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# The Frigate Constitution

## Memorial

*To the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States:—*

The undersigned, the Council of the MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY, acting under its instructions, again memorialize your Honorable Bodies in regard to the United States frigate *Constitution*, and the disposition to be made of that historic vessel:

A copy of a previous memorial on the same subject, heretofore submitted by us under similar conditions, is hereto appended, and to it we respectfully call your attention.

In the annual report of the Secretary of the Navy recently submitted, it is, however, stated that the vessel now lying at Charlestown is, because of repeated renewals, not the historic *Constitution*, or "the vessel with which Hull captured the *Guerrière*," and that to hold her forth as such is a case of "false pretences;" that, if repaired and put in commission, "she would be absolutely useless;" and, finally, that thus to restore her would be "a perfectly unjustifiable waste of public money." She should, therefore, be broken up, or, as an alternative, knocked to pieces and sunk as something of no further practical use,— what is designated as "a maritime end" being thus, "for purely sentimental reasons," conceded her.

Your Memorialists do not propose to argue these several points; we confine ourselves to protesting earnestly against them, and, one and all, denying them. If the vessel now moored at the Charlestown dock is not the historic frigate *Constitution*, then the Society for which we speak is not the MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY; for it was organized six years before the *Constitution* was launched, and the last survivor of our original members died sixty-five years ago; five times has the Society changed its habitation; it has hardly a thing in

possession which belonged to it in 1792, or in 1812; its very name has undergone legal alteration. Yet we hold it needless to argue that, through constant renewal and by unbroken succession, this Society is the MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY of 1791, and it is assuredly so regarded. We would look upon a denial of our identity as, at least, ill considered. It is in no respect otherwise in the case of the *Constitution*.

The assertion, officially made, that the present ship if rebuilt on her old lines would, when completed, "be absolutely useless" is scarcely less matter of surprise. Her sister frigate of exactly coeval build, the *Constellation*, has recently been repaired, and is now used as a training ship attached to the Naval War College at Newport; while another similar ship, now called the *Severn*, but until recently bearing the ill-omened name of *Chesapeake*, is in commission and connected with the Naval Academy at Annapolis. Formerly the *Constitution* was so attached to the Academy, and a distinguished admiral, still on the active list, has recently testified to the "intense interest" she excited in him when as a boy he for months lived aboard her. Why, then, it is pertinent to ask, should not the single symbolic "fighting frigate" of our earlier Navy, around which associations cluster, be restored, put in commission and used to replace the *Constellation* or the *Severn*, formerly the *Chesapeake*, to which vessels comparatively little historic interest, and, in the case of the last, less than no patriotic sentiments attach? Why should they be repaired and maintained, and the *Constitution* utilized as a "target"?

If to repair and maintain the *Constitution* would be an "unjustifiable waste" of the public money of the United States, what can be said on behalf of the *Victory*, and the outlay she entails on the British exchequer? That Nelson's flagship, which so proudly broke the opposing line at Trafalgar seven years before the *Constitution* called down the flag of the *Guerrière*, should now be towed to sea and practised at as a target by modern ironclads would as a suggestion from the Admiralty Board not only shock the public opinion of Great Britain but be resented as an outrage, or at best an unseemly levity. Are Americans less susceptible to sentiment, patriotism and gratitude than their cousins across the sea? Today, a century after Nelson died in her cockpit, the *Victory*, cherished by Great Britain as one of the most precious relics of her sea glories, is annually visited by scores of thousands of all nations. So, as the long record of those who flock to see her bears witness, the *Constitution* is in no less degree an inspiration to Americans. They feel towards her as towards a sentient being; for, in

one short half hour, in a time of deepest gloom, her broadsides elevated the United States from being an unconsidered people beyond the sea into respect as a confessed world-power. She then did for us more than the *Victory* ever did for England.

