



*Washington's Televised Rubicon:
The Howard Fast and Hollywood Loose
Artistic License of "The Crossing"*

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In 2000, A&E Television, Chris Rose Production, and Columbia Tristar Television released a fictional account of Washington's Crossing of the Delaware and the Battle of Trenton. As historians of the Ten Crucial Days, we spend a lot of time researching and interpreting these events. The story of the American Revolution is fraught with myth, and in our current social environment there are efforts to uncover so much of what has been whitewashed about history. This made-for-television production was derived from the prolific Howard Fast's 1971 novel of the same name. The operative word here is novel.

This film is meant to be a fictionalized account of the events with the storyteller's prerogative to invent conversations. Historically, it is easy to pick this story apart. Given our recent wave of social awareness, it is even easier to point to Fast's novel and this television adaptation and label this production as an example of our whitewashed, sensationalized history. The problem with the myriad of historical inaccuracies cannot all be excused as artistic license. Numerous unforced errors could have been corrected by historical advisors. While we are now uncovering new scholarship to better interpret the events, many errors in the film were known at production time but ignored.

The societal flaws are glaring, even in 1999. There are only three women in the cast. There are no actors of color – even Washington’s enslaved servant, Billy Lee, who was ever-present in Washington’s life during the revolution, is completely absent from the film. A focus of this production is John Glover, commander of the legendary Marblehead Massachusetts mariners who had saved Washington’s army during the New York Campaign and had the incredibly arduous responsibility of getting Washington’s army 800 feet from the western bank of the Delaware River to New Jersey that night during a Nor’easter. We have known since the event that approximately twenty-five percent of these fishermen were either Black or Indian. Even Emanuel Leutze’s iconic 1851 painting showed one of the Black Marbleheaders in the painting’s rowboat. And other than having two giggling women at a dinner table for a few seconds of screen time and one woman peering out a window during the battle scene, there is no effort to show any of the hardship endured or heroism displayed by women, American or Hessian, during these events. In this regard, once again, Hollywood is a mirror of how our society is confused about both race and gender. On this account, the film is an excellent example for white men who wonder why people of color and women feel marginalized in the retelling of our history.

So, with all of this, why do I love this film? First, I like the acting in this film. Jeff Daniels, specifically, portrays a frustrated but resolute Commander-in-Chief terrifically. At the time of its filming, Daniels was the same age (43) as Washington – not the grandfatherly image in the Leutze painting. The supporting cast, Sebastian Roché, Roger Rees, and others, were also very good. Secondly, the costumes, the cinematography, and even the dramatic script give the viewer an accurate sense of the urgency of what the Americans wore, what they endured, and their situation. I can forgive Hollywood's artistic license and social exclusion with a production that can still be used as an instructive tool - what one of my former supervisors would call “a teachable moment.” In that spirit, I offer the following analysis and commentary on the historical inaccuracies in the film. To view this film on YouTube, [click here](#). Running time: 89 minutes. I welcome

your feedback. To view this film on YouTube, [click here](#). Running time: 89 minutes. I welcome your feedback.

1. 5:07 December 7, 1776 The ragged American's emerging from the woods onto the shore of the ersatz Delaware River is misleading. Washington and the troops marched to Trenton and crossed at the Trenton Ferry. Some may have crossed at the South Ferry or Howell's Ferry, but they certainly did not march to the banks of the Delaware and wait for Durham boats to arrive.
2. 5:40 This scene of Washington looking across the "Delaware" looks oddly distant. At Trenton, the Delaware is only about 1,000 feet wide. This scene shows the river closer to about 3,000 feet wide, or about half a mile.
3. 6:34 This conversation between Washington and Glover would not have happened. While the army was in Brunswick on 2 December, Washington sent orders to numerous units to collect all of the watercraft on the Delaware. He specifically sent orders to Colonel Richard Humpton, of the 11th PA Regiment, to focus on collecting the Durham boats. Still, there is no evidence that the Durham boats were used to move all the troops across the river on 7 December.
4. 7:19 Robert McKenzie seems to be a fictitious character. The Durham Iron Works was owned by Loyalist, Joseph Galloway. Galloway had leased the property to George Taylor, a Whig. Ironically, Taylor was a signer of the Declaration of Independence and would supply munitions to the American effort.
5. 7:38 Glover tells Robert McKenzie that he is commandeering the Durham boats "...for the American Revolutionary effort." The Americans would not have referred to their actions as a "revolution." They spoke of the struggle as "The Cause," or the War with Britain.
6. 8:33 That is not a Durham boat. The Durham boats are 45 to 65 feet long, 8 foot wide beam, and 4 ½ deep. There are no seat benches in a Durham. Everyone in the boat would be standing. And again...the river is too wide in this screenshot.
7. 9:09 The scene with Washington and his officers hopping into the rowboat a mere seconds before the British troops start shooting is very effective Hollywood license, but that is all. The British were a days march behind the Americans. Some advance units probably did

