THE PILLAGED GRAVE
OF A
CIVIL WAR HERO

Colonel William M. Sky
1838 - 1864
C. S. A.
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The following account of Colonel William M. Shy has been reprinted from an article which appeared in the Tennessee Anthropological Association's journal, Spring 1980, Volume V, Number 1, titled TWO HISTORIC PERSONAGES.

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ABSTRACT

Occasionally unusual circumstances arise that call for the excavation of a historic burial. In 1977 the grave of Civil War hero Colonel W.M. Shy was disturbed. Upon examination a body was discovered that was thought to have been a recent murder victim. After a thorough examination, the body was identified as that of Colonel Shy.

Introduction

A short history leading up to the death of Colonel Shy has been included to give the reader an idea of the events preceding his death. The purpose of this paper is to show how professionals, trained in archaeology and related sciences, can assist law enforcement agencies in forensic cases that might otherwise go unsolved.
COLONEL WILLIAM M. SHY,
CIVIL WAR HERO

By
John T. Dowd

The Battle of Nashville

The Civil War was now in its waning months. The North’s superior industrial strength and never ending supply of manpower had taken their toll over the downtrodden Confederacy. Everything was going downhill for the Rebels. After the fall of Vicksburg the Union had concentrated practically all its force against the “other Rebel army,” the Army of Tennessee. This army was the last hope for the South. It was led by General John Bell Hood who at this time was a physically beaten and emotionally unstable man. He had lost the use of one arm at Gettysburg and lost a leg at the Battle of Chicamauga. He had to be literally strapped to his horse to travel. Hood’s condition well depicted the general condition of the Army of Tennessee at this stage of the war.

Hood had taken a severe “licking” at Franklin on November 30, 1864. He had ordered a full frontal assault against Union troops that were entrenched and behind stout breastworks. This suicidal attack was ordered by Hood mainly because he was angry for allowing this same Union force to slip through his fingers the day before, in a trap that had been poorly executed at Spring Hill. He was also a student of the “old school” method of fighting and thought the only honorable way to attack was head on with banners flying. Hood was said to have always associated valor with casualty lists. If this was true then he probably considered the Battle of Franklin a victory, for in one day’s fighting there, he suffered a staggering 6,202 casualties. Worse still was his loss in general officers. In no other battle did any army have so many generals killed and wounded. Five Confederate generals were killed outright; six were wounded, one of which soon died; and one was captured (Horn 1965:319).

At daybreak the next day Hood was once more ready to do battle but during the night the Union forces had stealthily left for nearby Nashville. Enraged, Hood hurried to Nashville and entrenched his troops in a threatening position on the hills south of the city.
Nashville at this time was probably the best supplied and most fortified city on the North American continent. Over 60,000 well-equipped and battle-ready Union troops were there while Hood had, at the most, 25,000 ill-supplied men, many of whom were sickly and barefooted. Morale was low after the bloody slaughter suffered at the hands of the Federals at Franklin. To consider laying siege to a fortress city such as this, with such an inferior force, shows Hood’s desperate state of mind at this time.

Hood stretched his thin lines to the limits, then patiently waited for his Union counterpart, General George H. Thomas, to make his move. On December 15, 1864, the weather broke and the Union forces attacked. The Rebel lines were so weak in many places that the first rush sent them retreating. There were a few spots of stubborn resistance but, as a whole, the outnumbered and decimated Confederates took a beating. As night fell they were giving ground all along their lines. The second day found the Confederate lines much shorter and back some distance from the day before. The extreme right was anchored by a formidable position known as Peach Orchard Hill and the left was anchored by Compton’s Hill. Compton’s Hill was meant to be the strongest point on the Confederate left but three things were against it from the beginning:

1). Its proximity to the surrounding enemy-held hills made it an easy target. Compton’s Hill was subjected to a heavy all-day crossfire from three directions. One Union battery, on a hill less than 400 yards to their front, fired over 500 rounds into Compton’s Hill on the second day of the battle. Confederate General Stevenson, who witnessed this bombardment, described it as “an artillery fire which I have never seen surpassed for heaviness, continuance, and accuracy” (Horn 1968:119).

