



Stand at Cumberland Gap and watch the procession of civilization, marching single file—the buffalo following the trail to the salt springs, the Indian, the fur-trader and hunter, the cattleraiser, the pioneer farmer—and the frontier has passed by.

—Frederick Jackson Turner, 1893

Crossing the Great Mountain Barrier

From Alabama to Canada the Appalachian Mountains rise in a series of parallel ridges between the eastern seaboard and the continent’s interior. If you were heading west in the days of travel by horse, boat, or your own two feet, crossing points were few and far between.

Mid-18th century explorers following well-worn bison and American Indian trails found their way through at Cumberland Gap. Their discovery opened the Ohio Valley to the first great wave of westward migration. Today at Cumberland Gap National Historical Park you can walk in the footsteps of yesterday’s travelers—men, women, and children propelled by dreams and determination.

The route through the gap was first brought to widespread attention by Dr. Thomas Walker, who had been hired to stake out an 800,000-acre grant beyond the Blue Ridge. In 1775 a longhunter named Daniel Boone was commissioned to blaze a road through the gap. Boone’s trace evolved into the Wilderness Road, establishing his place in history as a frontiersman and pathfinder.

Settlers immediately flooded into the Ohio Valley. Less than a decade after the end of the Revolutionary War, Kentucky became the 15th state. Though other routes were used, the Wilderness Road through Cumberland Gap was the primary way to the West until 1810.

In the 1790s traffic on the Wilderness Road increased. In the years 1780–1810 between 200,000 and 300,000 people crossed the gap heading west. There was eastbound trade traffic as well: crops, corn whiskey, and herds of livestock.

With a nation that now spanned the continent, long-distance transportation quickly improved in the first half of the 1800s. Canals, railroads, and well-engineered wagon roads crossed the Appalachians. Cumberland Gap declined in importance. Then during the Civil War both sides considered the gap strategic. By the end of the war the gap had changed hands several times, yet it saw no major action.

What a road have we passed! certainly the worst on the whole continent, even in the best weather; yet, bad as it was, there were four or five hundred crossing the rude hills . . . men, women, and children, almost naked, paddling barefoot and bare-legged along, or labouring up the rocky hills, whilst those who are best off have only a horse for two or three children to ride at once.

—From journal of Francis Asbury, 1803

In the 20th century, Cumberland Gap (and its associated roadways) continued to be a major economic artery for the Appalachian region. When Cumberland Gap National Historical Park was authorized by Congress in 1940, U.S. 25E, a major paved highway, passed through the gap, compromising the historic scene known to Indians and early settlers. To restore the historic landscape the highway was rerouted through the Cumberland Gap Tunnel, which opened in 1996. Over the next years the gap area was restored to the way it looked around 1810. Today you can see and experience the natural beauty of Appalachian mountain country.

“Gateway to the West”
© DAVID WRIGHT

Cumberland Gap Timeline

Long before humans came here, elk and deer in search of food trampled a path through the gap. For American Indians the gap was a vital pass to hunting grounds in what would later be Kentucky. It was also the key pass on the Athawominee (“path of the armed ones”), or the Warrior’s Path, the trail of trade and war.

Cumberland Gap is one of the very few natural corridors through the Appalachian Mountains. When Americans started migrating westward in the 1770s, the primary route was southwest via Virginia’s Great Valley Road, through Cumberland Gap, north through The Narrows (Pineville, Ken.), and into the Kentucky Bluegrass country and the Ohio River Valley.

1750 Gap explored by Dr. Thomas Walker and five companions. Hunting parties use gap passage thereafter.

1769 Daniel Boone makes his first passage through the gap.

1775 Boone and others blaze Wilderness Road through gap, opening Kentucky lands to settlers.

1776–1810 200,000 to 300,000 settlers cross Cumberland Gap into Ohio Valley.

1792 Kentucky becomes 15th state; first west of Appalachian Mountains.

1796 Tennessee becomes 16th state.

1796 Wilderness Road improved and opened to wagon traffic.

1800 The Wilderness Road through the Cumberland Gap became a two-way thoroughfare. As the stream of settlers moved west, thousands of cattle, sheep, pigs, and turkeys—along with corn whiskey—from western farms traveled east to the seaboard markets.

1806 Meriwether Lewis and William Clark pass through gap (separately) on the return leg of their expedition.

1830s and 40s Wilderness Road declines in importance as canals and railroads improve east-west travel elsewhere.

1861–65 Considered strategic by both sides, gap changes hands several times but sees no major action.

1864 Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, inspecting garrison, titles Cumberland Gap the “Gibraltar of America.”

