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PAPERS OF THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF DELAWARE.

XVIII.

A PAPER

ON

COMMODORE THOMAS MACDONOUGH,

UNITED STATES NAVY.

BY HIS GRANDSON

RODNEY MACDONOUGH,

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS.

Read before the Historical Society of Delaware, January 18, 1897.

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COMMODORE THOMAS MACDONOUGH.

THOUGH small in area, Delaware has furnished her full proportion of those who have counted it a privilege to serve their country in their country's need. In the stormy days which preceded the birth of the young Republic and in the stirring times that followed, her voice was heard in the halls of Congress, and her arm was bared on land and sea in support of liberty, justice, and equality.

Delaware may well be proud of her children and they of her. Among those who were proud to call themselves her sons was one who was a Delawarean by birth, a Delawarean by training, and, above all, a Delawarean in his intense love and loyalty to his country and in the undaunted courage with which he maintained her honor at home and abroad,—Thomas Macdonough, United States Navy.

HIS ANCESTORS.

Delaware born and bred, his family was of Scotch origin. His great-grandfather Thomas lived in the district known as Salmon Leap, on the river Liffey, county Kildare, Ireland. Either he or his father, I am unable to ascertain which, was a native of Scotland, but, on account of the disturbed condition of the country, had emigrated to Ireland and settled there. This Thomas had several children, two of whom,

John and James, came to this country about 1730,—John settling on Long Island, and James, the ancestor of the Delaware line, settling in St. George's Hundred, New Castle County, this State, at the place then called the Trap, but to which the post-office department in 1844 gave the name McDonough. Here he lived to a good old age, dying in 1792, eighty years old, and was buried in the family lot on the farm on which he lived. His wife was Lydia, daughter of Peter Laroux, also of St. George's Hundred. She was buried beside her husband. James and Lydia left several children, among whom was Thomas, the commodore's father, born in 1747.

Thomas lived in stirring times. He had adopted the practice of medicine, but when there came the call to arms in '76 he threw away the lancet and buckled on the sword. On March 22, 1776, he was commissioned by Congress major in Colonel John Haslet's regiment of Delaware troops in the Continental service.

Five months later the regiment took the field. The first engagement in which it took part was the battle of Long Island. In the absence of the colonel and lieutenant-colonel, Major Macdonough was in command, and acquitted himself so as to receive the thanks of General Washington. During this engagement he was wounded. Then followed the battles of White Plains, Trenton, and Princeton, in all of which the regiment participated. Its loss in officers and men in the battle of Princeton was so great, and the time of most of the men having expired, the regiment was disbanded and never reorganized, and the major returned to his home.

In 1782 he was colonel of the Seventh Regiment, Dela-

ware Militia. In 1788 he was appointed Third Justice of the Court of Common Pleas and Orphans' Court by Governor Collins. In 1791 Governor Clayton appointed him Second Justice of the Court of Common Pleas and Orphans' Court, and in 1793 he was again appointed by the same governor one of the Justices of the Court of Common Pleas.

His wife was Mary, daughter of Samuel Vance. He died a comparatively young man in 1795, and he and his wife are buried side by side in the family lot. Thomas and Mary left a number of children, among whom was Thomas junior, the subject of this paper.

III. EARLY LIFE AT THE TRAP.

Thomas Macdonough, junior, was born December 31, 1783, at the Trap, on the farm on which his father and grandfather had lived before him. For sixteen years he lived at or near his home, happy and contented and doing the duty that came to his hand. He always retained a lively recollection and affection for the home of his youth, and in a letter written to his sister Lydia from Middletown, Connecticut, in after years, he says, "I should like to visit the old home where I have spent some youthful happy hours; to stroll about the fields and woods as I used to do." Just after completing his sixteenth year he entered the navy.

It is not hard to understand why he should have chosen this course. His early associations were all of such a character as to make the choice a perfectly natural one for one of his temperament and disposition. Many a time, no doubt, in the long winter evenings, seated before the generous fireplace filled with blazing logs, with his children

around him, his father had told the story of the war; told of the long and weary march, of the camp-fire and the bivouac, the cold, hunger, and fatigue, the battle, and then the victory, beside which all their sufferings were as nothing. How the boy's heart must have throbbed as he heard the story from his father's lips! His Uncle Patrick had been a soldier, too, and had seen service as an officer under St. Clair in his ill-fated expedition against the Indians in 1791. His own elder brother, James, was a midshipman in the navy, and had taken part in the engagement between the "Constellation" and the "Insurgente." He, no doubt, had often poured into the boy's willing ears the stories of the sea. With such influences surrounding him, it needed but a breath to fan the spark of patriotism into a bright and steady flame.

