These lessons provide excellent opportunities for the students to use their language art skills, both in the interpretation process and in the writing assignments. They should be able to address the following questions:

- Did Noah Webster have a legitimate argument for this national language?
- Was Webster's plan practical and doable in his lifetime?
- What were some obvious problems with Webster's plan?
- Was Webster's goal ultimately accomplished?
- What would Webster think about our 'national language' today?

This unit of instruction can be introduced and completed in two class periods. Students will be assessed on the quality of their essays.

## **The Quest for an Educated Citizenry**

Not long after Americans had collectively acquired their independence from Great Britain during the American Revolutionary War came the troubling realization that, quite possibly, thirteen new nations had been created, rather than just one. Most of the geographical, economical, social, and political differences that had always existed between the English colonies were still obvious, if not more pronounced, among the states after the war. Even the Articles of Confederation did little to unify these new states. Article II declared that “each state retains its sovereignty, freedom, and independence” (Art. II, Articles of Confederation). Eventual problems caused by distrust in the new federal government, such as Shays’s Rebellion and the Whiskey Rebellion, were constant reminders that simply achieving independence had not necessarily created a united nation. Therefore, concerned proponents of the new American Republic searched for ways to prevent the unraveling of the vulnerable new nation.

Among the many suggestions made by American intellectuals, including cultivating a population of freedom-loving citizens, attempting to invent a more standardized language, and composing a list of national heroes and legends, was the ultimate goal of developing an “American culture” as a means to “unify a heterogeneous society, to heal political divisions and quiet political contentiousness, to foster republican citizenship, and to achieve respect for the new state in the eyes of the world.” (Kornfeld, 8). Consequently, most also believed that the cornerstone to creating this culture was the extension of a unified system of public education which would meet the needs of the new nation. They organized a campaign to encourage legislation which would replace the existing randomly funded and sponsored schools with tax-supported public schools that would provide a formal republican education. Included in the many American intellectuals that were interested in educating the citizenry of the new nation

were two notorious educational reformers, Noah Webster and Charles Coffin. Although these two men did the majority of their work in different geographical sections of the country and with different levels of students, they still shared the common goal of improving and extending education throughout the entire nation in order to insure a stronger and more efficient United States.

Noah Webster (1758-1843), was raised in Connecticut and educated at Yale. He later became a teacher, lawyer, and a devoted patriot. According to Webster, "We ought not to consider ourselves as inhabitants of a particular state only, but as Americans" (Garraty, 129). He was one of the many members of his generation who believed that a national culture was essential to giving Americans a true sense of identity. Webster did much in his lifetime to advance nationalism in education, which eventually earned him the title "Schoolmaster of the Republic" (Bailey 335). As a teacher, Webster witnessed firsthand the problems that resulted from the current practice of placing large numbers of children of various ages and levels in that same classroom and using textbooks which were written and produced in England. This, he believed, prevented the citizens of our new country from "staving off the influence of Europe" (Kornfeld, 20). He therefore made it his mission to write his own textbook, entitled "A Grammatical Institute of the English Language," commonly called the "Blue-backed Speller." In this book he attempted to "Americanize" the spellings of many commonly used words and to clarify their meanings, pronunciation, and usage in the hopes of creating a more pure and universal language. Eventually, this book became the "most widely used American textbook of the period; it sold more than 24 million copies in the first half century" (Kornfeld, 19). Webster later went on to publish a "Reader" textbook containing excerpts from inspirational speeches delivered by the leaders of the American Revolutionary War for students to read, memorize, and

recite. His objective was to encourage Americans to take pride in the nation's compilation of heroes and literature. This book also became a best-seller by the turn of the century (Garraty, 129).

At times, Noah Webster found himself in the position of having to justify his goal of unifying the American language. In two separate publications, "Dissertations on the English Language: with Notes, Historical and Critical, 1789" and "A Collection of Essays and Fugitive Writings, 1790" he tried to convince his audience to "Let us then seize the present moment, and establish a national language, as well as a national government" (Kornfeld, 103). Finally, Noah Webster's most notorious contributions to the American language were published in 1806 and 1828, respectively, first his "Compendious Dictionary" and later a massive, unabridged dictionary which earned him "lasting fame and respect" (Kornfeld, 19). The greatest evidence of Webster's triumph with these publications is the fact that both students and professionals of today still seek out a "Webster's Dictionary" for questions regarding vocabulary. Webster best expressed his passion for his life's work by his own statement, "A national language is a national tie, and what country wants it more than America?" (Kornfeld, 21).

