

Uncoverings 2008

Volume 29 of
the Research Papers of
the American Quilt Study Group

Edited by Laurel Horton



Quilts for McKinley: Women's Involvement in Politics

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Although women in the United States were unable to vote in presidential elections before 1920, they made quilts that expressed their political sentiments. By the end of the nineteenth century women had access to a vast number and variety of campaign ribbons and other textiles which they incorporated into their quilts. These textiles allowed women to stretch the boundaries between the public and private spheres to express support for candidates and causes. The political career of William McKinley, culminating in the presidential election of 1896, coincided with women's increased participation in political campaigns. An examination of surviving quilts documents some of the ways in which disenfranchised women actively demonstrated their support for McKinley throughout his career and memorialized him following his assassination.

William McKinley (1843–1901) served as the twenty-fifth president of the United States. Over a century later, few Americans know much about his life or career except, perhaps, that he was assassinated while in office. McKinley's political career coincided with an increase in women's participation in political campaigns. A study of quilts related to McKinley's campaigns offers clues to a better understanding of the ways women expressed their political sentiments prior to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.



Born on January 19, 1843, in the small town of Niles, Ohio, McKinley served in the Civil War, leaving with the title Brevet Major. After the war, he attended law school with the intention of entering politics.¹ As a young lawyer, he settled in Canton, Ohio, where he married Ida Saxton, the daughter of a prominent Canton citizen. McKinley, a Republican, was elected to congress in 1876, governor of Ohio in 1891, and president in 1896. McKinley was re-elected president in 1900; however, his second term was cut short when he was shot by Leon Czolgosz at the Pan-American Exhibition in Buffalo, New York. He died eight days later on September 14, 1901.² Many of the milestones of McKinley's political career are commemorated within quilts beginning with his role as a campaign speaker in the 1884 presidential campaign.

Textiles and Politics

During the early years of American history, women were excluded from the public arena of politics. Women had traditionally used quilts to express their artistry, display their skills, and to commemorate family and community relationships. It was a natural extension for them to express their patriotic or political loyalties in their quilts.³ As technological advancements in textile manufacturing expanded the range of fabrics available to American women during the mid-nineteenth century, political candidates and movements increasingly relied on campaign ribbons and other textiles to promote their causes. Examples of these ephemeral textiles were incorporated into quilts, which survive as documents of the political affiliations and opinions of the disenfranchised women who made them.⁴

Among the earliest textiles relating to American political events and figures are copperplate prints manufactured in Britain. The copperplate technique produced finely detailed images of a single color, usually purple, red, or sepia on a white background. British copperplates typically depicted images drawn from classical mythology, historical or topical events, or patriotic figures.⁵ Copperplate



prints were popular choices for home furnishings, including bed curtains and quilts. British manufacturers created fabrics especially designed to appeal to the American market, including depictions of George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Miss Liberty.⁶

By the 1820s factories in New England had begun to produce printed cotton textiles; however, the majority of textiles continued to be imported until the Civil War.⁷ Besides yard goods, the British produced handkerchiefs commemorating historical events, and quiltmakers often used these timely handkerchiefs as the centers for their medallion quilts. As a result of the 1824 presidential election, printers began to add more politically charged motifs onto their handkerchiefs.⁸

The presidential race of 1824 is thought to have been the first in which campaign-related items were distributed before the election.⁹ John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, and William H. Crawford competed for the support, not only of male voters, but also for that of non-voting women.¹⁰ Supporters of Adams and Jackson distributed cardboard sewing boxes decorated with campaign slogans and images of the candidates, clearly designed to appeal to women.¹¹ Other campaign items included bandannas, buttons, printed fabric, ribbons, snuffboxes, and thread boxes. The excitement generated by this campaign, culminating in the election of Adams, set a precedent, resulting in a pronounced increase in the number and variety of such campaign items in 1828 and subsequent elections.¹²

By 1840 William Henry Harrison's "log cabin and hard cider" presidential campaign portrayed him as a common man. People traveled to see Harrison make speeches and partake of the free cider.¹³ Politicians not only encouraged women to attend these events, but they recommended that they provide baked goods for political functions.¹⁴ Harrison's log cabin campaign inspired the creation of large amounts of campaign paraphernalia.¹⁵ This campaign initiated the widespread use of printed campaign ribbons, leading to over one hundred variations of ribbons over the course of the campaign.¹⁶ Newspapers illustrated women waving political handkerchiefs to show support at conventions and parades.¹⁷