2). It was opposite the Federal’s strongest point. Schofield was to the front and Wilson’s cavalry was on the Confederate’s left flank. Wilson’s command alone numbered over ten thousand, many with Spencer repeating rifles.

3). The placement of their breastworks was a major engineering blunder. Ector’s Texas Brigade had taken position on the hill late in the evening of the first day of the battle. In the darkness and confusion of the evening they placed the entrenchments so near the top of the hill and so far from the steep
brow, that the defenders would not be able to fire at the enemy at the very base of the hill. Famous Civil War historian Stanley F. Horn sums it up well when he says: “Thus by this error the steep face of the hill became rather more of an asset to the attackers than the defenders” (Horn 1968:124).

Ector’s Brigade was not to suffer the consequences for their poorly-placed entrenchments. The second day Ector’s Brigade was ordered to another position and was replaced by a brigade under Brigadier General Thomas Benton Smith. Smith’s brigade had not been active in the first day’s fighting. They had been sent on detached service with General Forrest to burn and destroy all of the railroad bridges and block-houses between Nashville and Murfreesboro (Official Records Vol. XLV Part 1, 1886:744). They had just arrived back from this service and on the first day of the battle were in reserve on the Confederate right, near the Nolensville Road. This command was made up of what was left of various different brigades. One of these was the 20th Tennessee under the command of Colonel William M. Shy.

The Hills Falls; Colonel Shy Is Killed

Despite all obstacles the afternoon of the second day found the battered Confederates still in possession of Compton’s Hill. Surrounded on three sides by thousands of Union soldiers, the marooned Rebels were receiving fire from all angles; many were shot in the back.

Around 4:00 P.M. it began to rain. The defenders had not slept. They were tired, cold, wet and hungry, but still they fought on. The rain was now coming down in sheets and it was getting much colder. They knew the enemy was massing at the foot of the hill for a full scale attack but could do nothing about it. Suddenly the massive Federal attack that had been building all day began. There were a few minutes of violent fighting and then it was all over. They came so fast with so many that the small force atop the hill was completely overwhelmed. The entire command of defenders was practically annihilated, only 65 individuals escaped (Horn 1968:127). Colonel William M. Shy and nearly half of his men were killed while bravely defending this hill (later this hill was to be called Shy’s Hill as a tribute for his gallant stand and heroic death).
When this strategic hill fell a sea of blue uniforms flooded the Confederate left and a complete rout was started. For the first time ever the Army of Tennessee ran. As darkness fell the Confederate army was in a full scale disorderly retreat. The "other Rebel army" of the Confederacy was no longer a threat to the Union.

The Battle of Nashville was over. The following day a local newspaper listed the following casualties:
The two days fight sums up about as follows, according to our estimates made; Federal loss, killed and wounded, four thousand.
Rebel loss, killed and wounded, three thousand, over three thousand prisoners, and thirty guns.

Colonel William M. Shy (1838-1864)

After the battle, Compton's (Shy's) Hill was covered with the dead and wounded from both sides. Among them was Colonel Shy; handsome in life, heroic in death. Dead at the age of 26, a minnie ball in his brain. He had been shot at close range, "his head being powder-burned around the hole made by the shot" (Marshall 1912:522).

William Mabry Shy was born in Bourbon County, Kentucky on May 24, 1838. He was one of ten children. His older brother, James Louis Shy, organized the Perry Guards which became Company G of the 20th Tennessee Infantry.

William, or "Bill," as he was popularly known by his comrades, enlisted as a private in Company H of the 20th Tennessee on its inception. He was appointed to the regimental color guards. In the spring, after the Battle of Fishing Creek, he was elected a Lieutenant. He was known to have been a man of quiet disposition, a man of deeds rather than words. He was modest and gentle; always calm and collected in battle. These attributes made him stand out among his men as a leader and at the reorganization of his regiment in front of Corinth, Mississippi, in May, 1862 he was made Captain of Company H. He was promoted to Major of the regiment in 1863 and the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel soon followed, and when Colonel Thomas B. Smith received his commission of
Brigadier General, Lt-Col. William M. Shy became Colonel of the Twentieth Tennessee (McMurray 1976:397-399). The tombstone on Colonel Shy’s grave reads Lt.-Col. but the family might not have known of his latest promotion."

