



The Oregon State Flag

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State flags run the gamut, from the easily recognized to the easily confused, from artistically simple to a catchall of more than you ever wanted to see. The Zia sun symbol on New Mexico's flag is simplicity itself. Once you have seen it, you will always know it. Alaska's flag, with its Big Dipper and the North Star, is also highly memorable. The Arizona sunset design, while a bit heavy, is nonetheless memorable due to its basic simplicity.

At the other end of the scale, the Oregon flag, while wafting in the breeze on an outdoor pole, has too much imagery for the eye to see or the brain to absorb (the case with the flags of quite a number of states). Even on display indoors, it requires careful scrutiny and a scholarly determination to reveal what amounts to a pageant of Oregon history.



Figure 1. The current Oregon State Flag, Front. Source: TME Company

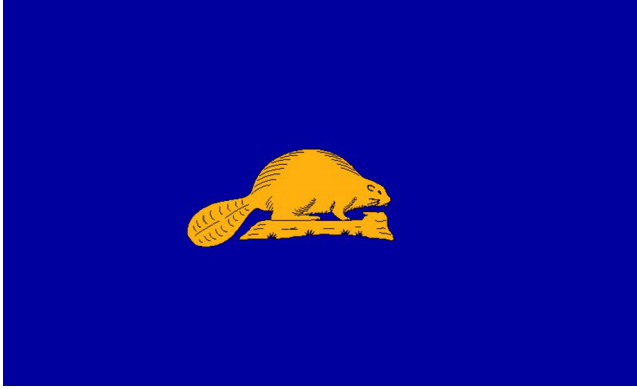


Figure 2. *The current Oregon State Flag, Back.* Source: TME Company

For someone who has never seen this flag, its official description in the 1925 *Oregon Blue Book* is not much help. The escutcheon of the state seal, the central feature of the flag, full of historical imagery, is merely mentioned in passing without description.¹

A photo of the flag, along with an enlarged view of the escutcheon, would reveal more detail than the average flag observer bargained for. For an explanation of those details, the researcher must find a description of the state seal.



Figure 3. *The current Oregon State Seal.* Source: Oregon Economic and Community Development Department.



THE SEAL

As is the case with all organizational entities, Oregon's state seal did not spring full-blown into its present form. Rather, it went through an evolutionary process, with bumps and detours along the way. The May 1899 edition of *Oregon Native Son* magazine provides a very descriptive seven-page history of the seal up to that date. Let us take a few moments to review a highly condensed rendition of that article, which provides a historical review of several quasi-official state seals.

We begin with a wheat and salmon design by Hamilton Campbell in 1846. It was used by the provisional territorial government (formed in 1843) until superseded when the Oregon Territory became official (in 1848). In 1849, the first territorial seal was sent to Governor Lane, but he rejected it. One year later, it was presented to Governor Gaines, who accepted and used it as the official territorial seal. However, it was not adopted by the territorial legislature until January 1854. Unlike the simple design of the provisional territorial government, this new seal displayed a veritable pageant of Oregon history, with a plow, mountains, a ship, a beaver, an Indian, and an eagle, plus a Latin motto: "I fly with my own wings". Although it was adopted by the territorial legislature, it was never officially recorded by the territorial secretary. A later attempt at re-creating it left out the plow.



Figure 4. *The Oregon Territorial Seal of 1846. Source: Hercher*

Three years later, the 1857 constitutional convention preceding statehood adopted yet another seal, containing 33 stars, mountains, an elk, a wagon, the Pacific Ocean, a British ship and an American steamer, a sheaf of wheat, a plow, a pick-ax, an American eagle but no beaver, a new motto "The Union", and the legend "State of Oregon". After the convention, a facsimile of the seal was procured, but altered by artistic license. The facsimile had 36 stars instead of 33, the artist threw in an extra sheaf and a rake, and added the date "1857". In rapid succession, a new seal was rendered with 35 stars followed by one with 38 stars. Oregon was admitted to the Union 14 February 1859, as the 33rd state. Some years later, the



Figure 5. *The Oregon Territorial Seal of 1854. Source: Hercher*

exact date unknown, an observant state printer noticed the erroneous date of 1857 and ordered a new facsimile. The new seal displayed the proper statehood date of 1859, but once again artistic license kicked in. The eagle turned its head to look in the opposite direction, a sunset had been added, and there were 32 stars instead of 33.²

Although all of these renditions were used in some degree on official documents, not one was properly adopted under state law. All were approved by various legislatures, some were adopted by governors, but none went through the legally required steps of legislative act signed by the governor, properly sealed, and attested by the secretary of state.