ENTERS THE NAVY.

"On the 5th of February, 1800," as he himself writes, "I received a Warrant as Midshipman in the Navy of the United States from John Adams, then President, through the influence of Mr. Latimer, a Senator from the State of Delaware. Soon after my appointment I joined the U. S. Ship 'Ganges' at New Castle and proceeded on a cruise in the West Indies against the French with whom the States were at war. On this cruise we captured two Guineamen and a French privateer and sent them to the United States. The privateer was run on shore. After considerable firing on her, her crew deserted her and got on shore. She was boarded by our boats, on board of one I was.

"About this time the yellow fever made its appearance on board and many of the men and officers fell victims after

a few hours' illness to its destructive ravages. Several Midshipmen and myself, with a number of men, having caught this fever were sent on shore at Havanna and put into a dirty Spanish hospital. Nearly all of the men and officers died and were taken out in carts as so many hogs would have been. A Midshipman, a surgeon's mate and myself, through the blessing of divine providence, recovered and took passage for the U. States, destitute of all the comforts and even conveniences of life. The consul, however, supplied us with shirts and some other articles of clothing. Off the capes of Delaware we were captured by an English ship of war on account of our vessel (a Merchantman belonging to Phila.) having Spanish property on board. I, with the other gentlemen, were put on board the ———, an American ship, and landed at Norfolk, Virginia.

"There the consul supplied us with money, etc., to enable us to join the 'Ganges,' which ship had left Havanna on account of the fever which raged on board of her and with difficulty reached the States with the loss of many men and officers. Took passage on board the ferry boat, crossed the Chesapeake bay and travelling up through the country got out of the stage at the Trap, my native place, after an absence of nearly a year, with straw hat, canvas shoes and in other respects poor enough. My relatives and friends were much surprised to see me as my death was, if not published, it was stated that I could not recover.

"I remained some short time at the Trap; then joined the 'Ganges' again. Took a short cruise in the West Indies and returned to Phila., where the ship was sold and the Navy, by law, reduced, and almost all the officers dis-

missed. Through the influence of C. A. Rodney, Esq., my father's and my friend, I was continued.

THE WAR WITH TRIPOLI.

"When I quitted the ship 'Ganges' I joined the Frigate 'Constellation,' Commodore Murray, and sailed for the Mediterranean, where we remained for about twelve months. Visited many ports in that sea and had a brush with the Gun Boats off Tripoli."

The "Constellation" returned to the United States in the latter part of 1802. In May, 1803, he was ordered to the frigate "Philadelphia," then being fitted for Mediterranean service. The "Philadelphia" sailed in July and reached Gibraltar August 24. Continuing, the Commodore says,—

"Soon after our arrival in that sea we captured a Moorish vessel of 30 guns without resistance, and I was put on board to assist in taking her to Gibraltar. The United States were at this time at war with the Regency of Tripoli and not with the Moors, though the latter had commenced depredations on our commerce. I was left at Gibraltar on board the Moorish ship and the 'Philadelphia' went up the Mediterranean to cruise off Tripoli, where she was lost by running on shore in chase and was taken possession of by the enemy, the officers and men put into close confinement and kept there for 19 months. Thus was I providentially saved from this prison and the apprehension of death which surrounded those of my shipmates in the power of a merciless foe.

"About this time Commodore Preble came out and took the command of the Squadron, under whom, a daring and

vigilant officer, may be considered the first impulse given to the Navy in his conduct before Tripoli. He took his Squadron to Tangier, had negotiations opened with the Emperor of Morocco, and coming to an arrangement of the difficulties the prize ship was given up. I then quitted her, not caring to be in his Majesty's service, and joined the Commodore's ship as passenger until we met with the 'Philadelphia.' On our passage up we spoke a British Frigate who informed us of her loss as stated.

