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A Balancing Act

Life Among the Trees in Hollywood Cemetery

This fall, the cemetery was once again resplendent with fall colors as trees changed to fiery oranges, bright reds and yellows, and deep burgundies. Though beautiful to look at, there's more to Hollywood's trees than meets the eye.

"Trees offer environmental, scenic and historic value to the cemetery," said Mike Van Yahres, who led a fall foliage tour of the cemetery on October 23rd. He is owner of the Van Yahres Tree Company of Charlottesville, which has overseen the care of Hollywood's trees since 1994.

Trees were an important part of the original plans of Hollywood, which was designed in 1847 by notable architect John Notman of Philadelphia. Today, the cemetery is a registered arboretum.

Hollywood's tree maintenance includes pruning, nutritional supplement, and, for the cemetery's oldest and most important trees, known as monarchs, lightning protection. The tree digitization program, part of the Environmental Stewardship Project that was funded by the generosity of the **Parsons Foundation, Dominion Energy Charitable Foundation, and the Richard S. Reynolds Foundation**, has allowed Van Yahres to document each of the cemetery's 2,000 trees and record and schedule their maintenance needs.

"We are trying our best to forecast the health and condition of every tree and doing whatever we possibly can to the highest possible standards to keep them in that status," he said.

Despite this careful attention, nature sometimes brings surprises.

Two revered oaks lost

As the last days of summer wound to a close, two monarchs as old as the cemetery itself unexpectedly dropped. The fallen white oak and red oak trees each stretched 75 to 80 feet high and were approximately 40-50" in diameter (DBH).

Van Yahres considers monarchs "the best and the brightest" trees in the cemetery and does not take them down "unless they are in a state of decline that is irreversible"—which these oaks were not.

Both trees were hollow. "Many mature trees are hollow. That's nothing that concerns us—cylinders are very strong," he said.

The red oak cavity had been filled with cinder blocks, bricks and cement sometime in the past to strengthen the trunk. While common up to the 1960s,

(continued on page 2)

Hollywood
Trees

Pages 1-3

Davis
Circle

Page 4

Reflection
and
Tribute
Page 5

James
Thomas

Page 6-7

Children's
Tour
and Website
Pages 8-9

2019 Donor
as of
October 31, 2019
Pages 10-11

Life Among the Trees (continued)

“we know now that the practice can cause harm.” Van Yahres’ grandfather was an early innovator using flexible tree cavity materials to fill trees. Today, trees are not filled at all. “We recognize that trees have the ability to compartmentalize their wounds and arrest further decay on their own.”

The trees were vulnerable because of their age—at least 150 years old, likely more. In addition, both trees had experienced significant damage to their crowns, leading their lower branches to grow overly large and robust. Despite pruning over the years, the trees never recovered their fullness on top and were vulnerable to winds. One had recently lost a large branch. “Then, there was a wind, and the rest of the tree came down,” he said.

Red oaks and white oaks can live for 200 and 500 years, respectively, though such longevity is rare, according to Mike Van Yahres. “That would be parallel to a human being living to be 105: It happens but it doesn’t happen very often. These trees, despite rigorous maintenance, were nearing the end of their lives.”

Visitors are often saddened to learn about the deaths of monarch trees, many of which have lived through the burials of Confederate soldiers, presidents, civic leaders, and thousands of others. Their immense sizes provide a testament to the passage of time.

“The big trees lend a historic authenticity to Hollywood,” he said.

Green machines

The rural or garden cemetery movement of the 19th century started in Paris, and quickly spread to the United States. City dwellers retreated to cemeteries like Hollywood to escape the pollution and other environmental concerns that arrived with the Industrial Revolution.

Today, we know that trees play a critical role in removing carbon from the environment and serve as an important force in mitigating global warming. They take in carbon dioxide through their leaves and convert it to oxygen through photosynthesis.

“A young mature tree, say 24 inches, maybe 75’ tall, maybe 40’ in branch spread, is going to have several tons of carbon in it, sequestered over its lifetime, and the larger trees much more,” said Van Yahres. “A tree of

that size also transpires about 100-200 gallons of water every day, and that adds a cooling effect to the area.”