Therefore, in the name and on behalf of the Society we represent, we renew the prayer embodied in the accompanying Memorial of 1903. We ask that immediate action be taken to the end that the course pursued by the British Admiralty as respects the line-of-battle ship *Victory* be pursued by the United States Navy Department in the case of the frigate *Constitution*. Accordingly, we pray your Honorable Bodies that the necessary steps forthwith be taken for preserving the "Fighting Frigate" of 1812; that she be repaired and renewed, and once more put in commission to be used as a training-ship in connection with our Naval Academies; and that, navigated as such by the students of the Academies, she be made in future to visit at suitable seasons points along our coast where she may be easily accessible to that large and ever-increasing number of American citizens who, retaining a sense of affection, as well as of deep gratitude, to her, feel also a patriotic and an abiding interest in the associations she will never cease to recall.

And your Memorialists will ever pray, etc.

CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS, *President*,  
SAMUEL A. GREEN, *Vice-President*,  
JAMES FORD RHODES, *Second Vice-President*,  
EDWARD STANWOOD, *Recording Secretary*,  
HENRY W. HAYNES, *Corresponding Secretary*,  
CHARLES C. SMITH, *Treasurer*,  
GRANVILLE HOWLAND NORCROSS, *Cabinet Keeper*,  
JAMES FROTHINGHAM HUNNEWELL,  
JAMES DE NORMANDIE,  
THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON,  
ALBERT BUSHNELL HART,  
THOMAS LEONARD LIVERMORE,  
ROGER BIGELOW MERRIMAN,

*Members constituting the Council of the Society.*

BOSTON, January 11, 1906.

## Memorial

*To the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States : —*

Your Memorialists, the Council of the MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY, acting under its instructions, would respectfully call the attention of your Honorable Bodies to certain facts connected with the United States frigate *Constitution* : —

That vessel is now lying at Charlestown, Massachusetts, in a dock also used by the steamships of the so-called White Star Line ; she is dismantled, out of repair, and liable at any time to injury from carelessness or accident, if not to destruction. Your Memorialists further represent that in the American mind an historical interest attaches to the *Constitution* such as attaches to no other ship in maritime annals, except possibly the *Santa Maria*, the flagship of Columbus, and the *Mayflower*, both of which disappeared centuries ago. The *Constitution* still remains; and it was the *Constitution* which, in the gloomiest hour of the War of 1812-14, appeared "like a bright gleam in the darkness." On the 16th of August of that year, Detroit, with all its garrisons, munitions, and defences, was surrendered to the British forces; on the same day Fort Dearborn, at what is now Chicago, was in flames, and with it "the last vestige of American authority on the Western lakes disappeared." The discouragement was universal and the sense of national humiliation extreme; for it seemed doubtful if even the interior line of the Wabash could be successfully held against an enemy flushed with success. The prophet of yet other disasters immediately impending was abroad, and, according to his wont, further depressed the already disheartened land. It was in this hour of deepest gloom that, on the morning of Sunday, August 30, the Sabbath silence of Boston was broken and the town stirred to unwonted excitement "as the news passed through the quiet streets that the *Constitution* was below, in the outer harbor, with Dacres," of the *Guerrière*, "and his crew prisoners on board." Thus it so chanced that the journal which, the next morning, informed Bostonians of the Detroit humiliation, in another column of the same issue announced that naval action which "however small the affair might appear on the general scale of the world's battles,



raised the United States in one-half hour to the rank of a first-class power in the world." The jealousy of the Navy, which had until then characterized the more recent national policy, vanished forever "in the flash of Hull's first broadside." The victory, moreover, was most dramatic — a naval duel. The adversaries — not only commanders but ship's companies to a man — had sought each other out for a test of seamanship, discipline, and gunnery — arrogance and the confidence of prestige on the one side, a passionate sense of wrong on the other. They met in mid-Atlantic, — frigate to frigate. It was on the afternoon of August 19, the wind blowing fresh, the sea running high. For about an hour the two ships manœuvred for position, but at last, a few minutes before six o'clock, "they came together side-by-side, within pistol-shot, the wind almost astern, and running before it they pounded each other with all their strength. As rapidly as the guns could be worked, the *Constitution* poured in broadside after broadside, double-shotted with round and grape, — and, without exaggeration, the echo of those guns startled the world." Of her first broadside in that action, the master of an American brig, then a captive on board the British ship, afterwards wrote: "About six o'clock I heard a tremendous explosion from the opposing frigate. The effect of her shot seemed to make the *Guerrière* reel, and tremble as though she had received the shock of an earthquake." In less than thirty minutes from the time we got alongside of the enemy," reported Captain Hull to the Secretary of the Navy, "she was left without a spar standing, and the hull cut to pieces in such a manner as to make it difficult to keep her above water."

