



Louisiana's Mississippi River Delta conjures images of a spirited culture and places of haunting beauty. It is a world shaped by a dynamic, centuries-old relationship between humans and a still-evolving land. Here a succession of peoples has both altered and adapted to the environment as they interacted with other cultures—changing and being changed. Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve tells the story of this land and its culture that together show one of the most interesting faces of the American experience.

Top photos, from left: a bald-cypress swamp in Barataria Preserve; costumed riders during Cajun Mardi Gras; coastal marsh, where Gulf meets delta; living history commemoration of the Battle of New Orleans at Chalmette Battlefield; cast iron tracery gives the French Quarter a 19th-century air.

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Mardi Gras celebrants have masked in New Orleans since the 1700s. Formal parades and the practice of parades throwing beads and trinkets began in the 1870s.

MASK AND BEADS-APS / ANGELA FAULKNER

Cajun Mardi Gras— Costumed horseback riders begging farmers for a chicken destined for the communal gumbo; egrets floating over the marshes of the Barataria estuary, its expanse broken by scattered fishing camps on stilts; the rampart at Chalmette Battlefield, where it is easy to imagine 5,000 British soldiers charging into a withering barrage of shot and shell; New Orleans, where a stroll feeds the senses—the keen aromas of gumbo or hot beignets drifting from French Quarter cafes, staccato tap dancing in the street, the endless trove of goods at the French Market, the glittering Mississippi seen from atop the levee. And the music—one is borne through the day on music, from jazz clubs on Bourbon Street to a Cajun two-step at the Liberty Theatre in Eunice; from accordion-driven zydeco to street-corner blues. How did such an endlessly fascinating place come to be?

First there was the land, the creation of the Mississippi River. At the end of its journey, the river deposits sediment scoured from 40 percent of the continental United States. The delta is a restless interplay of land and water: treeless marshes, distributary channels, slow-moving bayous, forested natural levees, freshwater swamps, and barrier islands. A small swath of the delta within the Barataria Preserve encompasses some of these natural features and a history of human activity. American Indians settled this land as it formed some 2,500 years ago. Beginning in the 1720s European settlers and enslaved Africans took their place among the Indians, inscribing on the face of the delta—alongside ritual earthen mounds and ancient shell middens—plantation fields, artificial levees, logging canals, trappers' ditches, and oil pipelines.

Just as soil washed from a huge watershed shapes the delta, people from all over the world shaped the remarkable delta culture. After founding the Louisiana colony in 1699, France laid down the basic cultural rhythms. Religion, language, law, architecture, music, food—all echo their French origins. Other groups contributed different rhythms, different overtones: Chitimacha, Houma, and other tribes; Canadian French; German settlers. Enslaved people from West Africa contributed their labor, agricultural practices, and culture. During the Spanish rule of Louisiana from 1763 to 1800, Spanish-speaking *Isleños* (Canary Islanders) and French-speaking free people of color from the Caribbean began arriving in the delta. French Acadians, driven from Nova Scotia by the British, settled the bayous and prairies.

Facing an influx of Americans and immigrants after the Louisiana Purchase, French-speaking, mostly Catholic, residents called themselves "Creoles" to distinguish native from newcomer. At the Battle of New Orleans, diverse groups found common cause under Gen. Andrew Jackson, driving back the British in the last battle of the War of 1812. The victory secured the Louisiana Territory for westward expansion, bolstered national pride, and gained the United States respect abroad.

Before the Battle of New Orleans, Jean Lafitte commanded a large confederation of smugglers and privateers based in Barataria Bay. Though long hounded by American authorities for smuggling slaves and goods, he joined forces with Jackson in the battle, providing men, artillery, and information. Pardon for his service, he slipped from the pages of history and lingers only in delta legend.



Accordion and alligator: icons of the delta world—the accordion because its driving rhythm underpins Cajun and zydeco music; the alligator as top predator in the bayou ecosystem.

Left: St. Louis Cathedral in Jackson Square.

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The bayous of the Barataria Preserve wind slowly through giant blue iris and baldcypress draped with Spanish moss. The word "bayou," borrowed by the French from the Choctaw Indians, is usually applied to the slow-moving rivers and creeks of the flat delta country.

