

## Chapter 7

### Test of Loyalty: The Battle of New Orleans

The War of 1812 pitted the fledgling United States against its former ruler, Great Britain. Considered a second war for independence, it lasted two and a half years, with its high point the Battle of New Orleans on 8 January 1815. Great Britain finally recognized the United States as an independent nation with the power to defend itself.

Prior to 1814 the war's theater of operations was in the northern United States. That year, however, the British suffered defeat in Baltimore and the Great Lakes, a loss that prevented them from launching a general invasion from Canada. They subsequently shifted their offensive to the south in what was to be the final and decisive blow against the Americans.

The fighting in Louisiana was really a series of Battles *for* New Orleans, lasting from December 1814 through January 1815. On the Chalmette battleground, just below the city, a diverse force of soldiers, sailors, and militia, including Indians and African Americans, defeated Britain's finest white and black troops drawn from Europe and the West Indies.

The American victory in the Gulf region forced the British to recognize United States claims to Louisiana and West Florida and to ratify the Treaty of Ghent, which ended the war. The Battle of New Orleans also marked Louisiana's incorporation into the American Union.

### Those Who Fought and Those Who Did Not

#### British Forces

Britain sent between 11,000 and 14,450 troops to fight in the Louisiana campaign. These included army and navy men fresh from campaigns fought against Napoleon in Europe, as well as veterans of other theaters in the War of 1812. Among the British forces were the First and Fifth West India Regiments, made up of about one thousand black soldiers from Jamaica, Barbados, and the Bahamas. Some of these units recruited and trained American slaves who escaped to British lines, attracted by the promise of freedom.

Major General Sir Edward Pakenham commanded the British army in the Louisiana campaign. Brother-in-law of the duke of Wellington, Pakenham was a seasoned veteran of European wars against Napoleon and was known as the "Hero of Salamanca"

for his bravery in the Spanish Peninsular War. Vice-Admiral Alexander Inglis Cochrane had charge of the British navy in American waters and directed naval skirmishes in the gulf.

### United States Forces

United States forces at the time of the Battle of New Orleans were much smaller than those of the British—somewhere between 3,500 and 5,000 troops. This detachment was composed of United States Army troops; Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Louisiana militia; Baratarian pirates; Choctaw warriors; and free black soldiers.

Legend has it that Britain's finest soldiers met a ragtag band of enthusiastic but inexperienced woodsmen on the plains of Chalmette. In reality, most of General Andrew Jackson's troops were seasoned in the use of firearms and well-disciplined, with some combat experience—and were better marksmen than the British. They were hampered, however, by a shortage of arms and equipment.

Major General Andrew Jackson, commander of the Seventh Military District, led United States forces in the Gulf campaign against Britain. An ardent expansionist and charismatic leader, Jackson inspired his men and the local populace to fight and defeat the British. Bernard Marigny, a leading Louisianian who disliked Jackson, grudgingly conceded: "Never was a general received with more enthusiasm. His military reputation, his well known firmness of character contributed to call forth a spontaneous movement. From all quarters, the cry was 'to arms!'"

### United States Troops

Jackson's forces in the Louisiana campaign included troops from the Seventh and Forty-fourth Infantry Regiments, two of the five regiments that made up the Seventh Military District. The Forty-fourth Regiment came from Louisiana and was commanded by Major Henry Chotard. In addition, artilleryists, dragoons, and riflemen from many units converged on New Orleans to battle the British.

Commander Daniel T. Patterson was in charge of the United States Navy in the Gulf region and shared joint command with General Jackson in the Louisiana campaign. Sloops, gunboats, and the USS *Louisiana* and USS *Carolina* made up Patterson's fleet.

### Regional White Militia

Militia units from surrounding states joined local troops in defending Louisiana. These forces included Brigadier General John Coffee's Tennessee Mounted Volunteers, General William Carroll's Tennessee Militia, Brigadier General John Adair's Kentucky Militia, and Major Thomas Hinds's Mississippi Dragoons. (Dragoons were mounted troops who rode into battle, dismounted, and fought on foot.) Major General Gabriel Villeré commanded the Louisiana Militia, and Major Jean Baptiste Plauché headed the New Orleans uniformed militia companies. Each of these uniformed companies—Carabiniers, Dragons à Pied, Francs, Louisiana Blues, and Chasseurs—had its own distinctive, colorful outfit. Many of their members had had previous military experience in France, Saint-Domingue (Haiti), and Latin America.

