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National Museum of African American History and Culture

Records of the Mississippi Freedmen's
Department ("Pre-Bureau Records"), Office of
the Assistant Commissioner, Bureau of Refugees,
Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1863–1865

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Collection Overview

Repository:	National Museum of African American History and Culture
Title:	Records of the Mississippi Freedmen's Department ("Pre-Bureau Records"), Office of the Assistant Commissioner, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1863–1865
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Summary:	This collection is comprised of digital surrogates previously available on five rolls of microfilm described in the NARA publication M1914. These digital surrogates reproduced the records of the Freedmen's Department (Precursor to the Office of the Assistant Commissioner in the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands) for the period 1863–1865. These records consist of bound volumes and unbound records, containing materials that include letters sent and received, operations and ration reports, registers of freedmen, labor contracts, and other records relating to orders issued and received, hospitals, and schools.
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Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

Acquired from FamilySearch International in 2015.

Related Materials

See also [Freedmen's Bureau Digital Collection](#)

Preferred Citation

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Biographical / Historical

[The following is reproduced from the original NARA descriptive pamphlet for M1914.]

THE FREEDMEN'S BUREAU

The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, also known as the Freedmen's Bureau, was established in the War Department by an act of Congress on March 3, 1865 (13 Stat. 507). The life of the Bureau was extended twice by acts of July 16, 1866 (14 Stat. 173), and July 6, 1868 (15 Stat. 83). The Bureau was responsible for the supervision and management of all matters relating to refugees and freedmen, and of lands abandoned or seized during the Civil War. In May 1865, President Andrew Johnson appointed Maj. Gen. Oliver Otis Howard as Commissioner of the Bureau, and Howard served in that position until June 30, 1872, when activities of the Bureau were terminated in accordance with an act of June 10, 1872 (17 Stat. 366). While a major part of the Bureau's early activities involved the supervision of abandoned and confiscated property, its mission was to provide relief and help freedmen become self-sufficient. Bureau officials issued rations and clothing, operated hospitals and refugee camps, and supervised labor contracts. In addition, the Bureau managed apprenticeship disputes and complaints, assisted benevolent societies in the establishment of schools, helped freedmen in legalizing marriages entered into during slavery, and provided transportation to refugees and freedmen who were attempting to reunite with their family or relocate to other parts of the country. The Bureau also helped black soldiers, sailors, and their heirs collect bounty claims, pensions, and back pay.

The act of March 3, 1865, authorized the appointment of Assistant Commissioners to aid the Commissioner in supervising the work of the Bureau in the former Confederate states, the border states, and the District of Columbia. While the work performed by Assistant Commissioners in each state was similar, the organizational structure of staff officers varied from state to state. At various times, the staff could consist of a superintendent of education, an assistant adjutant general, an assistant inspector general, a disbursing officer, a chief medical officer, a chief quartermaster, and a commissary of subsistence. Subordinate to these officers were the assistant superintendents or subassistant commissioners as they later became known, who commanded the subdistricts.

The Assistant Commissioner corresponded extensively with both his superior in the Washington Bureau headquarters and his subordinate officers in the subdistricts. Based upon reports submitted to him by the subassistant commissioners and other subordinate staff officers, he prepared reports that he sent to the Commissioner concerning Bureau activities in areas under his jurisdiction. The Assistant Commissioner also received letters from freedmen, local white citizens, state officials, and other non-Bureau personnel. These letters varied in nature from complaints to applications for jobs in the Bureau. Because the assistant adjutant general handled much of the mail for the Assistant Commissioner's office, it was often addressed to him instead of to the Assistant Commissioner.

In a circular issued by Commissioner Howard in July 1865, the Assistant Commissioners were instructed to designate one officer in each state to serve as "General Superintendents of Schools." These officials were to "take cognizance of all that is being done to educate refugees and freedmen, secure proper protection to schools and teachers, promote method and efficiency, correspond with the benevolent agencies which are supplying his field, and aid the Assistant Commissioner in making his required reports." In October 1865, a degree of centralized control was established over Bureau educational activities in the states when Rev. John W. Alvord was appointed Inspector of Finances and Schools. In January 1867, Alvord was divested of his financial responsibilities, and he was appointed General Superintendent of Education.