"I then, in the harbor of Syracuse, joined the Schooner 'Enterprise,' Lieutenant Stephen Decatur, commander. Was with him when the Frigate 'Philadelphia' was burned in the harbor of Tripoli and when he captured, by boarding, the Gun Boats in one of the actions with the enemy's vessels and batteries."

In the general plan which had been formed for the capture and destruction of the "Philadelphia," Lieutenant Lawrence and ten men, with midshipmen Laws and Macdonough, were directed by Decatur to fire the berth deck and forward store-room, and they did their duty courageously and well. Admiral Nelson at this time was in command of the English fleet blockading Toulon, and when he heard of the destruction of the "Philadelphia" and the way it was effected he declared it to be "the most bold and daring act of the age." For his services on this occasion the young midshipman was promoted to the rank of lieutenant, his commission being dated May 18, 1804. The young Delawarean was among those especially mentioned for gallantry in the bombardment of Tripoli, August 3, 1804.

"Here I consider," the commodore writes, referring to the operations in the Mediterranean, "was the school where our Navy received its first lessons, and its influence has remained to this day and will continue as long as the Navy exists. I remained in the Squadron during all its operations against Tripoli, presented the Flags of the captured Boats to Com. Preble at the request of Capt. Decatur, and was in 1805 or 6 appointed by the Commodore a Lieutenant of the Schooner 'Enterprise.'

"Captain Robinson now took the command of this vessel and sailed up the Adriatic to Trieste, thence to Venice, where she was hauled up in the arsenal and repaired. Passed the winter of, I think, 1805 in Venice. From Venice I went to Ancona and prepared four small vessels for Gun Boats to be employed against Tripoli. Thence sailed to Syracuse and joined the Squadron with the Boats. On our arrival at Syracuse found peace had been made with Tripoli. Joined the Schooner, Capt. David Porter as commander. Soon after I exchanged my station as first Lieutenant of the 'Enterprise' for the first Lieutenancy of the United States Brig 'Syren,' Capt. John Smith, with Lieutenant Warrington.

"Having now not much to do, visited many of the interesting ports and places along the shores of this sea. From Naples I went to Rome by land, visited Pompeii, Herculaneum, Mount Ætna, Malta and the towns of the Barbary powers and returned to the United States.

"When I was first Lieutenant of the 'Syren' Brig an occurrence took place in the harbor of Gibraltar which excited a good deal of feeling both on the side of the Eng-

lish and ourselves. A British Man-of-war's Boat boarded an American Merchantman which lay near the 'Syren' and took out, or impressed, one of her men. I went alongside the British Boat in one of ours and demanded him, which demand was refused. I then took hold of the man and took him in my Boat and brought him on board the 'Syren.' He was an American, and of course we kept him."

Before leaving the Mediterranean he met with an adventure that nearly cost him his life. While lying off Syracuse, he obtained permission one day to go ashore. Just as he was stepping into a boat to return to his ship he was set upon by three cut-throats armed with daggers. They found, however, that they had caught, not a Tartar, but an American, and a Delaware American. The young man drew his sword, and, though the odds were three to one, two of his assailants were soon disabled, and the third, taking to flight and being followed by the midshipman, ran into a building and upon the roof, from whence, there being no way of escape, he threw himself to the ground to avoid being taken.

His service in the Mediterranean showed his superiors something of the spirit that was in him. He was the gallant Decatur's favorite midshipman, and "wherever Decatur led he dared to follow."

VOYAGE IN THE MERCHANT SERVICE.

On his return to the United States in 1806 he was detached from the "Syren" and ordered to Middletown, Connecticut, under Captain Hull. Thence he was ordered to the

"Wasp," under his old commander, Captain Smith, and sailed for England and France with despatches, returning by way of the Mediterranean. On reaching home the "Wasp" cruised along the coast from Boston to Charleston enforcing the embargo laws. From the "Wasp" he was ordered to the ship "John Adams" and then to the frigate "Essex."

On May 22, 1810, he was furloughed and ordered to make a voyage in the merchant service. Soon after he sailed from New York to Liverpool as captain of the brig "Gulliver." From Liverpool he proceeded to Calcutta and then home, being absent about fifteen months. According to family tradition, an incident happened on this trip which was of considerable interest.