encounter Continental stragglers, and no doubt there would have been shots fired by local militia, but there was no engagement as portrayed in this scene.

8. 9:16 The British infantrymen that appear are not properly uniformed. Many British regiments wore red with yellow facings, but the vanguard of Cornwallis's troops were light infantry and Hessian Jager. The Jager wore short green coats, and the British Light infantry regiments coats may have been red with yellow facings but shorter coats than those depicted in this scene and would have been wearing caps rather than hats. The uniforms wore by the grenadiers (heavy infantry) in this scene are French and Indian War era design.
9. 14:19 Washington explains he divided the army with orders to Lee and Gates to bring their divisions to meet Washington on the western bank of the Delaware. It was a bit more involved than that. When Washington crossed the Hudson at Peekskill, he ordered Lee to remain near the Hudson Highlands with about 1,200 New Englanders to be sure the British would not turn north. It was only after Washington evacuated from Fort Lee on 20 November to begin the Retreat through the Jerseys that he began sending letters to Lee requesting that Lee march south to consolidate forces.
- 10.14:26 Washington asks of Lee and Gates, "Where are they? How can two armies simply disappear?" His orders to Lord Sterling to go find Lee suggest he does not know where either Lee or Gates are. Washington knew where these troops were. He was just frustrated they were not on the western bank of the Delaware with him.
- 11.14:35 Washington turns to Major General William Alexander, the male heir to the Scottish title, Earl of Sterling. Washington did not call him "Sterling." In his correspondence to General Alexander, he addresses him as "My Lord." We can surmise that he would have addressed him in conversation as either "Lord Sterling" or "General Alexander," more likely the former.
- 12.15:31 There is no evidence of this notion that General Alexander was given any orders to arrest Lee.
- 13.16:35 This scene opens with Alexander Hamilton transcribing a letter to Congress for the dictating Washington. Nineteen-year-old Captain Hamilton had just recently become known to Washington on or about 1 December whilst Hamilton's New York Provincial Artillery

- engaged in a cannonade at Brunswick on the Raritan, covering the army's retreat in a rear guard action. He did not become an aide-de-camp for Washington until March of 1777. Throughout the film, Hamilton's roll is entirely overblown. In fact, on the night of the crossing, Hamilton was very sick with what was described as pneumonia-like symptoms. He did participate in the campaign, but little has been written about his contribution other than the lore of his having been present at the actions at Nassau Hall on 3 January. Aides-de-Camp during the Ten Crucial Days were John Fitzgerald, George Bailey, Col. William Grayson, Tence Tilghman, and Samuel Blachley Webb. Robert Hanson Harrison was his military secretary.
- 14.16:51 Washington dictates, "Today is the 20th of December, in eleven days the enlistment papers for half the army..." It was well beyond "half" the army. By 1 December, enlistments for about twenty percent of the army had already expired, and by 31 December, the First Establishment of the Army would expire for about eighty percent of the rank and file.
- 15.19:14 Washington had just finished dictating a letter to Hamilton on 20 December. Mercer informs Washington that Howe is in New York and that the intelligence from a Dutch merchant suggests that Howe is not taking further action due to his dalliance with Mrs. Loring. While perhaps that is the fictional merchant's opinion, Howe had just left Trenton the day before (19 Dec.) He probably would have just arrived in York on that day. The suggestion that Howe's decision not to attack was due to his amorous distractions is misleading. Howe had no immediate plans to attack that had nothing to do with Mrs. Loring. Howe reasoned that since the American army would disintegrate due to the expiring enlistments and that there was little evidence that new troops would report before spring, Howe was in no hurry to put his troops at risk. Howe did not want to be remembered for spilling more blood.
- 16.19:31 Mercer says "...1,200 Hessians..." Actually, the number was closer to 1,500.
- 17.17:27, Washington tells Hamilton that he's very tired. Now, at 20:21 Washington says to Mercer, "Let's have a look at Trenton." So all of a sudden, he has the burst of energy to go look at Trenton. He continues with the statement, "I've never seen the town." Not true.

