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An update on Colonial witch bottles

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AN UPDATE ON COLONIAL WITCH BOTTLES

MARSHALL JOSEPH BECKER

ABSTRACT
The discovery of an 18th century “witch bottle” during controlled excavations at a colonial site in Essington, Pennsylvania in 1976 provided the first archaeological evidence for the use of these magical charms in the New World. Since that time, the author has identified five additional specimens in the northeastern United States. The geographic distribution of these artifacts reflects a widespread belief in magic in the northeastern English colonies. One recovered Pennsylvania witch bottle suggests that the use of magical charms lingered into the early 19th century.

INTRODUCTION
In today’s scientific world, fewer and fewer events are viewed as mysterious or unexplained and a belief in magic and sorcery seems farfetched. However, medieval and post-medieval belief systems in Europe and the American colonies uniformly accepted magical actions as the cause of all woes. With the rise of state religion in the 16th century, the Catholic Church began to define these events only as the work of the Devil or his agents. The paranoia associated with these beliefs led to the fashioning of “white” magical charms to protect against evil “black” magical spells and spirits. Witch bottles, rabbits’ feet, horseshoes nailed above doorways, and crucifixes are but a few types of white magical charms (Billson 1895:48, cf., Cockayne 1864, Fischer 1989:529, 708-715).

In 1976, the author recovered a “witch bottle” during archaeological excavations in Essington, Pennsylvania (Becker 1978). This type of white magical charm is well known in England (Merrifield 1954, 1955, 1987), however, the Essington witch bottle was the first artifact of this type found in the New World. Since the Essington example was first reported, the author has documented the discovery of five other witch bottles in America. The purpose of this paper is to update the reader on the status of colonial witch bottles, with specific emphasis on examples from Pennsylvania. Given the topic, a brief review of the magical belief system of colonial America is in order.

A BELIEF IN MAGIC
A belief in witchcraft and magic in colonial America likely arrived with the first European settlers and apparently continued in various ways for nearly two centuries. Lest we be tempted to view witchcraft in the colonies as a provincial and retrograde behavior, we should consider the parallel beliefs in England. In England, legal strictures against witchcraft date from at least as early as A.D. 1543 and remained in force until 1736. Witchcraft in the colonies appears to have reflected the tastes of the mother country just as the Colonials shared English architecture, ceramics, and other items of trade (cf., Boyer and Nissenbaum 1974, 1993).

In 1741, Isaac D’Israeli (1741, II:332-343) documented the state of magic in Europe at that time and cited Pierre Le Brun as dividing magic into three main categories: natural, artificial, and diabolical. Natural magic, such as cures from disease or finds of lost objects that are in answer to prayers, was considered acceptable and justified because it came from God (Robbins 1959:540-541). Artificial and diabolical magic, also referred to as “white” and “black” magic, respectively, were considered to be man-made. The intent of black magic was to harm someone or their property and was considered to be demonic and negative. White magic was the category of conjuring that was designed to protect persons, animals, or things from harm; the kind of harm that was generated by black magic. After A.D. 900, Catholic ecclesiastical law placed white magic into the same category as black magic and in theory punished its practice with excommunication.
Although practicing magic in colonial America was considered to be unlawful and immoral, conjuring often continued in secret, especially among the common folk. Negative events, such as sicknesses or accidents, were often viewed as magical actions that might very well be caused by black magic from an enemy or rival. It was therefore important to use white magic, often in the form of counter charms, to protect against or counteract the evil black magic of others (Macfarlane 1970:217-222, Woodman 1973, Merrifield 1980). Most of the counter charms that had been in common use became seen as folkloric magic by A.D. 1800 (Macfarlane 1970:103-114).

WITCHCRAFT IN COLONIAL PENNSYLVANIA

Nearly all of the New World settlements were established with a firm and traditional religious base that was, if anything, more intolerant than that of their parent groups in Europe. Erikson (1966) points out that the cultural boundaries within these groups were not clear, particularly as they relate to theological questions regarding God and the Devil. During the mid to late 17th century, various types of “deviant” behavior that once had been tolerated throughout the American colonies became evidence for the practice of “witchcraft.”

