KENTUCKY COVERLETS
by
Lou Tate
"Kentucky Coverlets" is a pretentious title for this small booklet. Here are illustrated only a few of the many coverlet patterns yet to be found in Kentucky.

When my aunt, Mrs. Wood Ford, Jr., took me to visit the old weaver, Miss Nan Owens, I had no concept of the splendid folk art development of American women in handwoven textiles or of the tremendous store of weaving lore waiting to be recorded.

Miss Nan, delighted that her old art was being continued gave me her draft collection—the weaving patterns of five generations of weavers. This was one of those rare gifts which transcend personalities—it was as if the master weaver were passing her shuttle on to an apprentice weaver. Since that memorable visit in 1928, I have researched into early and nineteenth century American hand-woven textiles as extensively as time permitted. At present over three thousand drafts have been collected—and that is but a fraction of the data available on this fine folk art of handweaving.

I wish that you might share the adventures in collecting drafts—the accumulating of drafts of the same pattern till you feel that you have a glimpse into three centuries, the long horseback rides in ante-bellum Cumberland River country, the zest at the end of a hot disappointing day of research in suddenly locating a collection of drafts of some long gone weaver and copying them by antique lamplight, the tang of walking Kentucky by-paths on rich October days when research becomes secondary to the sheer joy of living.

From the patterns collected, I have selected outstanding ones for this little booklet. Many of them are the favorite patterns which are to be found in every old collection of drafts. Others are rare patterns which have a definite American development. I have tried to arrange the coverlets illustrated so that you may become more familiar with weaves and names of patterns. As only a few of the many patterns can be illustrated, your pattern may not be included. I will be glad to give you any data in the research files concerning your coverlet pattern. And if you have any data pertaining to the coverlets illustrated or to any angle of handweaving, I will be most glad to have it for the research files—every item is an invaluable contribution in piecing the complete picture of early American handwoven textiles.

The research into early American handwoven textiles would not be possible were it not for the information which has been contributed. I would like to give credit to all—whether they have located but a single item or several hundred pieces of handwoven textiles. However mention must be made of the aid from Mr. and Mrs. John Henry Bousman, Mr. and Mrs. Wood Ford, Miss Mabel Palmore, and The Filson Club.

The coverlets have been collected from original sources in Kentucky. As there are many names for virtually the same pattern, I have used either the name most frequently found, the oldest name, or the old name which seems most suited to the pattern. Unless an authentic old name is found, the pattern is simply left unnamed till the old name is located.

The patterns are grouped according to "family". As weaving is such a creative art, it is rare that exact duplicates are found in coverlets. Sometimes the patterns are so closely alike that only a skilled weaver can tell the differences; sometimes so unlike that only a skilled weaver can analyse the similarities. In so few pages, I cannot attempt to be comprehensive. However, I hope that you will be able to analyse your coverlet and those you chance to see, from having studied the coverlets in this booklet.

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Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt, when she visited the loomroom of Lou Tate, was attracted by the drafts and coverlets of early Kentucky women. Her keen interest centered on the overshot weave—typical weave of the coverlets woven by women on their four-harness handlooms. In contrast to the SINGLE SNOWBALL coverlet of geometric double weave (foreground) of Mrs. Sidney Smith, Mrs. Roosevelt and Lou Tate examine the DOUBLE BOWKNOT coverlet of overshot weave, woven by Elizabeth Vermillion about 1840 on the Vermillion plantation near Harrodsburg and from her daughter Mrs. L. C. Scanlon.
The characteristic Kentucky coverlet is the one woven by a woman in her home for her own use or for her family. Usually the loom was a huge four-harness loom. Because weaving is a creative folk art and because the weaver visualizes the long years of life for her coverlet, it is often one of rare beauty.

The weave for this coverlet is the overshot weave. This is the typical weave for coverlets woven on the four harness home used loom. As may be seen in illustration 2, the weave has a heavy pattern thread shot-over groups of warp threads to form little blocks—hence, the name overshot. Groups of these blocks in turn give the characteristic geometric patterns to the overshot coverlets. Even the effect of wheels, circles, and curves are from varying sizes in blocks of overshot thread.

The pattern thread is held in place by a fine plain-weave thread which gives the smooth background to the coverlet.