Creole and Cajun: People of the Delta

Creoles and Cajuns—names romanticized, stereotyped, and misunderstood. Visitors are deluged with the words, all too often used to sell something rather than convey meaning about a people and their culture. Who are Creoles and Cajuns, and what do the names mean? Today various groups in Louisiana describe themselves as Creole—often claiming exclusive rights to the term. All have legitimate ties to that heritage. The distinction dates to the early 1800s, when Louisiana

ceased to be a European colony and became a possession of the United States. Creole originally meant "born in the New World." For many natives, whether of French, Spanish, African, or German heritage, it meant "us"—French-speaking, native born. "They" were Americans or European immigrants arriving in droves at the port of New Orleans, speaking not French but English or their native tongues. They were outsiders, bent on changing the Creole way of life.

Times change, meanings blur, and people's sense of themselves evolves. But "Creole" retains its old meaning as an adjective describing the food, music, and customs of those areas of Louisiana settled during French colonial times. In a sense, despite the overwhelming Americanization of Louisiana, the original Creoles won. Visitors come to experience Creole, to experience what sets this place apart: Mardi Gras and red beans, jazz and *joie de vivre*. Whoever came here—



Left to right: pan-roasting coffee beans, 1946; picking Spanish moss, 1940s; new father plays for his son on the steps of his music club, 1974.

English, African, Irish, Italian, Chinese, Filipino, Croatian, Honduran, or Vietnamese—contributed to Creole culture and in turn were shaped by it.

From their arrival in the late 1700s the Acadians, or "Cajuns," were a people apart. Mostly small farmers and craftspeople, they settled in the bayou country, where their isolation was compounded by their distinctive dialect and their fierce loyalty to family and place. Urbane New Orleans

ians saw them as quaint and rustic, subjects of humor. Driven by hard times to seek other livelihoods, Cajuns pioneered new ways to live off the bounty of the delta landscape. In this they were joined by other groups who helped shape the culture we now know as Cajun. No longer isolated, their culture is admired worldwide—even in New Orleans.

Shaping a New Land

The Mississippi River delta is some of the youngest land in North America. The deltaic sediments that underlie the New Orleans region are less than 4,000 years old. Natural processes—deposition of new sediment, erosion, subsidence (settling of sediment)—maintained a healthy equilibrium between land and water at delta’s edge. Human engineering has upset the balance, blocking sedimentation and increasing coastal erosion. Rising sea levels due to climate change are accelerating the loss—a football field’s worth of land every 45 minutes.



Natural levees along river and bayou provided higher land for farms and towns. Once forest was cleared, human settlement followed the narrow courses of the levees, leading to a pattern of linear settlement where waterways were the main corridors of transportation.

Before artificial levees and jetties, the Mississippi and its distributary branches built land in two ways. Spring floods overflowed river banks. The heaviest particles of the water-borne sediment settled on the bank; the rest spread out gradually. This process created natural levees (left) along the flanks of the waterways. The land,

highest near the river, sloped gradually down the back of the levee to freshwater swamps and finally marshes. The soils got wetter as the levee sloped downward. Oaks and other hardwoods dominated the highest ground; maple, ash, and palmetto the backslope; baldcypress and water tupelo the swamp; with

