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Norfolk Regional Center Cemeteries: Attempts to Honor Those Who Were Forgotten

Tatiana Moore

Commemoration serves as an important element of American culture. Memorializing heroes and the sacrifices they made has a certain sacredness for most people. Remembering a relative for who they were and all they did shows the respect people hold for their lost loved ones. However, there was a rather long period in American history where people were intentionally forgotten. Asylums were the destinations for those considered less-desirable, strange, or just plain weird by society; they were the homes for the unwanted. Nebraska had three asylums, and only in recent years have efforts been made to remember those who were forgotten so long ago in death. In an endeavor to contribute to these recognitions, this project examined the cemeteries at the insane asylum in Norfolk, Nebraska, and attempted to construct a map of the people buried there. Unfortunately, due to restrictions with federal law on privacy, the final product remains only an estimation as to the accurate locations.

Society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries differed greatly from the society of today. One example is the manner in which the mentally ill have been cared for. Mental health and the needs of those suffering from mental illness were not as well-known a century ago as they are today. The solution for society was to place “undesirable” people in a mental institution. In her book, *The Architecture of Madness: Insane Asylums in the United States*, Carla Yanni notes, “the stately towers of insane asylums were once a common sight at the

edge of American towns, and about three hundred were built in the United States before 1900.”¹ Nebraska did not differ from the rest of the country. By 1892, Nebraska had three asylums established in the state: one each in Lincoln, Norfolk, and Hastings. While this paper will focus on the cemeteries of the institution in Norfolk, the other asylums play a key role in its story.

Most secondary works written in relation to insane asylums deal primarily with the treatment of patients, the facilities’ establishment, and the changes in mental health.² Anything pertaining to the history of the Nebraska asylums follows closely with these themes. Only rarely are cemeteries mentioned in these works. If they are, it is usually to point out that the cemetery was not taken care of, overgrown, and recently discovered during some building project.³

The Norfolk Asylum for the Insane was created in 1885—fourteen years after the opening of the Lincoln Hospital—when the demand for more “psychiatric services in the state” was increasing.⁴ It opened and began receiving patients on February 15, 1888, the first of which were from the hospital in Lincoln.⁵ Following its establishment, the demand for such care was still increasing. Accordingly, only a year after it began operations, an addition was made to the facility to house 100 more patients. This still was not enough room to meet the growing demand. Therefore, four years after the Norfolk hospital opened, the state created yet another institution—

¹ Carla Yanni, *The Architecture of Madness: Insane Asylums in the United States*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 1.

² Thomas W. Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Edward Shorter, *A History of Psychiatry: From the Era of Asylum to the Age of Prozac* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997); Henry M. Hurd et. al., “The Care of the Insane in Nebraska.” In *The Institutional Care of the Insane in the United States and Canada, Vol. 3* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1916), 8-16.

³ Michael T. Keene, *Mad House: The Hidden History of Insane Asylums in 19th Century New York* (Fredericksburg: Willow Manor Publishing, 2013), 43, 46, 58-59, 86-88.

⁴ “History of the Norfolk Regional Center,” Elkhorn Valley Museum Archive; “Changes Dot Regional Center History: Threats to shut down facility nothing new,” *Norfolk Daily News*; Hurd, 8.

⁵ “History of the Norfolk Regional Center,” Elkhorn Valley Museum Archive.

this time located in Hastings.⁶ These three hospitals were fully functioning facilities. As noted in a *Norfolk Daily News* article, ten years after its opening, the Norfolk Asylum for the Insane could accommodate 300 patients and had a kitchen, a bakery, a chapel, a laundry facility, a barn, and sheds.⁷ In 1920, the name of the Norfolk institution became the Norfolk State Hospital.⁸ Twenty-nine years afterward, the name was again changed—this time to its current title: the Norfolk Regional Center (NRC).⁹ For over 100 years, the NRC was a place for the mentally ill. By 2010, it no longer dealt primarily with mental illness but rather with the state’s sex offenders.¹⁰ Today, the original purpose of the institution still exists, though all the original buildings and patients are gone.¹¹