Finally, trees support biodiversity and animal life. He noted that “white oaks are the single most important trees to birds because they have so many insects that like to feed on them, then the birds eat the insects.”

Trees of the future

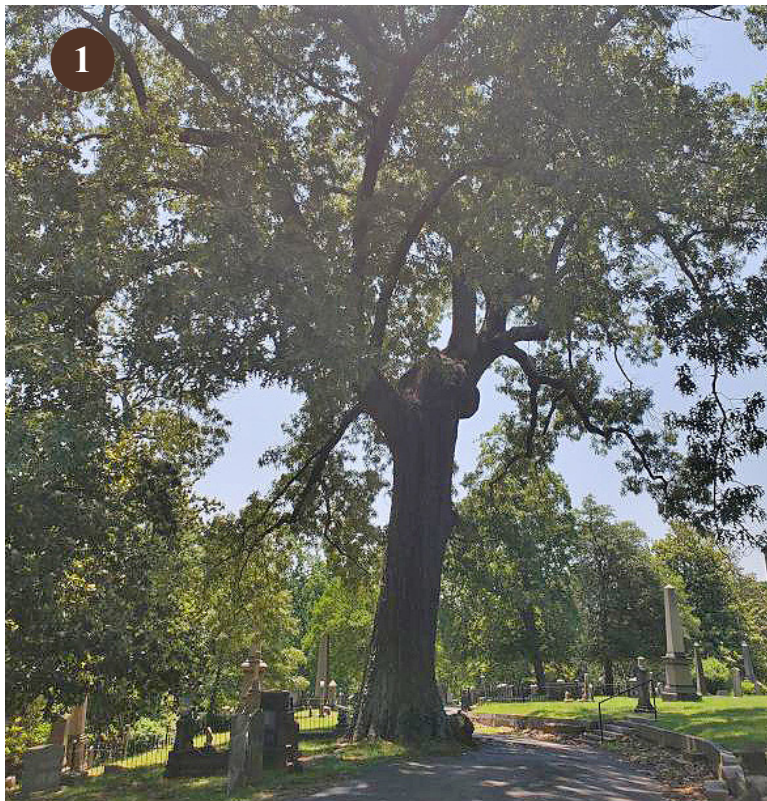
While monarchs can’t be replaced, Hollywood has long supported tree planting through Arbor Day events, with the most recent being held in 2018. As part of the Environmental Stewardship Project, funds were set aside for a tree planting program with the goal of placing specimens where they will mature nicely and provide a canopy for the future.

“In accordance with the digital plan and for the immediate needs, we are budgeting \$50,000 a year for the planting of new trees. This amount will be used for the next few years and then reduce over time as the number of new trees needed each year declines,” said David Gilliam, general manager of Hollywood Cemetery. “This will be a restricted fund managed by Friends to support the cemetery plans to plant new trees. Donors can designate their donation to be used for this purpose.”

For the plantings, a mix of deciduous, evergreens, and ornamentals will be selected, with white oaks and hollies (from which the cemetery gets its name) among the priorities. The cemetery does not have many hickories, said Van Yahres, “which are very difficult to transplant, but nonetheless we will plant more of those in the future because they are a native, long-lived tree and give biodiversity.”

According to the Hollywood arborist, “we’ve got to take the best care of the trees we have as long as we can, but we also have to be aggressive in planting new trees.” He anticipates planting about 50-60 trees this year, with more to come in the future.

Given the longevity of trees, Van Yahres is planning Hollywood’s landscape 100 years down the road. “As we consider the trees of the future, we will plant the kind of trees that are native and strong, and long-lived and statuesque,” he said. “But we won’t do that just willy-nilly; we will do that according to the cemetery’s sections, the topography, the views, the circulation, and use the trees to shape space well into the future.”



1. Cedar Ave. red oak (+/- 150 years old)
2. Hollow trunk with evidence of cement filling
3. Hollow base measuring 6 feet in diameter
4. Toppled by wind in August, 2019. See dark hollow center

The Language of Trees

Recent research shows that trees can communicate with each other, both above and underground.

“In a natural forest, many scientists believe that those interactions are so profound that it’s not unthinkable to think about that forest as a single organism rather than a collection of trees,” said Hollywood arborist Mike Van Yahres.