### Free Black Battalions

The First and Second Battalions of Free Men of Color played an important role in the Louisiana campaign, just as free black men had during the colonial period in the service of France and Spain. Louisiana was the first state in the Union to commission a military officer of African descent, and an act passed by the Louisiana legislature in 1812 was the first in the nation to authorize a black volunteer militia with black line officers.

This 1812 act basically reactivated the militia organization Louisiana inherited from the Spanish regime. It called for one free black battalion with a white commanding officer and free black officers at lower ranks. At the time of the Battle of New Orleans the First Battalion of Free Men of Color had a total strength of 353, including an eleven-piece band.

The First Battalion impressed General Jackson so much that he ordered the formation of a Second Battalion, mustered into service on 19 December 1814. Joseph Savary, a free black from Saint-Domingue who had been an officer in the French Army, recruited members to the Second Battalion from among the free black refugees from Saint-Domingue and Cuba. As a major, Savary was the ranking black officer in a battalion of 256 members and was the first African American awarded this high position in the United States Army. Colonel Michel Fortier, a wholesale merchant who had served in the Spanish colonial militia, commanded both battalions.

The Second Battalion of Free Men of Color fought in the nighttime battle of 23 December 1814 and at the Battle of New Orleans on 8 January 1815. Both battalions defended Jackson's line on the east bank of the river. Casualties among the free black battalions at the Battle of New Orleans numbered fourteen: one dead and thirteen wounded. Once the main fighting ended, a group of free black militiamen went onto the field to assist the wounded and take prisoners. Some British soldiers fired upon them, killing one and wounding three. Outraged, Savary led a company of free blacks from the Second Battalion to dislodge the British snipers. They were successful but suffered ten more casualties.

### Jordan B. Noble

Jordan B. Noble was the black drummer famous for beating the long roll at the Battle of New Orleans. Born in 1800 in Georgia, Noble came to New Orleans in 1811 and joined the Seventh Regiment of the United States Army one year later. He participated in several engagements of the Louisiana campaign. At the Battle of New Orleans he opened with reveille and closed with taps.

Noble's exploits at the Battle of New Orleans were only the beginning of his long career as a military drummer and, later, as a popular New Orleans musician. During the Seminole War in Florida in 1836 he served as a field drummer for the First Louisiana Brigade, and in the Mexican War of 1846–1848 he beat his drum for the Washington Artillery. At the outbreak of Civil War Noble rallied New Orleans free men of color to h

form militia companies on behalf of the Confederacy. When Union forces occupied southern Louisiana, he helped organize the free black Native Guards under General Benjamin Butler and served as a captain in the Seventh Louisiana Volunteers.

Noble also performed at parades and commemorative celebrations. When he died on 20 June 1890, Noble's obituary noted that "many will remember the white-headed old man and his well-worn drum, so often seen during the [World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial] exposition of 1884 and 1885."

### Choctaws

Fighting with Jackson's forces in Louisiana was a group of Choctaws, longtime enemies of the pro-British Creek nation. They were under the command of Major Pierre Jugeant, a part-Choctaw scout who grew up among Native Americans and spoke various dialects. In the Louisiana campaign Choctaw warriors harassed the enemy by making nightly raids on British pickets, guarded the approach to New Orleans by Chef Menteur Road, and fought in the battle of 23 December 1814. At the Battle of New Orleans they defended the line that ran through the swamp and woods.

### Jean Laffite and the Baratarians

The legendary Baratarian pirates lent assistance to Jackson and the Americans, primarily in the form of military supplies and artillery power. They also helped the United States by not siding with the British. Familiar with several passageways to New Orleans, the Baratarians had been approached by British officials to act as guides and allies. Acting as leader of the "Frenchmen of Barataria," several of whom were free blacks and escaped slaves, Jean Laffite went to American authorities while considering the British offer. He used the situation to his men's advantage, securing from Jackson promises of amnesty for past offenses in return for siding with the United States and committing his men to battle.