On 23 June 1775, Washington would have traveled through Trenton on his way to Cambridge to take command. Also, Washington's headquarters from 7 December to 14 December 1776 was indeed at the home of Thomas Barclay, as portrayed in the film. Barclay's home, "*Summerset*," is on a small hill in Falls Township in an area then called Colvin's Ferry (today's Morrisville, PA), only 2,800 feet, or ½ mile from the banks of the Delaware. One could see Trenton just walking out of the house and looking northeast.

- 18.21:59 Washington and Mercer greet Generals John Sullivan and Lord Sterling, arriving after Lee's capture. Sullivan and his New Englanders would have arrived from the north, having crossed at the Lowery Ferry in Alexandria, today's Frenchtown, NJ, thirty miles north, upriver from the spot that Washington hears the marching music. There is no evidence that General Alexander accompanied Sullivan's column into the encampment.
- 19.22:42 Washington pulls out his pocket watch, in regular daylight, and states that it is 5:00 PM. 2 December at 5:00, it would have been about a half-hour past sunset - twilight at the very least.
- 20.22:57 Washington turns to ride off alone. On 14 December, Washington (the real one) sent a letter to Congress explaining that he moved his headquarters upriver to the Keith House near Jericho Creek, eight miles upriver and 4 miles due west of McConkey's ferry.
- 21.23:25, the scene opens with a few of the Faden Map with Washington having just explained a plan to Colonel John Glover. We do know that Washington was aggressive in his planning. During the siege in Boston a year earlier, when the Charles River froze over, Washington presented a plan to his officers to go on the offensive - cross over the frozen Charles and attack Boston. Fortunately, he was dissuaded. We have nothing in Washington's papers that suggests that he came up with the plan to attack Trenton unilaterally. At this point, the Crown forces were now occupying three states, the militia was not turning out, and in exchange for amnesty, citizens were signing oaths of allegiance to the king, and many of his officers had lost faith in him. Since August, due to battle losses - disease, capture, killed, and desertion, his army had diminished from over 20,000 to fewer than 5,000. He would write to his brother, John Washington, "... "In a word, my dear Sir, if every nerve is not strained to recruit the new

army with all possible expedition, I think the game is pretty near up.” With the dire circumstances he faced in December of 1776, he realized that some bold action would be required to save “The Cause” of liberty, or they would begin the new year with little in the way of public support to continue the revolution. In late December, Washington realized that his diminished army was still superior in numbers, if not experience than any of the British cantonments strung over seventy miles in the Jerseys. Given a hostile local population in an occupied state and British command hubris, Washington saw an opportunity. Still, Washington’s leadership style was to interview his officers and local citizens to determine a plan of action. The politician in him would then suggest a course of action to each of his officers to gain consensus. He would then call a council of war that had been mandated by Congress. Collectively, Washington and his officers would discuss the plans. All present would still respect the fact that Washington was still in command; however, their opinions were considered.

22.24:40 As Barclay is at the table, we are to assume this dinner scene is at Barclay’s house. At this point in the film, we are past 14 December when Washington had moved his headquarters from Barclay’s house upriver to the William Keith house near Jericho Hill in Upper Makefield Township.

23.26:08 Hamilton arrives to report that General Horatio Gates has arrived. Washington instructs to have Gates join them at the table. Gates was nowhere near Upper Makefield. Rather, he was en route to find Congress feigning sickness to lobby Congress to replace Washington. Congress at this point in time had left Philadelphia to reconvene in Baltimore later in the month.

24.27:27 Washington reads a letter from Congress...” ...We leave you in full command with the power to make all decisions concerning our future...” On December 12, Congress passed a resolution that read, “Until Congress shall otherwise order, General Washington be possessed of full power to order and direct all things relative to the department and the operations of war.” Since the beginning of the conflict, it was understood that Washington needed Congressional approval for his intentions. With the British now threatening, Congress released Washington from that dictum and gave

Washington the latitude to make unilateral decisions without the approval of Congress.