Most of what we know about witchcraft in the colonial period derives from the written records. Erikson (1966), noting the litigious activity in colonial communities, suspects that these theological problems led the members of these individual communities to turn to the courts to adjudicate what was “good” and what was “evil.” The beginnings of legislating morality in America may be found in these early court records.

Drake’s (1968) excellent summary of the witchcraft trials in America places these events in relationship to contemporary activities in England. While the Salem, Massachusetts witch trials of 1692 are the most dramatic and widely known example of “witch hunting” in colonial America, 95 other incidents in the colonies are recorded prior to this time (Drake 1968). Most of these incidences took place in New England. Very few trials are known from Maryland, Virginia, or Pennsylvania. The rarity of witch trials in Pennsylvania does not mean that a belief in witchcraft and/or magic was not common, but rather that it was seen by the authorities as a folk ritual of no significance.

Prior to William Penn’s arrival in the region that came to bear his name, legal matters were covered by the laws of the various mother countries. Holland, Sweden, and England maintained early colonial outposts along the Delaware River drainage. To date, no evidence of witchcraft has been found in the legal records relating to the Swedish colony on the Delaware (1638-1655), or in the Dutch documents. Penn’s early County Courts, prior to the establishment of a Provincial Court in 1684, tended to involve accusations of magical acts being performed, but nothing that was taken seriously by any officials.

The extremely tolerant government of Pennsylvania was based on principals established by The Religious Society of Friends (the Quakers), and held only one witch trial during its first 40 years (1681-1720). While the common folk may have had a fear of witches, the prevailing enlightened attitude created a climate where a belief in magic does not appear to have thrived. It is not surprising that the few actual records relating to witchcraft from colonial Pennsylvania (including the area that is now the state of Delaware) reflect a mind-set that was very different from that in the Massachusetts and Connecticut colonies.

While the government of Pennsylvania was relatively progressive, it wasn’t immune from basic human nature, which often views foreign people and their practices as threatening. Such was the case when William Penn removed Swedish colonists from their developed prime lands along the Delaware River without compensation (Becker 1992b). This “fear of the foreign” is also reflected in the 1683 trial of Swedish immigrant Margaret Mattson, one of the few witch trials in Pennsylvania.

This trial is recorded in Colonial Records of Pennsylvania (1852, I:93-96), which notes that the Provincial Council met in the newly established “city” of Philadelphia on “7th 12th Mo 1683” where “Margaret Mattson and Yeshro Hendrickson, [were] Examined and about to be proved Witches.” The board ordered that their husbands each post “fifty pounds” to insure the appearance of these women at a hearing on 27th February (12th Month 1683/84). William Penn was to preside at the trial of these alleged witches. Interestingly, Yeshro Hendrickson’s name does not appear in later records regarding the trial. She may have died in the interval before the proceedings.
Margaret Mattson spoke only Swedish, revealing her to be a woman outside the rapidly expanding English society (cf., Henningsen 1998). At the hearing, multilingual Lasse Cock acted as her interpreter (cf., Becker 1986, 1992a) and James Claypoole served as interpreter for William Penn. The “Petty Jury Impanned” included the usual 12 men. They listened to the testimony, including hearsay allegations dating back 20 years. Most of this “evidence” involved bewitchment of cattle.

After the presentation of the evidence, Penn charged the jury and they soon returned with a brilliant verdict that “Brought her in Guilty of haveing the Common fame of a witch, but not guilty in manner and forme as Shee stands Indicted.” Even though she was found guilty of “haveing the Common fame of a witch”, no punishment was enacted and she apparently walked free. The light sentence in the Mattson case is typical of the few witch trials that did occur in Pennsylvania. Most cases were dismissed with fines or reprimands, or were simply discharged for lack of evidence.

**WITCH BOTTLES**

As mentioned previously, it was common for people in both Europe and the American colonies to utilize white magic charms to protect themselves against black magic. While many charms have been reported, a lack of regularity in form and context and the frequent use of perishable materials make it difficult to recover and identify these objects during archaeological excavations. An exception is the “witch bottle”, which, under the right circumstances, may survive to be identified centuries after it was created.

Witch bottles originated in central England, in a very specific area where their use remained concentrated for more than three centuries. In Suffolk, where the largest number of English witch bottles have been reported, the period from A.D. 1640 to the 1660s were the most active years for the trials of witches and wizards (Gurdon 1893:172-174). This part of England was home to numbers of Quakers who became part of William Penn’s “great experiment” in the New World. Although these were often well-educated families, folk traditions were strongly transmitted across the ocean.

