
canoe moose powwow
1555 1613 1625
boss frontier cookie
1635 1676 1703
barbecue American
1733 1776
abolition mammoth
1787 1802
1817 1831
Dixie dude
1859 1877
jazz motel
1913 1925
teenager cybernetics
1938 1948
UFO biodegradable
1953 1961
ageism geek yuppie
1969 1978 1984
PC newbie Ebonics
1990 1993 1997
AMERICA
in So Many Words
Words That Have
Shaped America
David K. Barnhart and
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AMERICA IN SO MANY WORDS

Words That Have Shaped America

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Introduction: Representative Words

America is built of words. Here are the best and the brightest of them, one for each year.

We Americans have added tens of thousands of words to the English language in the nearly four hundred years since speakers of English began living on this continent. A few of these words, like *sockdolager* (1827) and *tintinnabulation (1845)*, ring in our minds because of their oddity. But the most telling, and the most important, are ordinary building blocks of our everyday conversations: *apple pie* (1697), *mileage* (1753), *commuter* (1865), *gridlock* (1980), even *hello* (1885). They are so familiar it is hard to imagine they were once new.

This is a book that notices those words. Year by year, it shows words that have accumulated in our vocabulary to make us what we are today: *OK* (1839) and *nifty* (1863), *cool* (1949) and *groovy* (1937), *geek* (1978) and *soccer mom* (1996). Not all at once but bit by bit, the words we now take for granted have developed the American character.

For each year since the middle of the century of American independence, and for many earlier years from the time of the first English-speaking settlements, this book highlights one word or phrase of special significance that was added to the

vocabulary in the particular year. Most of these words have retained or added to their importance in the years since. They designate the things we talk about, the attitudes we take. They are the names we call ourselves.

Our choicest American words, for the most part, are for practical use rather than grand pronouncements. We could say they are Representative words, not Senatorial words. In fact, when we make our most profound statements of principle, we employ language that is universal rather than identifiably American. "When in the course of human events . . ." employs no particularly American vocabulary, nor "Four score and seven years ago . . ." nor "I have a dream. . . ." These use philosophical, religious, and everyday terms that were already in the common stock of English. For distinctively American vocabulary we look instead to the journals of *planters* (1619) and *pioneers* (1817), tales of *cowboys* (1779) and *yuppies* (1984), marketing of *cure-alls* (1821) and *fast food* (1954), news of *filibusters* (1852) and *boondoggles* (1935). Some of these words had inauspicious beginnings but increased in importance over time. Some developed new senses and dropped their original ones. Some just burst upon the scene and found such comfortable niches in our language that it seemed as if they had been around forever.

History

We can sum up the development of our language *P.D.Q.* (1875), using one easy label for each century: "Nature" in the seventeenth century, "Independence" in the eighteenth, "Expansion" in the nineteenth, and "Science" in the twentieth.

The first great American contribution to the English language, in the 1600s, came from the need to name the amazing North American animals and plants. Some of the new names came from English words like *corn* (1608) and *catfish* (1612), adapted or combined to suit the new situation. Others like *raccoon* (1609) and *moose* (1613) were borrowed from the impressive languages spoken by the Indians, imitated as best as possible in English. We borrowed from the Indians' names for tools, like *tomahawk* (1611), and customs, like *caucus* (1763).

As the colonies developed a momentum of their own, so did their influence in the English language, with the innovation of *Thanksgiving* (1621), *public school* (1636), and *boss* (1635). The colonists conceived and changed the *frontier* (1676). The first *alumnus* (1696) graduated. The eighteenth century reflected the religious *awakening* (1736), mustered the *minuteman* (1774), and greeted the *cowboy* (1779) and *immigrant* (1789). In the nineteenth century the nation tapped its *mammoth* (1802) ambitions and *know-how* (1838) to create urban *skyscrapers* (1883) and *sweatshops* (1892). In the twentieth century we tested *IQ* (1916) and educated *rocket scientists* (1985).

Over the years, as the United States has gained international importance, we have increasingly exported our words to the rest of the world. Not just for spacious skies and amber waves of grain is America known, but for its words. All over the world people say *OK*. They wear *T-shirts* (1919), sleep in *motels* (1925), raise *teenagers* (1938), listen to *rock and roll* (1951) and develop *software* (1959), and in doing these things they often use our words for them.