The "Gulliver" had discharged her cargo at Liverpool, taken in a fresh one, and was ready to sail. On the evening preceding her departure, Tom, as he was usually called, went on shore. As he was about to return to the brig later in the evening, he was approached, in the vicinity of the docks, by a stranger, who asked him if he belonged to any of the vessels in the river. He replied that he belonged to the American brig "Gulliver." Upon this the stranger gave a signal, and before Tom knew it he was surrounded by a press-gang, thrown into a boat, and presently found himself on board an English frigate lying at the mouth of the river. He at once demanded to see the commanding officer. On being taken before him he demanded his release, declaring that he was not only an American seaman but an officer of the American navy. The only reply vouchsafed was an order to go forward, and forward he went.

His name was entered on the purser's books, his station and mess assigned him, and a hammock and bedding served out to him, with directions to "turn in" as soon as possible. Accordingly he hung his hammock up and got into it, but without undressing, having determined to seize the first chance of escape. Shortly after midnight the corporal of the guard which had been relieved came below, unlashed the hammock next his own, undressed and turned in. Tom waited until the corporal was sound asleep, then slipped quietly out of his hammock, took off his own clothes and put on those of the sleeping corporal, and then, as soon as the corporal of the new guard had passed below to make his rounds, climbed up the ladder and gained the spar-deck. The officer of the deck was aft upon the starboard side and the sentries were walking their posts with regular tread. The starboard-gangway was shaded from the light of the moon by awnings, and walking deliberately up the ladder Tom looked over the ship's side.

"Sentry," said he, "what boat is that at the boom?"

"The second cutter, sir," replied the marine, without discovering the identity of his questioner.

Tom immediately walked up to the officer of the deck, and, being assured by the mistake of the sentry that he would not be discovered, touched his cap and respectfully said,—

"I would like to overhaul the second cutter, sir. I think there is rum aboard her."

"Very well, corporal," replied the officer; "search the boat and see what you can find."

Tom started quickly forward, but just as he got abreast

of the fore hatchway he saw the real corporal's head rising above the combings. He ascended no higher, for with one blow of his fist Tom knocked him down the ladder, and then sprang quickly out through the port upon the swinging boom and dropped into the boat. The flood tide was setting up the river strongly, and quick as thought Tom cut the rope which secured the boat and it dropped rapidly astern.

"Help! help!" shouted he; "the boat's loose."

"Get out a couple of oars," cried the officer of the deck as the boat swept past the quarter, "and you can hold her against the tide."

Tom did get out a couple of oars, but the moment they struck the water he began pulling rapidly up the river. The sentries on deck immediately discharged their muskets, and the third cutter was called away, but before she could be manned Tom had reached the shore, and shortly after was on board his own brig.

The next morning the "Gulliver" dropped down with the ebb tide, and as she passed the frigate Tom saw the second cutter swinging in her usual place. As he gazed upon the flag that floated at the Englishman's peak, he said to himself, "If I live, I'll make England remember the day she impressed an American sailor."

When war was declared against Great Britain shortly after, the rallying cry—"No Impressment!"—must have appealed to him with peculiar significance, and the memory of this experience must have been with him on the 11th of September, 1814.

Continuing the history of his naval life, the commodore writes:

"On my return from my India voyage I took charge of a merchant ship from New York and sailed for Lisbon, but the vessel springing a leak in a gale when out a few days, I was compelled from this circumstance to return to New York. The Non-intercourse law now taking place, I, of course, could not prosecute the voyage and quitted the ship. During the gale I was obliged to throw overboard part of the cargo.

"War having now been declared against Great Britain by the United States, I applied for service, and received orders to repair to Washington and join the Frigate 'Constellation' as first Lieutenant. I did not remain long on board this ship, for it required some time to complete her repairs and the time was irksome there. I therefore applied for and obtained command of the Portland station, where were several fine Gun Boats. After remaining a few months at Portland I was ordered by Mr. Madison to take the command of the vessels on Lake Champlain. Proceeded thither across the country through the Notch of the White Mountains, partly on horseback, carrying my bundle with a valise on behind, and a country lad only in company to return with my horses. Arrived fatigued at Burlington on the lake in about four days and took command of the vessels after waiting on the commanding General Bloomfield."