With over 100 years of service as institutions, there were surely cases where people never left the asylums and died in their care. In his book, *Remembrance of Patients Past: Patient Life at the Toronto Hospital for the Insane, 1870-1940*, Geoffrey Reaume states, “Death was an integral and final part of the patient’s experience.”¹² In fact, most asylums had places to dispose of bodies. Given that the NRC was a fully functioning facility, it also had its own burial ground. While discussing the asylums in New York state, Michael Keene notes that “[w]hen the residents died, they became nameless, anonymous, and probably went un-mourned.”¹³ Many of the cemeteries were used for those who had no family connection or for whom no family could be located. While there are likely people buried in the cemeteries that still had familial connections,

⁶ “History of the Norfolk Regional Center,” Elkhorn Valley Museum Archive; Hurd, et. al., 13.

⁷ “Changes Dot Regional Center History: Threats to shut down facility nothing new,” *Norfolk Daily News*.

⁸ “History of the Norfolk Regional Center,” Elkhorn Valley Museum Archive.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, “Norfolk Regional Center,” Last modified March 21, 2018, http://dhhs.ne.gov/behavioral_health/pages/beh_rc_nrcserv.aspx.

¹¹ Interview with head of maintenance, October 15, 2018.

¹² Geoffrey Reaume, *Remembrance of Patients Past: Patient Life at the Toronto Hospital for the Insane, 1870-1940*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 228.

¹³ Keene, 42.

there are several cases where an unclaimed patient was interred at the asylum.¹⁴ Most of the burials at American asylum cemeteries remained unmarked—and still do to this day.¹⁵ The lack of designation has resulted in unfortunate desecration. For example, in 1984, an asylum cemetery was discovered by a bulldozer in New York. The only item that would have given indication this was a cemetery was a rather large rock without an inscription. Over 700 people were buried in the area, but no records were kept pertaining to deaths at the asylum.¹⁶

While some mental institutions were not so concerned with remembering those who passed through their doors, the NRC was one that showed at least a little care. Today, one can find two cemeteries designated as part of the NRC. However, these places are not as well documented as other cemeteries one might find in a Nebraska town. The most visible and larger of the two cemeteries is located on the corner of East Benjamin Avenue and Highway 35. Of the reported 523 people buried in the cemetery, only twelve are marked by headstones. The fact that there are headstones at all is somewhat of an anomaly. The older cemetery is more secluded than the other. One must travel through Northeast Community College territory to get to the copse of trees that surround it. Like the other, this cemetery only boasts three headstones of the 100-some people buried there. According to the head of maintenance at the NRC, the most likely reason that the few individuals with headstones have them is due to family money. He also said that in recent years, the NRC has had people come through and add headstones for the relations they have found.¹⁷

¹⁴ Keene, 46, 53; Reaume, 232; JoAnne Young, “Restoring Dignity to the Dead,” *Lincoln Journal Star*, September 25, 2013, https://journalstar.com/news/local/restoring-dignity-to-the-dead/article_d3de0d35-8e93-5afa-9667-3e26f281eb6d.html.

¹⁵ Christian Védie, “The Cemetery Associated with Leyme Mental Hospital,” *History of Psychiatry* 16, no.1 (2005): 111-115.

¹⁶ Keene, 43.

¹⁷ Interview with head of maintenance, October 15, 2018.

Research pertaining to the treatment of patients within institutions has accompanied the discovery of long-forgotten asylum cemeteries. In 2017, researchers at the University of Mississippi announced their plans to exhume the remains of the up to 7,000 unmarked graves in the asylum cemetery. Their goal was to preserve the remains and learn what happened to the 11,000 people who died at the Mississippi State Lunatic Asylum. Though the act may be viewed as dishonorable to some, the families of these patients have reacted positively to the news, as they might be able to learn what happened to their relatives who went in and never came out.¹⁸ The remains of a person can tell quite the story. As noted by Keene, bones can “reveal[...] clear signs of disease, overwork, poor medical care, and, in some cases, violence.” Cause of death can also disclose information like this, as well as the characteristics of the institution itself. According to Reaume, “The manner in which inmates died can help to explain a great deal about hospital conditions at the end of a patient’s life and about the rituals and procedures that followed death.”¹⁹ Therefore, the research being done at the University of Mississippi may contribute a great deal to the asylum cemetery and institution scholarship.