The twenty-second Legislative Assembly finally resolved the problem in 1903, with

“An act [S.B. 143] To provide for the seal of the State of Oregon and to amend section 2406 of the codes and statutes of Oregon ... as follows:

The seal of the State of Oregon shall be an escutcheon, supported by thirty-three stars, and divided by an ordinary, with the inscription, ‘The Union’. In chief—mountains, an elk with branching antlers, a wagon, the Pacific Ocean on which a British man-of-war departing, an American steamer arriving. The second—quartering with a sheaf, plow, and a pick-ax. Crest—the American eagle. Legend—State of Oregon, 1859.

Passed the Senate January 31, 1903.

Passed the House February 20, 1903.

Approved [by the Governor] February 24, 1903.

Filed in the office of the Secretary of State February 24, 1903.”³

William H. Packwood, member of the 1857 Oregon Constitutional Convention, was interviewed and shared his memories in 1908 and again in 1917. All those years after the fact, he was able to name seal committee members and describe in considerable detail how each image of the seal was decided. His comments bear close scrutiny.

(1908) "A committee to design a seal was appointed and was composed as I remember it, of L. F. Grover and J. C. Shields of Marion County, Mr. Burch of Polk County, and myself, of Curry County."

(1917) "Being young, I was appointed only on some of the less important committees, one of which was the seal committee." Then he named the other committee members as Chairman L. F. Grover; J. C. Shields, of Marion [County]; and B. F. Burch, of Polk [County].

The record shows that "the president appointed as a committee on device of seal, Messrs. Burch, Kelly, and Grover". Later in the day, the committee recommended a device submitted to them by Harvey Gordon. The committee members were named as: Benjamin F. Burch, L. F. Grover, and James K. Kelly.⁴ So, Burch, Grover, and Kelly are officially identified as seal committee members. But in both interviews Mr. Packwood named Shields and omitted Kelly.

(1908) "Mr. Grover was chairman. He drew a sketch while the balance of us looked on and suggested one thing and another to be placed on the seal."

(1917) "Chairman Grover drew the seal with a steel pen as we progressed."

(1908) "Cape Blanco and the ships were, I think, Mr. Grover's idea."

(1917) "The two ships, one going and one coming, represented domestic and foreign trade. They were Grover's idea, as he was a businessman."

(1908) "The wagon, I believe, was inserted [at Cape Blanco] at the suggestion of Mr. Burch. It seems to be one that has fulfilled its purpose, having finished its long westward journey and come to rest where land and ocean meet."

(1917) "The wagon was placed at Cape Blanco on the Oregon coast, to show that the pioneers had gone as far west as possible."

(1908) "I think that all relating to agriculture should be passed as coming from Mr. Shields and Mr. Burch."

(1917) “Burch and Shields, representing the farming interests, put in a plow, a rake, a ripened sheaf of grain, and a wagon.”

(1908) “I do not remember whether or not I related to my fellow committeemen an incident that had occurred a few years before, but I am sure I had it in mind at that time.” He then related his memory of shooting an elk, which put up quite a struggle before he and his companions could finally kill it. The story was repeated in his 1917 interview.

“I was thinking of the incident while the sketch of the seal was being made, but was uncertain how the suggestion I wanted to make would be received, as it certainly was a novel one. I walked over to where Mr. Grover was at work on the sketch, and picked out a place for an elk to stand... I told the committee what a noble animal the elk is... I supposed the committee never gave the matter a second thought, but placed the elk on the seal at the place indicated by me.”

(1908) “The elk was the last figure to be placed on the seal, all of the others having been sketched in at the time I made my suggestion.”

(1917) “All simultaneously agreed, and chairman L. F. Grover promptly inscribed the picture of the elk as the finishing touch...”

The official report states the elk is to be added to Mr. Gordon’s copy⁵ but Packwood states that it was added to Grover’s sketch.^{6,7}

The report of the seal committee gives Harvey Gordon credit for designing the seal. Packwood, in both interviews, names Grover as the one who sketched the design. He does not mention Gordon in either interview. Gordon was not a delegate, and is never mentioned in the record except in that seal committee report. Grover was a delegate, amply documented throughout the record, and named to the committee.