The historian has truly said of that conflict: "Isaac Hull was nephew to the unhappy General [who, three days before the *Constitution* overcame the *Guerrière*, had capitulated at Detroit], and perhaps the shattered hulk of the *Guerrière*, which the nephew left at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, eight hundred miles east of Boston, was worth for the moment the whole province which the uncle had lost, eight hundred miles to the Westward. . . . No experience of history ever went to the heart of New England more directly than this victory, so peculiarly its own; but the delight was not confined to New England, and extreme though it seemed it was still not extravagant."

Therefore it is that the MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY, already, in 1812, an organization more than twenty years in existence, now directs this Memorial to be submitted — she, the oldest among them, speaking through her Council for all other similar societies throughout New England. In so doing it is

needless to enter into the earlier and later history of what was essentially the "Fighting Frigate" of the first American Navy; for, in the memory of the people of the United States, the *Constitution* is, throughout her long record, inseparably associated with feats of daring and seamanship—devotion and dash—than which none in all naval history are more skilful, more stirring, or more deserving of commemoration. How can they be so effectively commemorated as by the pious and lasting preservation of the ancient ship, now slowly rotting at the wharf opposite to which she was launched six years more than a century ago?

And while the name of the *Constitution* is thus not only synonymous with courage, seamanship, patriotism, and unbroken triumph, the ship herself is typical of a maritime architecture as extinct as the galley or the trireme. She slid from the ways at what is still known in her honor as Constitution Wharf in Boston harbor ten months before Nelson won the Battle of the Nile, and eight years to a day before his famous flagship, the *Victory*, bore his broad pennant in triumph through the Franco-Spanish line at Trafalgar; and your Memorialists hold that, in the eyes and minds of the people of the United States, no less an interest and sentiment attach to the *Constitution* than in Great Britain attach to the *Victory*. The *Constitution* in the days of our deep tribulation did more for us than ever even the flagship of Nelson did for England; and, thenceforth, she has been to Americans as a sentient being, to whom gratitude is due.

Yet by Great Britain the *Victory* ever has been and now is tenderly cared for, and jealously preserved among the most precious of national memorials. As such, it is yearly visited by thousands,\* among whom Americans are not least in number. The same care has not been extended over the *Constitution*; and yet your Memorialists would not for a moment suggest, nor do they believe, that the people, the Parliament, or the government of Great Britain are more grateful, more patriotic, or endowed with a keener sense of pride than the people, the Congress, or the Administration of the United States. As for the people, the contrary is, in the case of the *Constitution*, incontrovertibly proven by the names of the thousands of pilgrims from all sections of the country annually inscribed on her register.† So far as the Government is concerned, its failure to take measures for the lasting preservation of the old ship has been due, in the opinion of

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\* "During the summer as many as five thousand persons have visited the ship in one day."—*Report of Capt. C. H. Stockton to Chief of Bureau of Navigation, Jan. 27, 1904.*

† It is stated that nearly one hundred thousand persons have visited the *Constitution* during the last three years.



your Memorialists, neither to indifference nor to an unworthy spirit of thrift, but to the fact that, amid the multifarious matters calling for immediate action, the preserving of an old-time frigate, even though freighted with glorious memories, has been somewhat unduly, though not perhaps unnaturally, deferred to a more opportune occasion.

None the less, the *Constitution* "is the yet living monument, not alone of her own victories, but of the men behind the guns who won them. She speaks to us of patriotism and courage, of the devotion to an idea, and to a sentiment for which men laid down their lives." Therefore, your Memorialists would respectfully ask that immediate provision be made to the end that the course pursued by the British Admiralty in the case of the *Victory* may be pursued by our Navy Department in the case of the *Constitution*. We accordingly pray your Honorable Bodies that the necessary steps forthwith be taken for preserving the "Fighting Frigate" of 1812; that she be renewed, put in commission as a training-ship, and at suitable seasons be in future stationed at points along our coast where she may be easily accessible to that large and ever-increasing number of American citizens who, retaining a sense of affection, as well as deep gratitude, to her, feel also a patriotic and an abiding interest in the associations which the frigate *Constitution* will never cease to recall.