### Support Personnel

In addition to fighting on the line with Jackson, Louisianians contributed to the American victory in many ways. Although both United States and British officials doubted the loyalty of Louisianians to their new country, local residents expressed their support for Jackson. In the words of Bernard Marigny,

**When General Jackson arrived in New Orleans, all the inhabitants wished to fight. We know moreover that one cannot be French, or of French origin, without detesting the English domination. . . .**

**It would be impossible for our detractors to cite a single Louisianan, a single Creole, or a single naturalized Frenchman, who in the moment of danger, abandoned the country or refused to fight.**

With a common enemy to confront "nationalities no longer count; we are all Americans," noted Chevalier Anne Louis de Tousard, French consul *ad interim* at New Orleans.

Major Arsène Lacarrière Latour, principal engineer in the United States Seventh Military District, captured the mood of Louisianians in December 1814: “All classes of society were now animated with the most ardent zeal. The young, the old, women, children, all breathed defiance to the enemy, firmly resolved to oppose to the utmost the threatened invasion.” And French consul Tousard noted on 6 January 1815: “At the present moment every one is under arms in the camp, while the veterans and the old folks do service in the city and keep watch upon the enemy within our gates. All the French men marched, and I have only one who claimed exemption.”

Behind the front lines white and free black men forty-five years and older formed home guards to protect private property and maintain order in New Orleans and surrounding towns and posts. A free black man and former member of the Spanish militia, Gabriel Gerome, commanded a home guard company of seventy-nine free black men. Slaves and citizens helped widen canals and build breastworks along them. Slaves also fortified military positions and fought in several battles of the Louisiana campaign.

Women fashioned silk banners, flags, and bandages for militia regiments and made clothes for the troops. Nuns and free women of color nursed the wounded at hospitals and convents. Throughout the night of 7 January and into the morning of 8 January 1815, the nuns, women, and children gathered at the Ursuline Convent, praying before the statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor to protect their loved ones, city, and state. During communion at that morning's mass, a courier entered the chapel, crying out, "Victory is ours!"

## Plan of Assessment: Preliminary Engagements

### Jackson Arrives in New Orleans

General Jackson established his base of operations in New Orleans late in November 1814. Proof that Admiral Cochrane intended to direct the British Gulf Coast campaign against New Orleans persuaded Jackson to leave Mobile and concentrate United States military efforts on the Mississippi.

The citizens of New Orleans had already formed committees of public safety to protect their interests. They and members of the legislature did not entirely trust Jackson and feared that he would burn New Orleans rather than surrender it to the British.

### Preparations for War

Once in New Orleans, Jackson moved quickly to prepare for the enemy's expected assault. He prepared defense strategies to match the variety of attack paths available to the British. Jackson deployed Louisiana militia detachments to fell trees, scout enemies, and guard the numerous small streams the British could use to enter the city. To protect Lakes Borgne and Pontchartrain Jackson relied on navy gunboats under the command of Daniel T. Patterson. He also sent Major Plauché's New Orleans militia companies to Forts St. John and Petites Coquilles north of the city to fend off a Lake Pontchartrain approach.

And he ordered Jugeant's Choctaws and the First Battalion of Free Men of Color to guard Chef Menteur Road. In the event of a British advance up the river, Jackson also fortified what he considered the key to the Mississippi—Fort St. Philip near the mouth of the river. As a second line of defense, he prepared Fort St. Leon at English Turn.

### The Approach to New Orleans: British Options

In attacking New Orleans from their base at Negril Bay, Jamaica, the British had seven potential routes:

1. Bayou Lafourche, a deep, threadlike stream running from the Gulf of Mexico west of the delta into the Mississippi between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Because of its length and narrowness, the Americans could easily obstruct it.
2. Barataria Bay, opening on the gulf seventy miles west of the main mouth of the river almost directly south of New Orleans. Above the bay, numerous narrow channels connected with the Mississippi at points along the city's shores.
3. The main channel of the Mississippi was the best approach to the city and the only route affording use of large naval vessels. Forts and batteries guarded the river: Fort St. Philip was situated about thirty miles from the mouth, and about forty miles farther up was Fort St. Leon. St. Leon sat at English Turn, a strong point where the river made an S-shaped turn. Sailing ships normally had to wait for a change in the wind to advance up river.
4. Rivière aux Chênes and Bayou Terre aux Boeufs, small streams that emptied into the gulf just east of the river's mouth and extended inland almost to the English Turn. Small boats could navigate them, but a few troops could defend them easily.