The Oregon Constitutional Convention ran for just one month, from 17 August to 18 September 1857. The question of adopting a state seal was addressed shortly after 8:00 a.m., on the last day, when “the convention met pursuant to adjournment.”⁸ Benjamin F. Burch, L. F. Grover, and James K. Kelly were appointed as a committee. Burch was a delegate

from Polk County, Grover from Marion County, and Kelly from Clackamas County.

Before they could break away to do their job, there was debate pursuant to formal adoption of the constitution. It is estimated that this consumed at least an hour, quite possibly longer. Afterwards, Burch, Grover, and Kelly were among those who voted in favor, as were Shields and Packwood. This would indicate they were present for the debate, not away working on the seal. By then, it must have been 9:00 a.m., or later.

Just five hours later, at 2:00 p.m. on that last day, the committee of three “recommended the adoption of a device submitted to them by Harvey Gordon, Esq.”⁹

Here is a mystery man. Gordon was not a delegate or in any other way connected with the convention. Three delegates comprised the official committee. Yet the record shows they recommended a design by a stranger, Gordon, and added an image suggested by a delegate not a committee member, Packwood. Steve Hercher, in his extensive report on the Oregon state seal, opined that “Harvey Gordon’s precise role in the actual designing of the seal is unclear.”¹⁰ Packwood recounts how each image came to be, and those images are listed in the official record. We are led to believe that Gordon created the seal on his own, and presented it to the assembled seal committee. We must further believe that Gordon’s design just happened to bear all the same details which Packwood recalled as coming from the committee. To add to the mystery, where was Kelly, who was named to the seal committee, but not mentioned in either Packwood interview?

How did Shields enter the picture, without having been named to the committee, or mentioned in the final report? There is ample evidence of Packwood’s participation in the Oregon constitutional convention, but none linking him to the seal committee. Every mention of the seal committee consistently names Burch, Grover, and Kelly as committee members. The final report implies that Harvey Gordon, an interloper, was the artist. Much later, a biographical sketch of Packwood stated only that he “... suggested the elk on the Oregon seal.”¹¹ Considering the realm of

possibilities, it seems plausible that he could have made such a suggestion, even without being a member of the committee. Indeed, after the design for the seal had been completed, the committee "... recommended to be added to the mountain scenery, an elk ... indicating that our mountains are alive with noble game."¹²

The two interviews, nine years apart, are very consistent, despite details which conflict with the official record. Packwood each time provides so much detail about designing the seal that he must have been there. A definitive statement from Burch, Grover, Kelly, or Shields would be helpful, but so far one has not come to light. In the absence of sworn testimony from a fly on the wall, these may remain mysteries forever.

None of the early descriptions of the seal mention either trees or oxen, but a more recent *Blue Book* provides a nicely enhanced description, which includes both:

"The state seal consists of an escutcheon, or shield, supported by 33 stars and divided by an ordinary, or ribbon, with the inscription 'The Union'. Above the ordinary are the mountains and forests of Oregon, an elk with branching antlers, a covered wagon and ox team, the Pacific Ocean with setting sun, a departing British man-of-war signifying the departure of British influence in the region, and an arriving American merchant ship signifying the rise of American power. Below the ordinary is a quartering with a sheaf of wheat, plow, and pickax, which represent Oregon's mining and agricultural resources. The crest is the American eagle. Around the perimeter of the seal is the legend 'State of Oregon 1859'."¹³

The seal has been slightly modified over the years, but still bears essentially the same images. According to Hercher, "...technically speaking, a seal is considered legal so long as it contains the required symbols. Additional features are consequently permissible, it would seem, if they are not an obstruction to the legally defined elements."¹⁴

Multiple images, conjuring up a visual history of developing statehood, are appropriate for a seal. The 33 stars surrounding the shield indi-

cate Oregon's rank in becoming a state, well and good. Words identifying the state are also appropriate for a seal, which is used to indicate official status on documents, letters, badges, etc. The American eagle is self-explanatory. The inscription "The Union" is a reminder of the intense debate as to whether Oregon should become a free or slave state. All of these elements combined provide a rough syllabus for the study of Oregon history. This is a useful function for a seal, but not for a flag.