An act of Congress, approved July 25, 1868 (15 Stat. 193), ordered that the Commissioner of the Bureau "shall, on the first day of January next, cause the said bureau to be withdrawn from the several States within which said bureau has acted and its operation shall be discontinued." Consequently, in early 1869, with the exception of the superintendents of education and the claims agents, the Assistant Commissioners and their subordinate officers were withdrawn from the states.

For the next year and a half, the Bureau continued to pursue its education work and to process claims. In the summer of 1870, the superintendents of education were withdrawn from the states, and the headquarters

staff was greatly reduced. From that time until the Bureau was abolished by an act of Congress approved June 10, 1872 (17 Stat. 366), effective June 30, 1872, the Bureau's functions related almost exclusively to the disposition of claims. The Bureau's records and remaining functions were then transferred to the Freedmen's Branch in the office of the Adjutant General. The records of this branch are among the Bureau's files.

THE FREEDMEN'S DEPARTMENT

ORGANIZATION

In November 1862, the War Department appointed Col. John Eaton as general superintendent of contrabands in the Department of the Tennessee and the State of Arkansas. The Department's territory included the area from Cairo, Illinois, southward to the Mississippi Valley, including the cities of Memphis, Vicksburg, Natchez, and Little Rock, and the military posts of Columbus, Island 10, Corinth, Helena, Du Vall's Bluff, Pine Bluff, Fort Smith, Goodrich Landing, Milliken's Bend, and Davis Bend. In June 1863, Capt. Samuel Thomas was appointed assistant superintendent of contrabands under Colonel Eaton, for the Department in the area of Helena, Arkansas. Eaton's position and title were eventually changed to general superintendent of freedmen, and Thomas became the assistant superintendent of freedmen. When Col. Thomas assumed supervisory responsibilities for the provost marshals in various districts and posts, his title was changed to provost marshal of freedmen. The positions of both Eaton and Thomas, coupled with the office of the medical director, inspector of freedmen, and several freedmen's hospitals and homes, constituted the Freedmen's Department of the Department of the Tennessee. In November 1864, the Freedmen's Department became a part of the Department of Mississippi. By the summer of 1865, the functions and activities of the Freedmen's Department were assumed by the recently formed Freedmen's Bureau, so that the Department was the precursor of the Bureau's Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Mississippi.

ACTIVITIES

The functions and activities in the Freedmen's Department were similar to those of the later Freedmen's Bureau. The Department assisted freedpeople in securing food, clothing, shelter, medicines and medical attention, employment, land, education, and help in a variety of social matters, including legalizing freedmen marriages.

When Col. John Eaton assumed the office of superintendent of contrabands for the Department of Tennessee in 1862, his responsibilities included providing for the physical welfare of freedmen and the supervision of confiscated and abandoned lands under military control. Faced with the enormous challenge of providing relief for the thousands of starved and destitute freedmen who had flocked to Union lines, and to encourage freedmen to become self-supporting, Eaton established "contraband" camps and put freedmen to work cutting wood, hauling, erecting cabins, and gathering crops from the abandoned fields. While freedmen in most cases were not paid directly for their labor, proceeds from their labor were used to provide them with food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. In December 1863, the War Department appointed D. O. McCord as medical director of freedmen for the Department of Tennessee and Arkansas. McCord found only eight surgeons and one hospital to care for the medical needs of freedmen. He enlarged the staff to 32 and provided medical services for nearly every camp in the department's jurisdiction.¹ Medical assistance was provided for hospitals at Milliken's Bend, Louisiana; and Vicksburg, Goodrich's Landing, Pau Pau, Parks Camp, and Davis Bend, Mississippi.