He shared a story about elephants. “They start their day by eating acacia trees. But as they do, those trees send pheromone signals to other adjacent acacia trees that danger is in the air. Those trees then build up toxicity [by filling up their leaves with tannin]. When the elephants get to them, they bypass those trees and go further,” he said. “Each day the elephant has to travel at least 20 miles to get the variety of vegetation that is necessary. It’s an ongoing signal that has evolved over eons.”

To learn more about research on tree communication, Van Yahres recommended Peter Wohlleben’s *The Hidden Life of Trees*.

Extensive Restoration of Davis Circle Completed



Photographs by Bill Draper Photography



Davis Circle, resting place of Jefferson Davis and his family, has been restored and transformed through the generosity of the Ratcliffe Foundation of Tazewell, VA. The Circle is one of the most visited destinations in the City of Richmond.

A Reflection and Tribute

The Board of Directors of Hollywood Cemetery has been blessed for decades with the stewardship of very dedicated individuals. It has been a privilege to know many of them.

Three members of the Board hold a special place for me in Hollywood's most recent annals. They are all resting there today, so I do feel a certain ease writing about them without risking their discomfort.

To my knowledge and ever since 1847, the Cemetery Board has historically been male populated, comprised of individuals from all professions.

In 1983, the first woman was elected to the Board in its 150 + year history. Her name – **Emily Peyton Higgins**. She was wife, mother, grandmother, community volunteer, church woman, and a knowledgeable gardener. She had an abiding interest in Hollywood well before her board of director service. On the Board, she was an inspiration for the creation of a broad-based cemetery master plan finalized in 1995. The plan led to Hollywood's first inventory of trees (then well over 2,000) – their identification and location, longevity prospects, and care and maintenance requirements. She would be so gratified to know that, today, all of this information has been digitized for instant reference and planning. Emily Higgins was a Board member for twenty-two years.

Margaret Page Bemiss served on the Hollywood Board from 1996 until 2008. She was its second female Board member. She spoke her mind but always with dignity and grace. Margaret was a devoted conservationist of

both natural resources and historic places. She served at a time when the cemetery was really beginning to show its age. She was an advocate for repair and restoration of monuments and hardscapes. And she was a true steward of Hollywood's natural habitat, speaking for living things that could not speak for themselves. I remember her telling me on numerous occasions and with a broad grin – "You know...I am nothing but a troublemaker." Hardly, I thought to myself.

And lastly, **Dr. Hunter Holmes McGuire, Jr.** "Mac" received much of his knowledge of the Cemetery as a child from his mother. They were regular Cemetery visitors after church on Sundays. Over the years and particularly in his later ones, Mac became recognized as a consummate Hollywood Cemetery storyteller and its unofficial historian. He served on the Board for eleven years, published a walking tour guide booklet, created a video about Hollywood greats and not so greats, gave lectures about the Cemetery, and provided countless private tours. He was a staunch proponent of the creation of "**Friends of Hollywood Cemetery**" and its faithful supporter until his death in 2018.

I have been asked – "Were they visionaries?" If a visionary is one who supports but at the same time probes the status quo and one who is the author of new and sometimes bold ideas...then yes, they were visionaries. And they are missed.

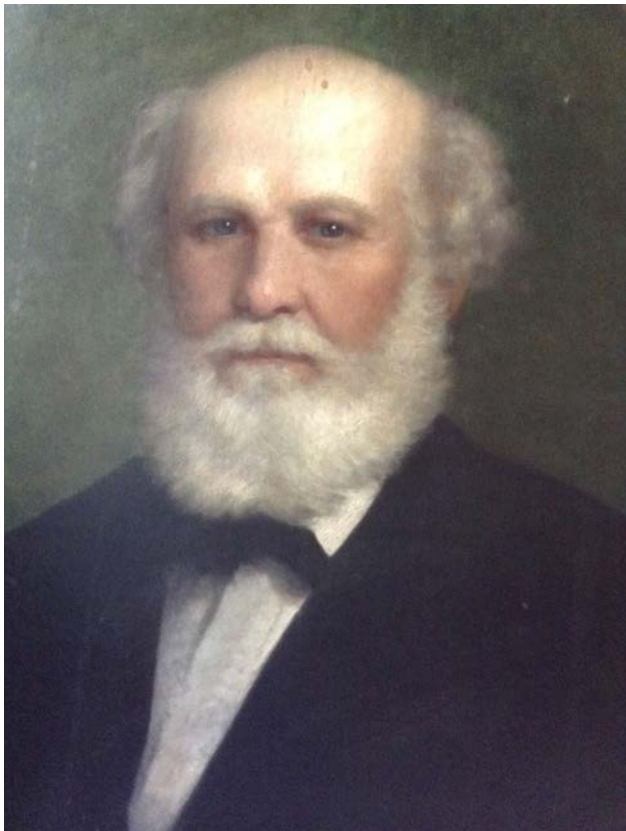
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November, 2019