The many witch bottles known from English contexts (Merrifield 1954, 1955, 1987) give a clear picture of their construction, which was mimicked in the American colonies. A witch bottle was created through several essential steps. First, a sealable glass bottle or ceramic jug was obtained. Then, urine was deposited in the bottle along with sharp objects such as pins and needles. Next, a suitable location to install the witch bottle was selected. Typically, this would be under a hearthstone or doorway, as these parts of a house were viewed as most vulnerable to the entry of spirits. The last step was to bury the sealed charm upside down to “invert” the magical spell. In addition to warding off the evil forces of a black magical conjurer, witch bottles were considered to be capable of sending the evil spell back to the originator.

In England, the preferred container was a narrow necked, large bellied “stoneware” jug, typically adorned with the face of a bearded man (Fig. 1) (Hume 1958). These hard-fired ceramic jugs, known as “bellarmines” or “grey beards”, were commonly covered with a salt glaze of a brown or mottled gray color. Bellarmines were produced in northern Europe at least since the late 15th or early 16th century. The bearded face, or mask, molded onto the neck or upper belly of bellarmines also is said by some authors to resemble the face of a warlock. This may have been a significant factor in their selection as containers for witch bottles in England.

Merrifield (1955:202) realized quite early in his survey of the archaeological evidence for witchcraft that stoneware bellarmines were not the only containers used for this magical purpose. Holmes (1951) suggested that there was a gradual shift away from using bellarmines and increasing use of glass bottles in England. No bellarmines are known to have been used as witch bottles in colonial America.
Numerous authors describe the use of urine and other agents in witch bottles (Blagrave 1671:154-5, Merrifield 1955:198). "How persons that shall unbewitch others by putting Urin into a Bottle, or by casting Excrement into the fire, or nailing of Horse-shoes at Mens doors, can wholly clear themselves from being white witches, I am not able to understand" (Mather 1684:269). Despite this statement by an early New England skeptic, urine and other agents needed to construct a witch bottle were gathered and used by practitioners of magic for more than another 100 years. Archaeologists recovering broken or unsealed witch bottles can use modern tests to look for chemical traces of urine, such as phosphorous.

A simpler and more reliable indicator is the presence of pins and/or sharp objects inside the bottle. Pins often survive in witch bottles long after urine has seeped out or evaporated. Bent or crooked pins also were used to drive witches from a churn and for other magical remedies. Interestingly, the feeling of a pricking or a pins-and-needles sensation was taken as a symptom of being bewitched (Gurdon 1893:181-182).

As mentioned previously, the archaeological context of a possible witch bottled should be considered in its identification. Chimneys and doorways were considered as vulnerable entries that needed to be protected against the intrusion of demons, spirits, and malevolent night airs. Placement of a witch bottle might be beneath, just outside, or near these locations.

AMERICAN WITCH BOTTLES
To the best of the author’s knowledge, a total of six witch bottles have now been identified from contexts in the northeastern part of the United States (Table 1). The majority, like those known from England, were dislodged from their original place of deposition and were found in secondary contexts. Only a few were recovered during the course of formal archaeological excavations, and in only two cases is the original find-spot known. In both instances, these bottles were placed in an inverted position. A brief description of the six American witch bottles known to date is as follows.
Table 1. American Witch Bottles Known to Date

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Container</th>
<th>Approx. Date</th>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Essington, PA</td>
<td>green glass bottle</td>
<td>1740</td>
<td>6 pins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewes, DE</td>
<td>“bottle”</td>
<td>1700-1750?</td>
<td>“pins”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horn Point, MD</td>
<td>glass bottle</td>
<td>1750-1760?</td>
<td>17 pins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providence, RI</td>
<td>clear glass bottle</td>
<td>1780-1820?</td>
<td>6 pins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia Beach, VA</td>
<td>glass phial</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>25 pins, 3 nails</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pittsburgh, PA</td>
<td>glass bottle</td>
<td>1800?</td>
<td>9 pins, 3 needles, 2 shoe insoles, felt</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Essington Witch Bottle

The Essington witch bottle was found by the author in Essington, Pennsylvania at excavations on Great Tinicum Island (36DE3) and was the first charm of this type recognized in the United States (Becker 1978, 1980). The Essington example, which is squat in form and very dark green in color (Fig. 2), was amply described and illustrated in a previous volume of *Pennsylvania Archaeologist* (Becker 1978:1-11), therefore its description here will be brief. The bottle type dates to about 1730-1740. When found, the bottle was still in its inverted position with its associated artifacts and contents intact, except for the urine (Becker 1978, 1980).