1889 Railroad tunnel completed under gap.

1908 Federal government completes Object Lesson Road, a project demonstrating modern road-building methods.

1920S U.S. 25E constructed through gap

1940 Cumberland Gap National Historical Park authorized by Congress; established 1955.

1996 U.S. 25E road tunnel completed, bypassing gap.

2002 Gap landscape restored to 1810 appearance.

Dr. Thomas Walker

Dr. Thomas Walker, surveyor for the Loyal Land Company, became the first white man to explore, describe, and document the route to the gap. Walker’s 1750 account describes things we can see today, like the entrance to the present Gap Cave, the spring coming from it, and the Indian road Walker followed. “This Gap may be seen at a considerable distance,” he wrote, “and there is no other, that I know of, except one about two miles to the North of it, which does not appear to be so low as the other.”

Daniel Boone

No name is more associated with Cumberland Gap and the opening of the West than Daniel Boone’s. Born near Reading, Pa., in 1734, Boone became renowned as a hunter and rifleman. In 1775 the Treaty of Sycamore Shoals secured a large portion of the Kentucky country from the Cherokees. That year Boone and 30 men marked out the Wilderness Trail from Long Island on the Holston River (Kingsport, Tenn.) through Cumberland Gap into Kentucky. There he founded Boonesborough and eventually held several positions in local government.

The Many Faces of Cumberland Gap



Cumberland Gap National Historical Park introduces you to faces and places from the era of westward migration. You are invited to join in the park's campfire programs, hikes, walks, music and craft demonstrations, tours of Hensley Settlement (a historic Appalachian community), and other activities scheduled throughout the year.

Begin at the visitor center where you will find an information desk, exhibits, orientation and history films, and book and map sales. Cumberland Crafts sells works by Southern Highland Craft Guild members. Guild artists and artisans give demonstrations. Service animals are welcome.

From the visitor center you can drive a winding four-mile-long road up the mountain to the Pinnacle Overlook (elevation 2,440 feet) for a spectacular view into the three states of Kentucky, Virginia, and Tennessee.



Planning Your Visit

From I-75 in Kentucky, exit onto U.S. 25E at Corbin and go south 50 miles to park entrance. From I-81 in Tennessee exit onto U.S. 25E at Morristown and go 50 miles north. From U.S. 58 in Virginia go west to the U.S. 25E intersection. Park gates are open 8 am to dusk all year. The visitor center, on U.S. 25E just south of Middlesboro, is open daily 8 am to 5 pm, except December 25. For firearms regulations ask a park ranger or visit the park website.

Trails Almost 85 miles of hiking trails wind through eastern deciduous forest in this 24,000-acre national park. Distances range from a ¼-mile loop trail to the 21-mile-long Ridge Trail. See maps below for locations, distances, and terrain. Maps of trails open to horse use are available at the visitor center.

Hensley Settlement Go home to the mountains! The 3½-hour tour includes a one-mile

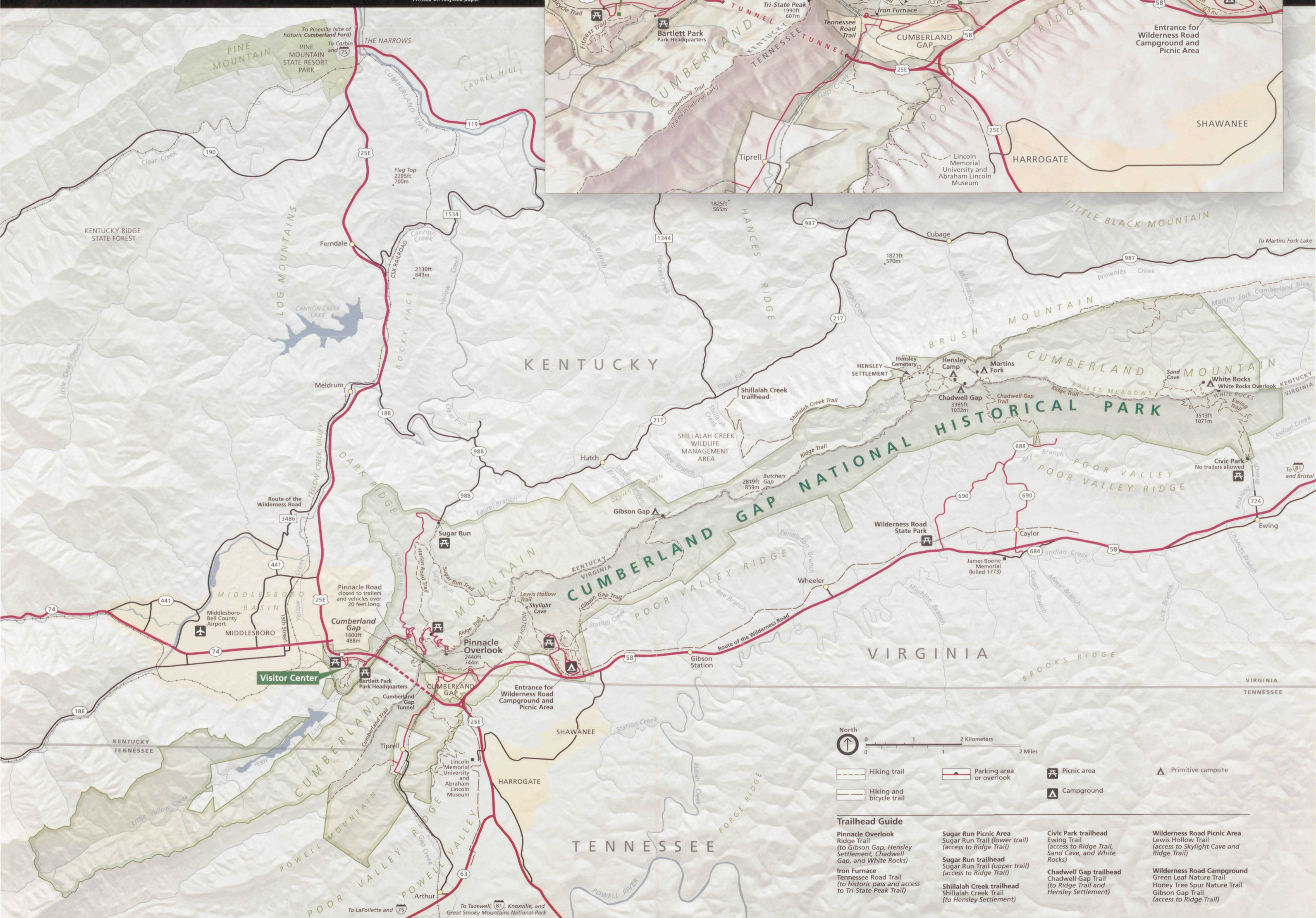
walk through the settlement, so wear comfortable shoes and bring a light snack. Reservations recommended; fee.

