

Cato Post Office and General Store  
3806-13810 United States Highway 10

Cato  
Manitowoc County  
Wisconsin

HABS No. WI-346

HABS  
WIS  
36-CATO,  
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
Rocky Mountain Regional Office  
National Park Service  
P.O. Box 25287  
Denver, Colorado 80225-0287

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
CATO POST OFFICE AND GENERAL STORE  
HABS No. WI-346

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36-CATO,  
1-

Location: 13806-13810 United States Highway 10  
Cato, Manitowoc County, Wisconsin

Present Owner: None

Present Use: This building was used as a U.S. Post Office and general store until its demolition in 1993.

Statement of Significance: The Cato Post Office and General Store was locally significant as a governmental and commercial resource within the unincorporated community of Cato. The building served as the general store from 1868 to 1993 and as the local post office since 1870. In both functions, the building served as a focus of social activity. It was also significant due to its direct association with John and Walter Killen, who were important business leaders within the community.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Date of Erection: 1868
2. Builder: Michael Murphy
3. Original and Subsequent Owners: The Cato Post Office and General Store was erected in 1868 by John Killen, a Scottish immigrant. Ownership of the building passed to Killen's son, Walter, in 1894. Walter Killen held title until his own retirement in 1927. The building was purchased at that time by Alois Huinker (also spelled Winker). The property passed to his son, Raymond, in 1970, and in 1971 to Raymond's widow, Olive Huinker. Olive Huinker retained ownership until 1993 when the building was demolished.

B. Historical Context

*Historical Information*

The early history of the community of Cato parallels the history of Manitowoc County. The first, and for a time, only white settler in the area was a French-Canadian fur trader named Jean Vieau, who established a trading post near an Indian village at the rapids of the Manitowoc River in 1795.

The dissolution of Native American claims to land in the area opened it up to large-scale settlement after 1831. The Green Bay Intelligencer reported on April 9, 1835, that "the Yankees, anticipating a day of sale, have penetrated as far north as the Manitowoc River, thirty-seven miles south of this place, seizing upon all the choice and commanding hill sites

and making claims. Exploring parties have also been upon the Manitowoc River, where it is possible that a sawmill and other improvements will be commenced this summer." This observation was prophetic—the first land claims were filed in the fall of 1835 for properties at the mouth of the river (where the modern city of Manitowoc is located) and at the location of the rapids.

In the spring of 1836, the Manitowoc Land Company, which mostly comprised Chicago investors, purchased a large tract at the mouth of the river. Only a few settlers responded to the first offering of land. However, in 1837, company stockholder Benjamin Jones led a large group to the area. They cleared land and erected a warehouse and several residences. An engineer named Waterbury then surveyed and platted the new community of Manitowoc.

Jacob W. Conroe and his brothers began the settlement of Manitowoc Rapids in the spring of 1836. They constructed a sawmill, the first in the county. It was quickly followed by three others: one located upstream on the Manitowoc River, another on the Neshoto (or West Twin River), and the third on the East Twin River (at the site of the modern city of Two Rivers).

By the spring of 1837, Manitowoc boasted a population of sixty persons, while Twin Rivers and Manitowoc Rapids had about forty persons each. The nationwide financial panic later that year nearly destroyed the fledgling county economy, as most of the mills closed and the county population shrunk to sixty persons. Most of these people remained from necessity rather than by choice. The economic recovery was slow.

Logging remained the primary industry of the county throughout this period, but a commercial fishing operation was established in 1837 at Twin Rivers Point. About thirty men were employed in this operation. Nearly all of the local laborers—including both the lumberjacks and fishermen—were French-Canadians.

