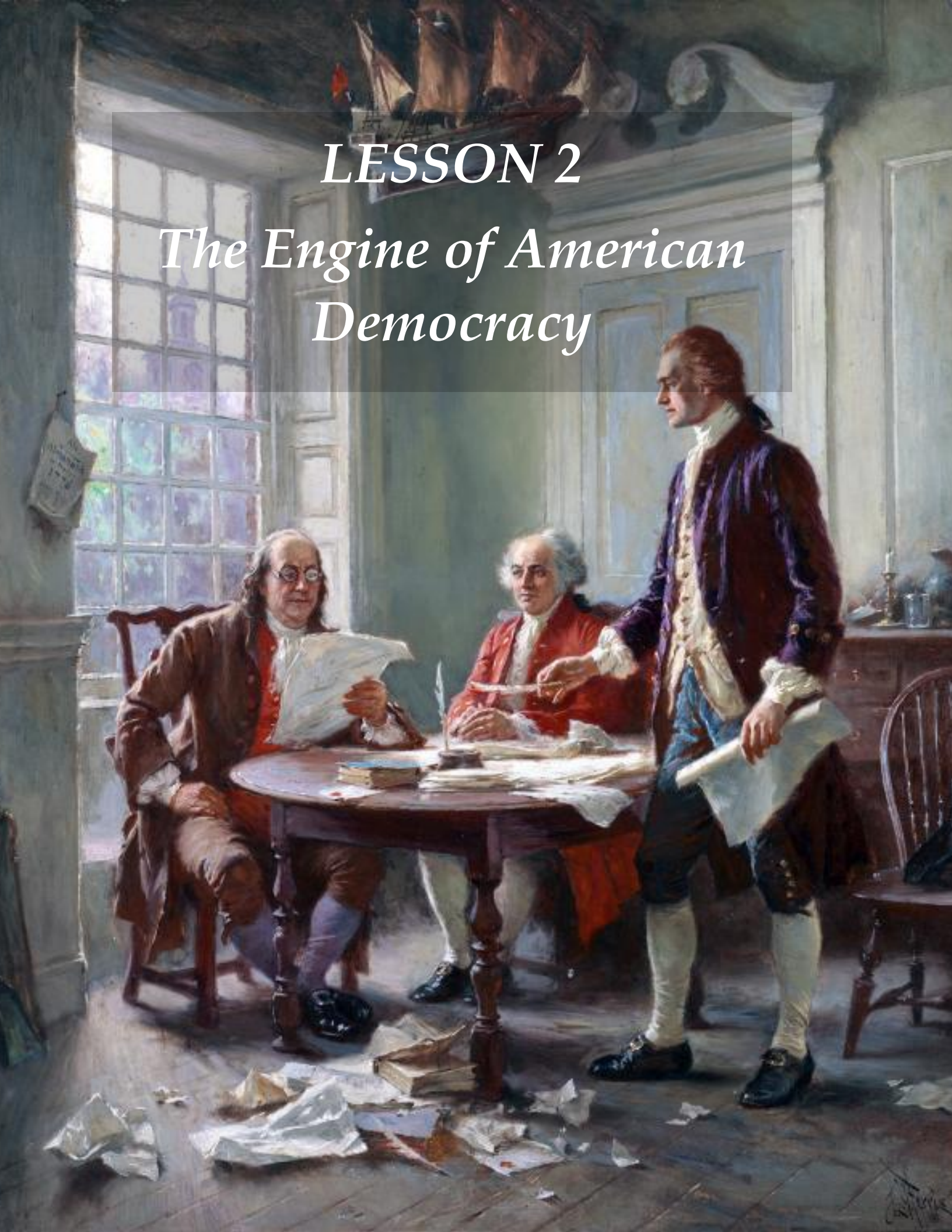


LESSON 2

The Engine of American Democracy



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LESSON 2

The Engine of American Democracy

Introduction

This lesson explores key ideas about religion and society that were held by America's Founders and some of the revolutionary documents that these ideas helped inspire. Along the way, we will ask why the Founders thought so much about religion and why they believed the right to openly practice one's religion was necessary if the Revolution was to succeed and the new nation was to flourish.

Key Terms and Concepts

As you read through the lesson, make sure you understand the following key terms and concepts.