- 25.28:04 Washington explains that at the beginning of the war, the Americans were in control of the three largest Colonial cities, Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. He continues, "We have lost New York. Congress has fled Philadelphia..." At this point in the conflict, the British occupied three Colonies: Rhode Island, New York, and New Jersey.
- 26.28:55 - "... (Trenton) is held by 1,200 Hessians..." The correct number was about 1,500.
- 27.29:00 Washington lists all of the Hessian supplies and provisions, implying they are chock full of all they need. This was not the case. Rall had been sending letters both to Donop in Bordentown and directly to British General James Grant in Brunswick, insisting on resupply.
- 28.29:10 "In four days, it will be Christmas. There will be a great deal of feasting and a great deal of drinking by the Hessians that day and through the night..." This propagates one of the most egregious myths of the campaign. Simply put, the Hessians were not feasting and drinking. Washington is suggesting that Christmas was celebrated in modern terms.
- 29.29:43 A scant few legitimate records of actual conversations exist of meetings Washington had with his generals. Still, the notion that Washington would announce the plans for The Crossing to his officers in the manner depicted is entirely contrary to what we DO know about Washington's leadership style. We do not know when Washington and his officers devised the plan of attack, but it would have been over the course of many days that Washington would have had private conversations with not only his senior officers but he would have also gathered intelligence from multiple local militiamen and citizens who supported 'The Cause.' This could not adequately portray in an 89-minute movie, so we can forgive the shortcut. However, it is important to understand that Washington would not have explained the plan to his officers. The plans would have all come together with consensus, if not concurrence, from his officers. Regardless, while the ensuing conversation between Washington and

Gates did not occur, Gates's sentiment was shared with many who had lost confidence in Washington.

30.31:40 Gates's outburst indicates the hubris the Crown officers openly opined. Regarding the angry banter between Gates and Washington, since Gates was not there, this did not happen. Suffice it to say, Gates would remain a nemesis to Washington.

31.34:46 Glover to Knox "To get a cannon across, we put a platform across two boats..." This conversation is absurd. They were at McKonkey's Ferry specifically so they could use the ferry boats for the cannon and the horse.

32.36:01 The "Sharpshooter" was not commonly used until after the American Revolution.

33.36:22 The officer of the Pennsylvania German Battalion is called Captain Heinemann. The name of the actual commander was Colonel Nicholas Haussegger.

34.38:14 Washington is riding toward what we presume is the McKonkey Ferry House. As opposed to the three-story stone and plaster structure shown, the McKonkey's house was a two-story wooden structure.

35.40:29 McKonkey tells Washington that the Delaware will be "cakes of ice" mimicking the image in the Leutze painting. The ice that forms on the Delaware at the ferry is not little icebergs but rather solid sheets. The ice forms first on the banks. As the frigid weather continues, the ice extends farther into the river, eventually covering the entire river in one solid sheet. Downriver, at the South Trenton ferry where Ewing's brigade was supposed to cross, is the estuary on the Delaware where the Atlantic tidal waters meet the river. As such, the ice was caked onto the banks, negating Ewing's efforts to cross at his assigned location. Saltwater freezes at lower temperatures than river water, thereby hindering Cadwalader's efforts to cross at Green's Ferry, just north of Bristol, then Dunk's Ferry, just north of Street Road in Bensalem, PA. River ice had formed on the banks, and Cadwalader reasoned that he would not be able to get his heavy guns across the River.

36.40:54 Washington states in a hushed tone..."...if I do not cross tomorrow...there will be no army." That is the best line of the whole film.