Campaign ribbons, inauguration ribbons, and handkerchiefs began to appear in quilts.¹⁸

During the Civil war, women in both the North and South organized events and created flags, banners, and other items to show support and raise money for the efforts of the men in the military. After the war, women continued to use these skills to show their advocacy for political candidates.¹⁹ They made banners for parades or presentation flags for their husbands' political clubs.²⁰

By the mid-nineteenth century, candidates recognized that the presence of their wives could enhance their public image. In 1856 Republicans promoted presidential candidate John Fremont by using his wife, Jessie, as a campaign tool to gain support from women. Supporters wrote popular songs about her and many women wore 'Jessie' badges.²¹ More than three decades later, President Grover Cleveland used his wife as an asset to help regain his presidency. In 1884 he was criticized for fathering an illegitimate child. Cleveland married Frances Folsom in 1886 hoping to benefit from her positive image. When Cleveland ran again in 1888 and 1892, his wife's name and image appeared on many of the campaign items and textiles.²²

By the 1880s the volume of available campaign textiles greatly increased. Bandannas were abundant and politicians promoted special silk handkerchiefs as appropriate gifts for a sweetheart.²³ Surviving quilts from this decade contain textiles from presidential campaigns and elections.²⁴ Campaign textiles continued to play an important role through the end of the nineteenth century. By William McKinley's 1896 campaign, it had become commonplace for women to collect campaign memorabilia as well as express their political sentiments in quilts.

Quilts Created Early in McKinley's Career

McKinley had served as a congressman since 1876 and had begun gaining recognition and a dedicated following within his local community. He was active in the Republican convention and



became a campaign speaker for James Blaine and John Logan who were the Republican presidential and vice-presidential candidates respectively against Grover Cleveland in 1884.²⁵ The earliest known textile related to McKinley is a ribbon from this campaign incorporated into a crazy quilt.²⁶ The ribbon is embroidered with the names “Blaine Logan and McKinley,” an indication that Republicans recognized the political promise of the young Ohio congressman.

In August 1891 McKinley began his first gubernatorial campaign in his birthplace of Niles, Ohio. According to one source, his popularity was so great that 30,000 people came to Niles to hear his opening speech.²⁷ Many well-wishers wore campaign ribbons in support of McKinley’s gubernatorial race, and some of these ribbons made their way into crazy quilts in the early 1890s.

The McKinley Birthplace Home and Research Center in Niles, Ohio, houses a crazy quilt containing three gubernatorial ribbons for McKinley.²⁸ These ribbons are printed with an image of McKinley and the message: “For Governor, Wm. McKinley Jr.” The quilt, assembled in several large blocks, is made of silk and wool pieces with a cotton backing. Although the provenance is unknown, the quilt is believed to have been made locally, as it contains a silk hat lining printed with “M. U. Guggenheim, Niles, Ohio.”

Another crazy quilt, owned by the William McKinley Presidential Library and Museum in Canton, Ohio, is pieced with silk and wool, with a wool backing.²⁹ The quilt appears to have been made by several women as most blocks are inscribed with initials, and two with the date 1892. One corner block incorporates a white gubernatorial ribbon printed with McKinley’s face and “McKinley for Governor.”

Women Gaining Ground in Politics

By the final decades of the nineteenth century, the sustained efforts of women to attain suffrage had begun to achieve results.



The first gains came in local elections. By the 1880s women in sixteen states could take part in school board elections, and many women were elected as school superintendents.³⁰ In Kansas, where women were allowed full participation in local elections in 1887, several cities boasted all-female town councils by the end of the decade.³¹

Nationally women did not have the right to vote in 1896 when McKinley was elected president; however, some Western states including Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, and Idaho formed exceptions by granting women full suffrage. These women were able to vote in all elections including the 1896 presidential race.³² After a decade of allowing women to participate in local elections, Kansas joined this list by granting women full suffrage in 1897.³³ As women gained more political freedom, they continued to use quilts as a method of political expression.³⁴

Improved technology led to an increase in the variety and abundance of campaign items during William McKinley's 1896 presidential campaign, including personalized ribbons. The ribbons, which included the name of the candidate, name of the delegation and city each represented, and the date the delegation visited Canton, became valuable documents that could be incorporated into the popular quilt styles of the day.