In March 1863, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton sent Adj. Gen. Lorenzo Thomas to the Mississippi Valley to develop a program that would enable freedmen to become self-sufficient and provide "useful service" as laborers and soldiers. Gen. Thomas instituted a plan that called for the leasing of abandoned and confiscated plantations to private individuals who would agree to hire freedmen. Three commissioners were appointed to supervise the leasing, and with the help of assistant provost marshals, they settled disputes that arose between freedmen and lessees (planters). Contraband camps were to be continued but only as a place for the unemployed and a source for acquiring able-bodied laborers to work on plantations. Planters were responsible for providing food, clothing, and monthly wages for the persons they employed. Male hands were paid \$7 per month, women \$5, and children between the ages of 12 and 15 received half wages. Instead of paying ordinary rent, planters were required to pay the Federal Government a produce tax that amounted to "two dollars for each four hundred pounds of cotton produced and five cents for every bushel of corn or potatoes." To protect freedmen and planters from the attacks of "guerillas," Gen. Thomas

established a "colored invalid corps." Comprised of black men unsuited for field service but capable of other military duties, the 9th and 7th Regiments, Louisiana Volunteers (later the 63rd and 64th Regiments, U. S. Colored Troops), provided the means for maintaining law and order under martial law. Col. Eaton served as the commander of the 9th regiment, and Samuel Thomas was colonel of the 7th regiment.²

Gen. Thomas's agricultural plan was not without debate and controversy. Questions concerning the benefits of his plan toward the welfare of freedmen and whether the army was the appropriate agency to handle the leasing of plantations caused considerable friction among military and Treasury officials. Nevertheless, by the end of 1863, camps, leasing of plantations, and employment of freedmen was transferred from the army to the Treasury Department. Under Treasury regulations, "home farms" replaced contraband camps as employment centers and homes for those freedmen unsuited for plantation work. Home farms were located at Helena, AR, Goodrich's Landing and Milliken's Bend, LA; and Natchez, Skipwith's Landing, Vicksburg, and Davis Bend, MS. Planter's seeking laborers from home farms had to apply to Treasury officials, and all able-bodied freedmen above the age of 12 were required to work. Freedmen who lived and labored on government home farms and chose not to contract with planters, received food and clothing but were not paid for their labor. Plantation laborers however, received wages according to a classification system based on their value as laborers. For example, first-class males received \$25 dollars per month and second- and third-class males received \$20 and \$15 dollars, respectively. First-, second-, and third-class females received \$18, \$14, and \$13 dollars, respectively. Planters were responsible for providing laborers with sufficient housing, and families with four or more persons were to be provided one-acre plots (without cost) for gardens. Sharecropping contracts were allowed as long as they were approved by Treasury personnel. The Treasury plan also called for the establishment of schools and mandatory attendance of children between the ages of 6 and 12. Despite its reforms, the Treasury plan was short-lived, and by March 1864, Gen. Thomas had regained control of freedmen affairs.³ The issue over the management of freedmen affairs and abandoned lands was not resolved until the establishment of the Freedmen's Bureau.

While most freedmen in the Mississippi Valley worked as laborers in government camps and on privately run plantations, some freedmen managed to lease and rent farms from the Federal Government for their own use. With assistance from leasing officials and Treasury agents, black farmers in the valley increased from 250 in 1864 to nearly 500 by 1865, with the largest contingent in areas around Helena, AR, and Vicksburg, MS. Perhaps the most notable example of black independent farming was at Davis Bend, the home of Jefferson Davis and his brother Joseph. On March 28, 1864, Gen. Lorenzo Thomas, ordered that the three Davis estates "Hurricane," "Palmyra," and "Big Black," were to be "reserved for military purposes, and will exclusively be devoted to the colonization, residence and support of Freedmen." The army supplied mules, wagons, and other farming implements. Black lessees were responsible for paying for items supplied by the government after raising a crop. Gen. Thomas' order also required that all white persons had to leave the area before January 1, 1865, and were only to return with the written permission from government officials. By the end of the 1864 planting season, and despite the destruction caused by the army worm, some 180 black lessees managed to produce nearly 130 bales of cotton and made enough profit from other crops to sustain their operations through the following spring.⁴