Each of the Nebraska insane asylums have their own cemeteries, and the ones in Lincoln and Hastings are in much the same situation as the ones in Norfolk. According to an article in the *Lincoln Journal Star*, the graves at the Lincoln cemeteries may have been marked at one time by 5-by-5-inch concrete markers and might have even been inscribed with the patient’s number. There are over 700 people buried in the two Lincoln cemeteries, but by now, very few of the graves are marked.²⁰ In 2013, it was documented that a movement was in force throughout the

¹⁸ Christine Hauser, “Buried at an Asylum, the ‘Unspoken, Untold History’ of the South,” *New York Times*, May 17, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/17/us/ole-miss-bodies-found.html>.

¹⁹ Reaume, 228.

²⁰ JoAnne Young, “Restoring Dignity to the Dead,” *Lincoln Journal Star*, September 25, 2013, https://journalstar.com/news/local/restoring-dignity-to-the-dead/article_d3de0d35-8e93-5afa-9667-3e26f281eb6d.html.

nation “to better identify those unclaimed souls from the past.”²¹ By the time of this article’s release, this force had been building for quite a few years.

In 2007, Adams County Historical Society director Catherine Renschler was one of the people pushing for the state of Nebraska to release the identities of those buried at the Hastings Regional Center (HRC) cemetery. These graves were marked by a concrete slab with a number etched into it—nothing else. Unfortunately, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services could not release these names without a court order due to “federal medical privacy law.”²² Only two years later was the desired outcome achieved. In May 2009, the Nebraska Supreme Court ruled that the names of the over 900 people buried at the HRC cemetery be released.²³ This decision also affected the NRC, as the Historical Society now has a copy of the names of people buried in its cemeteries. However, the information is still minimal. If one searches History Nebraska’s website for the list of people, a PDF document appears. On the document, one will find the name (or some sort of identification) of the deceased, the county from which the deceased originated, the date of death, date of burial, section number, lot number, and any comments pertaining to that person. Unfortunately, if someone were to take this document out to the cemetery, he or she would likely have a hard time locating anyone who did not already have a headstone. Information that was also released for the NRC was not a complete list of names. Nor did it include other important information.²⁴ To this day, information is difficult to come by because the NRC stands behind the federal medical privacy law, meaning they will not release some information.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Associated Press, “Mental Institutions Pushed to Release Names of Deceased,” *Norfolk Daily News*, May 21, 2007; Anna Jo, “Neb. High Court: Hospital’s Burial Records Public,” *Sioux City Journal*, May 16, 2009, <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/129DD22EB7EC5478>.

²³ Anna Jo, “Neb. High Court: Hospital’s Burial Records Public,” *Sioux City Journal*, May 16, 2009, <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/129DD22EB7EC5478>.

²⁴ Phone conversation with a History Nebraska representative, November 5, 2018.

The interest in remembering those forgotten proved to be a fruitful adventure. In 2012 at both the Hastings and Norfolk cemeteries, memorial gardens were established to commemorate the dead. Though these were not headstones over individual plots, the garden provided a place for people to go to give honor. According to the director of the Division of Behavioral Health at the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, “The garden is a way to recognize that the graves at this cemetery represent people who deserve to be remembered and accorded respect.”²⁵ This garden contains benches, a monument, flowers, and bushes. The Hastings memorial has the exact same attributes with one addition: a surrounding fence. The inscription on the memorial reads, “For all that was, For all that might have been, Grant us rest and peace.” In recent years, these memorials have been sites for moments of silence. For the past few years at the NRC, community members have gathered on World Mental Health Day, October 10th, to read the names of the deceased, lay flowers, and grant them a moment of silent remembrance.²⁶

²⁵ “Ribbon Cutting at the Norfolk Regional Center Cemetery Sept. 28,” *Targeted News Service*, September 20, 2012, https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&t=&sort=YMD_date%3AD&fld-base-0=alltext&maxresults=20&val-base-0=%22Ribbon%20Cutting%20at%20the%20Norfolk%20Regional%20Center%20Cemetery%20Sept.%2028%22&doref=news/14171311FB74A460.