THE FLAG

Before getting into details, let us explore the genesis of the flag. The current state flag had a predecessor version. Adopted before 1913, it was a regimental flag "to be of blue silk with arms of the State embroidered or painted in the center, with number and arm of service of the regiment in a scroll underneath. The size of the flag shall be five feet six inches fly, and four feet four inches on the pike. The fringe shall be yellow, four inches deep, and the cord and tassels blue and white silk intermixed. The length of the pike shall be ten feet, including the spear. - Section 3828 L.O.L." ¹⁵

There are some curious omissions of detail. The field is to be blue, but what shade of blue? There is no mention of what color the paint or embroidery should be. There is a description, but no image, of the military flag in *Oregon Blue Books* 1913-14 through 1919-20 (even though the law relating to the flag was repealed in 1917). The only known published picture is in the 1917 "Flag Number" of the *National Geographic Magazine*. That flag is full-color, which is easy to do when embroidered or painted; images on today's flag are entirely in gold, machine printed. The eagle crest faces left on the military flag, right on the state flag. The military flag has no trees, and no pickaxe. The configuration of stars and date are also different from those on the current flag. ¹⁶

After repeal of the military flag law, there was no official flag until 1925. "Oregon's official flag was authorized by legislative act, signed by Governor Walter M. Pierce on February 26, 1925. A measure creating the flag was introduced by Senators Milton R. Klepper and J. O. Bailey

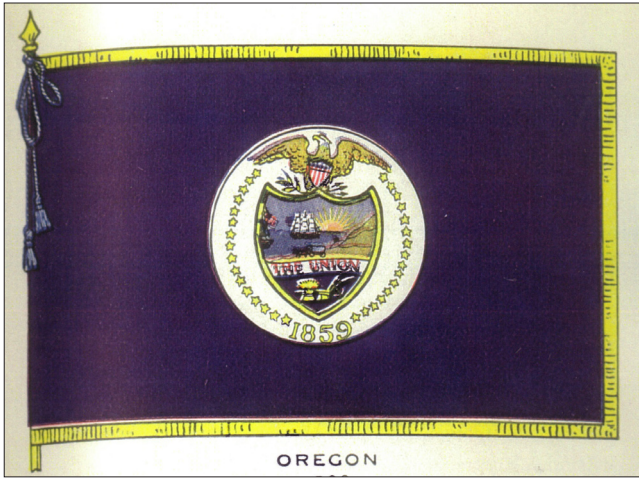


Figure 6. *The Oregon Military Flag* ca. 1917. Source: National Geographic Magazine, “Our Flag Number”, October 1917.

after various groups in the state had expressed the need for an official flag for conventions, public occasions, and other uses in connection with the national emblem. These expressions of need for a flag culminated in an official request from Portland postmaster, J. M. Jones, who wished a flag to present to the federal department at Washington, D.C., to hang with those exhibited by other states.”¹⁷

So, the need for a state flag was obvious, but the lawmakers were evidently not greatly inspired. “In designing the state flag, some semblance of the ensign described in the military code was retained, although the use of the escutcheon alone, rather than the entire state seal, was a new feature, and one which the designers believed would be more effective ...”¹⁸ The state flag was to be a modified version of the old regimental flag. Following precedent is faster and easier than creating original design.

Senate Bill 195, An Act Adopting a State Flag, states:

“Be it Enacted by the People of the State of Oregon: Section 1. A state flag is hereby adopted to be used on all occasions when the state is officially and publicly represented, with the privilege of use by all citizens upon such occasions as may be fitting and appropriate. It shall bear on

one side on a navy blue field the state escutcheon in gold, supported by thirty-three gold stars and bearing above said escutcheon the words 'State of Oregon' in gold and below such escutcheon the figures '1859' in gold, and on the other side on a navy blue field a representation of the beaver in gold."

" Passed by the Senate February 18, 1925 "

Signed by [unreadable] President of the Senate

" Passed by the House February 24, 1925."