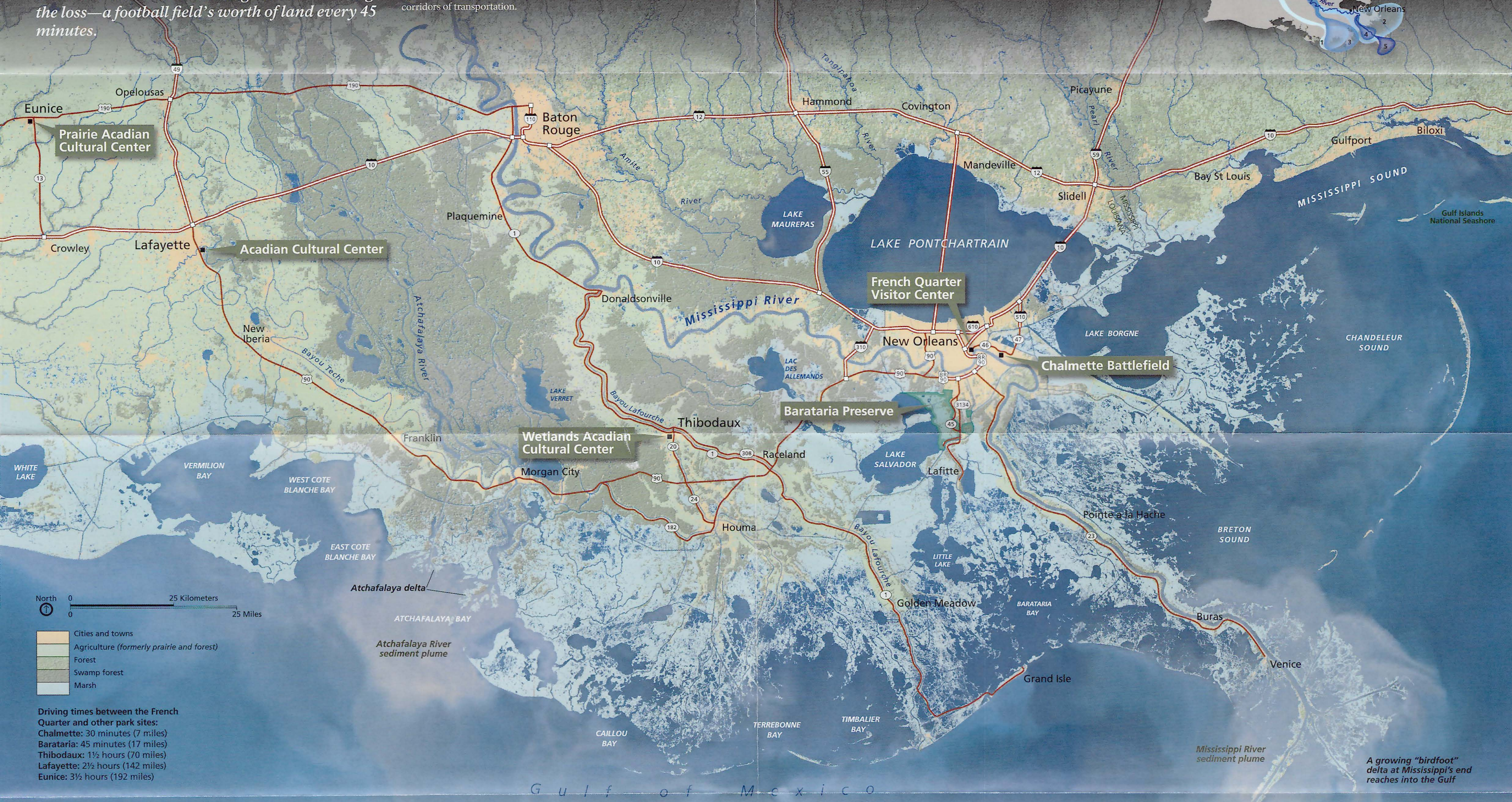
grasses, sedges, and rushes in the marsh.

The second process of delta-building occurs at the mouth of the river, where great plumes of sediment are deposited in the shallow waters of the Gulf of Mexico as the current slows. The deposits build up into mud flats, eventually colonized by

wetland vegetation. The river tends to wander and change course over this flat area, always seeking the shortest route to the sea. It often forks into two or more distributary channels within one delta. The new distributary forks sometimes capture the main flow from the old channel. In this way new deltas are built. As old

deltas wash away, their sediments are reworked by Gulf waves and storms into barrier islands and beaches. Over the last

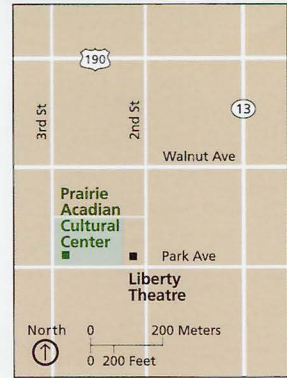
3,500 years the Mississippi has created five major deltas (below), the newest only 500 years old.