Sometimes the overshot weave is called the float-weave or the single weave.

There are several other coverlet weaves to be found occasionally in Kentucky—the double geometric weave, reversed twill weave, summer-and-winter weave, and the jacquard weave.

The double geometric weave gives a smooth plain woven surface with reversible sides from the use of two warps. As the name indicates, the pattern is composed of geometric blocks to form wheels, circles, tree borders, and like designs. The double woven coverlet is usually the work of a professional weaver.

The summer-and-winter weave is very rare in early handwoven Kentucky coverlets, though it is one of the popular weaves with present day Kentucky weavers. As the name indicates, there is a dark winter side and a light summer side to the coverlet. Though in effect, the appearance of the summer-and-winter coverlet is similar to the double geometric coverlet, it differs by having only one warp and by having a finely woven overshot thread. The few drafts found of the summer-and-winter weave in Kentucky indicate that the weave was used occasionally by both home weavers and professional weavers.

The jacquard weave, not introduced into the United States till about 1820, was never used extensively in Kentucky. Most of the coverlets in Kentucky today are either late mill woven jacquard coverlets or ones which have been brought into the state from the north. Unless otherwise specified, the coverlets illustrated are overshot weaves.

In Kentucky the finest coverlets were woven during the first half of the nineteenth century. The state, settled in the last quarter of the eighteenth century was well established before power weaving became commonplace. As an agricultural state, Kentucky had not great industrial expansion. Hence, after the first pioneer days were over, the women devoted their leisure to finer weaving. As weaving is a very creative folk art, there was a splendid development in Kentucky. Then by 1850, when power weaving began replacing handloom weaving, there was a deteriorating. Weaving was revived during the hard days of the Civil War and until times became more prosperous. It declined again, though there are many old weavers still living who can teach the new generation of weavers a few tricks of trade.

The written pattern for handwoven textiles is called a draft. The drafts were written on four or five line staffs similar to those used for music. The DOUBLE DIMONTs draft and the 1826 FRENCH FANCY draft written for Miss Susan McQuire, shown in illustration 3, are typical of the coverlet drafts written for use on the four harness loom used in the home. Though there were several methods of writing drafts, a good weaver could decipher any draft for the four harness loom. The drafts of one generation were passed on to succeeding generations much in the manner of old quilt patterns. There was a constant change of pattern owing to the urge on the part of weavers to create anew.
4. Each of the warp threads must be placed exactly according to the draft. In illustration 4 the little boy is handing the warp threads from the back of the loom to the woman who pulls each thread through a heddle eye. Every thread must be in accurate place or there will be a serious flaw throughout the length of the warp. Sometimes the weaver stuck a pin in her draft (see the pin marks in the DOUBLE DIMONTS drafts in illustration 3) to mark her place. It was nothing short of a miracle that early weavers in their badly lighted cabins could weave so perfect coverlets.
Weaving on a four-harness Loom

5. Mary Anderson Courtenay weaves on a four-harness loom at the J. B. Speed Memorial Museum during the exhibition Kentucky Handweavings of Lou Tate. Note that the back and front harness are lowered and that the two middle harness are raised. The pattern, threaded by a draft (such as those in illustration 3) into the harness (as in illustration 4), is controlled by the raising and lowering of the harness by the treadles underneath. Most patterns are woven according to the draft used for threading. However, some require a second draft to weave by.
THE double weave was usually the work of a professional weaver. The earliest double weaves were of geometric pattern and were woven on a loom of a type similar to the four harness loom. However, instead of four harness, the loom had from eight to twenty-four harness. Ordinarily the double woven coverlet is a geometric pattern woven on such a loom. There are some double woven coverlets in other weaves though.

There were only a few weavers in Kentucky who could weave fine double geometric coverlets. As a rule, these were professional weavers. The professional weavers were established in larger towns as was Abraham Deyarmon (illustration 6) or travelled about the state weaving wherever they happened to find weaving to do.

6. Ad of professional weaver Lexington (Ky.) Reporter, August, 1825, from Mary Anderson Courtenay.

The drafts of the professional weaver differed somewhat from those used by the home weaver on the four harness loom. The drafts were written on three to seven lines with each space representing four harness so that actually eight to twenty-four harness were used. Sometimes the professional weaver made his own patterns, but often he also had printed books of patterns from England, France, or Germany. A page of a 1793 German weaving book (reprint of 1771 edition) is shown in illustration 7.