Word of Colonel Shy’s death reached his family. Being unmarried the unpleasant chore of recovering his body fell to his parents. Colonel Shy’s mother and father were divided in their sympathies toward the war; she siding with the South and he with the North. These differences were most likely put aside when the tragic news of their son’s death reached them.

The area around the Shy farm was still in a turmoil due to the recent Battle of Franklin and this confusion was greatly magnified by the retreat and pursuit of the fleeing Confederate army after the Battle of Nashville. For a civilian to obtain permission to travel the busy and cluttered roads into Nashville was near impossible. Fearing to cross through the Union lines the Shy family solicited the help of their close friend, Dr. Daniel B. Cliffe, who held an influential position in the community. Dr. Cliffe had come from Ohio as a boy of thirteen to live with an uncle in Franklin. When war broke out in 1861, Dr. Cliffe served in the Twentieth Tennessee Regiment as General Felix Zollicoffer’s Brigade Surgeon. After the Battle of Fishing Creek he was captured because he was unwilling to desert the Confederate wounded in the rear of the battlefield. Dr. Cliffe was allowed to embalm the body of General Zollicoffer, who had been killed in this battle. He accompanied General Zollicoffer’s body to Louisville where he was detained for a few days while the General’s body went on to Nashville. After Dr. Cliffe returned home he soon became disenchanted with the Confederacy and supported the Union cause. However, he often used his influence whenever possible, to intervene between the Union army and the townspeople (Bowman 1971:106).

Dr. Cliffe made arrangements for his wife, Mrs. Virginia Cliffe, to go to Nashville to recover Colonel Shy’s body. Why he sent his wife instead of going himself is not entirely clear. He might have been unable to leave at this time due to the fact that he was urgently needed to tend the many wounded at Franklin.

The following information was furnished by Mrs. W.J. Montana of Silsbee, Texas who is “family historian” for the Shy family. It is a quote from her great aunt, Virginia Oliver Bell (who was named for Virginia Cliffe, Dr. Cliffe’s wife):

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When word came that he (Shy) had been killed, his family was not allowed to go through the Yankee lines to claim his body. A family friend, Virginia Whitfield Cliffe, wife of Dr. Dan Cliffe, took a spring wagon with a negro man to drive and brought his body home. This privilege was accorded her because of Dr. Cliffe’s connection in the north. Mrs. Cliffe found him without a stitch of clothing on, shot through the center of his forehead and impaled on a tree with a bayonet. He was buried in the family graveyard, and the marker still (1954) stands, a white shaft in the Buford’s cow lot (Montana 1979).

(Mrs. Montana further states that the bayonet and Colonel Shy’s canteen are still in the possession of the family.)

Colonel Shy was brought home and laid to rest in the family cemetery at Two Rivers, near Franklin, Tennessee. Since Dr. Cliffe was a good friend of the family and was skilled in the art of embalming, he very likely embalmed the body of Colonel Shy, but since no written proof of this has been found by the author this is only speculation.

There is another story concerning Colonel Shy’s body that appears to differ from the story in the Shy family records. At the time of the battle the Felix Compton home was the nearest house to Compton’s (Shy’s) Hill. Felix Compton’s daughter, Mrs. Emily C. Thompson of Birmingham, wrote the following statement for the Confederate Veteran magazine concerning her memories on the matter. It was published in 1912 and states in part:

Colonel Shy fell on the afternoon of December 16. His body, with many others of both armies, was laid upon the front gallery of our home. Shortly afterwards a Federal guard called my attention to Colonel Shy. Then turning back from the face a gray blanket which some kind friend had placed over the body, I saw him as he lay so peacefully there with that cruel hole in his brow (Thompson 1912:522).
The Compton Home where Col. Shy's body was brought after the battle.