Reverend Charles Coffin was another member of the Revolutionary generation who devoted his adult life to expanding education in America, focusing primarily on higher level institutions that were located in the southern section of the country, an area of the nation where learning how to farm had always taken precedence over "book learning." Coffin was a Presbyterian minister, teacher, and college president who was raised in Massachusetts and graduated from Harvard. He made his way to the South in 1800 and joined the faculty of Greeneville College, a small institution situated in the northeast corner of Tennessee that was on the verge of closing due to some conflicts involving the faculty and administration over religious

philosophy. Coffin's first official duty was to seek out donations, both money and books, from some of his wealthy contacts in the northeast who supported the expansion of education throughout the nation in an attempt to save the southern college from extinction. Apparently he was quite successful at this particular task, as some of his contacts turned out to be three American presidents: Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Andrew Jackson. Coffin was able to raise over \$9,000 in his first endeavor, and Greeneville College immediately "sprang back to life" (Fuhrmann, 20).

Eventually, Charles Coffin assumed both the vice presidency and presidency of Greeneville College. He is also credited with establishing a curriculum that was academically rigorous for higher level students, including writing, grammar, mathematics, history, philosophy, Latin and Greek, and also some general rules for conduct that were considered to be "strict even by the standards of the day" (Fuhrmann, 22). Students at all levels of instruction were required to undergo "examinations and exhibitions" at the end of each term, and commencement day at Greeneville College became a community-wide celebration where upwards of 700 people attended. Charles Coffin was reportedly able to "govern well, and, at the same time, to win and to retain the respect and affections of the youth" (Fuhrmann, 26).

Despite his credibility, Charles Coffin and the other trustees of Greeneville College were unable to persuade the United States Congress to award their college the 50,000 acres of land for a college in East Tennessee. Instead, that distinction went to the college that was formerly called Blount College, but is now known as the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. Nevertheless, administrators at that college were apparently impressed enough by Charles Coffin and his accomplishments at Greeneville College to try and convince him to come to UT. He was offered a large salary, an impressive home, and "greater opportunities and fewer difficulties" (Fuhrmann

34). Coffin accepted this new challenge and became the third president of the University of Tennessee. In addition to his administrative duties, he also continued to teach the subject that had always been his great passion, literature. Under President Coffin's leadership, the college began a major expansion project for some additional buildings, including what became his chief concern, a larger and more extensive library. In order to acquire money for this project, he personally embarked on a fund-raising campaign "to select and purchase suitable books for the library, with the money collected for that purpose" (Montgomery). Once again, Coffin's solicitations proved successful as he was able to accumulate over \$1200 in donations and numerous volumes of books for the new library. Coffin was also instrumental in building the college's first official building, called "Old College," for a cost of \$13,000.

Unfortunately, the Board of Trustees at the university became increasingly concerned about the amount of money that was being spent on building projects. They also disapproved of the reputation that the college was gaining for being a "school for the wealthy." These criticisms ultimately led to Charles Coffin's resignation. However, the Board did eventually honor his contribution to the institution by his devotion to the expansion of the college library, stating that "Coffin has done greatly more than any other individual in the south western portion of the Union, both in collecting the material, and in diffusing the elements and principles of knowledge and literature (UT Board Minutes, Jan. 5, 1833).

Noah Webster and Charles Coffin were by no means the only proponents of expanding education to the citizenry of the new nation. Many of those same notorious individuals that Webster paid tribute to in his "Reader," such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, actually discussed the benefits and the practicality of building a national educational system, even as early as the Constitutional Convention. Both reason and research

persuaded them to consider the idea of having “a common school in every town, an academy in every county, and a college in every state,” as proposed in Plato’s *Republic* (Unger, 261). But Noah Webster and Charles Coffin felt passionately enough about educating Americans that it became not only their life’s mission, but also their legacy. In fact, Noah Webster might be labeled somewhat of a ‘prophet,’ considering this nation’s ongoing work to achieve one of his own ideas, which was to “create a complete system of universal public education that would give ‘all classes’ of Americans the intellectual skills to govern themselves and the practical skills to sustain themselves and their families” (Unger, 40).