Early efforts by the Freedmen's Department to provide educational assistance to freedmen were limited. Lack of funds, inadequate schoolhouses, and the virtual absence of secure housing for teachers, reduced the Department's role to one of providing advice on the location of schools and where teachers were needed most. The Department relied, for the most part, on the work of army chaplains and teachers and missionaries from such groups as the American Missionary Association, the Western Freedmen's Aid Commission, the Society of Friends, the Board of Missions of the United Presbyterian Church, the Reformed Presbyterians, the United Brethren in Christ, the North Western Freedmen's Aid Commission, and the National Freedmen's Relief Association. To aid their work, the Department supplied teachers with rations, quarters, transportation, and in a few instances, places to teach. Convinced that freedmen education would be more efficient and effective if it were placed under the authority of the Freedmen's Department, General Thomas directed the general superintendent of freedmen to designate "Superintendents of Colored Schools" who were to be responsible for the location and opening of schools, collection of tuition, the occupation of houses and schoolrooms, and other matters relating to the education of freedmen. Industrial schools were established to teach black women how to properly care for their families.⁵

To assist freedmen in solemnizing slave marriages and to encourage family relations, General Thomas, under Special Order Number 15 (March 28, 1864), announced that "Any ordained Minister of the Gospel, accredited by the General Superintendent of Freedmen, is hereby authorized to solemnize the rite of marriage among Freedmen." Marriage certificates and licenses were produced, and Chaplains and Missionaries were issued detailed instructions on when and how they should be used. Ministers who performed freedmen marriages were required to send "Returns" to post superintendents containing such data as ages of the couples, the color of the couple's parents, the number of years the couple lived with another person, how separated, number of children, and number of children by previous marriage. Marriage registers were maintained to identify couples, resolve matters relating to inheritance, and to assist in the settlement of claims against the Federal Government, especially those involving deceased black soldiers. Many of the freedmen seeking to legalize their unions had lived in long-standing relations.⁶

ENDNOTES

1 Paul S. Peirce, *The Freedmen's Bureau: A Chapter in the History of Reconstruction* (University of Iowa: 1904), p. 9; See also Report of the General Superintendent, Freedmen Department of the Tennessee and State of Arkansas for 1864 (Memphis, Tennessee, 1865), pp. 94 – 95.

2 George R. Bentley, *A History of the Freedmen's Bureau* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944), pp. 22 – 23; see also Louis S. Gerteis, *From Contraband to Freedman: Federal Policy Toward Southern Blacks, 1861–1865* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, Inc. 1973), pp.155 – 156.

3 For a discussion of freedmen's affairs and abandoned lands in the Mississippi Valley, see Gerteis, *From Contraband to Freedman*, pp. 119 – 181.

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 169 – 181. See also, Report of the General Superintendent, Freedmen Department, pp. 40 – 41.

5 Report of the General Superintendent, Freedmen Department, pp. 80 – 87.

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 88 – 94.

Records Description

These records consist of volumes and unbound records. The volumes reproduced in this publication were originally arranged by the Freedmen's Bureau by type of record and thereunder by volume number. No numbers were assigned to series consisting of single volumes. Years later, all volumes were assigned numbers by the Adjutant General's Office (AGO) of the War Department after the records came into its custody. In this publication, AGO numbers are shown in parentheses to aid in identifying the volumes. The National Archives assigned the volume numbers that are not in parentheses. In some volumes, particularly in indexes and alphabetical headings of registers, there are blank numbered pages that have not been filmed.

The volumes consist of letters sent and received, special orders issued and received, registers of freedmen contracts and rations issued, school lists, registers of patients, and hospital reports. The unbound documents consist of letters and circulars issued and received, oaths of allegiance and evidence of amnesty, reports of operations and abandoned property, and reports of teachers and missionaries serving in the areas.