The order directing him to take command of the naval force on Lake Champlain was dated September 12, 1812. On December 12 of the same year he married Lucy Ann, daughter of Nathaniel Shaler, of Middletown, Connecticut.

There he afterwards made his home when absent from professional duty and there his children were born. One of them, "whom," as he writes in 1822 to his sister Lydia in Delaware, "I call Rodney after my friend in Wilmington," is now living in New York City, and another, Charlotte Rosella, now the widow of Mr. Henry G. Hubbard, is still living in Middletown. On July 24, 1813, he was commissioned master commandant.

THE BATTLE ON LAKE CHAMPLAIN.

War had been declared against Great Britain on June 18, 1812, and in view of the plans of the British, the command of Lake Champlain at the time the commodore was ordered there was of vital importance to American interests. Nobly did the young master commandant fulfil the duty intrusted to him.

The morning of Sunday, September 11, 1814, broke bright and fair. From the green slopes of Cumberland Head the eye takes in the gently curving shore, still clad in summer verdure, the sunlight dancing on the waters of the bay, and, just below, the American squadron skilfully disposed to the best advantage by its wise commander and waiting the coming of the foe. All is quiet and peaceful. Presently, around the point sweeps the British fleet, the red ensign of old England fluttering defiantly from every masthead in the morning breeze. Then comes the calm before the storm; and then the smoke and shock of battle, the cries of the wounded, and all the horrors of war. Then—then the simple message,—

"The Almighty has been pleased to grant us a signal victory on Lake Champlain in the capture of 1 frigate, 1 brig and 2 sloops of war of the enemy.

"T. MACDONOUGH."

To this message came the following response :

"NAVY DEPARTMENT, Sept. 19th, 1814.

"THOMAS MACDONOUGH, ESQ.,

*"Commanding the U. S. Naval Force on Lake Champlain,
Plattsburg.*

"SIR:—With the highest gratification which noble deeds can inspire, I acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 11th instant announcing the glorious victory which your skill and valor, aided by the intrepidity and discipline of your gallant associates, had achieved over a confident, vigorous, and powerful foe. Our lakes, hitherto the objects only of natural curiosity, shall fill the page of future history with the bright annals of our country's fame, and the imperishable renown of our Naval Heroes.

"'Tis not alone the brilliancy of your victory in a Naval view, but its importance and beneficial results that will fix the attention and command the gratitude of your admiring country.

"Accept, sir, the assurance of the high respect and warm approbation of the President of the United States which I am commanded to present, and my sincere congratulations.

"Very respectfully,

"Your obedient servant,

"W. JONES."

This victory had an important effect upon the negotiations for peace, which were being carried on at this time between the American Commission and the English Government. The latter had submitted a proposition which involved the acquisition of considerable new territory containing several strategic points. This proposition was promptly rejected by the American Commission, and the negotiations came to an abrupt halt. In this crisis the English Government appealed to the Duke of Wellington, who, in a letter of November 9, 1814, to the Cabinet Council, said :

“I confess that I think you have no right, from the state of the war, to demand any concession of territory from America. Considering everything, it is my opinion that the war has been a most successful one, and highly honorable to the British arms; but from particular circumstances, *such as the want of the naval superiority on the lakes*, you have not been able to carry it into the enemy's territory, notwithstanding your military success and now undoubted military superiority, and have not even cleared your own territory of the enemy on the point of attack. You cannot, then, on any principle of equality in negotiation, claim a cession of territory excepting in exchange for other advantages which you have in your power.”

The government took his advice, withdrew the obnoxious proposition, and the treaty of peace was signed soon after.

INCIDENTS OF THE BATTLE.

The technical details of the battle are matters of history. While awaiting the approach of the enemy, the commodore,

as he was then usually called, knelt on the deck of the "Saratoga" with his officers and crew and invoked the aid of the God of battles in the approaching conflict. In clearing the decks of the "Saratoga" for action some coops had been thrown overboard, and the poultry given their liberty. Just as the engagement was about to begin, a rooster flew up into the rigging, flapped his wings, and crowed loudly and defiantly. He was answered by three hearty cheers from the men, who regarded it as a sign of good luck.