The first clearing of land for agricultural purposes was by Horace Conroe in 1839, near Manitowoc Rapids. Conroe, however, soon gave up and returned to his native Vermont without harvesting his crops. Hiram McAlister is therefore recognized as the county's first farmer, planting and harvesting oats, potatoes, and other crops later that year. Along with peas, oats, barley, and rye, wheat was to remain the primary farm crop in the county until the 1870s. The first grist mill was erected on the Manitowoc River in 1852 by Ira and Isaiah Clark. Competition from the Plains states after the Civil War led to a major shift in agricultural emphasis from grains to dairying (with tame hay becoming the principal crop). The pine forests, and therefore the sawmills, had largely disappeared by 1870, but sufficient hemlock groves remained in some areas to support tannery operations for many years.

The first permanent settlers of the county were mostly Yankees, that is, New Englanders of English and Scottish descent. The French-Canadian laborers were mostly transients. The county population began to increase after 1850. In 1850, the total population of Manitowoc County was 3,720. Large-scale European immigration into the United States began after 1860. Most of these immigrants came from Germany, Bohemia, Ireland, and Norway. By

1870, the total population of the county had grown to 33,369. At this time, the majority of immigrants in Manitowoc County were German, numbering 9,335. Immigrants from Bohemia (2,360), Scandinavia (1,420), and Ireland (1,133), followed the Germans with the largest numbers.

The unincorporated community of Cato was established on the top of a large hill, the highest point in Manitowoc County. The first permanent residents of the Town of Cato were:

- 1847 - Hiel Heath, P.B. Classon
- 1850 - Ira Clark, Isaiah Clark, Seymour D. Robinson, Darwin Davis, Linsley Durham, Richard Evans
- 1851 - Thomas Thornton
- 1852 - William Hempton, Luther Wicker, Alanson Hickok, Eli Robinson
- 1853 - S.D. Harris, William Cary, John Morgan, A.R. Classon, Peter Comer
- 1854 - E. Roble, Gilbert Hanson, J. Lyons, Michael Fitzgerald, Benjamin Harris, Nelson A. Harris
- 1855 - A.P. Cary, William Kiel, Carl J. Gilbert, John Jacobsen
- 1856 - C.W. Butler, Hugh Jones, Frank Halron, I.J. Harris

The first non-farm building in the community was a schoolhouse. Two steam-powered sawmills were soon erected as well, the first by the Harris Brothers in 1854 and the second by Lyons and Chamberlain in 1856. The latter mill operated for only a few years, but the Harris & Company sawmill continued in operation, with an average of nine employees, until the early 1880s when the local forest resources were exhausted.

The development of the community was aided by two transportation improvements. First, the Neenah and Manitowoc Plank Road Company was organized in 1848 by investors from both of the named communities. By 1850, however, only 5 miles of 40 had been completed. The company was then reorganized with Judge George Reed becoming secretary. His considerable railroad investments led to frequent conflicts of interest as the plank road and rail routes were nearly parallel. As a consequence, the road was not completed until 1858. It remained in service until 1899, when it was purchased by the county. It was thus the last toll road in the state. The present U.S. Highway 10 follows the original route of the plank road.

The second transportation improvement involved a railroad between Manitowoc and Neenah. Ground was broken for the optimistically named Manitowoc and Mississippi Railroad in 1855, but no track was actually laid. The company was reorganized as the Manitowoc and Minnesota Railroad in 1868, then was purchased by the Milwaukee, Lake Shore, and Western Railroad in 1871. Track construction from Manitowoc to Appleton was finally completed in 1872. The line subsequently merged with the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad in 1893. This railroad line was ultimately abandoned c. 1970.

Cato was originally known as "Nettle Hill" and "Harrisville," but officially became Cato upon the arrival of the railroad line about 1870. The town of Cato, which gave its name to

the rail stop, had been named for the community of Cato, New York, the home of Alanson Hickok, the town's first chairman in 1856. Cato was actually one of seven named communities established within the town, the others being Whitelaw (now incorporated as a village), Cato Falls, Grimms, Clarks Mills, Oslo, and Gjerpen. The settlers were mostly Yankees, Irish, and, in the southern part of the town, Norwegians. The best known of the latter was economic theorist Thorsten Veblen, who was born on a farm near Oslo.