And your Memorialists will ever pray, etc.

BOSTON, December 31, 1903.

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The engagement between the *Constitution* and the *Guerrière* took place on the afternoon of August 19, 1812. The ship made Boston harbor during the night of Saturday, August 29. The next day news of the combat circulated in Boston. The subjoined article, prepared at its suggestion by a member of the MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY in furtherance of the foregoing Memorial, appeared in the editorial columns of the "Boston Herald" in its issue of Tuesday, August 30, 1904.

### SUNDAY, AUGUST 30, 1812.

In 1812 — ninety-two years ago — the thirtieth of August fell on a Sunday; a Sunday of great, though suppressed, excitement in what was still the town of Boston. For during the early hours of that Sabbath morning a rumor suddenly ran through Boston streets, and pervaded its homes, that the frigate "Constitution" was lying below, in the outer harbor — that in ship-to-ship fight

she had sunk the "Guerrière," and that she had on board the English captain and his crew, prisoners of war. The Puritan traditions, as respects Sunday observance, still held sway; but on that particular Sabbath the meeting-house porches were alive with whispered excitement, and all day long silent, well-dressed groups lined the southern wharves, or from the summit of house or hill peered seaward, straining their eyes for a glimpse of the hull and spars of the now famous ship of war. All day she lay quietly at her anchorage in the roads.

Monday morning she was still there; but early that day the frigate had occasion, in the famous figure of speech of George Canning, to "assume the likeness of an animated thing, instinct with life and motion;" to ruffle its swelling plumage; to put forth its beauty and its bravery, and collecting its scattered elements of strength, to prepare again to "awaken its dormant thunder." Fatigued beyond endurance by the strain and anxiety of the last fourteen days, believing himself and his ship at last in safety, Capt. Isaac Hull had been suddenly roused from a deep sleep by the startling report that an armed squadron was at the harbor's mouth and bearing in upon him. Simultaneously weighing anchor and clearing decks for action, he boldly moved out to meet the danger; but, as the "Constitution" approached the leader of the advancing squadron, signals instead of shots were exchanged, and to Hull's great relief he saluted the broad pennon of Commodore Rodgers, unexpectedly making port from a fruitless cruise.

Not until Tuesday, the first of September, did the "Constitution" find her way up above the Castle to an anchorage in the inner harbor. Hull then landed, and as he made a progress up State street to the Exchange Coffee House — then Boston's chief hostelry — the town went wild. Innumerable flags waved, a procession was formed, salutes were exchanged between the shore and the ships of war, and the intense feeling found utterance in every form of sound and motion. There was, too, sufficing occasion for it all. Its sense of self-respect had suddenly been restored to a people.

Almost the last of three generations have since passed away, and with them the memory of the conditions at that time prevailing. The event celebrated was but a fight between two frigates, and the victor greatly predominated in every element of strength; but a spell was broken, an insult had been avenged. Boston probably had never given way to such an outburst before; it has certainly given way to none such since. To understand its significance and realize its justification it is now necessary to recall a forgotten past.

In 1812 the United States, deemed a third-class power in the world — less than Portugal, hardly more than Algiers — had for a score of years been the unresenting football of antagonists as overbearing as they were powerful. Hamlet long before had said:

" 'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes  
Between the pass and fell-incensed points  
Of mighty opposites,"

and of this the United States had long afforded proof. With Napoleon and the country of Nelson and Wellington locked in a long death grapple, the young American nation had thought to traffic on their fields of battle. It had done so systematically and as matter of policy, regardless of insults and buffets. A people cannot pursue this course in a pure spirit of gain, preserving its manhood; and it must be admitted as historical truth that between 1807 and 1812 the people of the United States in general, and those of New England more especially, had lost all sense of pride.

