

An Introduction to *Rare Titles* from the *American Antiquarian Society*, 1820–1922

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Various source media, *Women's Studies Archive: Rare Titles from the American Antiquarian Society, 1820-1922*



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By Elizabeth Watts Pope, Curator of Books and Digital Collections at the American Antiquarian Society

Female authors publishing in the nineteenth century were once derided as a “damned mob of scribbling women” by a famous male novelist.¹ *Rare Titles from the American Antiquarian Society, 1820–1922* enables students and scholars to discover exactly what this mob of women were scribbling, and it turns out the answer is a little bit of everything.

One million pages from publications written, edited or translated by nineteenth-century women in the United States are now available digitally, many for the first time. A wide spectrum of subjects and genres are represented within the narrow focus of published works written exclusively by women, whether as authors, co-authors, editors, or translators. Full-text searching and sophisticated analysis tools will promote new avenues of research, enabling women’s writing to be studied in context with other work by women.

Thousands of titles by women were culled from the holdings of the American Antiquarian Society (AAS) located in Worcester, Massachusetts. AAS has the most comprehensive library in the world of the earliest printing done in the United States, in part because the Society has been collecting such material since its founding in 1812 by a retired printer. For more than two

centuries, AAS librarians, curators, members, and friends have been actively collecting *anything* printed in early America, including the most mundane printed items like lottery tickets and trashy novels. Casting such a vast net has necessarily caught thousands of works by women that were often overlooked in other collections. These range from leather-bound first editions of literary work that might have graced a gentleman’s library to cheap pamphlets of tawdry song lyrics that would have been hawked on the street corner. Publications once considered unimportant or even throwaways when they were first printed are often the most sought-after sources for today’s scholarship; they are more likely to be by underrepresented groups and they are less likely to have been saved and made available in libraries given continuing inequities in publishing, collecting and librarianship. Each survivor is thus made more valuable.

About the Authors

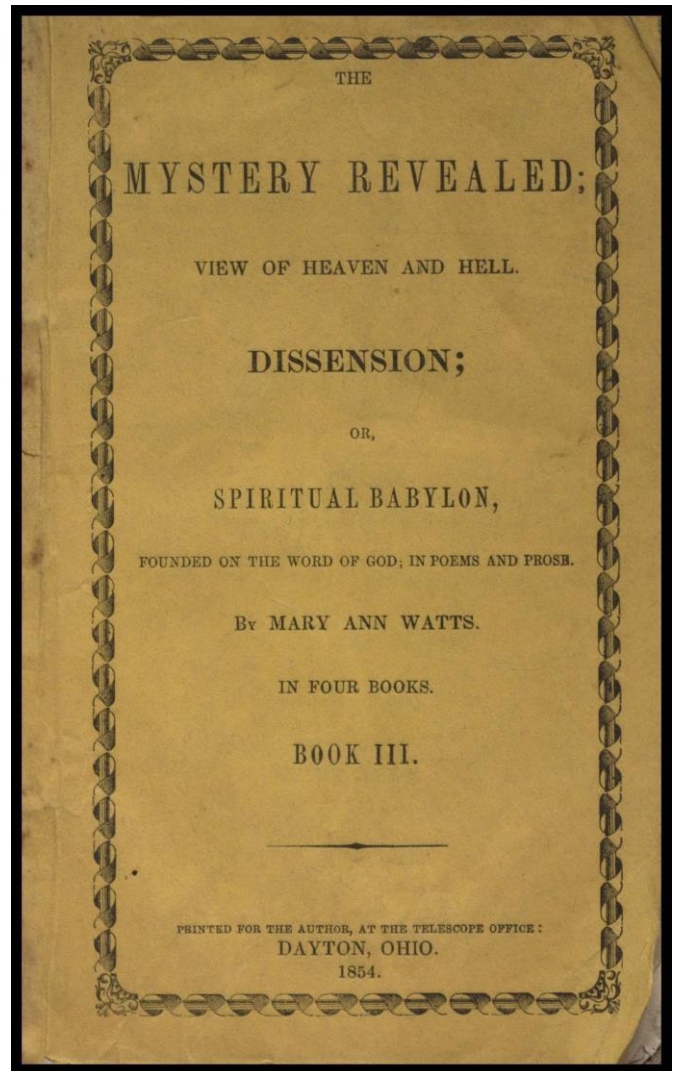
Over 2,000 individual female authors have at least one work represented in *Rare Titles from the American Antiquarian Society, 1820–1922*. Their demographics vary widely, encompassing different class backgrounds, ages, marital statuses, occupations, etc. The authors hailed from all over the country. Their books and pamphlets were originally published all over the United States from Portland, Maine, to Portland, Oregon. A few were even published outside the US. Some of the authors represented were women’s rights pioneers; others were anti-suffrage activists. Some were women of color; others were blatantly racist. Some female