- 37.42:37 This scene is on the morning of 25 December. Glover explains that a "...night march in this weather." They did not know that a nor'easter would arrive shortly after the crossing would begin. Glover's point is well taken, but the plan was still, at that time to attack before daybreak.
- 38.46:02 I've never seen that flag before. We do not know what, if any, flags were carried across the river. Despite the orders that every man was to carry a weapon, it is possible that some regimental flags were brought on the march.
- 39.47:33 Washington explains that he and General Greene will take "the Pennington Road," which at the time was referred to as the Penny Town Road.
- 40.48:14 Glover says, "As for the crossing...I am in command...". No. Knox was in command of the logistics for the crossing, not Glover.
- 41.48:10 Glover explains how each boat will have one of his men in command. "He will be at the tiller." Technically, the word tiller is correct. That term had been in common use since the 17th Century, but the rudders on the Durham boats were called "sweeps."
- 42.49:00 These are not Durham boats. And no one would be sitting.
- 43.50:47 Washington asks Hamilton for the time. "Almost 10, sir," Hamilton replies. We believe that Washington would have crossed just before 10 PM. It was shortly after 10 PM that the weather turned severe. John Greenwood, a young fifer with the 15th MA Regiment, would later write, "it rained, hailed, snowed, and froze, and at the same time blew a perfect hurricane." Also, Hamilton would not have been with Washington. He would have been with his First New York Provincial Artillery unit. And, as previously stated, Hamilton was suffering from a viral infection.
- 44.51:13 Knox asks Washington if he can cross. As stated previously, Knox was in command of the operation and would not have crossed until much later, near the completion.
- 45.52:08 Washington turns to Lord Sterling to give him command at McConkey's. Lord Sterling actually crossed with Greene's division earlier in the operation
- 46.53:06 Washington to 250 lbs. Henry Knox. "Don't swing your balls, or you will swamp the boat." Washington was not known for his sense of humor.

- 47.57:27 Washington addresses the collection of locals who have been held specifically to ensure that no word of his plans makes their way to the enemy. Washington most assuredly would NOT have told these local detainees his plans.
- 48.57:51 As previously stated, the crossing occurred during a severe storm. This scene shows no signs of inclement weather. The snow and sleet were relentless, and the fog down by the river hampered visibility to the degree that some would claim they could not see more than ten feet.
- 49.1:00:07 This scene shows the column with men marching in single file. The men were marching eight abreast.
- 50.1:01:13 Washington stops and calls for Hamilton. The scene portrays the location where Washington divides the columns at the village of Birmingham. It was at this location that Washington turned to his commanders and instructed them to synchronize their watches. His orders are that the columns should reach Trenton simultaneously and begin the attack at 8:00 AM. In the scene, he has Greene's column heading straight, with Sullivan's column turn left. In fact, it was Sullivan's column that went straight along the river road with the New England regiments, and Greene, with Washington, who turned left (northeast) onto the upper ferry road.
- 51.1:02:34 The road portrayed in this scene is a well-maintained modern gravel surface constructed for vehicular traffic. Like most roads of the time, the Penny Town (Pennington) road on which they marched would have been a frozen path across a field. The road would have shown cart or wagon tracks. It certainly would not have been a two-lane graveled road.
- 52.1:03:45 At this point in the morning (about 7:45 AM), the harsh sleet would have subsided. The weather was still a wintry mix, but it certainly would not have been sunny as portrayed in this scene Washington asks the local, "Where is the Hessian guardhouse?" One mile from Trenton was the cooper shop owned by Richard Howell. That morning, there were twenty-four soldiers under the command of lieutenant (leutnant) Andreas Weiderholt. And at that point, the columns would have already been deployed into three ranks with Mercer's regiment on the left, Stephens's in the center and Fermoy's on the right.

- 53.1:04:13 The local explains the Hessians would be sleeping because, "...they made a great celebration yesterday," further propagating the myth of the Hessians partying it up for Christmas.
- 54.1:04:39 Hamilton gallops off with another soldier to, as Washington asks, "Silence that guardhouse." The ensuing scene is gratuitous Hollywood violence. Americans, (especially not Hamilton) did not burst into the cooper shop and kill four Hessians while they ate their breakfast. Weiderholt had stepped out of the shop to light his pipe. Upon seeing the advancing Americans, he mustered his men. What ensued was a fighting retreat with the Hessians firing at the advancing Americans as they ran back into Trenton in an attempt to alarm the garrison.
- 55.1:06:37 Washington pulls out his watch. It reads 7:58. Washington had given Sullivan the order to attack at 8:00. Rather than waiting passively until exactly 8:00 PM, there would have been a buzz of activity.
- 56.1:06:49 Sullivan looks at his watch which reads 7:59 AM. Sullivan would not have been looking at this watch as the action had already begun. A few minute earlier, about the same time Greene's column encountered the Hessian picket at Howell's cooper shop, the vanguard of Sullivan's column, Stark's NH Regiment, engaged the Jäger detachment at Philemon Dickenson's home, Hermitage, at the river. By 7:58, Weiderholt's grenadiers would have been rushing down King Street. Men of the Rall, and Lossberg regiments would have been coming out of the homes along King and Queens Streets where they had been billeted. The Kyphausen regiment, billeted closer to Front Street, were forming up to engage the New Englanders who were approaching from the River Road as the Jäger were moving across the Queen Street bridge to occupy the high ground. Twenty dragoons of the British 16th Light "Queen's Own" who were billeted at the Trenton Friends meeting house would have heard the alarm and mounted their horses. They, too, would be going to the Queen Street bridge to report the attack to other garrisons.
- 57.1:07:04, 1:07:29, and 1:07:55 I'm not sure where these artillery pieces are being moved to. They appear to be moving in front of the infantry who are about to advance through the town. The guns were placed