²⁶ JoAnne Young, “Restoring Dignity to the Dead,” *Lincoln Journal Star*, September 25, 2013, https://journalstar.com/news/local/restoring-dignity-to-the-dead/article_d3de0d35-8e93-5afa-9667-3e26f281eb6d.html; Eric McKay, “Memorial Service Honors Those Buried in Norfolk Regional Center Cemetery,” Posted October 10, 2016, <http://newschannelnebraska.com/video/memorial-service-honors-those-buried-in-norfolk-regional-center-cemetery/>; Andrea Larson, “Buried Regional Center Patients Honored on World Mental Health Day,” *Norfolk Daily News*, October 11, 2018, http://norfolkdailynews.com/news/buried-regional-center-patients-honored-on-world-mental-health-day/article_7315e4e8-cd5b-11e8-85d7-3729a0fbbe9f.html; Associated Press, “Memorial Moment at Neb. Psychiatric Hospitals,” October 10, 2011, <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&doref=news/13A50A2438CB42C8>; “Memorial Service to be Held on World Mental Health Day for Those Buried in Norfolk Regional Center Cemetery,” *States News Service*, October 7, 2016, http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A465881907/AONE?u=unl_kearney&sid=AONE&xid=a93ff6cd; “Moment of Silence for Those Buried in Regional Center Cemeteries,” *Lincoln Journal Star*, October 8, 2011, https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&t=&sort=YMD_date%3AD&fld-base-0=alltext&maxresults=20&val-base-0=%22Moment%20of%20silence%20for%20those%20buried%20in%20regional%20center%20cemeteries%22&doref=news/13A5D9F7D868BBC8.

While the memorials are grand additions to the cemeteries, they do little to curb people's curiosity. Knowing the general location of a person's burial helps to eliminate *some* mystery, but not all of it. The goal of this project was to map out plots in one of the two NRC cemeteries. What sounds like a simple task was really a rather difficult one. Before plotting points on a map, examination of the document containing the identities was needed. After organizing the document in an Excel spreadsheet, a curious discovery was made. There were four sections identified—though one section has no number associated with it. The sections do not begin with the number one as would be expected but rather with the number two. There are also 72 names without locations, which could be interpreted as the number one section. Following a trip to the cemeteries to document the headstones, though, two of those names were found on headstones within the “old cemetery.” However, the last 70 remain a mystery.

One explanation for missing documentation could be the result of a fire at the Norfolk Hospital. In September 1901, a fire destroyed one of the main buildings on the asylum grounds. One man perished in the flames, and though much was saved, the building itself was completely gutted, and records were destroyed.²⁷ Looking at the dates of those with unknown locations, some of their records could have been lost in the fire, though there is little information to confirm that. Another reason for missing documentation could simply be lack of recording. In Reaume's book, he noted that in the records for Toronto, there were unknown causes of deaths, which could be attributed to poor record keeping.²⁸ Perhaps the same situation happened at the NRC. While it is possible records were lost in a fire, another troubling explanation could account for the missing documentation. Yanni notes in her book how statistics were altered at institutions if

²⁷ “Fire at Norfolk Hospital,” *Norfolk Daily News*, September 28, 1901; Nebraska State Historical Society, “Norfolk Regional Center Cemetery Records, 1888-1954,” 2010.

²⁸ Reaume, 226.

the patient died. In one case, the director would simply erase the patient from the record if he or she died instead of reporting him or her as “uncured.”²⁹ Whatever the reason, the reality remains that there are no records available to the public of where these people are buried. Another fascinating find made upon the visit to the cemeteries was that one of the headstones in the “old cemetery” is not a patient listed on the public register. Given the death date, it is unlikely that this person’s records were lost in the fire. So, perhaps there are more historical documents than just a map for the cemeteries that remain untouchable.

