

# A MYSTERIOUS UFAGE

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Having recently acquired a facsimile copy of Noah Webster's dictionary, I found myself growing curious about the use of the long, or cursive s, which looks like an f except the crossbar does not extend to the right.

The long s, I learned, was a modification of the Roman s, which was deemed unsuited to rapid writing, and thus was gradually changed to the f shape. In handwriting, it doesn't look as much like an f as it does in type. Printers were said to dislike it because of the possibility of confusing the two letters.

It was gradually phased out in the nineteenth century. In 1786, Benjamin Franklin wrote: "The round s begins to be the mode, and in nice printing the long s is rejected entirely." John Bell of London is supposed to be the first publisher to discard the long s entirely -- in his edition of The British Theater, published in 1775. Yet, it was still being used in 1806 when Noah Webster published the first edition of his A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language. (He used English in the title, but Englilh in the text.)

Although the round s was used generally in capitalization, it was sometimes replaced by a doubled lower-case f, explaining why some English family names start with ff. (In my International Who's Who for 1966-67, however, Sir Arthur Frederic Brownlow fforde is listed alphabetically, not under the s's, but the f's. Wonder how he pronounces his last name?)

About the only thing I have been able to establish is that the long s was never used at the end of a word. For a while I thought that in the case of a doubled s, the first would be long and the second round. Then I ran across this string on page 193 of Noah Webster's work:

Misfape, Mifsile, Misfion, Misfionary, Miffifippi, Mifsive,  
Mifsletoe, Miffpeak

(Yes, Noah left the fourth s out of Mississippi.) Did the typesetters grab whatever form of s came to hand, or is there some rule to explain these various uses? Perhaps some reader can clear this up for me, or suggest a suitable reference work.