The yarns for the double geometric coverlets were often prepared at home and then carried to the professional weavers. Even today, there are delightful tales told by old men of their long horseback rides with huge bags of wool on either side of the saddle to the coverlet weaver’s house. The weaver either charged a flat rate for weaving coverlets or else wove on shares.

7. Draft of professional weaver, 1771-1793, Mr. A. Vernon Lynn.

9. **EIGHT CROSSES with PINE TREE BORDER**, double geometric weave—Mrs. Walton Hampton. The double weave has two warps—one of dark color, one of light color. Each surface shows a smooth plainwoven cloth. One side will have a dark background with a light pattern; the other, a light background with a dark pattern. The two warps may be pulled apart where they do not interlace.
The Jacquard weave, easily recognized by its pictorial design of flowers, birds, historic events, houses, etc., was not used extensively in Kentucky. The loom, named after its originator Joseph M. C. Jacquard, was invented in France shortly after 1800. Though used throughout France by 1810, through many parts of Europe by 1815, the loom was not introduced into the United States until 1820-22. The first looms of the jacquard type to be used in the United States were power looms used at the mill in Roanoke, New York. Though a majority of the jacquard looms were power looms, some of the earlier ones were hand operated fly shuttle looms.

Though there were thousands of jacquard looms with their huge high heads and perforated patterns in use by the time of the death of Jacquard at his home in Lyons, France, at the ripe old age of eighty, the loom was just becoming known in Kentucky. This was largely owing to the fact that Kentucky was already settled and was largely agricultural.

Most of the Jacquard coverlets to be found in Kentucky are mill woven. A few of the earlier ones were woven by traveling professional weavers. Many of the earlier ones have a double warp, are dated in the corner, and have a rather small pattern.

The pictorial design was usually a European imitation. Even the General Washington on Horseback pattern is a copy of the French jacquard pattern of Napoleon on Horseback. Occasionally an American development of pattern will be found in a jacquard coverlet. For the most part, the jacquard weave is not important as a folk art development though it is important as the connecting weave between the folk weaving on handlooms and the power weaving development.
12. Detail of a jacquard coverlet.


Returning to the overshot coverlets patterns which represent the real folk art development in American handweaving, we will find that the simplest patterns will continue in use and that from those simple patterns, many pattern changes will take place.

One of these simple patterns is the little DIAMONDS in illustration 16. The unit used for this pattern marks the beginning of several different pattern developments in America. Two of the simplest developments of the pattern are shown in illustrations 17 and 18. A weaver would recognize by analysis of the pattern that each part of the unit had been increased and that three colors are used to form a DOUBLE DIAMONDS pattern. The other pattern has a smaller double diamond and combines a square or table with the pattern. It too is called DOUBLE DIAMONDS or as an old draft has it DOUBLE DIMONTS.

It requires close analysis to follow all the tangents found in this folk development. A completely different effect is obtained by increasing the size of the center dot of the simple diamond motif. This new pattern is then combined with various squares, with the leaf motif, or with a wheel motif to form one of the patterns known as GOVERNORS GARDEN, GRANNYS GARDEN, BONAPARTES MARCH, BONAPARTES RETREAT, BONEY-PARTES RETREAT ACROSS THE ROCKIES, and LOVERS GARDEN. A variant of the pattern with the leaf motif is shown in illustration 19.
19. GOVERNORS GARDEN Combined with a DOUBLE BOWKNOT—Miss Rosa Augusta.
The center motif of the three illustrations on this page is a development from the simple unit in the diamond pattern. However, by the series of changes which have taken place, the pattern is so far removed from the original unit that it is only after handling hundreds of drafts that the connecting links can be traced. The name MASON'S ARCH AND CROSS, 1835, seems a suitable name for the first one—illustration 20—though MOUNTAIN COWCUMBER or MOUNTAIN CUCUMBER are fairly old names for the pattern.