A Presbyterian church, the only church ever built in the area, accurately reflected Cato's ethnic makeup. Most of the parishioners were of English, Scottish, or Scots-Irish ancestry. The founding families included the Hemptons, Palmers, Davises, Morgans, HARRISES, Coopers, Robinsons, McNutts, and Darlings. The church was erected in 1869 adjacent to the public school, on land donated by Nelson Harris. However, it was without a pastor for all but a few years of its existence. The church was finally demolished in the late 1940s or early 1950s. However, the adjacent Cato Heights Cemetery is still used for occasional burials.

The Cato Post Office and General Store was erected in 1868 in the heart of the community's commercial district by John Killen, an immigrant who became a prominent local resident. Construction of the building is attributed to Michael Murphy, an immigrant carpenter who was responsible for building most of the early structures in Cato. The building was used as a general store and most recently as a food cooperative. Simultaneously, it served as the community's first and only post office since 1870 when rural mail service was inaugurated in Manitowoc County. In both roles, it filled an important economic and social function in Cato.

Established as a rural market center or "hamlet," Cato also became known as a rest stop on the Manitowoc to Neenah Plank Road and on the Manitowoc to Appleton rail route. These factors, together with the local industrial development promoted by John and Walter Killen and their associates, most notably John Kirch and Dr. Richard S. O'Donnell, allowed the community to enjoy a stable economy and a gradually increasing population until 1930, when the effects of the Great Depression and the mobility provided by the automobile combined to render many such small retail centers redundant. Little new construction has occurred since that time; the surviving buildings reflect the "Golden Age" of Cato's economy from 1870 to 1910. Today's ethnic makeup of the community mirrors the German and Bohemian mix that characterizes northern Manitowoc County.

### *Biographical Information*

*The Killen Family* - John Killen (born 1833) was a Scottish immigrant and American Civil War veteran who settled in Cato in 1868. That same year, he opened a general store along what was about to become the Neenah and Manitowoc Plank Road (modern Highway 10). In the mid-1880s, Killen purchased the adjacent buildings of the former Harris & Company sawmill, following the mill closing. Killen leased out one building as a cheese factory, which operated until 1967 (it is now an apartment building); a second building on the site

was used as a grist mill and grain elevator (rebuilt c. 1900 and closed c. 1970); and a third building was leased by Killen's son Walter (born 1864) as a cheese box factory.

Walter Killen was also a farm implement dealer and a partner in a brickmaking operation in the community. Various members of the Killen family served as U.S. Postmaster between 1870 until 1927. In that year, Walter Killen retired and sold all of his real estate to various individuals. This marked the end of a long period of economic stability for the community and the beginning of its gradual decline.

*Michael Murphy* - A native of Ireland who emigrated to the United States in 1849, Murphy was both a farmer and carpenter by trade. He constructed most of the original buildings near the village of Cato, including his own farmstead, which is still extant. Murphy served on the Cato Town Board for many years, and also served two terms in the Wisconsin State Assembly. His oldest son, M.H. Murphy, was a schoolteacher, Sheriff of Manitowoc County (1881-85), deputy collector of internal revenue (1886-88), and co-founder of both the Manitowoc Fuel and Land Company and the American Seating Company.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Information

1. Architectural Character: The Cato Post Office and General Store, constructed c. 1868, was a Greek Revival style building. Attaining popularity in Wisconsin around 1830, the Greek Revival style was used in northeastern Wisconsin until the early 1870s. As the first national style to be used in northeastern Wisconsin, the Greek Revival reflected social and economic influence brought by Yankees from the east into Wisconsin.

The Cato Post Office and General Store displayed characteristic features of the style such as wood frame construction, a low-pitched roof, front-facing gable framed by heavy moldings to create a pediment, and a symmetrical main facade featuring a recessed center entry with double-doors and sidelights. Alterations to the building included an asymmetrical addition to the west side (c. 1880) and a post-1900 portico with ornamental, non-classical columns.