This account appears to contradict the other but it is still possible that both stories are true. After the battle the Compton house was used as a hospital. Felix Compton's daughter tells of one hundred and fifty dead and wounded being in their home at one time (Thompson 1912:523). Mrs. Cliffe could very well have found Colonel Shy's body as stated. The trip from Franklin, in the wintertime by wagon, would have been tiring for Mrs. Cliffe. The most logical place for her to go to rest and freshen up before the return trip would be the Compton house. She may have even stayed the night. Perhaps while there, the body was wrapped in a blanket and laid on the porch. This could have been how Compton's daughter might have seen the body. The reader must bear in mind that the author is only giving a possible explanation for both stories. Both accounts are from reliable sources and cannot be ignored.
If not for his heroic stand and tragic death at the Battle of Nashville, Colonel Shy would be just another forgotten name on the long list of casualties suffered in this senseless battle. When the Battle of Nashville was fought the 20th Tennessee Infantry Regiment was only a mere remnant of what it had been at the beginning of the war. The 20th Tennessee was organized in Middle Tennessee on June 12, 1861. It originally contained 880 men but when paroled at the end of the war on May 1, 1865 at Greensboro, North Carolina, it listed only 34 men. The 20th Tennessee had fought from one end of the Confederacy to the other. Their record shows them engaged in such famous battles as: Fishing Creek, Shiloh, Port Hudson, Murfreesboro, Hoover Gap, Missionary Ridge, Atlanta, Franklin and Nashville (Tennessean's in the Civil War, 1964: 217-219).

Colonel Shy had gallantly commanded his men through all these battles only to be killed in the very last one. If not remembered in history for these other battles he is, nevertheless, one of the most remembered names, with the possible exception of Generals Hood and Thomas, associated with the Battle of Nashville.
Vandalism of the Grave

The grave of Colonel Shy lay peacefully behind the beautiful antebellum home on Del Rio Pike with little notoriety for over a hundred years. Then, on Christmas Eve of 1977, local police officers were called to investigate a report that the grave had been disturbed. Upon arriving, the deputies discovered a headless body on top of the casket and thought someone had placed a murdered man in Colonel Shy's burial plot. Local authorities could not match the headless corpse with any of their missing persons reports. Wild theories abounded, some even speculated that the head might have been removed to hamper identification of the body. Dr. William M. Bass, Forensic Anthropologist and Head of the Anthropology Department, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, was called in to aid with the removal and identification of this unknown body. If one had followed the story in the newspapers it would have read much like a condensed version of a Damon Runyon murder mystery. Excerpts from some of these newspaper articles are as follows:
Col. Shy's grave as first seen by Dr. Bass.

To aid in the investigation the grave is reopened —

And the heavy metal casket removed.
Dec. 21, 1977 Franklin. Williamson County authorities investigating the tampering of a Civil War soldier's grave discovered that a second body had been placed in the grave probably within the last year. The body is an adult male, clad in what appeared to be a tuxedo. The body of Colonel Shy, in its steel vault, was undisturbed, officials said (Nashville Banner, Dec. 31, 1977).

Dr. Bass arrived and a more thorough search turned up the head and other missing body parts. Four days later this article appeared:

Jan 4, 1978. The body was found in a sitting position. Bass estimated the body to have been dead two to six months (Nashville Banner, Jan. 4, 1978).

A couple of days later the plot thickened:

Jan. 6, 1978. The corpse apparently died from a blow to the head. Bass said that the victim was a white male with brown hair, approximately 5'11", 175 pounds and was from 26 to 29 years old. Bass determined that the man had been dead from six to 12 months. "It looks like we have a homicide on our hands", said Chief Deputy Fleming Williams (Nashville Banner, Jan. 6, 1978).

By January 9th the truth was beginning to become evident. By now Dr. Bass had taken the remains back to his laboratory in Knoxville for a more thorough examination. It was now becoming obvious to the investigators that the corpse was very likely that of Colonel Shy. Dr. Bass stated:

Jan. 9, 1978. "I got the age, sex, race, height and weight right but I was off on the time of death by 113 years." (Nashville Banner, Jan. 9, 1978).

The article goes on to explain that Dr. Bass does not normally deal with embalmed bodies. This corpse had the appearance of one that had been dead but a few months. Some of the flesh was still pink and there were remnants of brain and intestinal matter found in the body.

By January 13th, all of the evidence had been examined and most of the tests returned. The three-week-old mystery about the body, believed at first to be that of a recently murdered man, was solved to everyone's satisfaction. The Nashville Tennessean by-lined:
ITS OFFICIAL, SHY IN OWN GRAVE

It went on to quote Williamson County Chief Deputy Fleming Williams as saying: “Our conclusion is that whoever dug down into Colonel Shy’s grave found the cast iron coffin, broke through the top of it and pulled Colonel Shy out, then stripped him of everything of value” (Dawson 1978:13).