¹ So said Nathaniel Hawthorne in a letter to his publisher in 1855, reproduced in Caroline Ticknor,

Hawthorne and His Publisher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), 141.

authors went to their small town's newspaper office and paid for the printing of perhaps a hundred copies of a poem they wrote, like Mary Ann Watts in Dayton, Ohio, whose work *The Mystery Revealed* (1854) only survives in the one copy at AAS. Others were famous authors with lucrative contracts with big-city publishing firms who sold hundreds of thousands of their books in just a few months, like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853). Just as it is impossible to describe a single universal American experience, the diversity of works by women demonstrates that there is no universal female experience either.

Though few in number, published works by Black, Indigenous and Latina authors are identified and foregrounded in *Rare Titles from the American Antiquarian Society, 1820–1922*. Women of color were largely excluded from print publication in the United States in the nineteenth century. The odds were stacked against them in acquiring literacy or access to the predominately white networks of printers, publishers, and editors. However, several women of color created a place for themselves in print, authoring books in a range of genres from biographies to novels to fortune-telling manuals. A woman who could not write herself, such as Sojourner Truth, might recruit a white amanuensis to co-author her story. Or a female author might be published by her family's publishing company, which she may also help to run. Mrs. M.J. Randolph, a self-described "Indian doctress" also of African descent, wrote *Human Love in Health and in Disease* (1860) with her husband and he was listed as the publisher on the title page of *Human Love*; however, the following year Mary Jane Randolph herself was listed as the publisher



Watts, Mary Ann. *The mystery revealed; view of heaven and hell: Dissension; or, Spiritual Babylon, founded on the word of God; in poems and prose: By Mary Ann Watts; In four books. Book III*. Printed for the Author, at the Telescope Office: Dayton, Ohio, 1854. *Women's Studies Archive*.

of one of her husband's books and in later years their books were described as published by the Randolph Publishing Company.

Each individual author has a story and a life and a corpus of work beyond her writing that can also be investigated. Yet discovering information about the lives of nineteenth-century American women authors, beyond a few famous examples, can be quite difficult. Most of the women whose work is included in *Rare Titles from the American Antiquarian Society, 1820–*

1922 would not have considered themselves “authors,” per se. Many wrote only one book and the majority have passed unheralded into history.