Some of the volumes contain more than one type of record, reflecting a common recording practice of clerks and staff officers of that period. In Series 1 (1.6), for example, the volumes of registers of rations issued to freedmen and planters also contain a few special orders issued by the provost marshal general of freedmen. Another example of additional series within volumes can be found in the volumes of registers of patients on Series 2 (2.2.3). Researchers should read carefully the records descriptions and arrangements in the table of contents to make full use of these documents.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

American South
Freedmen's Bureau
Reconstruction, U.S. history, 1865-1877
Slaves -- Emancipation

Container Listing

Series 1: Office of the General Superintendent of Freedmen

1.1: Letters Sent by John Eaton, General Superintendent of Contrabands

Scope and Contents: The single volume of letters sent by Col. John Eaton, general superintendent of contrabands, spans the period February–December 1863. Volume (74) is arranged chronologically. The letters dated February–August and December 1863 are from Memphis, TN, and those dated September–November 1863 are mostly from Vicksburg, MS. The volume has a name index.

1.1.1: [Volume \(74\), Feb.–Dec. 1863](#)

1.2: Orders and Circulars Issued and Received, Oct. 1863–May 1865

[Image\(s\)](#)

Scope and Contents: Unbound orders and circulars issued and received, October 1863–May 1865, are arranged chronologically. Many of the orders are from subordinate officers.

1.3: Miscellaneous Reports from Subordinate and Staff Officers, Dec. 1863–July 1865

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

Scope and Contents: Unbound miscellaneous reports from subordinate and staff officers, December 1863–July 1865, are arranged by type of report and thereunder chronologically. The records include operations reports, reports of expenditures, ration reports, reports of teachers and missionaries serving in the areas, and reports of permits granted at Lake Providence, LA.

1.4: Records on Renting and Leasing of Abandoned Property

Scope and Contents: Unbound records of renting and leasing of abandoned property for the period 1863–1865 are arranged by type of record. The records include reports of leased plantations giving the names of the lessees, the names of the plantations, the number of freedmen employed, and the number of acres under cultivation; lists or rolls of freedmen on plantations; reports of the examination of rolls of freedmen; bonds of planters; accounting records relating to payment of freedmen; applications to rent abandoned property; assignments of houses to officers of the Freedmen's Department; reports of rented property; reports of property occupied for military purposes; and reports of rents received.

1.4.1: [Records on Renting and Leasing of Abandoned Property \(Roll 2\), 1864–1865](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

1.4.2: Records on Renting and Leasing of Abandoned Property (Roll 3), 1864–1865

[Image\(s\)](#)[Image\(s\)](#)[Image\(s\)](#)

1.4.3: [Records on Renting and Leasing of Abandoned Property \(Roll 4\), 1864–1865](#)

1.5: Register of Contracts

Scope and Contents: The single-volume register of contracts, February–September 1865 (287), is arranged chronologically.

1.5.1: [Volume \(287\), Feb.–Sept. 1865](#)

1.6: Registers of Rations Issued to Freedmen and Planters

Scope and Contents: The two volumes of registers of rations issued to freedmen and planters, 1865–1866, 1 (286) and 2 (288), are arranged by "freedmen" and "planters." "Freedmen" entries are arranged chronologically, and "planters" entries are arranged alphabetically by initial letter of the surname of the planter. Volume 1 (286) also contains a few special orders issued by the provost marshal general of freedmen that are duplicated in volume 75 of the special orders issued (May 1864–June 1865) described below. The Bureau created the 1866 entries.

1.6.1: [Volume 1 \(286\), 1865–1866](#)

1.6.2: [Volume 2 \(288\), 1865](#)

1.7: Lists of Pupils in Schools at Vicksburg

Scope and Contents: The single volume of lists of pupils in schools at Vicksburg, January–May 1865 (289), is arranged chronologically. The amount of tuition paid is shown. The volume also contains a numerical listing of the "number of pupils in the colored schools of the District of Vicksburg," January–May 1865, arranged by month and thereunder by town.

1.7.1: [Volume \(289\), Jan.–May 1865](#)

1.8: Register of Freedmen

Scope and Contents: The single-volume register of freedmen is undated, unnumbered, and arranged alphabetically by initial letter of the surname of the freedman. The entries give the name, age, and former occupation of the freedman and name and residence of the former owner. The volume is marked "Virginia," but the listed freedmen are from Tennessee, Mississippi, and Alabama.