Another development along similar trends is the INDIAN TROUBLE or ROSE IN THE GARDEN in illustration 21. By another combination of pattern units the FOUR WHEEL or SOLDIERS RETURN in illustration 22 was developed. The pattern is as yet unfiled as there are many patterns of the FOUR WHEEL and SOLDIER RETURN names, and as yet no good authentic old name has been collected.

The KINGS FLOWER is another of the patterns found with slight differences. Illustration 23 shows one variation and illustration 24 shows the same pattern in a later interpretation. The SOUTHERN BEAUTY or NORTHERN BEAUTY—depending on which side of the Civil War your grandfather fought on—has the same units as are used in the KINGS FLOWER. Another very delightful pattern is the FOX TRAIL (illustration 26) though it is never found in like variations, but is much as the fox and ever in a new path.
23. **KINGS FLOWER.**

24. **KINGS FLOWER with double square.**

25. **SOUTHERN BEAUTY** which uses two instead of three repeats of the center unit.

26. **FOX TRAIL** an illusive pattern never found exactly alike.
27. OPPOSITES—Miss Georgia Hemans.

28. OPPOSITES—Mr. Roy Ballou.

29. QUEENS DELIGHT—Mrs. Lou K. Witcofski.

30. JACKSON PURCHASE—Mrs. H. S. Pace.
Old time weavers used patterns in “opposites” frequently. There were several reasons for their use. The same warp could be used for threefold purpose—to weave coverlets as those in illustrations 27 and 28, to weave a heavy blanket commonly called “double” blanket though it was not a double weave, and to weave white “dimity” counterpanes. From such a useful start the patterns in opposites had a remarkable folk art development. Two steps in the development may be seen in the QUEENS DELIGHT (illustration 29) or CHURCH DOORS AND WINDOWS or DOORS AND CHURCH WINDOWS; and in the JACKSON PURCHASE (illustration 30) a pattern frequently found in south central Kentucky.

Some of the most subtle designing in early American handwoven textiles are found in the finely developed patterns in opposites. One of the finest of these is the DOUBLE IRISH CHAIN (illustration 31). Another very pleasing growth in pattern is the FEDERAL KNOT which lends itself to striking colorings. A simpler development but an effective one is the FEDERAL CITY (illustration 33).
The GENTLEMANS FANCY pattern developed from a simple little unit (illustration 34) into a more complex group of units as TENNESSEE FLOWER (illustration 35); thence into the unnamed pattern in illustration 36; and finally into the typical GENTLEMANS FANCY (illustration 37). With the pattern are a score of names of which either GENTLEMANS FANCY or YOUNG MANS FANCY are most frequently found. In the other names are CATALPA FLOWER, COMPASS WORK, LADIES DELIGHT, PARSONS BEAUTY, PLATFORM, and WORK COMPLETE. As the gentlemen remark, the ladies delight in whatever the gentlemen fancy.

34. Unnamed simple unit pattern.

35. TENNESSEE FLOWER—
Mrs. E. T. Ford.

36. Unnamed—Mrs. Sarah Elizabeth McClure.

37. GENTLEMANS FANCY—
George Elliston.
38. GENTLEMANS FANCY—Here the GENTLEMANS FANCY has developed entirely away from the original unit.
The wheel motif is a particularly difficult one to classify. The wheels are formed by different methods. Often the wheel is an illusion (illustration 39) and the basic analysis would not produce a wheel. The favorite wheel patterns are the chariot wheel patterns. A few of the wheel patterns are BIG WHEELS, CHARIOT WHEELS, DOUBLE CHARIOT WHEELS, EASTERN WHEELS, FOUR WHEELS, NINE WHEELS, SINGLE CHARIOT WHEELS, WHEEL OF THE WESTERN WORLD (a reference to the epic days of early Kentucky?), WHEEL OF FORTUNE, and WHEEL OF TIME.


40. SINGLE WHEEL.

41. DOUBLE CHARIOT WHEELS.

42. NINE CHARIOT WHEELS—Mrs. Burt Smith.
43. DOUBLE CHARIOT WHEEL, 1839, of rare American development—Miss Ruby Addison Henry.
Probably the greatest number of early American patterns center around the snowball or flower motif. Many of these patterns require one draft to thread the loom by and a second draft to weave by. In early days of research, I had great difficulty with such patterns for it is rare to find the second pattern—the weaver was just supposed to know it. Finally a very delightful weaver of the old school tipped me off "you jist use reversit treadling". This weaver was Mistress Dolly Bartley who created patterns herself though she said that she was never so good a weaver as some of the older weavers (illustration 44).