Quilts for McKinley

McKinley's national prominence in the 1890s coincided with the popularity of crazy patchwork and outline embroidery.³⁵ Therefore, it is not surprising that women used these two techniques, as well as conventional pieced patchwork, when making quilts to commemorate McKinley. Crazy quilts were an ideal medium for incorporating campaign textiles. The technique allowed the quiltmaker to use a variety of fabric types, often scraps or remnants of memorable clothing or textiles, and embroidery techniques to create a fabric scrapbook.³⁶ The appearance of crazy quilts began to decrease in fashionable magazines by the end of the 1880s and the



quilts created in the 1890s contained much less ornamentation.³⁷ By the turn-of-the-century, other techniques prevailed in the periodicals.³⁸

The popularity of outline embroidery overlapped that of crazy quilts. Although the two techniques produced very different visual effects, both provided opportunities to incorporate embroidered outlines of human figures, animals, and household objects. Women used drawings as patterns to create designs which they embroidered with red floss. These quilts required less skill and were intended to be used as functional, washable quilts as opposed to the decorative crazy quilts. As outline quilts gained in popularity, magazines began to offer more designs including drawings of political figures.³⁹ The popularity of McKinley and his wife led to the production and use of their images in quilts. Women used both crazy quilting and outline embroidery when they commemorated McKinley in quilts during his presidency.

The Election of 1896

Following McKinley's nomination as the Republican candidate for president in June 1896, Canton became infected with campaign fever. That summer, tens of thousands of people traveled to Canton to meet McKinley and to hear him speak.⁴⁰ Mark Hanna, McKinley's campaign manager and financier, ensured that Canton's atmosphere and visitors' travel experiences were pleasurable through the provision of campaign materials and other accommodations. One historian argues that it was Hanna, not McKinley, who defeated William Jennings Bryan, the democratic candidate.⁴¹ According to one newspaper, it was cheaper to travel to Canton than to stay at home.⁴² One student who traveled to Canton with a friend said, "the town reminds one of the World's Fair. The streets are a moving mass of people—one is besieged on every side by fakirs selling badges, pictures of 'McKinley wife & home,' peanuts, canes, ect. ect. [sic]."⁴³ The spell-bound student rhapsodized about McKinley's charisma in a letter to her parents when



Figure 1. Collection of McKinley Campaign Ribbons, c. 1896. Printed silk campaign ribbons (clockwise from left): “Canton Women’s McKinley Club, Flag Day, October 31, 1896,” 73.11.5, 64.15.24, 60.20.22.1; “Women’s Excursion to Canton, July 15th 1896,” 64.15.17; “Women’s McKinley Club, 1896,” 60.20.15; “Ladies’ McKinley Club, Norwalk, O., October 22, 1896,” 65.150.35; and “Canton Ladies’ Reception Committee,” 65.150.31. *Used by permission of the Wm. McKinley Presidential Library & Museum*

she stated, “his very presence seems to electrify his hearers and they cannot help being inspired with higher ideas of loyalty and patriotism after hearing him speak.”⁴⁴

Delegations of people traveled to Canton from across the nation, taking advantage of discounted tickets and free fares provided by Hanna.⁴⁵ Many groups had special political ribbons made to record the event (figure 1). Women not only accompanied men but frequently formed their own delegations to travel to Canton (figure 2). Newspapers commented on the handsome and inspiring pres-



Figure 2. Crowd of Ladies, October 4, 1896. Ladies gather from the Oil City Delegation (PA) to hear McKinley's speech. Newspaper supplement.

