



Detail: Portrait of Noah Webster by James Herring (1833), National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C. [Source](#)

## The Lock: Noah Webster in the Archive

Jill Lepore | Harvard University

One day, about ten years ago, I found myself on a cold winter's afternoon in a tiny library in Amherst, Massachusetts, reading the papers of the lexicographer Noah Webster, opening box after box, tugging out folder after folder, turning page after page. Mostly, his papers were letters to his wife, to his children. Wonderful, delightful, and not at all remarkable. A bit disappointing, actually. The thing is, I sort of hated Noah Webster, and I didn't know what to do about it. So it was with a weary heart and a sinking spirit that I opened Folder 18 of Box 3. But then, everything changed when I found, inside, a lock of Noah Webster's hair, red and wispy. I picked it up, held it in my hand, and marveled at it. It had been clipped by his daughter, Eliza, and kept, in an envelope, all these years. I don't really know why, but it set me to weeping. Noah Webster was a miserable, irascible man. But his daughter had loved him.

I thought about that lock of hair while reading Diana Taylor's , *The Archive and the Repertoire*. Taylor asks us to consider the scene, and not the story, as the elemental unit of cultural analysis. Archives preserve the written past. But repertoires are treasure-troves of performances, of acts unspoken. Thinking about repertoires puts the people back in. I thought about Eliza, with her comb and scissors, cutting, twining, making meaning. And I remembered

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what it meant to me, a century and more later, to hold that lock of hair in my hand. And I thought about the strands that tie and tangle us together, across time, across space, and maybe forever.

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**Jill Lepore** is the David Woods Kemper '41 Professor of American History at Harvard University and a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. Her books include *The Story of America: Essays on Origins* (Princeton, October 2012), *The Mansion of Happiness: A History of Life and Death* (Knopf, June 2012), *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History* (Princeton, 2010), *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (Knopf, 2005), *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (Knopf, 1998), and *Blindspot* (Spiegel and Grau, 2008), a novel written jointly with Jane Kamensky. Her biography of Benjamin Franklin's youngest sister will be published in 2013.