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James Thomas, Jr.

Richmond Tobacconist, Philanthropist, and Churchman

His funeral was one of the largest held in 19th century Richmond. His church, First Baptist Church, was then located at Twelfth and Broad Streets and was said to have been “the largest church building in Richmond.” It was packed with mourners - rich and poor, black and white, on that October afternoon in 1882, and many were turned away for lack of space. The pews of the middle aisle were reserved for family. The eastern gallery was reserved for servants. “The burial-case was concealed from sight by a great profusion of flowers, and many elegant floral designs were borne by pall-bearers. There was the ripened sheath and scythe, the pillows, cross, and crown anchor. “The richness of these offerings was something quite unprecedented here,” wrote a newspaper reporter for the *Daily Dispatch*.



James Thomas, Jr. (1806 - 1882)

James Thomas, Jr. arrived in Richmond from Caroline County with little more than his own ingenuity yet through intrepid work became likely Richmond's first millionaire and among its earliest philanthropists. At his funeral was a cross section of Richmond society: fellow business magnates, distinguished Baptist clergy (some twelve presiding

in the service), faculty and some 150 students from Richmond College which he had served as president of its Board of Trustees and loyal benefactor, church members who had witnessed his superior churchmanship across the decades, and persons of African descent who had worked for the man or knew him through his benefactions for the First African Baptist Church just down the street from First Baptist Church.

Prior to the funeral service the family would have gathered at their Italianate mansion at the corner of Second and Grace Streets. The Thomas residence was known as an unofficial hotel for visiting Baptist clergy, including notable missionaries and celebrated preachers. Once during an annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention, “over sixty delegates” were lodged at the Thomas home. The clergy knew that the price to be paid as a guest was to debate finer points of theology with their host. The challenge was worth it to enjoy the hospitality of James and Mary Wortham Thomas and the lively company of their son and daughters.

Mary Wortham Thomas was eighteen years younger than her husband, and she had been a member of First Baptist Church since early in her life. She was one of the founding members of the Ladies' Sewing Society of the church which supported a city missionary. The Society reached out to serve in various Richmond neighborhoods including Fulton, Shockoe Valley, and Sidney. She volunteered in the city's Confederate hospitals during the War and afterwards, she led the Hollywood Memorial Association to honor the graves of the fallen and laid the cornerstone of the Confederate Memorial in Hollywood Cemetery. A granddaughter once shared the following story: “On the day appointed for laying the stone, the homes of the president and vice-president of Hollywood Memorial Association were surrounded by the Federals. When they heard that the stone was to be laid that day, the officers they knew of being connected with the Association were not allowed to leave their homes. These ladies sent notes to Mrs. Thomas by servants asking her to lay the stone.”

James Thomas himself had several associations with

James Thomas (continued)



Mary Wortham Thomas (1823 – 1897)