In any case, the fifteen headstones, satellite map of the cemeteries, and the PDF document available on History Nebraska were the main sources for this map. Unfortunately, because the “old cemetery” is completely surrounded by trees, the satellite view of the area was not useable for plotting points. Given that there are also no public records stating explicitly who is buried in the “old cemetery,” this became an impossible project. Therefore, the focus centered around the “new”—and more visible—cemetery (fig. 1).

²⁹ Yanni, 84.



Figure 1. Satellite view of the “New” Norfolk Regional Cemetery. Image from Google Maps.

After locating the names of the people who have headstones and discovering their official location on the document, a few points could be added to the map. Due to the placement of the current headstones, the graves do not appear to follow one set pattern. Therefore, many—if not all—of the points on the finished map are best guesses. For example, the graves of Leopold Stepan and Caroline Blele indicate that they are in the same row and that the numbering of plots counts from west to east. However, this is only in section two. In section four, the graves of Elizabeth Sander and Father Albert Edwards, as well as those of Elsie Sandoz and Maria Kling, indicate that the plots increase in number from east to west. Therefore, the few markers that surround these graves or that lie in between them, are probably the most accurate of all the points on the map. Section three did not have any markers within the same row or that were side-by-side, so without some sort of indication from records, there is no way to know which direction the numbering followed. It is also impossible to determine how big each section is and where section one lies. Because there are so many unlocated graves in the document and that few of

them are within the “old cemetery,” one hypothesis is that section one consists of the “old cemetery.” However, without more information, it is impossible to tell for certain. While plotting along the edges of the cemetery, this dilemma reared its head again. The fence around the property is a pretty good indication of the boundaries of the cemetery; however, the problem with the fence is that there is no indication of how close it lies to the graves. Looking at the satellite view of the map, there are what appear to be uniform lines throughout the middle of the cemetery. It would make sense that these are the rows where graves sit, but without more information, this conclusion cannot be fully reached.

In many of the articles, reports, and documents about the cemeteries, the number 523 is used to specify the amount of people buried in the “new cemetery,” and 100 is reported as the total for the “old cemetery.”³⁰ The spreadsheet available from History Nebraska only lists 516 names.³¹ As mentioned previously, it was also discovered that one person is not listed on the record. In 2008, prior to the release of information from HRC, a local Norfolk woman had been conducting research about those (known to be) buried at the NRC. At that time, 450 was the official number of bodies.³² The question remains, how many people are really buried in these locations (fig. 2)?

³⁰ Andrea Larson, “Buried Regional Center Patients Honored on World Mental Health Day,” *Norfolk Daily News*, October 11, 2018, http://norfolkdailynews.com/news/buried-regional-center-patients-honored-on-world-mental-health-day/article_7315e4e8-cd5b-11e8-85d7-3729a0fbbe9f.html; Associated Press, “Memorial Moment at Neb. Psychiatric Hospitals,” October 10, 2011, <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/13A50A2438CB42C8>; “Moment of Silence for Those Buried in Regional Center Cemeteries,” *Lincoln Journal Star*, October 8, 2011, https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&t=&sort=YMD_date%3AD&fld-base-0=alltext&maxresults=20&val-base-0=%22Moment%20of%20silence%20for%20those%20buried%20in%20regional%20cemeteries%22&docref=news/13A5D9F7D868BBC8.

³¹ Nebraska State Historical Society, “Norfolk Regional Center Cemetery Records, 1888-1954,” 2010.

³² Sheryl Schmeckpeper, “Forgotten Souls,” *Norfolk Daily News*, November 1, 2008, http://norfolkdailynews.com/news/forgotten-souls/article_af7726fe-294e-5d47-95f8-ae30abc9ae41.html.