Not without a consciousness that it was true, they read of themselves in the columns of the English press as "spaniel-like in character," a people who "the more they were chastised the more obsequious they became;" and one, moreover, which "could not be kicked into a war." The very frigate they had built and launched and manned, now lying at their harbor's mouth, had been contemptuously referred to as "a bundle of pine boards sailing under a bit of striped bunting." Submitting to it all their confidence in themselves was wholly gone. Suddenly it had been restored; once more they held up their heads, victors over their bully in a square yard-arm fight — small wonder they went wild! Had they failed to do so they would have been more or less than men.

Recalled through the vista of years, the situation was, withal, in every respect dramatic. England, in the years which followed Trafalgar, was fairly drunk with a consciousness of sea power. She ruled the wave. None questioned her absolute supremacy. Hers, almost immemorably, had been a record of unbroken victory — victory on a scale both large and small. During twenty years of incessant conflict, numbering in them more than two hundred ship-to-ship encounters of approximately equal force, the cross of St. George had averaged but one defeat in every forty fights. Contemptuously ignoring all international rules of courtesy or conduct, she had made the United States gulp down the very dregs in the cup of humiliation; for, on the twenty-second of June, 1807, in sight of the American coast, the unlucky frigate "Chesapeake" had been compelled to drag her way, a battered, helpless hulk, back to the port from which she had the day before sailed, disgraced and degraded, with officers and crew smarting under a humiliation never either forgotten or forgiven. Unresistingly pounded into abject submission, her company had been mustered on her own deck by a British subaltern, and those whom he saw fit to designate had been taken forcibly from her. Five years later had occurred the affair of the "President" and the "Little Belt." Numerically the armed ships of the United States were to those of Great Britain as one to a hundred; morally they were as nothing. As was said at the time: "No one act of the little navy had been at all calculated to gain the respect of the British. First was seen the 'Chesapeake' allowing herself to be beaten with impunity by a British ship only nominally superior to her. Then the huge frigate 'President' attacks and fights for nearly three-quarters of an hour the British sloop 'Little Belt,' of only eighteen guns, and it was claimed, had been beaten off by her." It was asserted also that those in command of the "President" had mistaken the sloop "Little Belt" for the frigate "Guerrière;" and because of that, Captain Dacres of the "Guerrière" and his crew felt the full passion and duty of revenge. In future there was to be no possibility of mistake, and so the "Guerrière" wore her name writ large on her mainsail. She hungered for a meeting with the "President."

And the day came when the "Constitution" took upon herself the quarrel of her sister ship, and in her turn hungered for a meeting with the "Guerrière." On the nineteenth of August, 1812 — fifteen months after the affair of the "Little Belt" — that hunger was appeased. The story of what then occurred, and where it occurred, is familiar. It will not bear repetition. Suffice it to say that war had at last been declared with Great Britain on the eighteenth of June, 1812. Then followed an unbroken series of military disasters, culminating, in August, with the disgraceful surrender of Detroit, and the destruction of Fort Dearborn, where Chicago now stands. The entire Northwest was either in possession of the enemy or at his mercy. The cup of humil-

iation was full; it apparently only remained to drain it. The collapse was complete; and, where open panic did not rule, utter discouragement prevailed. In the midst of it all the "Constitution" sailed on the fifth of July out of the Chesapeake, and into the midst of a British squadron. She eluded and outfooted them, her escape a marvel of skill and endurance. During a part of that three-day ordeal the "Guerrière" was at the front and pitted against her. On the twenty-sixth of July Hull reached Boston. He then had reason to believe he was about to be called upon to turn his command over to another, but first he was in search of a fight. He knew his ship; he had tested his crew; he craved the square issue of battle. So, reporting his arrival, he did not wait for orders, but, on the second of August, turned the "Constitution's" prow seaward. The very next day the anticipated order came. He was relieved of his command; but, with that command, he was out of the way, headed for mid-Atlantic, hunting for an opponent. His ship's company shared his eagerness; from the youngest powder monkey to the executive officer they were in the hunt, and when, at last, on the afternoon of Wednesday, August 19, the grim order to clear away for action came, it was met with a joyous cheer. This was at 4 P.M. Two hours and a half later the "Guerrière" was rolling in the trough of the sea, a battered, sparless, foundering hulk. The next day she sank. She is there in mid-ocean now.