Signed by [unreadable] Speaker of House.¹⁹

To complete the required steps for official status, it was "Approved by the Governor February 26, 1925, and filed in the office of the Secretary of State February 26, 1925."²⁰

The new flag must have been quite newsworthy, as *The Oregonian*, the state's largest newspaper, featured it in an article of twelve column inches, plus a three-column wide photograph. The article gives an excellent and enthusiastic account of events leading up to the finished product, beginning with tantalizing headlines:

"OREGON FLAG FINISHED"

"EMBLEM TO BE SENT EAST TO LEXINGTON FETE"

"Colors Completed by Local Factory by Special Request of Adjutant-General."

The report continues:

"Oregon at last has a state flag ... made of beautiful blue and gold satin ...

Admitted to statehood in 1859, no provision was made ... for a state flag until the last session of the legislature ...

Officials in charge of the celebration of the anniversary of the Battle of Lexington, Mass ... invited Oregon to send its state flag ... saying that all other states would have their flags displayed at the event.

George A. White, adjutant-general ... conferred with officials of the Meier & Frank Company to have the flag made. [Meier & Frank was the largest department store in the Pacific Northwest, headquartered in Portland.] The first Oregon flag is Oregon-made. ‘The flag is constructed as beautifully as any flag could be’ the attorney-general said. ‘The Portland firm accomplished a difficult task in a splendid manner.’

The dimensions of the first emblem are four feet by six feet. On a field of navy blue satin appears the state escutcheon in gold, supported by 33 gold stars and in gold the words ‘State of Oregon’. Below the escutcheon is given the year Oregon became a state, 1859. On the reverse side of the flag appears a beaver in gold, centered on the field of blue.”

The article was accompanied by a photo of two women holding the flag, with the caption “Emblem given state through legislative enactment at last session. Miss Blanche Cox ... and Miss Marjorie Kennedy ... are holding the flag.”²¹

Were these ladies the “Betsy Rosses” of the Oregon flag? Were they the Meier & Frank seamstresses who sewed the flag? The 1924 Portland city directory shows no listing for Marjorie Kennedy, but does list a Blanche R. Cox as “Dept. Mgr M&F” (most likely Meier & Frank). No other personal information was located.

In hopes of gleaning information straight from the source, I wrote to Macy’s, current owner of the old Meier & Frank Company, requesting archival information. I thought this accomplishment should have been considered important enough that the company might have kept a file documenting the event, and copies of any such documents might contain details not found elsewhere.²² Macy’s representative replied “This building has been packed up and emptied for remodel/construction. Unfortunately there is no method to substantiate if any of what you are requesting even exists and/or where it may be at this time. I

wish we could be of further assistance, but due to timing of this request it is not possible.”²³

Further frustrating this intrepid researcher, I sent two separate letters to *The Oregonian*, then and now the state’s largest and oldest daily newspaper, published in Portland. One was a letter to the editor requesting correspondence from former Meier & Frank employees who might remember either the flag-making process or company displays of the event. The letter was never published.²⁴ The other letter was to the photo archives department of *The Oregonian*, asking if a print of the photo in the paper, made from the original negative, could be purchased. There was no reply.²⁵

The flag is described in the 1925-1926 *Blue Book*, and in those to follow, but no picture. In the 1929-1930 *Blue Book*, beneath the description, is a note: “No state flag has ever been made, so it is impossible to fill requests for picture of same.” This would suggest that requests had been made, and that whoever inserted the note missed *The Oregonian* article. Someone caught the gaffe, and the next edition of the *Blue Book* featured line drawings.

THE BEAVER

So, there we have it, a state seal full of imagery, which came to be substantially reproduced, in gold, on a piece of navy blue cloth, to become the Oregon state flag. End of story? Not quite. The flag has a different image on its reverse: a beaver. While a beaver did appear on two early versions of the seal, it was soon dropped. Who decided to put the beaver on the flag? The record is silent on that. Even so, an editorial in *The Morning Oregonian* enthusiastically states: “With formal adoption of a state flag for Oregon, the beaver is restored to its rightful place of distinction. The beaver was the primary incentive for early exploration, and it dominated the fur trade era ... which finally led to settlement ... It is the universal symbol of thrift and industry and constructive endeavor-qualities as essential now as ever ...”²⁶

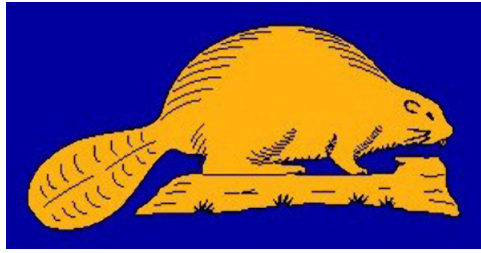


Figure 7. Detail: Beaver on reverse of Oregon State Flag. Source: FOTW.