The words of our past make clear that there was never a golden age from which we have degenerated into our current troubles. From the first days of the English language in North America, its speakers have been embroiled in difficulties, conflicts, failures, and calamities. Yet, as our vocabulary also shows, we have retained the optimism that coming times will be better and that we can, through sacrifice or ambition, not just pursue happiness but attain it.

Choices

Each year has seen dozens, sometimes hundreds of new American words. There have been two attempts to record them all: the four volumes—2528 pages—of the *Dictionary of American English* (1938–44) and two volumes—1911 pages—of the *Dictionary of Americanisms* (1951). Each averages well over ten entries to a page, so we begin with 20,000 or so words identified as American in origin. In the half century since the publication of those dictionaries, we have created many more

Americanisms and discovered earlier ones. This book makes no attempt to list them all. Instead, it seeks for each year the ones that have meant the most to us, either at the time of their creation or at the present day—or both.

Whatever the individual merits of the more than three hundred words and phrases chosen for this book, they all have the distinction of making a place for themselves in the American vocabulary. This is no mean achievement. Most terms that are invented, like most *gizmos* (1944), do not make it. To take a typical example, *OK* and the lesser-known *n.g.* are the only two survivors of the blizzard of humorous initialisms coined in Boston in 1839. On the other hand, some years in our history have seen an explosion of significant new words. In 1915, for example, arose *community center, flapper, handicapped, homeroom, parent-teacher-association, lowdown, goof, pink slip, runaround, schlock, skyhook, Tin Lizzie, cover girl, teammate,* and *black widow spider.* Of these, we chose *flapper* as most revealing of the attitudes of the time. Many of the words in this book are not necessarily distinguished; some are positively low. But they all are symptomatic of American thought and action.

Origins

Where did the words come from? Some are borrowed from other languages, like *raccoon* (1609) and *banjo* (1740). Others are familiar English words with new American meanings, like *corn* (1608) and *pioneer* (1817). Some are new combinations of familiar words, like *catfish* (1612), and other are corruptions or slang versions of words, like *wannabe* (1981). Some are abbreviations, like *AWOL* (1863) and *DJ* (1950). Some take people's names, like *gardenia* (1760) and *teddy bear* (1906), or place names, like *bunkum* (1819) and *Chautauqua* (1873). A few are imitative, like *katydid* (1752) and *duh* (1963). And a few—just a few like *sockdolager* (1827)—seem to have sprung from nowhere.

Not all of our entries are single words or abbreviations. Some are compounds made up of two or more words. But they are compounds that we treat as single words; only the

accident of spelling makes *deadhead* (1841) look like one word and *hot dog* (1895) like two. *Drugstore* (1810) is spelled as one word, *skid row* (1931) as two, and *grass roots* (1901) sometimes as one, sometimes as two; but all are singular concepts. In such compounds, the whole is different from the sum of the parts. For example, the words *rock and roll* (1951) viewed individually do not have any obvious connection with music, and *couch potato* (1976) is not the name of a vegetable.

Each of our chosen words has been assigned to a year in which it was newly coined or newly prominent. For a few words, assigning the year was no problem at all. We know, for example, that *OK* was invented in 1839 and became popular almost immediately. And we know who Teddy Roosevelt was speaking to, on what day, when he launched the modern meaning of *muckraker* in 1906.

More typically, however, important Americanisms slip into our language without any formal announcement. They may have been widely known before the earliest available evidence. One day they just show up in writing and speech, seemingly already well established. This is the case especially with older words, but it is also true of many recent additions, like *dis* (1986) and *about* (1991). Scholars have sought their beginnings in old books, magazines, newspapers, diaries, letters, government records, and legal documents, but the search has only begun and many earlier sightings can be expected. For example, it was not until 1996 that researcher Barry Popik discovered a newspaper article that dates *hobo* as far back as 1848; previously it had been observed only from 1889. This book makes use of the best evidence available at present, and we look forward to further revelations that will improve our knowledge of a word's history. We have taken advantage of the necessary uncertainty about starting dates and made the choice for each year as significant a word as possible.

Every year there are many thousands of potential new words, some of them deliberately coined, others spontaneously created in response to new situations. They are like seeds in the ground, waiting for rain and favorable weather to sprout. Should we note the date when the seed was planted, when it sprouted, or when it became a full-sized plant?

