the Latin

letters: the ab-

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Dictionary

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 ex-
tend 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 possibil-
ity 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 English 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 Horde is listed
alphabetically, not under the s's, but the f's. Wonder how he pro-
nounces 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:

Misshape, Mifile, Mission, Missionary, Miffipimi, Mifsive,
Mifsletoe, Mifspkeak

(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 ex-
plain these various uses? Perhaps some reader can clear this up for
me, or suggest a suitable reference work.