Scientific Evidence Collaborating Colonel Shy’s Identity
Because the body was in such an excellent state of preservation no one involved with the case even considered that it might be Colonel Shy, who had been buried some 113 years. Another problem causing the confusion was the fact that the public and press were demanding an immediate answer to the riddle without allowing Dr. Bass sufficient time to conduct his examination in a slow, scientific manner. With more time, and under proper laboratory conditions, evidence was soon gained that proved that this was definitely not a recent murder victim but was more likely the body of Colonel William M. Shy.

(Pertinent information was drawn from the official report submitted by Dr. Bass to the concerned law enforcement and state medical officials and is shown here in the following condensed form.)

The following determinations were made after the skeleton was examined by Dr. Bass in Knoxville (Bass n.d.):

SEX: Male
Based on both morphological observations and anthropometric measurements of the cranial and post cranial skeleton (Bass 1971). The pelvis is that of a male, the skull has brow ridges and large mastoid processes, and, to quote Dr. Bass: “The squarest chin I have ever observed on a mandible” (FIGURE 1).
AGE: 26-29  
The age estimation is based on closure of all the epiphyses and morphological changes on the pubic symphysis (McKern and Stewart 1957). (Shy was 26 when killed.)

RACE: White  
(Caucasoid). Based on morphological features of the skull and the association of a large amount of light brown hair with the body (skull) which is also indicative of a white or Caucasian individual.

STATURE:  
Mean 5'10½" or 179.21 Cm. Based on measurements of the left femur (490 mm) using the formula (Trotter and Gleser 1958) for white males.

CAUSE OF DEATH:  
Blow to the left forehead, just to the left of the midline. The entrance wound is approximately 17 X 24 millimeters in diameter (FIGURE 1). An exit wound measuring 49 X 60 millimeters occurs in the right parietal (FIGURE 2). The projectile traveled in a downward path through the skull before exiting. Death would have been instantaneous. The force of the projectile was so great that the skull was fractured into seventeen pieces; both mastoid processes at the base of the skull were split.

LENGTH OF TIME SINCE DEATH:  
113 years. Color and warpage of the skull indicated that it had been buried for many years.

DENTITION:  
No dental work (cavities but no fillings; normal condition for this period of time).
FIGURE 1. Frontal view showing entrance wound.

FIGURE 2. Posterior or occipital view showing exit wound.
Other evidence was also now in from various laboratories scattered around the state that further substantiated that the mysterious body was most likely that of the Civil War hero. Some of the more important evidence is listed as follows:

(1). The body was dressed in a white silk shirt, trousers that partially laced up the sides and black square-toed boots (popular during the Civil War).

(2). The State's Toxicology lab showed no modern synthetic materials in these clothes.

(3). There was embalming fluid (arsenic) present in the flesh.

All concerned parties were now in agreement that instead of having a murder case on their hands they had instead a morbid case of grave-robbing.

Reburial Ceremony

Colonel Shy's remains were gathered from labs across the state and plans were made for his reburial. Shy had not married and had no living descendants but other relatives were contacted and told of the upcoming ceremony. Mrs. W.J. Montana, a great-great-granddaughter of Colonel Shy's brother came to Franklin from Silsbee, Texas to represent the family. The following is a newspaper article, in part, that describes the ceremony:

On Monday the 13th day of February, 1978, a cold rain was falling. The weather was probably much like as it was at the original burial, 114 years ago. The service was brief. There was no drumroll or rifle salute. Six civilian-dressed members of the Sons of the Confederacy carried the gray coffin to its resting place. Members of the D.A.C. were also on hand with Confederate flags, and one was placed on the grave. The Rev. Charles Fulton of St. Paul's Episcopal Church said a short eulogy over the Shy coffin, donated by the Franklin Memorial Chapel. Mrs. Montana praised Franklin's historical community for its warmth and sincerity. She remarked, "I guess he could have been put back in the ground in a pine box, but the people of Franklin gave a very warm ceremony." (Lyons 1978)
The Cast Iron Coffin

The cast iron coffin that had originally contained the body of Colonel Shy had been severely damaged by the graverobbers (FIGURE 3). Mrs. Montana graciously donated the cast iron coffin to the Carter House, a prominent home that was at the center of the heaviest fighting during the Battle of Franklin. The Carter House is now run by the Association for the Preservation of Tennessee Antiquities and has been turned into a famous Civil War Museum.