There is much more to it than that. Native Indians traded beaver skins to European explorers for knives, axes, guns, and other iron products.²⁷ Beaver fur was the standard of the trade, and took the place of currency where cash was not available.²⁸ Especially after Beau Brummell made the beaver hat fashionable, the fur trade was highly profitable for everyone involved.

At the time of the 1804-06 Lewis & Clark Expedition, “beaver was the greatest, most immediately exploitable wealth of the trans-Mississippi west. The beaver pelt could be gotten back to St. Louis, where it fetched a fair price, then to New York where it fetched a better price, and on to London where it fetched a fabulous price.”²⁹

Fur was not all the beaver had to offer. Its perineal gland secretes castoreum, a bitter-tasting, foul-smelling liquid. Oddly enough, this horrible fluid was used to fix and enhance the delicate aroma of the finest perfumes.³⁰ Before the advent of modern medicine, it was also employed to alleviate the miseries of common ailments.³¹ In the wisdom of the ancients, if it smelled bad and tasted bad, it must have been good medicine.



Figure 8. Beaver (*Castor canadensis*). Source: www.oregon.governor.gov

In addition to its monetary value, beaver meat was thoroughly enjoyed by Indians and whites alike.³² Lewis & Clark reported, “The men prefer the flesh of this animal to that of any other which we have...”³³

Although peltry was widely used for trade, hard cash was needed for local business transactions. Gold dust from California was abundant, but difficult to weigh accurately. In 1849 the territorial legislature authorized a private mint to melt gold for the purpose of minting coins. The Oregon Exchange Company in that year minted \$58,500 in \$5 and \$10 gold coins. They bore the impression of a beaver, so they were called “beaver money”.³⁴ The coins remained in circulation until 1854, when the San Francisco Mint bought most of them in exchange for standard U.S. coinage. While beaver coins have mostly disappeared and are no longer legal tender, one such \$5 gold beaver coin was recently purchased by a collector for \$125,000.³⁵

Those frisky critters with their beautiful pelts gave their lives for the Oregon Country. Oregon is rightly nicknamed the “Beaver State”. By placing a beaver on the backside of the flag, as the sole image, it has been honored. It is the flag’s best feature. But who suggested the beaver? How was it decided to give this image the distinction of having a field of its own? There must be answers, but so far they remain elusive. Meanwhile, nearly every Oregonian knows that the Oregon state flag has a beaver on the back.

At a recent high school class reunion, my former classmates graciously cooperated when asked to describe the state flag. Most of them knew it was blue and gold, and had a beaver on the back. The fun came with trying to remember the front. Answers included “emblem, 1859, gold stars, covered wagon, capitol, seal, oxen, ‘State of Oregon’, shield, Union, Oregon, Douglas fir, and a round thing with a covered wagon and some lettering”. Collectively, they did quite well. The state capitol does not appear on either seal or flag, but everything else does. Not bad at all for folks who have been out of school more than fifty years, and haven’t had reason to study the flag since then. Family members did about as well, but the most accurate description came from a high school sophomore, who

confidently said it had two sides, blue and yellow, with a beaver on one side and the state seal on the other.

Clearly, the beaver reigns supreme as the flag's most distinctive feature. A jumble of words and images on a state seal serves a useful purpose. It represents the many facets of American settlement in the Oregon country. The seal is a stationary image, so it can be studied at length. A flag flying from mast or pole is not stationary, nor is it close enough to the viewer to be examined. A flag should have instant recognition at a glance. This is not possible if there is too much imagery. The fewer images presented, the more quickly recognized. Words on a flag are not necessary, and only detract from the image.

A flag is best when it bears a simple image, boldly displayed, recognizable to those it represents. For those who know Oregon history, the beaver is a perfect choice. If ever the people of Oregon feel inspired to design a new flag, they would be well advised to keep the navy blue field, keep the beaver, and toss everything else. The resulting flag would be easily recognized, historically significant, and memorable.



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23. Letter reply from Macy's. 26 Feb. 2007.
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