2. Summary Description: The Cato Post Office and General Store was a simple rectangular building, two-and-a-half stories in height. The original store was enlarged, c. 1880, to accommodate an agricultural seed-and-feed business. For reasons unknown, a new porch was constructed on the main facade between 1900 and 1920 (The latter porch showed evidence of vehicular damage resulting from its close proximity to the highway; this may provide an explanation for the earlier replacement). Apart from these early adaptations, exterior alterations were limited to window replacements on the second-floor level. Most importantly, the nineteenth century commercial front was intact, a rare commodity in most commercial buildings that survive from the early period of development.

## B. Detailed Description of Exterior

1. Overall Dimensions: The original structure was 34 feet x 54 feet in size, with a maximum roof height of 24 feet. The c. 1880 two-story addition was 16 feet x 54 feet, with a maximum roof height of 16 feet.
2. Foundation: Rock-faced limestone and mortar.
3. Wall Construction: The exterior walls were covered with narrow-width clapboard siding, painted maroon.
4. Structural System: Balloon frame.
5. Porches, Stoops, etc.: A one-story porch with a shed roof and ornamental pre-cast concrete columns extended across the entire main facade of the building. The porch foundation consisted of cut limestone for the original section of the building and concrete for the addition. Four columns supported the porch; a fifth, the center column, was missing. The porch dated from sometime after 1900, and possibly replaced an earlier version.

An exterior wood stairway led to the second floor on the east side of the building. The simply constructed stairs with open risers began at the front of the building and had one intermediate landing. The upper, second-floor landing was enclosed by a flat-roofed vestibule.

A doorway at the northeast corner of the building was used as the primary entrance for the Cato Food Cooperative. It was also provided with an enclosed vestibule and a half-flight of wood stairs. The enclosure had a shed roof and wrapped around the corner to the rear. It originally also provided access to the basement via exterior steps of stone but had been blocked off.

A rear doorway was served by a small, open wood porch that was reached by either of two half-flights of wood steps, one parallel to and the other perpendicular with the rear wall of the building.

6. Chimneys: The building had a single chimney stack of cream brick construction, located at the gable roof peak on the rear (north) end. There were also two modern metal smokestacks that served a modern furnace. They were located in the approximate center of the west facade addition roof.

### 7. Openings

a. Doorways and Doors: The Cato Post Office and General Store had six entrances: four on the first floor level, one to the basement, and one to the second floor. Of these, the main entryway possessed the greatest historic integrity.

The main doorway was centered on the south wall of the original block of the building. It consisted of double doors fitted with one-over-one windows. A single door was provided for the front of the west addition. This was a solid wood door of rustic appearance without windows. Both of these entries and their materials were wholly original.

The enclosed doorway at the northeast corner of the building was a heavy wood door and may also have been original. The enclosure around it had a modern wood door of simple construction and was without windows.

The rear entry on the first-floor level was a heavy wood door with a single large light. While the door fabric may have been original, the window was a modern replacement. The door on the second-floor, which is enclosed by a vestibule, matches the rear first-floor door.

b. Windows: Fenestration of the original facade was symmetrical in placement, and closely related to that of the rear facade. The main doors were flanked by two wide sidelights of two panes each, angled into the recessed doorway. The first-floor facade also displayed large four-paned casement windows on both sides of the entryway. These windows all appeared to be original in design. The second-floor main facade windows were all non-original. Two symmetrically placed openings that once held a pair of windows in each, were filled by a trio of windows on the right, two double-hung and one casement variety, and by a pair of casement windows on the left. All of these windows had aluminum sashes. A central, two-light casement window was located within the gable on the main facade. This was the only exterior opening provided for this level.

The east side of the building, paralleling County Trunk Highway J, had only one window on the first floor. This was an original six-over-six double-hung window that was located near the corner entryway. There were a total of six one-over-one double-hung windows on the second-floor placed in the following manner: single, pair, pair, and single. The windows were all non-original, but their locations may have been original. In addition, the stairway vestibule, which was situated between two sets of paired windows, also had a pair of single-paned casement windows.