## Bibliography

### **Primary Sources:**

Articles of Confederation

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### **Secondary Sources:**

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Fuhrmann, Joseph T. The Life and Times of Tusculum College. Greeneville: Tusculum  
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## Lesson Plan Outline

**Unit:** The Quest for an Educated Society, 1760-1820

**Lesson Title:** Noah Webster's Dissertations on the English Language

**Grade Level:** Eleventh Grade Advanced Placement US History Students

**Essential Question related to Vital Theme:** How did Noah Webster help to create a national culture by working for the creation of a national language?

**Lesson Time:** One fifty-five minute class period

**Curriculum Standards:** Course Description Outline for AP US History

**Technology used and how:** N/A

**Materials:** copies of *Dissertations on the English Language: with Notes, Historical and Critical, 1789*, for each student

### Activity description and overview of instructional strategies:

Students will receive primary source documents of Noah Webster's *Dissertations* (Kornfeld, 102-7) to read and interpret. They will be instructed to find evidence to answer the following questions:

- How did Webster justify his plan to nationalize the American language? Did he have a valid argument?
- Would most Americans at that time have agreed with Webster at that time? Why or why not?
- What would have been the greatest advantage to using Webster's plan?
- What would have been the greatest disadvantage to using Webster's plan?
- Do you agree or disagree with Webster on this issue? Why or why not?

After analyzing this document, students are instructed to write a persuasive essay to argue for or against the creation of a national language. They are encouraged to use the knowledge they have previously acquired about the situation of the United States under the new government and the diversity of the population.

**Assessment:** The students will be assessed on the quality of their essays, based on their use of facts, interpretation, and inference of prior knowledge.

### Works Cited:

Kornfeld, Eve. Creating an American Culture, 1775-1800: A Brief History with Documents. Boston. New York. Bedford/St. Martins, 2001.

## Lesson Plan Outline

**Unit:** The Quest for an Educated Society, 1760-1820

**Lesson Title:** Noah Webster's Collection of Essays and Fugitiv Writings, 1790

**Grade Level:** Eleventh Grade Advanced Placement US History Students

**Essential Question Related to the Vital Theme:** How did Noah Webster help to create a national culture by working for the creation of a national language?

**Lesson Time:** One fifty-five minute class period

**Curriculum Standards:** Course Description Outline for AP US History

**Technology used and how:** N/A

**Materials:** copies of *A Collection of Essays and Fugitive Writings, 1790*, for each student

### Activity description and overview of instructional strategies:

The instructor will first review the previous assignment regarding Webster's *Dissertations* and discuss the persuasive essays that the students wrote to argue for or against the creation of a national language. Then each student will receive a copy of Noah Webster's Collection of Essays (Kornfeld, 108-109) to read and interpret. Students will be asked to re-write Webster's 'Preface' and change the spellings of the words that he had altered in his attempt to defend the orthographic reforms he had proposed. After making these corrections, the students and teacher will discuss which word modifications were practical, and therefore accepted by the public, and which modifications were not. The teacher should introduce the following questions into the discussion:

- Why do you think the public greeted this book with "ridicule and disbelief?"
- How did Kornfeld describe Webster's response to his critics?
- How could textbooks or a dictionary be used as 'propaganda'?
- Regarding your persuasive essay, does this assignment change your opinion of creating a 'national language'?
- Was Noah Webster's idea of an "American Language" ever accomplished?
- Do you think Noah Webster would approve of our public schools providing ESL (English as a Second Language) lessons and textbooks today?
- If not, how could you justify ESL to Noah Webster?

At the end of this discussion, students should be able to understand the difficulties of addressing the needs of a diverse population, both in Noah Webster's day and today.

**Assessment:** There will no grades assigned for this activity.

### Works Cited:

Kornfeld, Eve. Creating an American Culture, 1775-1800: A Brief History with Documents. Boston. New York. Bedford/St. Martins, 2001.