Coercion	Established religion	Natural rights
Conscience	Founders	Promissory note
Declaration of Independence	Human equality	Unalienable
Engine of American democracy	Moral blueprint	Virtue

Key Questions

Once you complete the lesson, you should be able to answer the following key questions:

1. Was religious freedom a priority in the early American colonies?
2. What were the three main benefits of religion in the minds of the Founders?
3. Why did the Founders oppose an established church if religion was so important for public life?
4. What religious principle is accurately described as the “Engine of American Democracy?”
5. How does the *Declaration of Independence* function as a “moral blueprint?”
6. What does it mean to refer to the *Declaration of Independence* as a promissory note?
7. Regarding religion, what were Madison's three main arguments in *Memorial and Remonstrance*?
8. How did Thomas Jefferson believe truth would prevail in society?

The Colonial Background

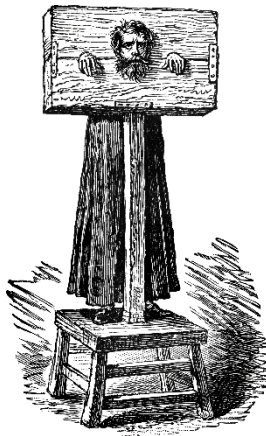
The United States was not always a welcoming place for all religious groups. 17th century colonies such as Rhode Island (founded by the Baptist Roger Williams) and Pennsylvania (founded by the Quaker William Penn) generally practiced religious freedom, but they were the exceptions in colonial America. In most places, individuals that refused to attend state-sponsored churches or pay religious taxes to support those churches often suffered unpleasant consequences. In Virginia, Baptist pastors were deprived of their property, jailed, and publicly whipped for preaching without a license.

In Massachusetts, Quaker missionaries were persecuted, and on rare occasions even executed, by colony leaders for spreading their faith. In many colonies, laws and public opinion prevented Catholics from running for public office, holding some jobs, and purchasing land.



CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Question: Which colonies practiced a form of religious freedom before the American Revolution?



By the 18th century, a growing number of people were uncomfortable with this type of treatment of religious minorities. A good example of this is James Madison, one of the important American Founders. In 1774, he wrote to a college friend in Philadelphia about five or six well-meaning men who were in jail for nothing more than publishing their religious ideas. For years, he and others like Thomas Jefferson had watched sincere religious people in their home state of Virginia be imprisoned, whipped, fined, and harassed for peacefully refusing to support the official state church. In this letter, Madison wrote that he had “run out of patience” with the situation. “I must beg you,” he wrote, to “pray for liberty of **conscience** to all.”

The Benefits of Religion

Knowing the harsh treatment some people were enduring, it might be tempting to think that Madison and the other Founders would conclude that religion was a bad thing. In fact, they believed the opposite. The Founders didn’t agree on everything, but they did agree that religion was important for democracy. So, they

were eager to make the new American Republic a welcoming place for religion. Their reasoning was based on a few basic ideas.

1. Religion promotes virtue: The Founders knew from history that a government based on democratic principles could not survive without **virtue**. Without virtue, they reasoned, people would act badly and it would require a strong government that deprived the people of their basic freedoms to keep peace in society. In a speech to the Virginia Constitutional Convention, James Madison said it was foolish to think “that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people.” The Founders recognized that religion was a valuable source of virtue. They also knew from history that when all religious communities are allowed to freely practice their religion, communities tend to be more peaceful and religious groups tend to create things like hospitals, orphanages, and schools that benefit everyone in society.

Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.

President John Adams, Letter to Massachusetts Militia, 1798

2. Religion protects democracy: The Founders’ understanding of history and their recent experience with the British King made them sensitive to the abuse of power. They understood the value of a strong effective government, but were convinced that too much power in the hands of a central government was a threat to human freedom and democratic government. As we will see, the First Amendment’s insistence on the “free exercise of religion” and ban on an “established religion” were both ways the Founders intended to keep government from violating the rights of the people.

3. Religion preserves other liberties: The Founders also understood something we discovered in Lesson 1. Humans have a natural desire to search for answers to life’s great questions and to base their lives on those answers when found. To try and control what and how people worship was not only a denial of a basic human right but it would violate other rights such as free speech, assembly, and press.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Question: What are 3 reasons the Founders believed religion was good for the new American Republic?