The first shot fired on the "Saratoga" was fired by the commodore himself. With his own hands he trained a 24-pounder on the British flagship "Confiance" as she advanced bow on, and when within range discharged the piece. The shot raked the "Confiance," killing and wounding several of her men, and carrying away her wheel. During the action he repeatedly assisted in working the guns, and was three times thrown across the deck by splinters. At one time, while sighting his favorite gun, a shot cut the spanker-boom in two, and a piece of the heavy spar, falling upon his back, knocked him senseless to the deck, and it was some minutes before he recovered consciousness.

Soon after a shot took off the head of the captain of the same gun and hurled it against him, knocking him across the deck and into the scuppers, where he fell unconscious between two guns. He quickly recovered and returned to his post. Every one of the officers of the "Saratoga" was either killed or wounded except Macdonough, and when he was asked how he had escaped serious injury, he replied, "There is a power above which determines the fate of man."

One more incident is quoted from a memoir of the com-

modore by one of the members of this Society. "Another son of Delaware, whose name should raise a feeling of applause in the hearts of us all, has left an account of an eyewitness to this battle, and of his visit to the 'Saratoga' afterwards. Said Mr. Clayton: 'I was told by Mr. Phelps, a Senator from Vermont, that he was a boy living on his father's farm near the banks of Lake Champlain when Macdonough's action of 1814 with the British occurred. That after the English had surrendered and the action had ceased, he took a boat and went off to the flag-ship "Saratoga," that he might say he had seen Macdonough. When he had climbed up on deck, he found it slippery with blood and almost covered with the wounded and the dead. That he saw a man walking back and forth rapidly on the quarter-deck, his hat pulled down nearly over his eyes, and his face and hands almost black with powder and smoke, and, upon asking a seaman who that man was, he said, "That's Commodore Macdonough."'"

During the action he was the commander, cool, confident, and with the air of authority born of command. In the hour of victory he was the friend and companion-in-arms, his heart torn by the suffering of the gallant fellows who had made that victory possible. No wonder he was an object of love and admiration to his crew. At the time of this engagement he still lacked a few months of being thirty-one years old.

HIS AFTER-LIFE.

On November 30, 1814, he was commissioned captain, then the highest rank in the navy, to take rank from September 11, 1814. On the same date he was ordered to

command the steam frigate "Fulton First." On May 13, 1815, he was ordered to Portsmouth, N. H., to take command of the navy-yard and superintend the equipment of the ship "Washington" until the arrival of Commodore Chauncey. On April 22, 1818, he was directed to proceed to Boston, assume command of the frigate "Guerriere," and convey to Russia the Hon. G. W. Campbell, Minister to the Court of St. Petersburg. After performing this service he returned to the United States by way of the Mediterranean. "At Naples," he writes, "I was presented to the Emperor of Austria, Francis II., and also Ferdinand, King of Naples, on board the United States Ship of the Line 'Franklin,' which ship these Sovereigns visited."

On March 11, 1820, he was ordered to command the "74" building at New York. This ship was the "Ohio," and was launched the same year. He was attached to her until April, 1824, four years, but, as she was laid up in ordinary at New York during that period, he spent much of the time at his home in Middletown. On May 31, 1824, he was ordered to New York to command the "Constitution," of glorious memory, and on October 29 sailed once more for the Mediterranean under the last orders he was ever to receive.

On his arrival in the Mediterranean, being the senior officer on the station, he assumed command of the American squadron. Owing to ill-health, however, he was relieved of the command of the "Constitution" on October 14, 1825, with permission to return to the United States, but he never lived to see his native land, dying at sea while homeward bound, ten days out from Gibraltar, November 10,

1825. He was buried at Middletown, Connecticut, Saturday, December 1, 1825, with military, civil, and Masonic honors. His wife had died a few months before, and they now lie side by side in the quaint old cemetery overlooking the Connecticut River.

The simple inscription on his monument reads as follows:

"Sacred to the memory of Com. Thomas Macdonough of the U. S. Navy. He was born in the State of Delaware Dec. 1783, & died at sea while on his return from the command of the American Squadron in the Mediterranean on the 10 Nov. 1825. He was distinguished in the world as the Hero of Lake Champlain; in the Church of Christ as a faithful, zealous, and consistent Christian; in the community where he resided when absent from professional duties as an amiable, upright, and valuable citizen." He knew his duty and he did it well.

HECKMAN

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