The final three approaches were by way of Lake Borgne:

5. Ascend Chef Menteur Road to the Plain of Gentilly, a segment of dry land over which troops could march to New Orleans.
6. From Lake Borgne through one of the small bayous that came within a mile of the Mississippi.
7. The route from Lake Borgne through the narrow straits known as the Rigolets, across Lake Pontchartrain, and up Bayou St. John. A well-known route of commerce, this course would take a landing party within two miles of New Orleans.

The seventh choice constituted the one the British originally intended to pursue, but a shortage of light vessels and Cochrane's belief that the Americans effectively defended this route forced him to abandon this plan. Instead, the British selected option number six, sailing into Lake Borgne and landing below New Orleans via Bayou Bienvenu.

### **Battle of the Gunboats, 14 December 1814**

Determined to land his forces below New Orleans, Cochrane first had to destroy the American gunboats on Lake Borgne. On 12 December Lieutenant Thomas ap Catesby Jones, commander of United States gunboats at New Orleans, sighted the British fleet of 45 barges carrying 1,200 men and 43 large guns. The luckless Americans had only 5 gunboats manned by 183 men and 23 small guns, a dispatch boat, and the tender *Alligator*.

At first Jones believed that the British were just going to dock and pursue a land battle, but instead they came after Jones's gunboats. When the wind died on 14 December the grossly outnumbered Jones could retreat no further. Rather than admit defeat and destroy his boats so that they could not fall into enemy hands, Jones decided to fight to the end. After a grueling battle, the superior British fleet captured all five American gunboats and the *Alligator*, but at a cost of 17 killed and 77 wounded. United States casualties numbered 10 killed, 35 wounded, and 86 captured.

The loss of Lake Borgne was significant. The defeat severed United States sea communication with Mobile, limiting contact to interior roads and completing Britain's blockade of Mobile. In addition, control of Lake Borgne gave the British access to a variety of approaches to New Orleans. British control of the lake, along with the loss of his gunboat scouts, confused Jackson's plans for defense of the city; he had no idea where the British would land or which route they would take.

### **Fight in the Dark, 23 December 1814**

The nighttime battle of 23 December 1814 was fought between advance, or frontline, elements of the British army numbering about 1,600 men and Jackson's army on the Villeré and adjacent plantations below the city. That morning British forces tried to capture General Jacques de Villeré, ranking officer of the Louisiana militia, but he was not home. Instead, they apprehended his son, Major Gabriel de Villeré. Gabriel, however, escaped to New Orleans with news of the British landing and attack.

Jackson detached army, artillery, and marine forces, Tennessee militia, Mississippi dragoons, Plauché's battalion, Captain Thomas Beale's Orleans Rifles, eighteen Choctaws, and the Second Battalion of Free Men of Color south of the city to meet the British. Although they fought to a stalemate on the night of the twenty-third, Jackson's attack threw the British off balance and battered enemy morale. The cost of the engagement was high: 277 British casualties (46 killed, 167 wounded, and 64 captured) and 213 United States casualties (24 killed, 115 wounded, and 74 captured). Hardest hit was Beale's rifle company, composed primarily of New Orleans lawyers and merchants.

### **The Rodriguez Canal and the Treaty of Ghent, 24 December 1814**

Jackson withdrew his army and established a line behind the Rodriguez Canal, a twenty-foot-wide and four-foot-deep abandoned canal on the old Macarty plantation located six miles below the city. The general stationed most of his troops four miles above New Orleans to meet a second attack from Chef Menteur and sent the remainder to defend approaches below the city. The Rodriguez Canal detachment prepared to meet the

enemy by setting up fortifications from the river to the swamp with eight batteries in the line. Jackson used this encampment as his base of operations for the Battle of New Orleans. It placed him two miles from the British position at Chalmette.

Meanwhile, on 24 December United States and British commissioners, meeting in Ghent, Belgium, signed a peace treaty that ended the War of 1812. Both British and American forces in Louisiana continued their efforts, unaware of the official end of the war.