The north (rear) facade possessed the highest degree of original fabric. The first floor had three six-over-six, double-hung windows that were symmetrically spaced. The second floor had two widely-spaced windows; while both remained in original openings, the materials had been replaced with one-over-one, double-hung windows with aluminum sashes. There was an asymmetrically located window between these two. This small, one-over-one, double-hung window served a modern bathroom. There were no windows on the third-floor level, only a louvered vent. Due to the slope of the land, the foundation rose about 4 feet above ground level, which allowed space for two four-paned casement windows.

The west facade addition had window size and placement that differed greatly from those found in the original section. The centrally located *main facade door* was flanked by two double-hung windows. The second floor had a single, off-center, one-over-one, double-hung window.

The west wall of the addition had three regularly spaced double-hung windows on the second floor, no windows on the first floor, and four evenly spaced windows across the masonry foundation. The extreme right and left windows on the basement level were four-paned casements, while the two center windows were larger in size but boarded up. Interior modifications suggested that these openings were used primarily to pass through larger items of merchandise (e.g., lumber), but may also have been intended to serve as light sources.

8. Roof: The gable roof consisted of standing-seam sheet metal, painted black. Roofs on the entry vestibules and on the west addition were composed of asphalt shingles. The west addition also included a false-front parapet on the main facade.

### C. Detailed Description of Interior

1. Summary Description: The integrity of the interior of the Cato Post Office and General Store varied greatly from floor to floor. The basement was unchanged since construction, and there were few alterations within the west facade addition where the seed-and-feed was located. The first floor of the original block was relatively intact, but the second floor had been radically altered.

2. Floor Plans: See accompanying drawings (Figure 1).

3. Stairways: The principal stairway was a long, wide, flight of steps. The stairway had an unusual ratio of length to width (13 feet x 5 feet).

4. Flooring: The floor in the general store consisted of excellent quality hardwood flooring with natural wood-grain finish, laid diagonally. While that material was not original, it may have been installed as early as 1890. The second-floor was covered with a variety of modern materials including carpeting and vinyl tile.

Both floor levels of the west addition consisted of unfinished wood planking. The basement floors were concrete.

5. Wall and Ceiling Finishes: The original store featured an intact pressed metal ceiling and plastered walls concealed underneath modern store materials such as pegboard along the west wall. The second level of the original section had been completely remodeled with modern materials. Traces of earlier materials, such as post-1900 wallpaper, could still be seen, but traces of the original wall and ceiling coverings could not.

Walls and ceilings on both levels of the west addition were unfinished wood. Except for the wood stairway enclosure, walls on the basement level were constructed of thick fieldstone masonry. The low ceiling was unfinished.

6. Highlights: While much was altered on some levels, and largely unfinished on others, highlights of the interior of the Cato Post Office and General Store include the hardwood

flooring, the pressed metal ceiling, the rustic masonry of the original basement, and the brass postal boxes in the relocated postal lobby.

#### D. Site

The Cato Post Office and General Store was located on the northwest corner of the intersection of U.S. Highway 10 (the former Manitowoc to Neenah Plank Road) and County Trunk Highway J in the unincorporated community of Cato. The building faced Highway 10 with no setback.

The building was located on a rectangular parcel of land which sloped to the north and west, away from the roads. The parcel measured 100 feet x 230 feet, and was located in the northeast quarter of the southeast quarter of Section 4, T 19 N, R 22 E. The building was located in the center of Cato's former commercial district, which has been seriously altered. To the east, the building was bounded by Highway J and a vacant lot where the Cato Hotel once stood. On the north and west, single-family residences dominate the landscape, while to the south, the Herman Klann House and a vacant lot rest on the opposite side of Highway 10.

### PART III. SOURCES OF PROJECT INFORMATION

#### A. Bibliography:

##### 1. Primary Sources

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Figure 1: Floor plans for the Cato Post Office and General Store.