Even for words that have well-documented beginnings, when they became known beyond a small circle and entered general use remains a question. Take the very recently prominent *Ebonics,* for example. We know that it was first coined in 1973 and used in a book in 1975. But not until mid-December 1996 did the word emerge from obscurity into national discussion, and not until early 1997 did *-onics* or *-bonics* become a well-established suffix used to create new words. Any of these years could have been the year for *Ebonics.* We chose 1997.

At whatever date these words can be said to have entered our language, they have all given shape to the ongoing project that is America. They have helped us determine who we are, where we have been, and where we are going.

Note on Sources

For the information in this book we are indebted above all to two great dictionaries published by the University of Chicago Press: *A Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles,* edited by William A. Craigie and James R. Hulbert (4 volumes, 1938–44) and *A Dictionary of Americanisms on Historical Principles,* edited by Mitford M. Mathews (2 volumes, 1951). Also essential at every point was the monumental *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2nd edition (Oxford University Press, 1989).

Two new dictionaries in progress have provided invaluable aid and inspiration: the *Dictionary of American Regional English,* edited by Frederic G. Cassidy and Joan Houston Hall (3 volumes, A–O; Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985–96) and the *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang,* edited by J. E. Lighter (1 volume, A–G; Random House, 1994).

For new words, we have drawn especially on the *Third Barnhart Dictionary of New English,* edited by Robert K. Barnhart, Sol Steinmetz and Clarence L. Barnhart (H.W. Wilson, 1990); *Fifty Years Among the New Words: A Dictionary of Neologisms, 1941–1991,* edited by John Algeo and Adele S. Algeo (Cambridge University Press, 1991), and *The Oxford Dictionary of New Words* compiled by Sara Tulloch (Oxford University Press, 1992). An essential guide has been *The Barnhart New-Words Concordance,* compiled by David K. Barnhart (Cold Spring, NY: Lexik House, 1994, supplement 1995).

We have relied extensively on three periodicals: *The Barnhart Dictionary Companion* (1981–), a quarterly to update general dictionaries; *American Speech* (1926–), publishing numerous articles on American words; and *Comments on Etymology* (1971–), with significant new material on the origins of American slang. Valuable information on slang also comes from Barry Popik's postings on ADS-L, the American Dialect Society E-mail discussion list.

An essential source on the origins of political terms is *Safire's New Political Dictionary* by William Safire (Random House, 1993). On New York City, *The City in Slang: New York Life and Popular Speech* by Irving Lewis Allen (Oxford University Press, 1993).

We have also consulted numerous books about American English. Two of the most important are *The American Language* by H. L. Mencken, edited and abridged by Raven I. McDavid, Jr. (Knopf, 1963) and *I Hear America Talking: An Illustrated Treasury of American Words and Phrases* by Stuart Berg Flexner (Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1976).

Sources often consulted on the early colonial years include *The European Discovery of America: The Northern Voyages A.D. 500–1600* by Samuel Eliot Morison (Oxford University Press, 1971) and *The Complete Works of Captain John Smith (1580–1631) in Three Volumes*, edited by Philip L. Barbour (University of North Carolina Press, 1986).

Helpful older works include *Dictionary of Americanisms* by John Russell Bartlett, 4th edition (Little, Brown, 1877); *Americanisms Old & New* by John S. Farmer (Thomas Poulter, London 1889); *An American Glossary* by Richard H. Thornton (J. B. Lippincott, 1912); *American Dialect Dictionary* by Harold Wentworth (Thomas Y. Crowell, 1944).

We have also been helped by *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition* (Houghton Mifflin, 1992), and *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition*, electronic edition (Merriam-Webster, 1995).

Some other sources of particular value for individual entries are listed below. This is by no means a complete list, but we are especially grateful for the following: 1640 *pull up stakes*, 1675 *scalp*, 1696 *alumnus, alma mater*, 1721 *classmate*: *The Diary of Samuel Sewall 1674–1729*, edited by M. Halsey Thomas (2 volumes; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973). 1762 *armonica*: *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, Volume 10 (January 1, 1762, through December 31, 1763)*, edited by Leonard W. Labaree (Yale University Press, 1966). 1783 *passenger pigeon*: *The Passenger Pigeon: Its Natural History and Extinction* by

A.W. Schorger (University of Wisconsin Press, 1955). 1839 *OK*: Four articles by Allen Walker Read in *American Speech,* Volume 38 (1963): 5–27, 83–102; Volume 39 (1964): 5–25, 243–67. 1876 *moxie*: Frederic G. Cassidy, "The Etymology of *Moxie*," *Dictionaries* 16 (1995): 208–11. 1921 *media*: Stuart Y. Silverstein, "The First Word on the Algonquin Round Table," *OED News* Series 2 No. 5 (January 1997): 4–5. 1974 *streak*: Randy Roberts of the Western Historical Manuscript Collection at the University of Missouri, Columbia, for materials from the Peter Tamony collection.