The Importance of Religious Freedom

If the Founders thought religion was important, it may seem odd that they opposed an official, national church like the one that existed in England. However, they were eager to end the religious persecution they

had witnessed in European nations and the American colonies. While they were convinced that religion was important for society, they were also convinced that an **established religion**, protected and promoted by the government, would lead to corruption and intolerance. So, their great task was to find a way to ensure religion remained an important part of American society without permitting an official, established religion that was funded and enforced by the national government.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Question: What was the great task of the American Founders when it came to religion?

The Founding Documents and their Relationship to Religious Liberty

We often refer to the group of individuals who figured prominently in the founding of the United States as the **Founders**. In this section, you will explore the Founders' own words in different documents written prior to 1789. As you read, note what they thought about religion and religious freedom and the role each would play if the new American Republic was to survive.

❖ *THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE* ❖

The *Declaration of Independence* was formally adopted in Philadelphia by the Second Continental Congress on July 4, 1776. In this document, the Founders declared the colonies' independence from England and provided a “**moral blueprint**” or a set of principles on which to build a new country. They included in this document a universal principle that became the “Engine of American Democracy.” It says:



We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights

--Declaration of Independence

The Declaration and Natural Rights: In declaring their independence from Great Britain, the American Founders justified their decision by appealing to something they called “**natural rights**” which is a way of saying rights that are common or “natural” to all humans and sourced in a greater than human source. In other words, these rights were not legal rights given by a human government. Instead, these natural rights were “**unalienable**” which is to say they can’t be taken away. Their reasoning was simple—if these rights didn’t come from the government, then the government doesn’t have a right to take them away. They believed God had given certain rights to all people, not just the British, and not just Americans. If any ruler

refused to uphold these basic rights, the people had the right to end their political relationship and create another one. This was the basis of their argument against the King of England. By violating the natural rights of the people, he had forfeited his right to rule.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Question: What are natural rights, where do they come from, and who can take them away?

The Declaration and Human Equality: The Founders declared that one foundational right was **human equality**. That equality, they said, came from the Creator, a greater-than-human source, which makes this statement of human equality a bold religious statement. The fact that this equality came from a Creator God was important to the Founders because it put an important limit on human government. A just and responsible government will acknowledge these rights that come from something bigger than itself and protect them for all its citizens.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Question: Why was the Founders' statement that "all men were created equal" a religious claim?

The Declaration as a "Promissory Note": Unfortunately, the Founders did not always live up to their own high standards. Perhaps the most obvious example is the presence of human slavery. The Founders were aware that their words in the Declaration did not match the current conditions in the young Republic. In fact, many of the Founders were opposed to slavery and tried their best to eliminate it in the young nation. For example, Thomas Jefferson, who was ironically a slave owner, tried to eliminate slavery in several state and federal proposals, including an early draft of the Declaration of Independence. He called the practice of slavery a "cruel war against human nature itself" and a "great political and moral evil." Unfortunately, his and similar proposals were all blocked by a small number of delegates and the end of legal slavery throughout the country would have to wait for the devastating U.S. Civil War.



In 1857, on the eve of that destructive conflict, the future President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, delivered a speech in which he talked about the Declaration's commitment to human equality. He said that the Founders "did not mean to assert the obvious untruth, that all were then actually enjoying that equality" at the time it was written. Instead, he said, they "meant simply to declare the right, so that the enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit." In other words, he said that the Founders understood that not everyone enjoyed full human equality

in their day. But, they were determined to provide the American people with the principled defense of human equality they would need to one day make it a reality.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Question: What did Abraham Lincoln say was the great value of the Declaration's words?

In the 20th century, the great civil rights leader and Baptist pastor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his famous "I Have a Dream Speech" on the steps of the Lincoln Monument. In that speech, he called the "magnificent words" of the Declaration of Independence a "**promissory note**." This was a way of saying the words in the document were a promise to be fulfilled as soon as possible. Appropriately, King delivered this famous speech in August, 1963 on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. His most famous letter was written from a Birmingham jail cell just a few months earlier and it contained a similar sentiment. In this letter, he wrote that "what is best in the American dream" can be traced back to the "great wells of democracy" which he identified as the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