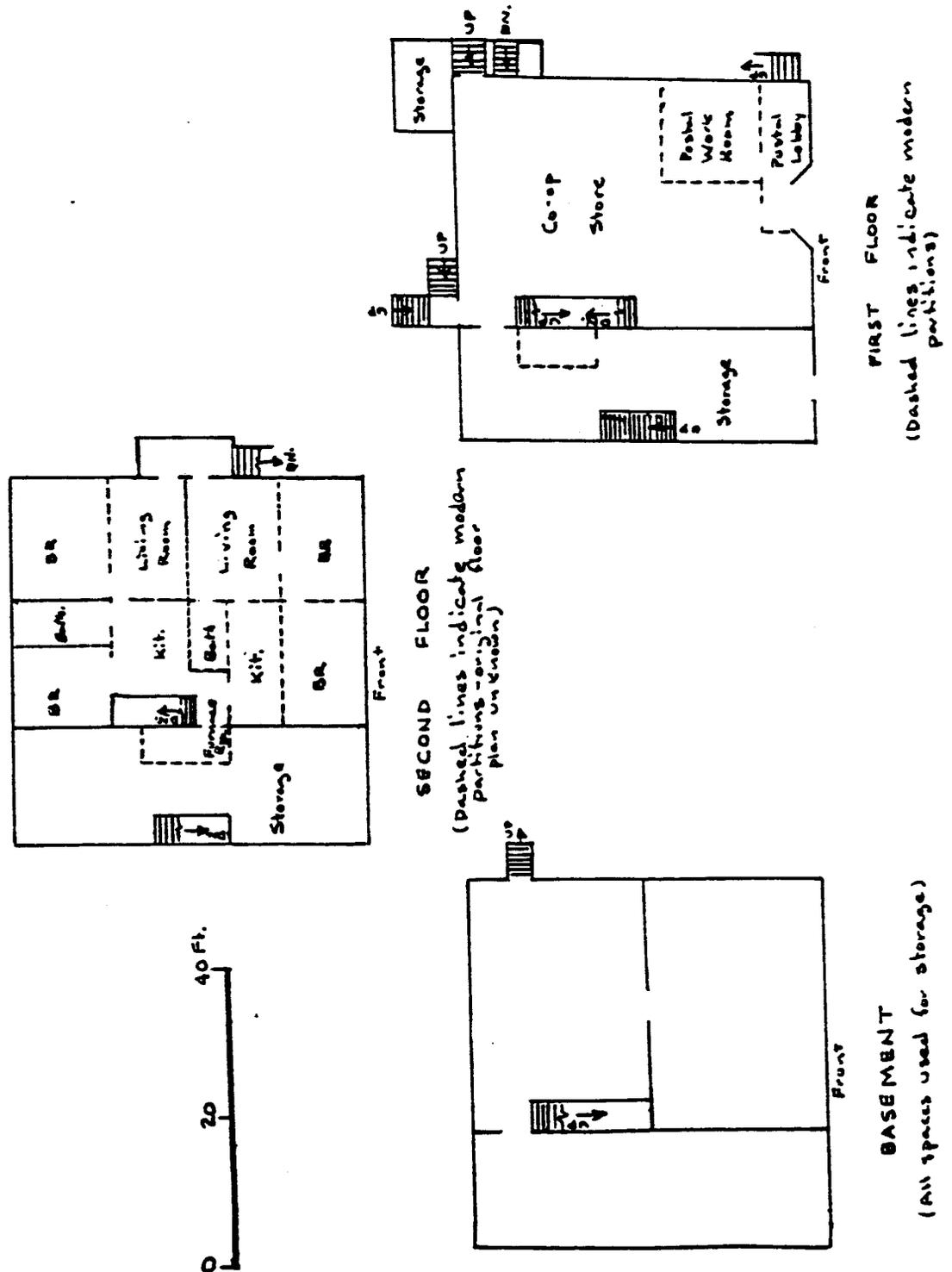


Figure 2: USGS Quad: Whitelaw, Wisconsin (7.5 minute series)  
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