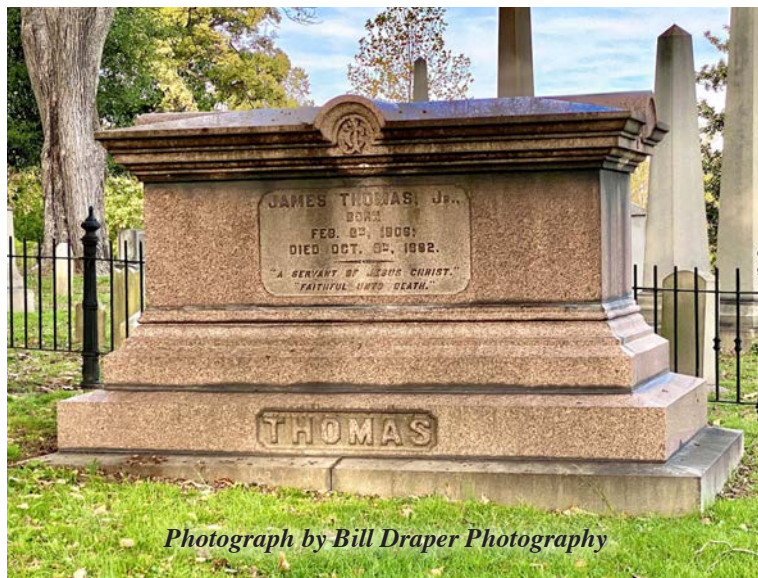
Civil War lore. At the War's beginning, he "equipped at his expense, a battery of Artillery that bore his name." He rescued the bell of First Baptist Church which was to be melted for cannon for the Confederacy. Instead, he gave an amount of gold worth its value and today the bell is prominently displayed on the church lawn on Monument Avenue. As a charter member of the Board of Trustees of Richmond College (now the University of Richmond), he urged diversification of funds, but the trustees invested in Confederate bonds which soon proved worthless. After the War, with the school virtually dead and gone, he gave \$5,000 - a munificent sum in the postwar South - to reopen the college. Across the years his gifts to the college were estimated at about \$60,000 which made Thomas its largest contributor up to the 1880s. Thomas Hall, one of the original dormitories on the present campus, is a memorial to the school's first great benefactor. In 1867, he also was among the signers of the bail-bond for Jefferson Davis.

James Thomas's philanthropy benefited many good causes. He "gave liberally" to the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, the first seminary established by Southern Baptists; and he was the chief provider of funds so that the members of First African Baptist

Church could own their first building which still stands on Broad Street.

A self-made man, James Thomas came to Richmond to work with a brother and he soon recognized the value of bright leaf tobacco. In time, his brands of tobacco were known around the world. He became the leading tobacconist in Richmond with factories also in Danville and Lynchburg. He made, lost and regained fortunes. Despite his busy work life, he served as superintendent of the Sunday school at First Baptist Church and actively participated in church life.

His funeral lasted until late afternoon, and the shadows were lengthening when the procession reached Hollywood. The mourners would have walked along Confederate Avenue, made a turn onto Cedar (where the black iron dog is a landmark) and stopped at a large oak tree which now comes out into the roadbed. They would have walked up the hillside past the Richmond College plot and to a select spot where all that was mortal of James Thomas Jr. was laid to rest. Later, a striking pink stone slab was placed over the tomb. In time, across the hills and valleys of Hollywood would be the final resting places of many of his contemporaries, colleagues, friends and family.



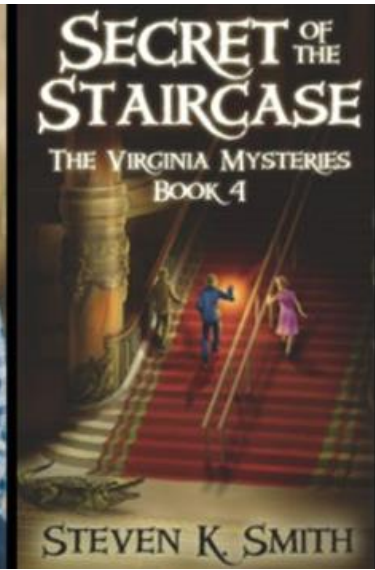
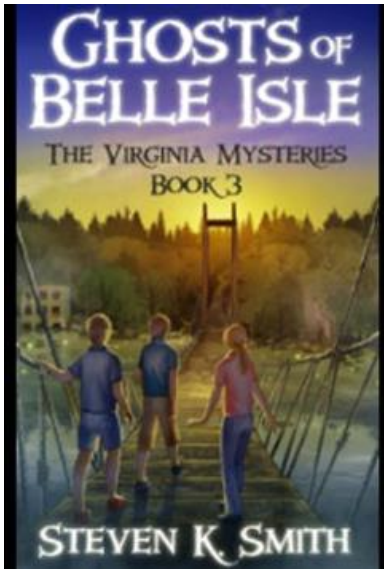
Photograph by Bill Draper Photography

Contributed by Fred Anderson

For a full treatment of the man and his family, see *The Virginia Baptist Register*, No. 55, 2016, written by Fred Anderson and available through the Virginia Baptist Historical Society. Fred Anderson is the executive director *emeritus* of the Virginia Baptist Historical Society.