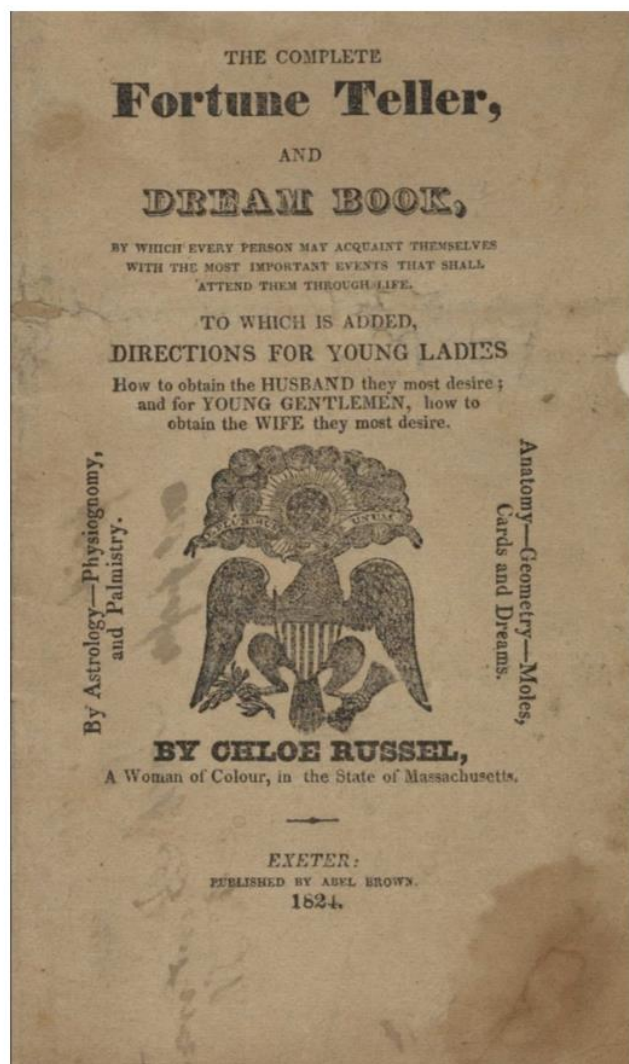
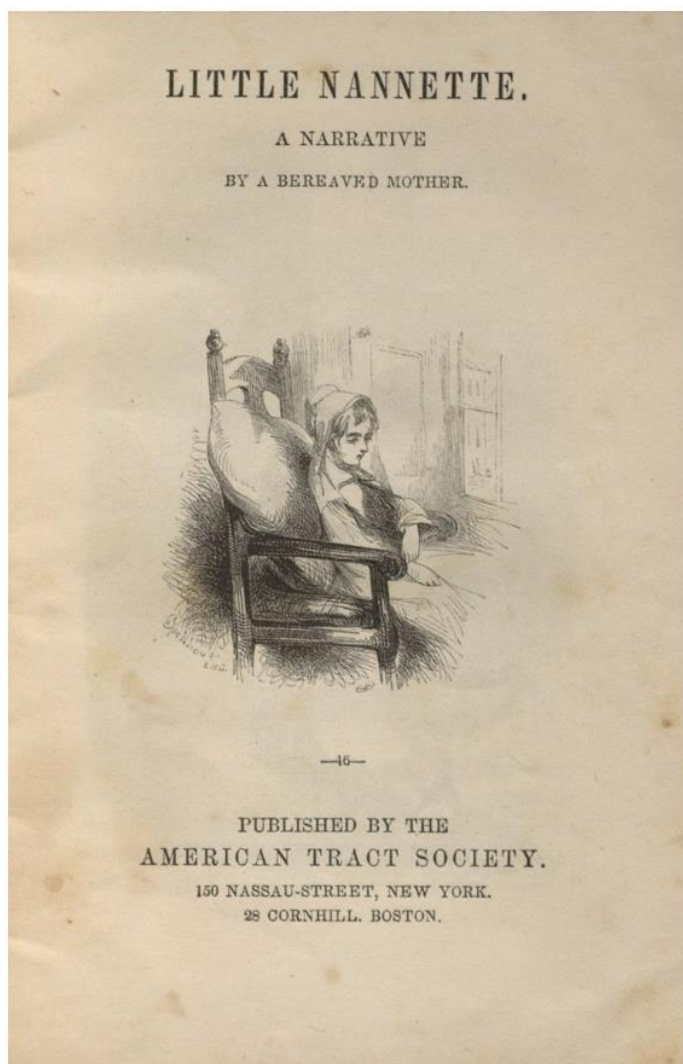
One way the American Antiquarian Society has worked to combat this erasure is through what is called “authority work.” Curators and catalogers at the AAS have made a concerted effort for decades to identify as many female authors as possible and create an authorized heading (a standardized version of the author’s name plus additional details) for each author. This information is kept in an official registry known as the name authority file that libraries agree to use to make it easier for researchers to find all an author’s works by using the same version of her name in all catalog records. In effect, AAS is part of the authority structure that determines who is officially considered an author in the United States by “authorizing” an individual’s name and adding it to the name authority file kept by the Library of Congress. Adding women to this authority file is frequently more difficult than adding male authors as often less is known about women authors’ lives.

To create an authorized heading, enough information needs to be gathered to distinguish an individual author from any others. The usual difficulties of identifying non-famous people hundreds of years after their death are compounded for female authors. Women’s public presence was frequently subsumed under the men in their lives. Women were less likely to appear under their own names or as heads of households in the places catalogers usually look for additional biographical information, such as city directories, census records, and newspapers. Their names often changed after

marriage or even multiple marriages. A woman may have published under her husband’s name – such as Mrs. John H. Kinzie – but may be listed in public records under her birth name or use different names in different decades of her life.