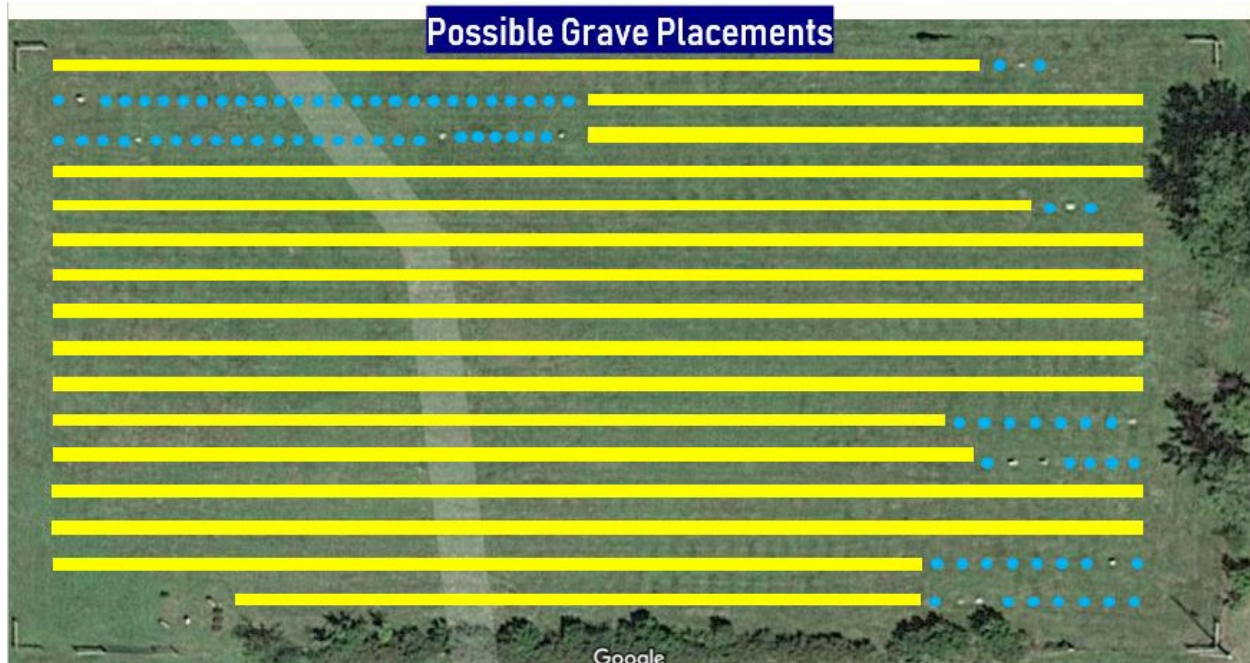


Figure 2. Possible Grave Placements Map. The blue dots represent estimates as to where graves lie between known headstones, while the yellow lines represent places where graves could be located. Initial image from Google Maps.

A story that appeared many times over the course of this research involved the headstones of Elsie Raymond Sandoz and Henriette Lyonette. According to local tales, Elsie Sandoz is believed to be the sister-in-law of famous Nebraska author Mari Sandoz. Henriette Lyonette also has a connection to Sandoz, as Lyonette was a wife of Mari Sandoz's father, Jules Sandoz.³³

Though mystery surrounds these cemeteries and those like it throughout the country, care and respect are still dominant at the NRC. Both cemeteries are well-managed. The head of maintenance at the NRC said they go out every few days and clean up the cemeteries, removing

³³ Traci Rylands, "For All that Might Have Been: The Cemeteries of Nebraska's Norfolk State Hospital for the Insane, Part I," *Adventures in Cemetery Hopping ~ A blog by Traci Rylands*, September 30, 2016, <https://adventuresincemeteryhopping.com/2016/09/30/gone-but-not-forgotten-the-cemeteries-of-nebraskas-norfolk-regional-center/>; Sheryl Schmeckpeper, "Forgotten Souls," *Norfolk Daily News*, November 1, 2008, http://norfolkdailynews.com/news/forgotten-souls/article_af7726fe-294e-5d47-95f8-ae30abc9ae41.html.

branches, mowing the grass, and pulling weeds.³⁴ They may not know how many and who exactly they are looking after, but they do still give respect. This map might only tell part of the story, but as documentation and more curious researchers, genealogists, and historians poke around, it may contribute to the historiography of the Nebraska asylum cemeteries.

³⁴ Interview with head of maintenance, October 15, 2018.

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