One of the very old snowball motifs, is the BACHELORS BUTTON. My earliest old draft of that pattern is "BACHELORS BUTTON, 1775." The older forms of the pattern simply use the repeated unit as in illustration 45. A similar form is found in the double geometric coverlet in illustration 46. The other names for the pattern include LITTLE FLOWERS, NORTH CAROLINA BEAUTY, WESTERN BEAUTY, 1835.

There are many pattern developments from the simple unit. Even eighteenth century weaving books list several very elaborate patterns based on this unit. One of the finest developments seems to be an American one which may date about the first quarter of the nineteenth century. This pattern combines the BACHELORS BUTTON units with a fine large wheel and a subtle square to form the EASTERN WHEELS pattern (illustration 47)—or FOUR WHEELS, WESTERN WHEELS, and WHEEL OF THE WESTERN WORLD.
47. **EASTERN WHEELS**—Mrs. E. L. Richards.
One of the favorite interpretations of the snowball motif is found in the NINE SNOWBALL pattern. One of the most impressive angles of the folk development of American handwoven textiles is the continual redesigning of patterns. That same urge to recreate takes place among weavers today, though often the patterns they create may have been created by earlier weavers in other parts of the country. In the research files there are about fifteen very definite pattern developments in the NINE SNOWBALL pattern. Several of such changes are shown.

48. NINE SNOWBALLS woven as threaded.

49. NINE SNOWBALLS using a BACHELORS BUTTON unit combined with a square.

50. NINE SNOWBALL variant known as VINE AND SNOWBALLS, 1846; a late development of the pattern.

51. NINE SNOWBALL variant showing a wide change in the snowball motif, but definitely connected with the VINE AND SNOWBALLS variant.
52. **NINE SNOWBALLS** woven as threaded. This coverlet was purchased from the third wife who remarked that the first wife "set a powerful store by her kivers"—Miss Amy Longest.
Among the other patterns based on the snowball or flower motif are BEAUTIFUL SQUARES, CROWNS AND PILLARS, DOGWOOD BLOSSOM, DOUBLE COMPASS WORK, DOUBLE SNOWBALLS, FORTY-NINE SNOWBALLS, FOUR SNOWBALLS, LEES SURRENDER, MORGANTOWN DRAFT, SHELLS AND SNOWBALLS, SINGLE SNOWBALL, SIXTEEN SNOWBALLS, SNAIL TRAIL AND CAT TRACK, TABLES AND FLOWERS, and TWENTY-FIVE SNOWBALLS.

53. CROWNS AND PILLARS, a development using four snowballs similar to one of the NINE SNOWBALL variants.

54. DOGWOOD BLOSSOM circa, 1840
Mrs. Eddie F. Daniel.

55. FORTY NINE SNOWBALLS
woven by the threading draft—
Mrs. E. C. Terry.

56. FORTY NINE SNOWBALLS
woven by the second draft—
Mr. W. C. Johnson.
Of the patterns based on the snowball motif, the most effective one is the SNAIL TRAIL AND CAT TRACK. Not only is the pattern pleasing at first glance, but it becomes better liked the longer it is known. As our ancestors were agricultural, they often selected names close to the soil. By some the pattern was visualized as a vine in blossom, by others as an animal trail and track. So with the pattern, found in every group of drafts or coverlets, are these names:

**Cats Paw**  
**Cats Paw and Snails Trail**  
**Cats Track**  
**Cats Track and Snails Trail**  

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57. **SNAIL TRAIL AND CAT TRACK**, pattern for professional weaver, 1771-1793  
—Mr. A. Vernon Lynn.

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58. **SNAIL TRAIL AND CAT TRACK**—Mrs. Sarah Elizabeth McClure.