Not even the birth or death dates are known for some female authors, in which case what is supplied are the years they were actively writing. The author of two editions of a tailoring manual published in Vermont is described only as “Jones, Amanda, active 1822-1823” in the accompanying information about the context of publication taken from AAS’s online catalog record. That authorized heading contains all that is known for certain: Amanda Jones’s name as it appeared on both title pages and the years the two editions of her work were published.

For other female authors, even their name is unknown. A woman may have published anonymously or under a pseudonym or sometimes a haze of uncertainty hovers over her authorship. A number of authors are described only as “An American Lady” or even in one instance “Bereaved Mother.” Reading the prefaces of such volumes reveals why a woman might choose to keep her name out of print: it could be considered immodest or not lady-like for a woman to put her work out into the world. However, men also published anonymously and a self-deprecating preface was a convention many followed, so it is unclear how significant a role gender played in anonymous or pseudonymous publication.



Left: Bereaved Mother, et al. *Little Nannette: A narrative: by a bereaved mother*. 46. Illustrated by Frederick M. Coffin, Published by the American Tract Society. 150 Nassau Street, New York. 28 Cornhill, Boston, [Between 1858 and 1865?]. *Women's Studies Archive*.

Right: Russel, Chloe. *The complete fortune teller, and dream book ... directions for young ladies how to obtain the husband they most desire; and for young gentlemen, how to obtain the wife they most desire: By astrology--physiognomy, and palmistry. Anatomy--geometry--moles, cards and dreams: By Chloe Russel, a woman of colour, in the state of Massachusetts*. Published by Abel Brown, 1824. *Women's Studies Archive*.

In other instances, it is unclear how much the individual whose name is attached to a book was involved in its creation. *The Complete Fortune Teller, and Dream Book* (1824) is described on the title page as being by "Chloe Russel, a woman of colour, in the state of Massachusetts." Scholars have confirmed details about the purported author's life, but it is uncertain how

active a role she may have played in authoring the book or whether her name was used for marketing reasons.² *Rare Titles from the American Antiquarian Society, 1820–1922* has erred on the side of inclusion.

² Gardner, Eric. "'The Complete Fortune Teller and Dream Book': An Antebellum Text "By Chloe Russel, a Woman of

Colour,'" *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 78, No. 2 (June 2005): 259-288.