Wm. McKinley Presidential Library and Museum

ence of the women, noting that “the gay and varied costumes of the ladies produced a much finer effect than had the best efforts of the men with all their campaign regalia”.⁴⁶

During McKinley's 1896 campaign, newspapers and women's magazines encouraged women to participate in politics and become familiar with the issues so that they could form their own opinions about each candidate. One newspaper article encouraged women:

Whatever concerns the whole human race concerns women just as much as men. It is therefore of vital importance that women should understand perfectly the great political and economical questions of the day. It is not enough to let your politics be made for you by your husband, father or brother. Think your side out for yourself.⁴⁷

Women stepped out of their domestic circle to encourage votes for McKinley. Some women voiced their support through public speeches. On July 15, 1896, a combined delegation of six hundred women representing several women's organizations traveled from Cleveland to Canton.⁴⁸ The women selected Mrs. Elroy M. Avery,



an active and prominent citizen of Cleveland, to speak publicly to McKinley about their faith in his policies and support for his election.⁴⁹

On October 27, 1896 Mrs. Laylin, representing the Women's McKinley Club delegation from Norwalk, expressed these sentiments in a speech which was subsequently published in the newspaper:

We have long honored and revered you as the highest type of American manhood, the ideal son, husband, citizen and statesman; a man whose every act has been pure and noble, and who will grace the chair filled by Washington, Lincoln and Garfield. Though we are allowed no voice in the coming contest, yet we have the right to express our preferences. We want a statesman for our president, not a demagogue. We want a party in power that stands for purity, honesty, financial stability and protection to American industry, and not one that favors anarchy, repudiation and demoralization of our business interests.⁵⁰

Toward the end of her speech, Mrs. Laylin added, "we wish to assure you that we shall use our influence in every way possible to help roll up that glorious majority that will greet you one week from today."⁵¹

Quilts Created during McKinley's Presidency

A ribbon printed with, "I Will March for Sound Money," a slogan particularly associated with the 1896 campaign, was incorporated into the design of one crazy quilt (plate 14).⁵² As this quilt also contains the 1884 "Blaine Logan and McKinley" ribbon, it suggests that the unknown maker not only supported McKinley in 1884, but remained loyal through his 1896 Presidential election. The quilt top also contains ribbons of other Republican politicians dated between 1884 and 1896. Considering that women did not yet have the right to vote, this quilt illustrates the depth of women's political participation in the late-nineteenth century.



Figure 3. Ribbon Quilt Fragment, c. 1896, 15 3/4 x 14 in. Pieced quilt fragment made entirely of printed silk ribbons.

Courtesy of the Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio, 2003.0.7

Another crazy quilt contains ribbons collected between about 1885 and 1912, including one dating from the 1896 campaign on which a photograph of McKinley is sewn.⁵³ Though the ribbon is deteriorating, some of the printed slogan, “Patriotism, Protection, Prosperity, Wm. McKinley, The Nations” is still legible. Another ribbon on the quilt associated with this campaign is the “South Norwalk Republican Club.”

Pieced quilting had been overshadowed by crazy and outline embroidery in fashionable circles in the 1880s, but in the 1890s, some women turned to calico pieced patchwork as periodicals no longer promoted elaborate crazy quilts.⁵⁴ The rectangular dimensions of campaign textiles such as ribbons, handkerchiefs, bunting,



Figure 4. Campaign Ribbon Quilt, 1896–1901. Image of H. G. Fries standing next to a quilt pieced of silk 1896 campaign ribbons.

Courtesy of Church of the Savior United Methodist Archives

and banners made them suitable for geometric patchwork. Unlike the easily identified ribbons and handkerchiefs, however, the inclusion of campaign bunting or banners may be overlooked in quilts unless supporting documentation is available.

Some women collected ribbons and made quilts or other decorative items entirely of campaign ribbons. One quilt fragment was created of twenty-six ribbons, twenty-four of which were from McKinley's 1896 campaign (figure 3).⁵⁵ These ribbons include slogans and names of groups that traveled to see McKinley during his front-porch campaign: "Oil Fields of McDonald Penna. McKinley and Hobart Club, Canton, O. Oct 14 1896," "Memorial Post Cleveland, O.," "Washington County, Ohio Delegation!" "Pennsylvania Company Employees Sound Money Club.



Cleveland,” “The Boston Herald Pilgrimage, Oct 26-29, 1896,” “Employee of Oliver Iron and Steel Co., Pittsburg to Canton, O.,” “Erie Railroad Employees, Erie, Sound Money Club,” “Employe[e]s of Walker Co. Cleveland. Oct. 17, '96,” “Harmony Barefoot Society of the New York State McKinley League,” “McKinley and Hobart Honest Money,” and “British American Republican Club, Jamestown, N.Y.”