The Six Sites of Jean Lafitte

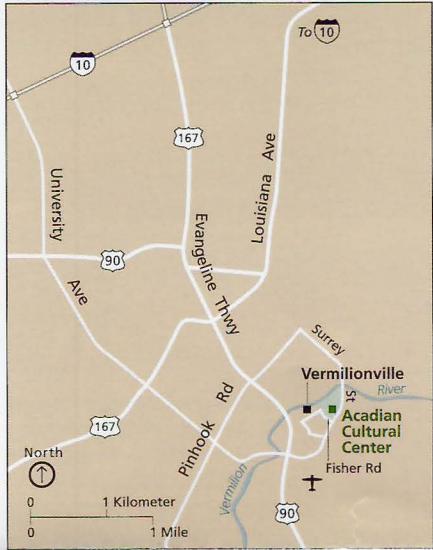
Exploring Acadiana

Eunice



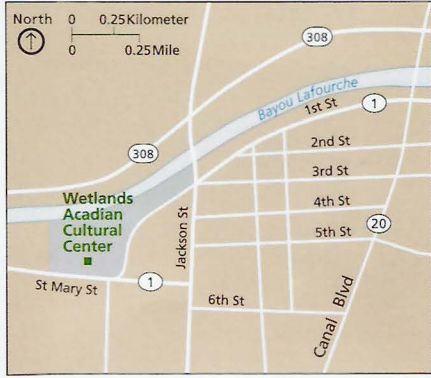
Prairie Acadian Cultural Center utilizes exhibits, Cajun music and dancing, cooking demonstrations, and live radio programs at the Liberty Theatre to interpret the culture of the Acadians who settled the southwest Louisiana prairies. 250 W. Park Ave. Eunice, LA 70535 337-457-8499 www.nps.gov/jela/Prairie acadianculturalcenter.htm

Lafayette



Acadian Cultural Center presents exhibits, films, programs, and boat tours of Bayou Vermilion to share the history, customs, language, and contemporary culture of the Acadians who settled Louisiana. 501 Fisher Rd. Lafayette, LA 70508 337-232-0789 www.nps.gov/jela/Acadianculturalcenter.htm

Thibodaux



Wetlands Acadian Cultural Center interprets the bayou Acadian culture with music, exhibits, art, boat tours of Bayou Lafourche, craft demonstrations, and other activities.

314 St. Mary St. Thibodaux, LA 70301 985-448-1375 www.nps.gov/jela/Wetlands acadianculturalcenter.htm

The New Orleans Area

French Quarter



French Quarter After founding New Orleans on a bend of the Mississippi River in 1718, French colonists laid it out in a neat grid. The distinctive look of the 66-block *Vieux Carré* (old square) is due to its architectural styles, developed in New Orleans in the 1700s and 1800s. The St. Louis Cathedral, the heart of the district, is flanked by grand Spanish colonial public buildings.

Visitor center exhibits, walking tours, films, music performances, folkie and cooking demonstrations, and ranger talks highlight the history and culture of New Orleans and the Mississippi River delta. 419 Decatur St. New Orleans, LA 70130 504-589-2636 www.nps.gov/jela/French quarter.htm

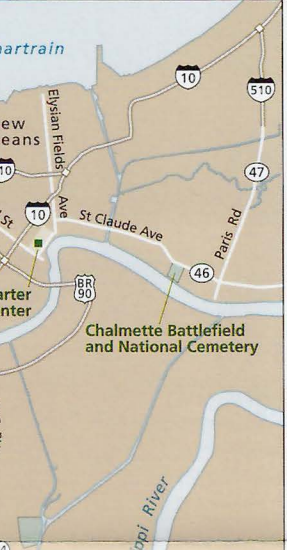
Directions to Barataria Preserve from French Quarter Take Magazine St. to Calliope St. Turn right onto ramp for “Mississippi River Bridge” (Business Hwy 90). Take exit 48. Turn left at second light onto Barataria Blvd. Stay on it for nine miles until you reach the preserve.

Barataria



Barataria Preserve is made up of 24,000 acres of marsh, swamp, and hardwood forest. The preserve offers a visitor center, environmental education center, ranger programs, walking trails, waterways, and picnic areas. 6588 Barataria Blvd. Marrero, LA 70072 504-689-3690 www.nps.gov/jela/Barataria preserve.htm

Chalmette



Chalmette Battlefield and National Cemetery offers living history programs, ranger talks, and visitor center exhibits and films. The battlefield is the site of the 1815 Battle of New Orleans; the Civil War-era national cemetery holds more than 15,000 graves of American troops from the War of 1812 to the Vietnam War. 8606 West St. Bernard Hwy. Chalmette, LA 70043 504-281-0510 www.nps.gov/jela/Chalmette battlefield.htm

About Your Visit

Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve 419 Decatur St., New Orleans, LA 70130 www.nps.gov/jela or 504-589-3882

Contact park headquarters or individual park sites for information on days and hours, programs, drive time between sites, volunteering, and accessibility. There are no camping facilities, food, or lodging in the park; these can be found in nearby communities. Public transportation is very limited; contact the park or view website. See the park website for information on firearms regulations and other special uses.

Accessibility We strive to make our facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. For information go to a visitor center, ask a ranger, call, or check the park website.

For Your Safety In summer drink plenty of fluids and avoid exposure to sunlight for long periods and at midday. Avoid small mounds of dirt; biting fire ants may live there. In Barataria Preserve, stay on trails; be alert for venomous snakes; don’t approach or feed wildlife (especially alligators); use insect repellent.

To learn more about national parks, visit www.nps.gov.

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