About their Writing

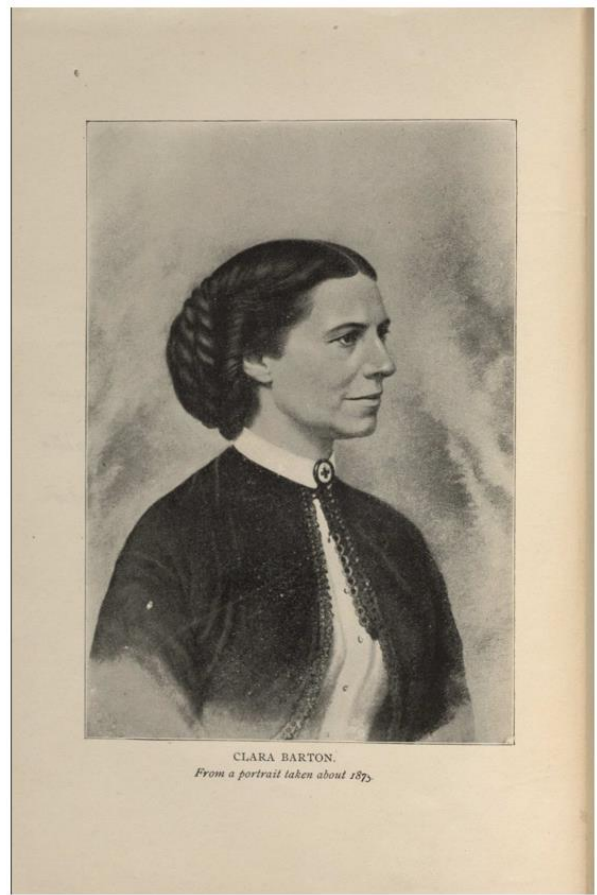
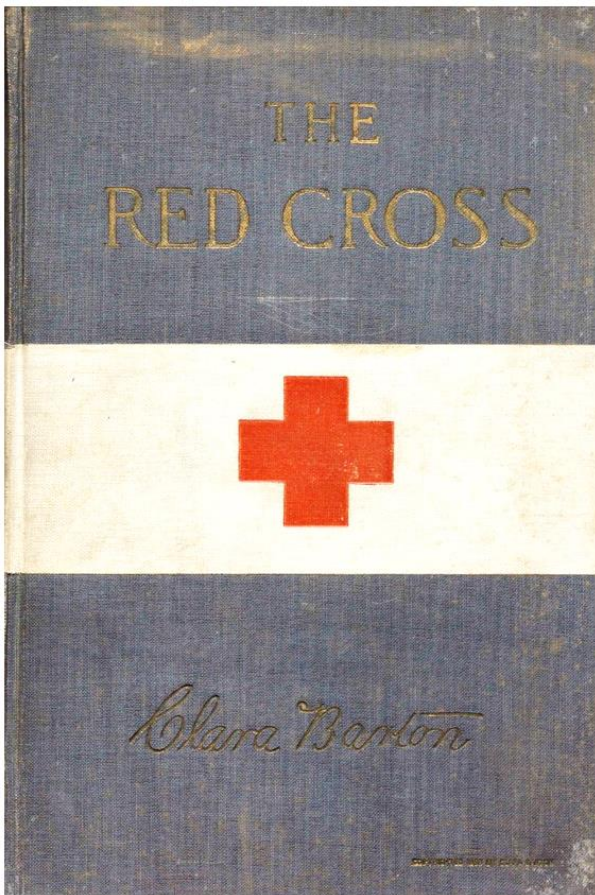
Gathering all kinds of women's writing in one place creates a resource more expansive and inclusive than just "A Library of Famous Fiction" (although it does include an anthology with that exact title, which includes only one work by a female author besides the introduction by Harriet Beecher Stowe). Hundreds of books of poetry are included, but so too are hundreds of religious works and children's books. Some publications even document in print what would originally have been oral performances, and thus inaccessible to today's researcher. These include sermons preached by women such as Priscilla Cadwallader or Anna Braithwaite or songs transcribed from memory in *Spirituelles* (1873) by Christine Rutledge, a member of a group of former slaves travelling and giving concerts to raise funds for the support of freedmen's schools in South Carolina. While the majority of works by women could be considered related to the domestic sphere – such as cookbooks, novels, and books for children – nineteenth-century female authors did not limit themselves to writing about and for the home. Women wrote about political history (see *Anglo-American Isthmian Diplomacy, 1815-1915* by Mary Wilhelmine Williams), genealogy and local history (see *Five Typical Scotch Irish Families of the Cumberland Valley* by Mary Craig Shoemaker), medicine (see works by Clara Barton on the Red Cross), and more.

Not only did nineteenth-century women's writing cover a wide variety of genres and subjects, there was also more women's writing being published than there ever had been in history. One reason was because there was more printing being done overall. The industrial

revolution had transformed nineteenth-century printing, as it had so many other parts of life, but there were also social and cultural shifts that encouraged more women to take on the role of author.