Photographic evidence that women or families collected campaign ribbons to make commemorative quilts is found in a souvenir booklet sold at the time of McKinley’s funeral in 1901. The photograph shows Henry Fries, a Canton butcher, proudly standing in front of a quilt pieced entirely of 1896 campaign ribbons (see figure 4).⁵⁶ According to the caption, the quilt consisted of 412 ribbons that he collected from the campaign. Though it is Fries who appears in the photograph, the quilt was likely made by his wife. This photograph illustrates how, by the late-nineteenth century, quilts were no longer associated solely with the feminine domestic sphere but had also become an acceptable medium for the public political expression of both women and men.

Women sometimes only used part of a campaign textile when piecing it into a quilt. The one-patch quilt style required that women cut up ribbons in order to integrate them into the quilt. Researchers located one such quilt that contains a McKinley ribbon as part of the Illinois Quilt Research Project.⁵⁷ In another quilt fragment, the quiltmaker incorporated pieces of campaign ribbons into her silk hexagon patchwork.⁵⁸ The central hexagon consists of a red, white, and blue striped ribbon surrounded by alternating hexagons containing the images of President McKinley and Vice-President Hobart. Plain silk hexagons radiate outward from this central motif. Hobart died during McKinley’s first term, so these images date from the 1896 campaign. Though the quilt was never finished, the placement of McKinley and Hobart in the center of this fragment demonstrates their importance to the maker.

Mrs. Thomas Gilkison made a quilt of cotton bunting from McKinley’s 1896 campaign.⁵⁹ Her husband owned the Friendsville Coal Mine in Illinois, and according to existing information, the



bunting in the quilt draped a float representing the mine in a political rally in Friendsville. The quilt is pieced in a Double T pattern, in blue and white fabric.⁶⁰ The names of McKinley and John R. Tanner, the Illinois Republican gubernatorial candidate in 1896, are visible on one block of the quilt.

Not all of the quilts made to commemorate McKinley include campaign textiles. Mrs. S. K. Daniels made a quilt she called the "Liberty Tree," which she signed and dated "1896" (plate 15).⁶¹ The quilt is composed of blocks pieced from solid red, blue, and white cotton fabrics, and names and other expressions are embroidered onto the unpieced areas in red yarn. The names include Washington, Lincoln, Grant, Wm. McKinley, and J. R. Tanner. Additional inscriptions include Civil War battles, and patriotic and temperance statements, such as "Battle of Chattanooga," "Pittsburg Landing," "one flag, one country," and "abstain from strong drink," which presumably express Mrs. Daniels' interest in historical events and political sentiments. The inclusion of J. R. Tanner suggests that Mrs. Daniels lived in or had ties to Illinois; although, there has, as yet, been no attempt to further identify the maker.

Many quilts with signatures or embroidered names were friendship quilts, representing the group effort of a club or community (figure 5).⁶² Women in Cleveland made a signature quilt in a wagon wheel design, using red floss on plain white fabric. The central block features the embroidered name of William McKinley in the style of his signature with "President U. S., 1897" highlighted in blue floss. Surrounding his name are the embroidered names in of his cabinet members in the style of their signatures: Attorney General, Joseph McKenna; Postmaster General, James A. Gary; Secretary of Agriculture, James Wilson; Secretary of the Interior, Cornelius N. Bliss; Secretary of Navy, John D. Long; Secretary of State, John Sherman; Secretary of Treasury, Lyman J. Gage; and Secretary of War, Russell Alger. Rounding out the names are other prominent citizens, such as Mark Hanna, a wealthy Cleveland banker and McKinley's campaign manager. The quilt also includes names of local organizations and individuals, both in the center of each design and between the spokes. These include the



Figure 5. Wagon Wheel Block Illustration, c. 1897. Friendship quilt block containing the names of McKinley and his cabinet members. *Illustration by the researcher. Original quilt at the Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio, 55.497*

“Wellington Ohio Club”, “The Dorcus Society,” “Girls Friendly Society,” “Home Foraged Women,” and “The Book and Thimble Club.”