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—David K. Barnhart *Lexik House, Cold Spring, New York*

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—Allan A. Metcalf *MacMurray College, Jacksonville, Illinois*

Contents

THE ENGLISH IN AMERICA: 1497–1750

The story of the English language in North America begins almost exactly five hundred years ago, on July 24, 1497. At about 5 A.M. that midsummer day, Captain John Cabot, along with some of the eighteen-member crew of his ship *Mathew,* set foot on the eastern coast of what we now call Canada and spoke the first words of English ever heard on this side of the Atlantic.

Modern historians do not know where Cabot landed that first time. Most likely it was present-day Newfoundland; Cabot's own happy notion was that they had reached Asia. For our story, his mistake doesn't matter. What does matter is that they had come from the port of Bristol in England and thus spoke English. (Cabot himself was Italian, but like Columbus he had taken up residence in another country to further his maritime projects.)

As it happens, the voyage of the *Mathew* had no influence whatsoever on the later development of American English. Cabot and his men saw signs of human habitation: traps, fish nets, and a painted stick. But they met nobody, so they did

not learn any native words to import into English. Nor did they stay to start an English-speaking settlement. They soon got back on board their ship, looked at a few more islands from a safe distance, and then returned in high spirits to Bristol on August 6, confident that they had found a short way to Asia.

That set the pattern for the next century. The English found North America a nice place to visit, but they didn't want to live there.

Later English explorers did meet some of the native peoples of the Atlantic seaboard. They began the process of enriching the English language with local names for the strange flora and fauna of the continent. Translations of tales by travelers from other nations also brought American words into English, including the first word we list in this book, *canoe* (1555).

But the real impetus for adding American stock to the English language came when the English finally decided to put down roots in North America. It was in territory that, at the suggestion of Sir Walter Raleigh, they called *Virginia* in 1585 by gracious permission of their "virgin queen" Elizabeth I. Raleigh sponsored the first of their attempts, a colony on Roanoke Island off the coast of what is now North Carolina in 1585. Those English settlers gave up in 1586, then returned to Roanoke in 1587, only to vanish mysteriously before the next English ship could visit in 1590. They left behind as a message to the visitors only the letters "CROATOAN," neatly carved on a tree. The word was borrowed from American Indian speakers in the vicinity and referred to an island some fifty miles to the south. *Croatoan* is thus the first word known to be recorded by the English on the North American continent, and the first forwarding address. Unfortunately, by the time English explorers went looking for the ex-Roanoke colonists some thirty years later, the forwarding notice had expired.

In the early 1600s, the English language finally came to North America for good. The first successful Virginia colony, made famous by Captain John Smith's accounts, began at what the English called *Jamestown* (after King James I) on May 14, 1607. By accident, a second English-speaking colony began far to the north of Virginia in December 1620. The *Mayflower*

set out for Virginia but landed on Cape Cod instead. (No one knows for certain why their destination changed.) The ship's passengers found a suitable harbor north of the Cape and established the Plymouth Plantation there, soon to be joined by others in what was called *New England* (1616), the land of the Massachusetts and other tribes.

At the time of these visits and settlements, the inhabitants of what is today the United States were speaking other languages. In fact, they were speaking hundreds of different languages, all as sophisticated as the languages of Europe, and most with more complicated grammar than English.