The details of that memorable conflict are in every American history, and there is neither reason nor space here to recount them. One incident is, however, less well known, and, in these days of race feeling and burnings at the stake, may well be recalled. The African race is, fortunately, not as a rule resentful, but it so chanced that of the four men forcibly taken by the "Leopard" from the "Chesapeake" in June, 1807, two were negroes. Shipped at Annapolis the "Constitution" numbered in its crew others of the same blood — black men, with woolly hair. Referring afterward to this fact and the conduct of those men, Hull, a rough seafaring sailor of the period, remarked: "I never had any better fighters than those niggers. They stripped to the waist and fought like devils, sir, seeming to be utterly insensible to danger, and to be possessed with a determination to outfight the white sailors." The cry was not then, "Remember the 'Maine'!" but "Remember the 'Chesapeake'!" and perhaps the negroes had it on their lips as well as in their hearts.

This was on the nineteenth of August, eight hundred miles east of Boston, about south of Cape Race, on the present route to Southampton. Ten days later the anchor of the "Constitution" again gripped bottom off Rainsford's in Boston harbor. It was a case of David returning from his combat with Goliath. Probably in their day David's astonished compatriots cheered to the echo their champion. The Bostonians certainly did so now, for, yesterday cowering, to-day they stood erect. A deathly spell was dispelled. They, too, could fight. The thirtieth of August was the awakening day.

Yet, strangely enough, by some unaccountable chain of circumstance, that frigate, which then restored to the nation its sense of self-respect, is to-day rotting at a dock in Charlestown — directly in the face of the wharf from which she was launched, and which still, a hundred and seven years later, bears her name — rotting there, a useless, disappearing hulk, while, in flagrant violation of international ethics, we have given the name of "Chesapeake" — a name we lost in fair fight — to a new vessel, and that new vessel, perpetuating the memory of disgrace and defeat, is used, of all possible purposes, as a training ship for our naval cadets! The mere mention of the



fact suggests an inquiry into the mental condition of a Congress and department which for a moment permit such a disgraceful anomaly. Perpetrated in the name of economy it is a case of monumental ingratitude. Would it have cost more to rehabilitate the "Constitution" than to build a new "Chesapeake"? This question is one very opportune in Boston on this thirtieth of August; following hard on Guerrière-day it is a question not easy to answer. And, again, the old wooden frigate "Constellation," long in use at Newport, has just been put out of commission and now lies in dry dock at the Brooklyn Navy Yard in process of renewal. From the day on which the "Constellation" was launched, Sept. 7, 1797 — scarcely six short weeks before the launching of the "Constitution" — her history has been mainly one of mishaps. Always well fought, her flag, unlike that of the "Chesapeake," never came down to an antagonist; but, the direct opposite in this respect of the "Constitution," her unluckiness was uniform — some trick of fate always intervened to make her victories valueless or turn them against her. During the entire War of 1812-14 she was blockaded in the Chesapeake; and, while the name of the "Constitution," as she went from battle to battle, became synonymous with victory, that of the "Constellation" was suggestive only of hope deferred, and final disappointment. Never once during the struggle did her pennon fly in mid-ocean.

During the last session of Congress, at the instance of a new England senator, an item was inserted in the naval appropriation bill, as framed and passed by the House of Representatives, providing for the repair of the "Constitution" — "Old Ironsides." It met with no opposition in the Senate. Later the bill, as amended, went into the hands of a conference committee, and when it emerged therefrom the "Constitution's" item was no longer there. It had been stricken out at the instance of the conferees on the part of the House — on grounds of economy! Provision was made for the repair and maintenance of the "Chesapeake," a sailing ship commemorative of the deepest disgrace and most mortifying defeat this nation ever was called upon to endure, and use is found for her; but the frigate which, in the hour of deepest discouragement, restored self-respect and hope to the United States, was, for considerations of thrift, doomed to rot at a wharf. The "Constellation" — unlucky sister of the lucky "Ironsides" — could be sent to Brooklyn to be restored, but the old "Fighting Frigate of 1812" was pronounced not worth preserving!

On this thirtieth of August, of all days in the year, is it not timely, as well as appropriate, for Bostonians to inquire of Congress and the Navy Department: Why is this thus?



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