Another friendship quilt, a pieced outline-embroidered signature quilt, prominently features embroidered images of William and Ida McKinley in red floss. Beneath William McKinley is embroidered “18 W. McKinley 96” and beneath his wife, “Mrs. McKinley.”⁶³ The signatures written in the corners of each block are believed to be either the names of people who contributed to the making of the quilt or names of friends and relatives of the woman or women who made the quilt. The quilt came to the William McKinley Presidential Library and Museum through Mrs. McKinley’s relatives and it was most likely given to the McKinleys by admirers.



Figure 6. Memorial Outline Quilt, (80 5/16 x 72 9/16 in.) c. 1901. Outline quilt made of white cotton with embroidery in red floss. *Courtesy of The Minneapolis Institute of Arts; Gift of Christopher Monkhouse in honor of Anita and Myron Kunin for their support of acquisitions for the Textile Department, 2002.251*

Some women's organizations created quilts to be sold at fundraisers or presented as gifts to public figures. A quilt presented to President McKinley by the Daughters of the American Revolution includes printed or painted inscriptions of participating groups and the names of various states and U.S. territories (plate 16).⁶⁴ Some of these locations include "San Buenaventura," "Philippines," "Hawaii," and "Puerto Rico." The groups named



and incorporated into the quilt include “La. Society United States Daughters of 1776 & 1812,” “Daughters of the Confederacy,” “From the Ladies of the U.S. Mint,” and “sons of American Revolution.” A majority of the states that were then part of the United States are painted along the outside borders of the quilt.

Mourning our President

Though crazy and outline quilts had declined in popularity by 1901, women continued to use these methods when they made quilts that commemorated McKinley after his death. A crazy quilt from the early-twentieth century incorporates a memorial ribbon, edged in black and printed with McKinley’s name, the date of his death, and his reported last words “Thy Will Be Done.”⁶⁵

Magazines published printed drawings of William and Ida McKinley that turn-of-the-century quiltmakers traced to create their own embroidered portraits. After McKinley’s death, women continued to use these patterns as well as new imagery related to his assassination. One such quilt features the central images of William and Ida McKinley, as well as a depiction of the Temple of Music in Buffalo, New York, where McKinley was shot (figure 6).⁶⁶ Beneath McKinley’s image are the words “We Mourn our Loss, President McKinley.” The presence of the embroidered outlines of President and Mrs. Roosevelt suggests that the maker may have found the presidential succession reassuring as she dealt with the shock of McKinley’s violent death. Other images on the same quilt include political figures, important buildings, and ships.

Another outline embroidered quilt made after McKinley’s death also contains an illustration of President Theodore Roosevelt.⁶⁷ On this quilt, however, McKinley is absent; only an outline portrait of Mrs. McKinley is featured. The quilt, made of white cotton with a red border and embroidery of red floss, contains youthful designs. The maker may have chosen images of living people as being more appropriate designs in a quilt potentially-made for a child.



Conclusion

Quilts historically have been an important medium for women's personal expression. In the nineteenth century, women also used quilts to display their political affiliations and opinions. As more campaign textiles became available, women began to display these items in their homes, which was an acceptable method of political participation. By using the time-honored feminine association with needlework in a new, public way that transcended the domestic sphere, women were able to gain more access and participation in political affairs. Though rarely advocates of full suffrage, politicians recognized the important role women could play in a political campaign. With increased availability and variety of campaign textiles, women were creating new roles for themselves in the political arena by the time of McKinley's 1896 campaign.

An examination of the body of quilts associated with William McKinley reveals the high degree of interest and participation of women in the political events of the late-nineteenth century. A majority of the quilts discovered and discussed in this research relate to his presidency; however, political quilts created throughout McKinley's career illustrate the changing role of women in politics. Several quilts incorporate embroidery or artifacts that span multiple decades of political support for McKinley and or the Republican Party. As early as his congressional and gubernatorial campaigns, women were taking notice of McKinley becoming active in campaign events. Women emerged from the private sphere to present public speeches to McKinley during his 1896 presidential campaign. Using campaign memorabilia and other textiles, women preserved their memories and sentiments in their quilts. These quilts form scrapbooks of the political sentiments and activities of women prior to passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, and researchers should not overlook their importance as a means of illuminating this important aspect of America's social and political history in the lives of past generations.



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