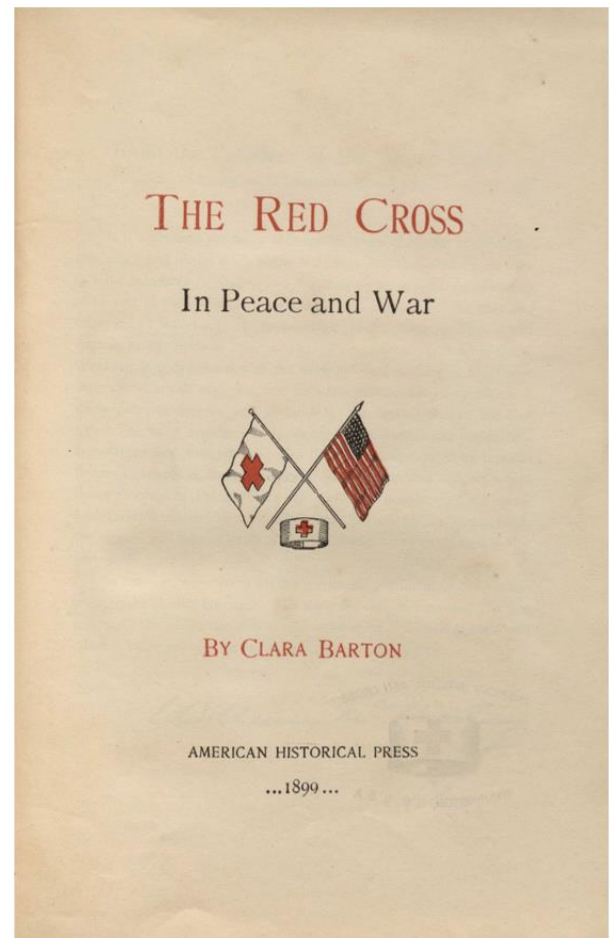
By the 1820s, new forms of print technology were taking hold in the United States that made the printing process easier and less expensive. Innovations included machine-made paper instead of hand-laid paper, steam-powered iron rotary presses rather than wooden presses operated by hand, and stereotyping which allowed a replica of one setting of type to be reused rather than having to be reset by hand each time more copies were wanted. If books were cheaper to print, publishers were more likely to take the chance on a book they were not sure would make money because at least they had not invested as much in it upfront as they would have had to do in the eighteenth century. This lowered the barrier to entry and women authors were among those who took advantage of the opportunities provided by more and cheaper printing.

Also in the nineteenth century the United States had an expanding population clamoring for new printed content to read. Demands for universal education and one of the highest literacy rates in the world made the United States a rich market for print publications. Cheap works like sensational fiction or children's books were less prestigious, but they could provide an entry point for female authors. Publishers began to see women authors as commercially viable, both because their works proved popular with audiences and because publishers were able to pay female authors less than male authors given that women's labor was less valued.



*Rev. William E. Barton
is prayed to accept this volume
with the high esteem and cordial
regard of the author and compiler.
Clara Barton*

*What thy heart wishes most,
that my heart asks for thee.
C. B.*



Barton, Clara. *The Red Cross in peace and war*: by Clara Barton. American Historical Press, 1899. Women's Studies Archive.

Despite the increasing volume of books and pamphlets written by nineteenth-century women, they have been subject to varying levels of neglect and dismissal. Like compounding interest, there is also power in compounding inequity. Works written by nineteenth-century women often were less valued than those by men in their own time. This devaluation impacted what was considered worth publishing, saving, studying, collecting, etc. Inequity has continued to compound throughout history with women's works being less likely to be saved in official prestigious archives, less likely to be included in "standard" bibliographies, less likely to be part of digitization projects. Each of these gaps and hurdles are exponentially compounded for women of color.

Much systematic work remains to be done and *Rare Titles from the American Antiquarian Society, 1820–1922* is one step in that direction. It was made possible because AAS curators and catalogers have been working for decades to enable researchers to locate works written by women in the Society's collections. Recently, in order to identify as many female authors as possible, AAS staff used census data on the most popular names for women during each decade of the nineteenth century. Catalogers then searched for all the AAS catalog records that included one of those popular women's names as an author. Each work was then checked to see if it could be determined to have been written, edited, translated, or co-authored by a woman. In the AAS catalog, all such titles published before 1900 are designated with "women as authors" as a local subject heading, meaning it is not nationally authorized by the Library of Congress. That information was used to identify titles for inclusion in *Rare Titles from the*

American Antiquarian Society, 1820–1922, and now their full texts can now be searched in one place in context with each other.

Women's words have not always been taken as seriously as men's, despite women making up roughly half of the population. *Rare Titles from the American Antiquarian Society, 1820–1922* takes women's published words seriously and presents them in conversation with those of other women to enable new areas of study. After all, you cannot study something until you can see it.

Further information

For more information about *Women's Studies Archive*, go to:
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CITATION

Watts Pope, Elizabeth: “An Introduction to *Rare Titles from the American Antiquarian Society, 1820–1922*” Cengage Learning (EMEA) Ltd, 2021.

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