Along the Atlantic coast, the English first encountered languages of the Algonquian family, including Delaware in the south and Massachusett, Narragansett, Abenaki, and Penobscot in the north. As they variously aided, traded, and debated with the English newcomers, speakers of Algonquian languages gave us *skunk* (1588), *muskrat* (1607), *raccoon* (1609), *opossum* (1610), and *moose* (1613) on land, and in the water *terrapin* (1613) and *quahog* (1643), a clam; *chinquapin* (1612), a kind of chestnut, and *hickory* (1670); *puccoon* (1612), a plant producing red dye, and *atamasco* (1629), a lily; *persimmon* (1612), *tuckahoe* (1612), an edible root, and *cushaw* (1698), a kind of squash; *hominy* (1629), *pone* (1634), and *samp* (1643), cornmeal mush; *kinnikinnick* (1729), a mixture of leaves for smoking, *moccasins* (1612), *tomahawk* (1611), *pocosin* (1634), or "dismal swamp," *squaw* (1634), *papoose* (1634), *wigwam* (1628), *wampumpeag* (1627), *powwow* (1624), and *netop* (1643), a friend.

Sometimes, rather than borrowing from the Indians, the newcomers made use of familiar English words to name the unfamiliar. For example, in America they created new meanings for *turkey* (1607), *corn* (1608), *clapboard* (1632), and *bluff* (1666). They created new combinations of old English words in *bluefish* (1623), *johnnycake* (1739), and *groundhog* (1742).

And the English colonists also borrowed from other Old World languages, as speakers of those languages intermingled with the English in the new. From Spanish, for example, the settlers got *tamale* (1691) as well as words like *canoe* and *barbecue* (1733) that ultimately came from Indian languages;

from Dutch, *boss* (1649) and *cookie* (1703); and from Bantu languages of West Africa, *tote* (1677).

After the initial burst of new names in the early 1600s, over the next century the American colonies contributed at a relatively slow rate to the development of the English language. The colonies were, after all, lightly populated, and they were greatly dependent on England not just for manufactured goods but for matters of culture and learning. Significant contributions to American English as we know it now were relatively rare.

Only as the eighteenth century developed would we begin thinking of ourselves and our language as distinctively American. But already we were developing our own concepts and practices, and words to name them: *frontier* (1676), *public school* (1636), and *alumnus* (1696), *alma mater*, (1696) and *classmate* (1713). We experienced *religious awakenings* (1736). We invented *schooners* (1716), sold goods at *stores* (1721), and began to build *covered wagons* (1745). And we were the first to have speeches and books that were *lengthy* (1689).

1555 canoe

Long before any English-speaking person paddled one in American waters, *canoe* was an English word for an American Indian invention. If by "discover" we mean "tell the Europeans," then Columbus discovered the canoe while he was busy discovering America. He observed natives of the West Indies traveling across the water in boats made of a single large tree, hollowed out with a sharp stone, and propelled with paddles. Columbus called the vessel by the name the Cariban Indians of Haiti gave it: *canoa.* The author of a 1555 book that explained the canoa for English readers said it is "very longe and narowe," with room for as many as forty paddlers.

In 1608, shortly after the founding of the first English colony in Virginia, Captain John Smith reported that the settlers were following the Indian example and getting around in "canowes." So it happened also on later frontiers as European

settlers pressed westward. These canoes were not all of the hollow-log variety, which was especially suited for uninterrupted travel on the water. Within the North American continent, where frequent portages were necessary between rivers and lakes, the lightweight birch-bark canoe was preferred. And to navigate the birchless plains farther west, canoes were made of buffalo hide.

In recent times, Americans have tinkered with the materials of canoes, making them of wood, fiberglass, plastic, and aluminum. Especially with these new materials, there still is no other human-powered vessel so portable, maneuverable, speedy, and sturdy for travel in shallow and narrow waters. In all likelihood, there are far more canoes plying American waters today than there ever were before Columbus landed.

1588 skunk

Thomas Hariot went as scientific observer with the English expedition that established the short-lived Roanoke colony. His *Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia,* published in 1588, includes the first list of Algonquian Indian words translated into English. Most of his translations didn't make it into the English vocabulary, but we can recognize the beginnings of modern *skunk* in *Saquenúckot.* He describes it as one of "two kindes of small beastes greater than conies [rabbits] which are very good meat." Hariot does not mention the distinctive defensive odor of the skunk, perhaps because his book was intended to advertise the advantages of life in Virginia. A book of 1634 about New England was more candid, naming "Squunckes, Ferrets, Foxes" among "the beasts of offence."

1602 Indian

Columbus started it. When he found land after sailing westward across the Atlantic, he thought he had succeeded in his "Enterprise of the Indies," arriving at the distant part of the