FIGURE 3. Section of cast iron coffin that was broken by vandals to remove the body.
Cast iron coffins were very expensive and only people of some prominence could have afforded them; most people in 1864 were buried in pine boxes.

This cast iron coffin weighs almost 300 pounds and has a glass plate over the face area for viewing the remains. It has an oval iron plate that fits over the glass just before burial. The coffin was sealed and bolted with steel screws and has four handles on each side (FIGURE 4). It had been painted white when originally used. The coffin, having been beneath the ground for 114 years, was heavily covered with rust. To prepare the coffin for exhibit it was first dipped in a vat of paint remover to remove the splotches of white paint and rust. Then a removal process, recommended by the Smithsonian Institution, was used which consisted of repeated chemical saturation, wrapping it overnight in plastic, and then steel wooling. Emery wheels on drills were used on the heaviest encrustations. The process was repeated until a “smooth” iron was reached. The final step was to encase the coffin in a plexiglass display case.

There is an old saying that “something good comes out of everything.” If so, then the “something good” that came out of the vandalism of Colonel Shy’s grave has to be that now there is this most interesting artifact (the coffin) from the Civil War period displayed for the public to view.

FIGURE 4. Colonel Shy’s cast iron coffin.
The furor raised over the vandalism of Colonel Shy's grave was short lived. The general public has a fickle mind; what holds their interest today is often erased by tomorrow's headlines. Colonel Shy has once more been forgotten. Re-buried with dignity, the remains once more peacefully rest in the intended grave under the original headstone which reads:

Lt. Col. W.M. Shy
20th Tenn.
Infantry C.S.A.
Born May 24, 1838
Killed at Battle of
Nashville
Dec. 16, 1864
Conclusions

The person, or persons, responsible for vandalizing the grave of Colonel Shy was never apprehended. Many of the local residents are sure that they know the identity of the vandal but this does not necessarily mean that they are correct. The vandal may have escaped punishment from the law but he will probably have nightmares for the rest of his life over this gruesome deed.

The statement that Colonel Shy's body was found naked and impaled to a tree with a bayonet will possibly bring about much comment. This could explain his not being buried in his uniform but his uniform, most likely, was in too tattered a condition for it to be used as a burial suit anyway. The part about him being "impaled to a tree with a bayonet" will probably disturb some Civil War buffs because it suggests undue brutality by the Federal troops. If indeed he was impaled to a tree it could have been done by the looters and scavengers that were always attracted after a battle. There is also the possibility that it was done by the attacking forces. The Federals paid heavily in taking this hill. One historian states:

It has been said that in the taking of Shy's Hill Minnesota's losses were the greatest suffered by the state in any Civil War engagement — 302 men killed, wounded or missing, from the Fifth, Seventh, Ninth and 10th Minnesota Regiments (Huddleston:1964, Part IV, p.39).

Chivalry had worn thin this late in the war. Perhaps some of the troops, angered at seeing so many of their comrades fall, did perform this shocking deed. There is one case of documented brutality connected with the fall of Shy's Hill. Colonel Shy's commanding officer, Brigadier-General Thomas Benton Smith was captured during this engagement. While being marched to the rear under guard he was struck over the head three times with a saber by a Federal officer. At first the wounds were thought fatal but he survived. Some years later the effects of this injury to his brain caused him to be committed to the Tennessee State Hospital for the insane, where he remained until his death. (Horn 1968:141).

The Science of Forensics has, in recent years, become recognized as an aid to law enforcement. If this case of vandalism had not been properly investigated by a competent Forensic Anthropologist such as Dr. Bass, the truth might have never been learned and the law would still be looking for a murderer in Williamson County.
Acknowledgements

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The author has tried to assemble this work in a readable and interesting manner, using as a basis historical fact laced with things as they came about. This story was built around the work of Dr. William M. Bass. Again, I would like to thank Dr. Bass for allowing me the use of his data.
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