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59. **SNAIL TRAIL AND CAT TRACK**—Mrs. Esther A. Carter.
The WHIG ROSE is the pattern most frequently found. It too, has the snowball unit used. In the research collection, there are over eighty variations of the pattern. Many of these are closely alike; others vary widely. A few of the names found with the pattern are JOHN BELLS ROSE, COMPASS WORK, LINKS AND COMPASS, METHODIST WHEEL, WHIG ROSE AND BIRDEYE, WHIG ROSE AND CHARIOT WHEELS, and WHIG ROSE AND SNOWBALLS. Thomas Jefferson used the name WHIG ROSE when he sent a WHIG ROSE to a friend with the wish that it would keep him warm.

This pattern is another of those patterns which need be woven by a second draft. It is extremely rare that the second draft is written. When woven by the threading pattern, a wheel pattern results.

60. WHIG ROSE woven as METHODIST WHEEL by the threading draft to form a chariot wheel pattern—Judge R. C. P. Thomas.

61. WHIG ROSE in typical form—Miss Sytha Ballou.

62. WHIG ROSE in double weave with PINE TREE BORDER—Mrs. J. H. Bousman.

63. WHIG ROSE in reversed twill weave
The variants of the WHIG ROSE pattern are numerous. Often the development shown in the variant is crude and unpleasing, lacking the charm of the WHIG ROSE pattern. Occasionally, a delightful variant will be found.

64. WHIG ROSE AND CHARIOT WHEELS, the threading and weaving drafts cleverly combined into a beautifully balanced pattern—Mrs. Mary Elizabeth Ryherd.

65. WHIG ROSE with broken centers; such variants are often found in colors woven in four or more colors—Miss Jane Hall.

66. WHIG ROSE border with a TWENTY-FIVE SNOWBALL pattern—Mrs. Maud Wilks.

67. WHIG ROSE AND BIRDEYE, a pattern of pleasing contrasts; note the jeans suit of walnut brown—Mrs. J. A. Jennings.
The PINEBLOOM pattern is the one most often selected by artists for fine folk art development in handwoven textiles. It is a favorite pattern. Every draft or coverlet collection will have at least one variation of the PINEBLOOM pattern. There is not a great variation in the different drafts of the pattern as the finest development is in the subtle colorings possible. Usually the name used has a connection with the pine tree as PINEBLOOM, PINE BURR, PINECONE, PINEKNOT, PINETOP; the local names as KINTUCK BEAUTY or SOLDIERS RETURN are also used.

A development from the PINEBLOOM is the BLAZING STAR or SEA STAR. A close analysis will show that the difference lies in the BLAZING STAR having a double center block to the single large block in the PINEBLOOM.

68. PINEBLOOM.

69. PINEBLOOM with a delightful border.

70. BLAZING STAR (1906) or SEA STAR.
71. PINEBLOOM woven before 1826—a coverlet which today has aged to a rare gold tone like melted sunlight in contrast to the rich depth of the indigo blue—Miss Addie Hawkins
Another of the favorite early patterns is based on the leaf motif. A series of little blocks which increase in size produce the illusion of a leaf or bowknot. There are scores of variants to the leaf motif as it lends itself to many changes. DOUBLE BOWKNOT is the name often used for the pattern. Other names include

**Blooming Leaf**
**Flowering Leaf**
**Hickory Leaf**
**Leaf pattern**
**Lemon Leaf**
**Magnolia Leaf**
**Mountain Leaf**
**Olive Leaf**
**Orange Leaf**
**Rose Leaf**
**Rose Leaves and Chariot Wheels**
**Rose Leaves and Snowballs**
**Rose Leaves, Seashells and Snowballs**
**Sage Leaf**

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72. **DOUBLE BOWKNOT**—Mrs. L. C. Scanlon.

73. **LEAF or DOUBLE BOWKNOT** combined with a square—Mrs. John Bratton.

74. **Another DOUBLE BOWKNOT** variation.
75. SIXTEEN SNOWBALLS with DOUBLE BOWKNOT border woven by second draft.

76. TWENTY-FIVE SNOWBALLS with DOUBLE BOWKNOT border woven by threading draft—Mr. Lee Cook.

77. GOVERNORS GARDEN with LEAF corner—Mrs. Irvin Dennis.

78. FLOURISHING WAVE, a development of the leaf motif; also known as the OCEAN WAVE or FLOATING WAVE—Mrs. J. B. Harvey.
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