on the high ground above King and Queen Streets while the infantry ranks swept into the town from the east and west.

58.1:07:12, 1:07:19, 1:07: 24 - These are good shots of what Trenton might have looked at the time.

59.1:08:17 This, and subsequent forthcoming scenes, are good representations of the strength of the American force, though, throughout these battle scenes, it seems the Hessians were outnumbered about 8 to 1 rather than a more accurate 2.4 to 1.

60.1:08:23 Washington yells, "Stay with your officers, men! For God's sake, stay with your officers!" The troops were given orders at the beginning of the march to stay with their officers. There is no evidence this was called out at the onset of the battle.

61.1:08:51 I like the scene with the mother with her child looking out the window as it shows a bit how citizenry is at the mercy of war in urban warfare, however one must ask...why would a mother be peering out a window with her child in the middle of a battle rather than huddled in some safe place on the floor to avoid any possible casualty? Most of the citizenry of Trenton would have evacuated the town ahead of the occupying Hessian forces, but indeed, some had stayed in town.

62.1:08:59 What I find interesting here is how Knox's artillery seems to be engaged without any muskets yet being fired. This may not be too far off the mark, however, due to the fact that weather conditions were such that indeed, many of the men would have had difficulty loading and firing. Cannon were known as "the foul weather weapon" able to more readily fire under adverse weather conditions. However, the weather conditions in the film at this point seem perfectly fine.

63.1:09:06 The Hessian adjutant knocks on Colonel Rall door to roust him from his bed. Rall subsequently moves like a snail to get into uniform and take command while the attack is in full swing. This is exaggerated but does express Rall's initial reaction. The garrison had been under attack daily since their arrival two weeks prior.

64.1:23:59 Washington asks Mercer, "How many men have we lost?" Mercer replies, "None." Washington asks, "Wounded?" Mercer replies, "None." In fact, two soldiers reportedly died from exposure on the march to Trenton. About six or seven were wounded

- including Captain William Washington, a second cousin, and 19 year old Lieutenant James Monroe. Monroe wound was rather severe having been shot through the torso and having a severed artery. Had it not been for Dr. John Riker, Monroe would have likely perished.
- 65.1:27:09 The bio card for Hugh Mercer states that he died from a bullet wound several days after the Battle of Trenton. At the onset of the Battle of Princeton on 3 January, 1777, Mercer was knocked off his horse and bayoneted seven times. He was brought to the Quaker home of Thomas Clarke where he died from his wounds nine days later.
- 66.1:28:18 The bio card for Rall refers to an epitaph “His tombstone reads: ‘ Here lies Colonel Rall. For him, all is over.” While is attributed to a tombstone for Rall at the Presbyterian Church of Trenton, both the tombstone, and his exact place of burial are lost to history. It is conceivable that the site was covered over during a 19th-century expansion of the church building.
- 67.1:28:34 The title card reads, “The records show that a total of 16, 992 Hessians were brought to America to fight the colonists. Of this number, 10,492 returned to Europe in 1783.” According to Hackett Fisher, there were 18,970 soldiers from Hesse-Cassel, plus another 15,248 from other city-states of the Holy Roman Empire. Of those, 10,784, or 56% of the Hessians returned, and approximately 9,000, or 59% from other principalities returned. Still, the point is well taken. Many stayed.

Respectfully Submitted,

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