

WEBSTERISMS: IN SEARCH OF NOAH'S HEADWORDS

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Noah Webster's *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828) is a browser's paradise, revealing many words whose meaning has changed since Noah's time and others that he idiosyncratically defined. I offer fifty of Webster's definitions below, and challenge the reader to guess the headwords that Webster was trying to define. To make the task more approachable, wordlengths are provided for the to-be-discovered headwords, which are listed in alphabetical order of their appearance in the dictionary. All of these headwords, if not Webster's definitions, should prove to be familiar to readers of *Word Ways*.

1. A name given in Ceylon to a large snake, a species of Boa, which is said to devour travelers. Its flesh is excellent food. (8)
2. A machine, in the human form, which, by certain springs, performs some of the natural motions of a living man. One of these machines, invented by M. Vaucanson, appeared in Paris in 1738, representing a flute player. (7)
3. A name given by Herschel to the newly discovered planets between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter. (8)
4. In the West Indies, a hog roasted whole. It is, with us, used for an ox or perhaps any other animal dressed in like manner. (8)
5. Polite literature; a word of very vague signification. It includes poetry and oratory; but authors are not agreed to what particular branches of learning the term should be restricted. (6-7)
6. A treat on wearing a new suit of clothes, or on receiving a suit from the tailor; also a treat on first coming into prison; a garnish. (8)
7. Any little round thing, that plays loosely at the end of a string, cord, or movable machine; a little ornament or pendant that hangs so as to play loosely. Our common people apply the word to a knot of worms, on a string, used in fishing for eels. (3)
8. To embarrass with difficulties; a popular or vulgar use of the term in the United States. (6)
9. The cook-room or kitchen of a ship. (7)
10. A company of travellers, pilgrims or merchants, marching or proceeding in a body over the deserts of Arabia, or other region infested with robbers. (7)
11. A liquor extracted from mushrooms, used as a sauce. (7)
12. An officer who superintends the reception of ambassadors. A person who regulates the forms to be observed by the company or attendants on a public occasion. (6 2 10)

13. That confusion, or confused mass, in which matter is supposed to have existed, before it was separated into its different kinds and reduced to order, by the creating power of God. (5)
14. Voluntary descent from rank, dignity or just claims; relinquishment of strict right; submission to inferiors in granting requests or performing acts which strict justice does not require. Hence, courtesy. (13)
15. A name given to certain deformed and helpless idiots in the Alps. (6)
16. In modern usage, a male of the human species, who dresses himself like a doll, and who carries his character on his back. (5)
17. The geological deluge, which is supposed to have swept the surface of the earth, and to have conveyed the fragments of rocks, and the remains of animals and vegetables, to a distance from their native localities. (7)
18. One who delights in promoting science or the fine arts. (10)
19. Old clothes; tattered garments. [A vulgar word.] (4)
20. A name given to certain followers of Des Cartes, who held the opinion that they were uncertain of every thing except their own existence and the operation and ideas of their own minds. (6)
21. The practice of medicine without a medical education. Hence, quackery; the pretensions of an ignorant man to medical skill. (10)
22. The fling of a horse. In Spanish, flight, escape. (8)
23. To unfold; to open and expand. (6)
24. A substance dug from the earth, or penetrated with earthy or metallic particles. (6)
25. A softer name for a deist; an unbeliever; one who discards revelation. (11)
26. An imaginary being, supposed by the cabalists, to inhabit the inner parts of the earth, and to be the guardians of mines, quarries, &c. (5)
27. A stringed instrument of music; in England and the United States, used chiefly by ladies, but in Spain and Italy, much used by men. (6)
28. A person affected with debility, lowness of spirits or melancholy. (13)
29. Impotence of males; inability to procreate children. (10)
30. In Hindoostan, a thick wood of small trees or shrubs. (6)
31. Pieces of old cable or old cordage, used for making points, gaskets, mats, &c., and when untwisted and picked to pieces, it forms oakum for filling the seams of ships. (4)
32. Something fantastical or uncommon, or some thing that has no particular name. (8)
33. Sweet or rich so as to cloy or nauseate. (8)
34. A house or apartment appropriated as a repository of things that have an immediate relation to the arts; a cabinet of curiosities. (6)
35. Any place where irrational animals are produced. (4)
36. An officer who has the care of the poor or of an idiot, etc. (8)
38. A temple in the East Indies in which idols are worshiped. (6)
39. An assembly where each person contributes to the entertainment. (8 for NW, 6 for us)
40. Any frightful object, especially in the dark; a bugbear; a word in common popular use in America. (5)

41. A new term in geography, used to designate a great number of isles in the Pacific ocean, as the Pelew isles, the Ladrones, the Carolines, the Sandwich isles, the Marquesas, the Society isles and the Friendly isles. (9)
42. One who is impertinently busy or meddling. (10)
43. Practicing tricks; juggling. (11)
44. The parts of generation. (7)
45. A place appointed for the assembling of troops, or the place where they assemble; or the port or place where ships are ordered to join company. (10)
46. The foretelling of future events by persons without divine aid or authority, and thus distinguished from prophecy. (10)
47. A woman who meddles in public affairs; in contempt. (11)
48. In universities and colleges, a classic author written with wide spaces between the lines, to give room for the observations or interpretation dictated by the master or regent. (4-4)
49. A piece of paper bearing some number in a lottery, which entitles the owner to receive such prize as may be drawn against that number. When it draws no prize, it is said to draw a blank, and the holder has nothing to receive. (6)
50. A corrupt pronunciation of the word English by the native Indians of America. (6)