### **Grand Reconnaissance , 28 December 1814**

General Pakenham launched a reconnaissance in force against Jackson's line at Rodriguez Canal. However, Pakenham called off this probing attack at the very moment when, unbeknownst to him, his right wing on the edge of the swamp began to turn toward Jackson's exposed left flank. Heavy fire from Choctaws hidden in the woods helped force back the British. Following this action, Pakenham began to realize the effectiveness of United States firepower and moved to bring more artillery to his line.

### **Battle of New Year's Day, 1 January 1815**

The Battle of New Year's Day was decisive in the eventual United States victory. Once the morning fog cleared, batteries of the two armies started bombarding each other and waged a powerful artillery duel. British shots landed in the fields well behind United States lines, and eventually Pakenham ordered his guns withdrawn. The United States won this engagement. Casualty reports reflect the American victory: 11 killed and 23 wounded on the American side and 32 killed, 44 wounded, and 2 missing on the British.

## **The Battle of New Orleans**

### **British Offense**

Pakenham's plan called for attacking Jackson's forces with four groups. Major General Samuel Gibbs led the main assault with 2,200 troops against the left flank of Jackson's line held by General Carroll. The West India regiments attacked Coffee's unit and the Choctaws from the cover of the woods in an attempt to create a diversion. Major General John Keane advanced with 1,200 men in a column between the river and the levee, also meaning to distract United States forces from Gibbs's attack. Pakenham held a fourth group, General Lambert's 1,400 men, in reserve.

### **American Defense**

Jackson concentrated his men on a 700-yard battle line and left a 950-yard line of swamp for the most part exposed. Because the British could not mass a large attack against a line in the swamp and woods, Jackson placed only about 1,000 men from Coffee's Tennessee Mounted Volunteers and the Choctaw company along it. He massed approximately 1,500 men from the United States Army, Carroll's Tennessee militia, New Orleans uniformed companies, and the two free black battalions behind the earthworks on

Rodriguez Canal. In reserve were the Kentucky and Louisiana militia and the Mississippi Dragoons.

### On the West Bank

Simultaneous with the main battle on the east bank of the Mississippi, United States and British forces engaged in combat on the west bank. British Colonel William Thornton led 300 soldiers, 200 marines, 200 sailors, and part of the Fifth West India Regiment against about 1,000 Louisiana and Kentucky militiamen commanded by Brigadier General David B. Morgan. Thornton's mission was to silence United States Commander Patterson's batteries and use them against Jackson's flank.

### Battle Overview

The British attacked on two fronts at the Battle of New Orleans: the primary one against Jackson's line on the east bank of the Mississippi and a secondary one against United States positions on the west bank. The former failed and the latter succeeded. Fortunately for Jackson, Pakenham was defeated and killed at Chalmette before the British victory across the river had been ascertained and used to advantage. With Generals Pakenham and Gibbs killed and General Keane severely wounded, command of the British troops went to General Lambert, who decided to give up the campaign just as Thornton was winning on the west bank.

### Confusion and Death on the Battlefield: A Contemporary Assessment

Those who fought in the Battle of New Orleans described battlefield action as confused and haphazard in the dark hours of that foggy 8 January morning. Many times they were unaware of the danger that lurked just beyond viewing range. In the words of one Kentucky militiaman:

**The official report said the action lasted two hours and five minutes, but it did not seem half that length of time to me. It was so dark that little could be seen, until just about the time the battle ceased. The morning had dawned to be sure, but the smoke was so thick that every thing seemed to be covered up in it. Our men did not seem to apprehend any danger, but would load and fire as fast as they could, talking, swearing, and joking all the time. All ranks and sections were soon broken up. After the first shot, every one loaded and banged away on his own hook.**

The same man gave a touching, vivid account of the battlefield at Chalmette following the Battle of New Orleans:

**When the smoke had cleared away and we could obtain a fair view of the field, it looked, at the first glance, like a sea of blood. It was not blood itself which gave it this appearance but the red coats in which the British soldiers were dressed. Straight out before our position, for about the width of space which we supposed had been occupied by the British column, the field was entirely covered with prostrate bodies. In some places they were laying in piles of several, one on top of the other. On either side, there was an interval more thinly sprinkled with the slain: and then two other dense rows, one near the levee and the other towards the swamp. About two hundred yards off, directly in front of our position, lay a large dapple gray horse, which we understood to have been Pakenham's.**