Gap Cave Tours Join park rangers on an exciting two-hour adventure exploring this majestic underground cathedral. The one-mile tour includes three levels of the cave via 183 steps. For the safety of all, no children under the age of five are permitted. Reservations recommended; fee.

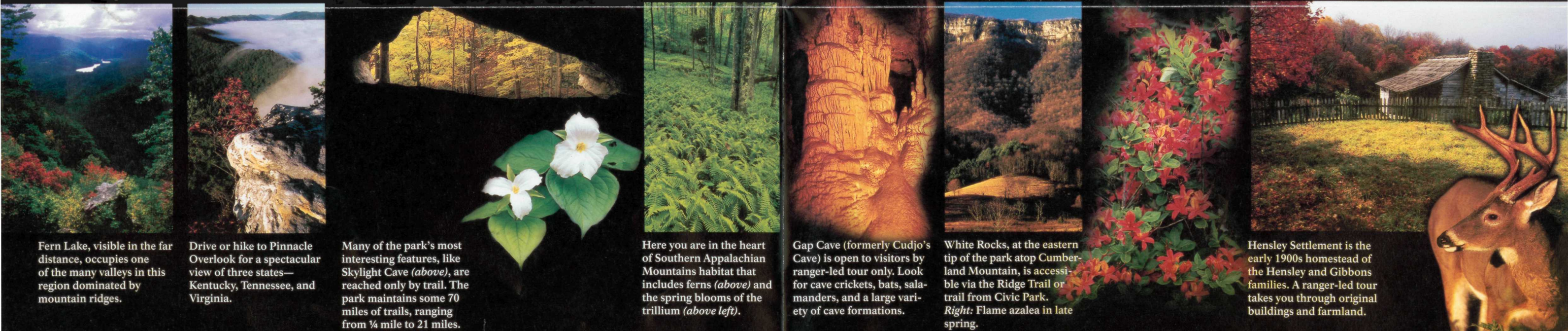
More Information
Cumberland Gap National Historical Park
91 Bartlett Park Road
Middlesboro, KY 40965-1848
606-248-2817
www.nps.gov/cuga

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The Many Places of Cumberland Gap



Fern Lake, visible in the far distance, occupies one of the many valleys in this region dominated by mountain ridges.

Drive or hike to Pinnacle Overlook for a spectacular view of three states—Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia.

Many of the park's most interesting features, like Skyline Cave (above), are reached only by trail. The park maintains some 70 miles of trails, ranging from ¼ mile to 21 miles.

Here you are in the heart of Southern Appalachian Mountains habitat that includes ferns (above) and the spring blooms of the trillium (above left).

Gap Cave (formerly Cudio's Cave) is open to visitors by ranger-led tour only. Look for cave crickets, bats, salamanders, and a large variety of cave formations.

White Rocks, at the eastern tip of the park atop Cumberland Mountain, is accessible via the Ridge Trail or trail from Civic Park. Right: Flame azalea in late spring.

Hensley Settlement is the early 1900s homestead of the Hensley and Gibbons families. A ranger-led tour takes you through original buildings and farmland.

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