A Special Hollywood Tour for Richmond Youth

On the morning of Saturday, June 29th, nearly a dozen adolescents and their families, along with children’s librarians and history enthusiasts came out to learn about the history of Hollywood Cemetery by taking a specialty walking tour for children. While children have been welcomed on the adult historic tours of the cemetery and may have even attended with school groups, this tour was developed to be kid-focused and prioritized the interests and needs of children. The objectives of the tour were for kids to learn about local history, to encourage summer reading, and to promote exercise by taking a walking tour.



I collaborated with local author, Steven K. Smith, known for his middle-grade series, *The Virginia Mysteries* whose books include “adventures with a twist of history.” Each book is from the point of view of two adolescent brothers and their good friend; these stories include adventures surrounding the characters’ new home, spotlighting Virginia’s histories.

The historical themes in each story help to reinforce the social studies curriculums for the 3rd, 4th and 5th grade levels. Smith’s most recent book, *Shadows at Jamestown* (2017), has been named a Virginia Readers’ Choice elementary title for 2019-20 by the Virginia State Reading Association.

The third book in the series, *Ghosts of Belle Isle* (2014), includes Hollywood Cemetery as one of the main settings. Smith’s fourth book, *Secret of the*

Staircase (2015), focuses on The Jefferson Hotel and the man who established it. Since Lewis Ginter is buried in Hollywood, the storylines as well as the historic sites mentioned in both books were included on the tour.

Only a few of the adolescents and family members had ever visited Hollywood Cemetery before although they were all from the greater Richmond area. As each guest arrived, Smith greeted them and made connections to see which books had been read. One of Smith’s sons came along on the tour. While I was chatting with him about

his father’s work, I asked which character resembled him. He laughed and responded, “the character Sam.” Close by, 11-year-old Juliana Ransom’s face lit up as she whispered to her mother, “I just met Sam!”

The tour began in the Confederate Soldiers section with an introduction and moved to the Confederate

monument, which is a key focus in the book. Throughout the tour, historical facts about the cemetery connected to Smith’s books. For example, at the pyramid, the children recalled what the characters had noticed about the monument. They were engaged and asked great questions. Throughout the tour, excerpts from Smith’s books were read that related to each place that we stopped during the tour. One of the exciting parts was having Smith available to answer questions about his stories. He discussed how he researched the history of the cemetery and shared how he developed the stories. He even gave away a few secrets for how he came up with the story ideas. Other stops on the tour included Presidents Circle, the overlook of the James River, the Lewis Ginter mausoleum, and Davis Circle.

(continued on page 9)

Danielle Broughman, who brought her daughter to the tour, shared, “We really had a great time and learned so much.” She further shared that her daughter told their family that they need to get a family plot in Hollywood.

For those who missed the tour, Steven K. Smith and I have collaborated on a self-guided tour, which is posted on Hollywood Cemetery’s website and the author’s website.

*Contributed by Sharon Pajka, Ph. D.
Professor, Gallaudet University*



www.HollywoodCemetery.org

While there’s nothing like visiting Hollywood Cemetery in person, there is a wealth of information for you to explore on our website! Since the relaunch in 2015, over 70,000 people have visited the cemetery’s website, enjoying features such as the interactive timeline and virtual tours. There is also an extensive digital database of Burial and Genealogy records on our site for you to search for records or submit memories and photos to be added to your loved one’s memorial page. You will also find a detailed archive of these newsletters, options to donate to the cemetery’s preservation, and upcoming events. We hope you will take advantage of the information at your fingertips on www.hollywoodcemetery.org.



Be sure to follow us on our other online portals as well!

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We are indeed grateful to the following donors for their generous support of Friends through October 31, 2019. You have enabled us to raise awareness of Hollywood and to continue vital monument and fence restoration. Thank you for helping us to preserve Hollywood Cemetery for generations to come.

Ed

Edward M. Farley, IV
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