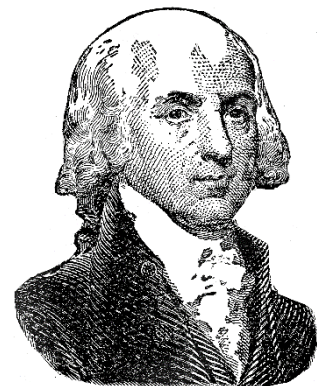
The life of this great civil rights leader is a wonderful legacy of the Founders' determination to create a society in which individuals could exercise the rights given by their Creator even though many of those rights were unrealized in their own day. In addition to enslaved people, women and religious minorities such as Jews, Catholics, Muslims, Buddhists, and others also experienced inequality in law or public life until later in American history. Not surprisingly, many groups would eventually look to the Declaration's radical religious truth claim that all of us are created equal by God as an inspiration for their movement.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Question: Why did Martin Luther King, Jr. call the *Declaration of Independence* a promissory note?

❖ MEMORIAL AND REMONSTRANCE AGAINST RELIGIOUS ASSESSMENTS ❖

Once the Revolution was complete and the war was over, the victorious colonists set upon the difficult task of creating a new nation including a single governing document later known as the Constitution. As the 4th President of the United States, James Madison swore to uphold the U.S. Constitution, a document he helped shape as a Virginia delegate at the Constitutional Convention. Just two years before the Convention that created the Constitution, Madison presented a document to the Virginia General Assembly that stressed the importance of religious liberty. This 1785



document was given the colorful title of *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments*. In this document, Madison argues that:

1. Religion encourages people to be good citizens

People must voluntarily make good choices for society to remain free and religion helps people make good choices.

2. It is useless to try and force someone to believe something

Religion is important to a free society but a person's religious beliefs and practices must be based on their own conscience. Madison said that "the opinions of men . . . cannot follow the dictates of other men." In other words, it is useless to try and force someone to believe something because true belief is voluntary. A word used to describe the attempt to force someone to do something against his or her will is **coercion**.

3. The right to be religious is natural and unalienable

Religion is "in its nature an unalienable right" and thus can't be taken away by a government or hostile group of private citizens. These thoughts should sound familiar as this was the same argument made in the Declaration of Independence.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Question: Did James Madison believe it was possible to force someone to believe something?

❖ *VIRGINIA STATUTE FOR ESTABLISHING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM* ❖



Just a few months after Madison introduced *Memorial and Remonstrance*, the Virginia legislature passed a law that was originally introduced by Thomas Jefferson and then reintroduced by Madison. That law is today known as the *Virginia Statute for Establishing Religious Freedom*. Jefferson believed this was one of the most important things he did in his lifetime and asked that it be one of three accomplishments listed on his gravestone (along with "Author of the Declaration of American Independence" and "Father of the University of Virginia").

Jefferson believed that religious truth is important to American society but that freedom would be threatened if the government or a powerful group of private citizens was allowed to decide for everyone what was true. In Jefferson's words, "truth is great and will prevail if left to herself" through "free argument and debate."

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Question: How would truth prevail in society according to Jefferson?

Jefferson begins the Statute by declaring that “almighty God hath created the mind free” and it is unjust to force someone to worship what they don’t believe is true. Jefferson is saying here the same thing Madison said—that if God himself allows people to choose what is true, then government or religious officials should not try and force what God does not.

The Statute also declares that no one will be forced to attend a religious service or pay taxes to support an official religion. Jefferson was known to be a free-thinker in comparison to the orthodox religious ideas of the day. Yet, like most of the Founders, he enthusiastically favored voluntary attendance and financial support of churches or other houses of worship. The point of the statute was that forcing someone to support a religious system against their will was unjust and ineffective.

The Jefferson Monument: One of the most impressive buildings in Washington, D.C. is the Jefferson



Memorial. This marble building overlooks the Tidal Basin with a grand dome supported by dozens of impressive marble columns. The monument is considered one of the anchor points of the Washington Mall and is sometimes referred to as a “shrine to America’s freedom.” The monument’s walls are covered with Jefferson’s sayings. The northwest wall contains quotes from the Virginia

Statute for Religious Freedom including “Almighty God hath created the mind free” and “No man shall be compelled to frequent or support religious worship or ministry or shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief.” In this monument to liberty, religious freedom holds a prominent place. By 1789, the nation was ready to make religious freedom an important feature in the Constitution itself.

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