

A Short History of the *American National Biography*

At the ANB, we care about history, including our own. Biographical reference works are the result of years of research and editing, dependent on institutional and public support as well as the contributions of myriad individuals and scholars. They are truly team efforts. And the work is never done, especially now that most reference works have migrated from print to online.

The *American National Biography* was conceived as the successor to the *Dictionary of American Biography*, whose original twenty volumes had been published between 1926 and 1937 under the auspices of the recently founded American Council of Learned Societies. Modeled on the *Dictionary of National Biography* first begun by Sir Leslie Stephen in the 1880s (and now known as the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, or *ODNB*), the DAB was very much a creature of its times. Its focus was on great and significant persons who had substantially impacted the creation of the American nation, which meant that the vast majority of its entries highlighted white Anglo-Saxon men. Only 709 women were included among the 15,000 entries and members of ethnic groups and racial minorities were also severely unrepresented. One especially glaring omission was Sojourner Truth.

Since the 1920s and 1930s, how and why we do history significantly changed, with dramatic implications for biographical reference works. The number of professional historians increased dramatically, and the discipline expanded its horizons with the development of new research methods, the

discovery of new primary sources, and the growth of new fields of study, such as the history of African Americans, women, immigrants, workers, and others.

Virtually all aspects of the past were now seen from a different perspective. This new emphasis called for a broader, more inclusive biographical dictionary.

In 1986 the American Council of Learned Societies engaged in discussions about the future of the *Dictionary of American Biography* and concluded that instead of updating the entries, an entirely new biographical dictionary should be undertaken from scratch. Professor John A. Garraty of Columbia University, along with Professor Mark C. Carnes of Barnard College, agreed to oversee the editorial work, and Oxford University Press signed on as publisher. Both OUP and ACLS committed substantial financial resources to the undertaking, and the project also received support from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The entire project was a powerful example of the potential of public-private collaboration in major humanities efforts.

To create the database from which ANB subjects were selected, scores of reference works were examined. Also included were the subjects of books, dissertations, and essays of a biographical character that had appeared in recent decades. The directors of every state historical society were asked for suggestions, as were the presidents of all the nation's scholarly societies. In addition, individual scholars nominated thousands of possible subjects for entries. Inclusion in the DAB did not automatically guarantee a spot in the ANB.

For example, colonial era New England clergy turned out to be significantly overrepresented, and many did not make the cut.

All potential subjects were placed in categories, mostly occupational: politics, the military, and diplomacy; art and architecture; the performing arts; business, journalism and literature; law; medicine; science and technology; religion; education; the social sciences; social reform; and sports. In all, nearly thirty thousand people from all walks of life were considered and 17,400 chosen. Of those, nearly 40 percent had not appeared in the original DAB or its supplements, a significant expansion of scope and content.

The task of selecting subjects was the work of nearly two hundred associate editors, each assigned to a topical category. Once a person was selected, the associate editors recommended a length ranging from 750 to 7500 words and proposed potential authors. When completed, each essay was reviewed by the associate editor who made the assignment and then by the ANB staff at Columbia University. If substantial revision was required, the manuscript was returned to the author with suggestions and queries. Oxford University Press fact-checked each entry and also supervised the copyediting of manuscripts to ensure uniformity of style and format. This complicated process was time-consuming and expensive, but necessary. Its chief purpose, aside from promoting factual accuracy, was to ensure that the ANB reflected a national breadth of judgment and opinion.

The publication of the *American National Biography* in 1999 was greeted with popular and scholarly acclaim. As Merle Rubin wrote in the *Wall Street*

Journal, “Although written to a high standard of scholarship, *American National Biography* is designed for the general reader. The writers and editors have sought to make each entry as clear as possible, yet have managed to do so without dumbing things down ... The range of subjects is truly dazzling.” The volumes won the American Library Association’s Dartmouth Medal given to the best reference work published during the previous year for their “comprehensive examination of the incredible diversity of the men and women who have in some way shaped the history of the United States ... Though published in the waning years of the 20th century, the *American National Biography* is a reference work for all times.”

Those waning years of the 20th century were also the beginning of a technological revolution that would dramatically reshape the way information was consumed and deployed. Although the ANB appeared in print in 1999, plans had long been underway to migrate the entire resource online, where it debuted in 2000. Since then almost two thousand new entries have been added, both subjects who have recently died and those who were missed in the original volumes. In addition, numerous corrections and additions have updated the original print entries, thus fulfilling the promise of electronic publishing of creating a platform that can be continually updated and refreshed. When John Garraty stepped down as general editor, he left the project in the capable hands of Mark Carnes, who had been there since the beginning. In 2012 Carnes turned over the responsibilities of general editor to Susan Ware, who had previously edited the final volume of *Notable American Women*, which appeared in 2004. And so

the project moves forward, continuing its proud history of documenting the life of a nation through the lives of its people.