**Something about half way between the body of the horse and our bre[a]stwork there was a very large pile of dead, and at this spot, as I was afterward told, Pakenham had been killed, his horse having staggered off to a considerable distance before he fell. I have no doubt that I could . . . have walked on the bodies from the edge of the ditch to where the horse was laying, without touching the ground. . . .**

**When we first got a fair view of the field in our front, individuals could be seen in every possible attitude. Some laying quite dead, others mortally wounded, pitching and tumbling about in the agonies of death. Some had their heads shot off, some their legs, some their arms. Some were laughing, some crying, some groaning, and some screaming. There was every variety of sight and sound. Among those that were on the ground, however, there were some that were neither dead nor wounded. A great many had thrown themselves down behind piles of slain, for protection. As the firing ceased, these men were every now and then jumping up and either running off or coming in and giving themselves up.**

### Casualties

A major contributing factor to British defeat was the loss of many officers and the confusion that resulted from their deaths. Two out of four generals were killed and another wounded on the battlefield. Many British troops fell back after Pakenham and Gibbs were killed, and their retreat broke morale and threw the whole army into disarray.

British casualties for 8 January were extremely high compared to American losses. On the British side were 291 killed, 1,262 wounded, and 484 captured or missing, a total of 2,037. Jackson lost only 71 men: 13 killed, 39 wounded, and 19 missing.

## Aftermath of the Battle of New Orleans

### Bombardment of Fort St. Philip, 9 –18 January 1815

For nine days following the Battle of New Orleans five British war vessels anchored off Plaquemines Bend and blasted Fort St. Philip. Forces at the fort fired back with cannons, slowly forcing a British retreat downriver. During the bombardment more than a thousand shells rained down on the United States position, killing two and wounding seven men. This diversion, however, helped protect British forces as they withdrew through Lake Borgne and into the gulf.

### Martial Law in Louisiana

Unaware of the peace treaty signed 24 December 1814 and fearful that the British might return, Jackson refused to lift an edict of martial law imposed prior to the British invasion. Many Louisianians objected to what they considered harsh, unjust treatment. Among them was Louis Louailler, a state legislator from Opelousas who supported the war effort but criticized Jackson in local newspapers for his continuance of martial law. Jackson threw Louailler in jail, only to have federal district Judge Dominick A. Hall release Louailler on a writ of habeas corpus. In response, Jackson placed Hall and United States Attorney John Dick under arrest, too.

When Hall returned to the bench, he found Jackson guilty of contempt of court and fined him \$1,000. Jackson remained bitter about this incident for a long time, and almost thirty years later, Congress refunded his fine with interest.

### Treaty of Ghent Ratified: News Finally Arrives

Official word that the United States Congress had ratified the Treaty of Ghent reached New Orleans on 13 March 1815. A few days later the British fleet sailed from Louisiana waters. Jackson revoked martial law, dismissed his troops, returned militia units to state control, and pardoned military offenders.

### Images of Jackson

After the Battle of New Orleans Louisianians gave Jackson mixed reviews. Some hailed him as a "conquering hero" and honored him with parades, triumphal arches, religious ceremonies, balls, and parties. Others scorned him as the "butcher of New Orleans" and master of "bloody deeds," blaming Jackson for what relatively few casualties there were from the campaign.

On a national level, Jackson's victory gave him some of the recognition and popularity necessary to win the presidential election of 1828. "Old Hickory" had in part won his reputation at the Battle of New Orleans.

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## Conclusion

The Gulf Coast campaign, culminating in the Battle of New Orleans, was of great significance to Louisiana and the United States. Defeat forced British policymakers to ratify the Treaty of Ghent, thereby ending the war and recognizing United States claims to Louisiana and West Florida, areas included in the Louisiana Purchase. Now isolated in the North American Southeast, Spain was then more willing to relinquish East Florida, soon accomplished in the Adams Onís Treaty, negotiated in 1819. In addition, the campaign strengthened Louisianians' loyalty to the United States and resulted in the state's "Americanization" in terms of political identity.

One of the more tragic outcomes of the Gulf Coast campaign was the reduction of the Creek nation. Bereft of their British allies, the Creek were vulnerable to American aggression and land speculation. Both as general and later as president, Andrew Jackson's Indian policy favored removal.

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