1.8.1: [Volume \(Unnumbered\), Undated](#)

1.9: Register of Rations Issued

Scope and Contents: The single-volume register of rations issued, January–October 1864 (76), is arranged by station and thereunder chronologically. The entries in the volume include the number of destitute or employed men, women, and children issued rations.

1.9.1: [Volume \(76\), Jan.–Oct. 1864](#)

1.10: Miscellaneous Records, 1863–1865

[Image\(s\)](#)

Scope and Contents: Unbound miscellaneous records, 1863–1865, are arranged by type of record. The records include a few letters received by John Eaton, trimonthly and weekly returns of officers and freedmen in the Freedmen's Department, oaths of allegiance, evidences of amnesty, and a few contracts.

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Series 2: Offices of Staff Officers

2.1: Assistant Superintendent of Freedmen (Provost Marshal of Freedmen)

2.1.1: Register of Letters Received

Notes: The single-volume register of letters received, January–June 1865 (73), is arranged chronologically and has a name index. Entries in the volume include endorsements.

2.1.1.1: [Volume \(73\), Jan.–June 1865](#)

2.1.2: [Letters Received, June–Nov. 1864](#)

Notes: Unbound letters received, June–November 1864, are arranged chronologically.

2.1.3: Special Orders Issued

Notes: The volume of special orders issued, May 1864–June 1865 (75), is arranged by year and thereunder in chronological order and numbered.

2.1.3.1: [Volume \(75\), May 1864–June 1865](#)

2.2: Medical Director and Inspector of Freedmen

2.2.1: Letters Sent and Orders Issued by the Medical Director

Notes: The single volume of letters sent and orders issued by the medical director, March 1864–June 1865 (296), is arranged chronologically.

2.2.1.1: [Volume \(296\), Mar. 1864–June 1865](#)

2.2.2: [Letters Received by the Medical Director, Feb. 1864–June 1865](#)

Notes: Unbound letters received by the medical director, February 1864–June 1865, are arranged alphabetically by initial letter of the surname of the correspondent.

2.2.3: Registers of Patients

Notes: The two volumes of registers of patients, 1 (292) and 2 (294), cover the period August 1863–July 1864. Volume 1 (292) is apparently a register of patients at Prentiss Hospital, Vicksburg, and Volume 2 (294) is a register of patients at Freedmen's Hospital Number 2 in Vicksburg. Both are arranged numerically. Volume 1 (292) also contains miscellaneous lists and morning reports dated December 1863–February 1864.

2.2.3.1: [Volume 1 \(292\), Aug. 1863–July 1864](#)

2.2.3.2: [Volume 2 \(294\), Jan. 1864](#)

2.2.4: Morning Reports of Freedmen's Hospitals in Department

Notes: The three volumes of morning reports of freedmen's hospitals, 1 (291), 2 (298), and 3 (299), cover the period February 1864–October 1865. Volume 1 (291) consists of reports (March 1864–May 1865) from a hospital at Milliken's Bend, LA, until May 13, 1864, when it was moved to Island 102 and was known as Freedmen's General Hospital Number 2, Branch 2. Volume 2 (298) seems to be reports of Freedmen's General Hospital, Vicksburg (February 1864–October 1865). Volume 3 (299) includes reports (March 1864–July 1865) from the following hospitals: Branch 1 at Goodrich's Landing, Branch 2 at Parks Camp, and Branch 6 at Davis Bend. They are arranged by time period and then by name of hospital.

2.2.4.1: [Volume 1 \(291\), Mar. 1864–May 1865](#)

2.2.4.2: [Volume 2 \(298\), Feb. 1864–Oct. 1865](#)

2.2.4.3: [Volume 3 \(299\), Mar. 1864–July 1865](#)

2.2.5: Register of Requisitions for Medicines and Supplies

Notes: The single-volume register of requisitions for medicines and supplies is dated 1863 (301). The volume is arranged for the most part alphabetically by name of supply. The entries appear to be items requisitioned at Prentiss Hospital. The volume also contains a list of names and prescriptions for the sick and wounded at various hospitals dated April–August 1865.

2.2.5.1: [Volume \(301\), 1863](#)

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