Six spherical headed pins (Fig. 3) constitute the entire artifact assemblage recovered from within this tightly plugged bottle. The number of pins, six in this case, is considered significant as hexagonal symbols were often used to ward off evil powers (Becker 1978:2). The Essington witch bottle had been carefully buried in a specifically prepared small hole just large enough to accept it. The two other artifacts that were found in this hole were immediately in contact with the inverted shoulder of the bottle; an association so close as to preclude the possibility that they had accidentally fallen into the hole prior to placing the bottle in an inverted position. One of the objects was a long bone of a medium sized bird (possibly a partridge) and the other was a black-glazed redware pottery sherd from a small bowl (Fig. 3). A whittled wooden plug (Fig. 3) was used to seal the bottle.

Figure 2. The Essington witch bottle.
The Lewes Witch Bottle

Excavations at the site of an early Colonial period Dutch fort in what now is Lewes, Delaware yielded a probable witch bottle that went unrecognized as such until after the author identified the Essington example. During research on another project, this author reread the many publications relating to the excavations at the Swanendael settlement in the Lewes area and noted a reference to “a bottle with pits in it!” (Bonine 1964:14).

The bottle was excavated in a feature described by Bonine (1964:14) as a small oval dark area cutting into the rectangular area on the north corner of Feature 191 (an exceptionally large postmold associated with the south bastion of the fort). Bonine (1964:14) identified this oval dark area as a “later intrusion” into Feature 191, but said no more about the bottle. The excavation was in an area near what was the doorway of the old farm house built after the palisades of the fort had rotted away. This author infers that this was a witch bottle deposited in a dug hole (which intruded upon Feature 191), but the type and date of that bottle was never recorded, nor were the pins counted. It is uncertain if the bottle was inverted, however, based on the context and description, the author is confident that this bottle is an example of the English tradition of white magic.

Over the years, the author interviewed several people who had participated in the Lewes excavations of 1964 and earlier, but none recall the bottle or what became of any of the artifacts. The author remains hopeful that some day this bottle and its contents, which probably date to ca. A.D. 1700 to 1750, will reappear.

The Horn Point Witch Bottle

In the fall of 1972, archaeological investigations were conducted at Horn Point at The Maryland Environmental and Estuarine Study Center in Providence, Maryland. During excavations at this site on Maryland’s Eastern shore, the pin filled neck of an inverted olive green glass bottle was discovered. The body of the bottle appears to have been shorn off during earthmoving activities at the site, but it seems to have been placed near the rear of a brick structure. Fortunately, the ball-headed straight pins had all migrated to the neck area prior to the damage to this container. Martha Schiek, who was participating in the excavation, recognized this find as evidence of ritual activity (Schiek and Thomas 1974).
The neck of the bottle indicates that it probably was made during the period from ca. 1750-1760. A total of 17 pins were found in or around the neck, some being straight while others were slightly bent or broken. This author suspects that 18 pins had originally been present, as multiples of the “magical” number six were often used. Disruption to the site prevented the initial context from being identified, but when the excavators were searching the disturbed area for the body of the bottle, a number of glass fragments, splinters of bone, and a horseshoe were noted. Any or all of these may have been associated with the original deposit.

The Cove Lands Charm
A witch bottle recovered during excavations near Providence, Rhode Island, and known locally “the Cove Lands charm”, employed a hand blown clear glass phial as a container (cf., Virginia Beach, below). Many of the earliest known English witch bottles used such small containers, perhaps because they were less costly than bellarmines or larger glass bottles. This tubular container is 92 mm long and varies from 19 to 25 mm in diameter. These phials commonly contained medicines and were used over a long period of time. The Cove Lands example may date from between 1780 and 1820, based on general features. Six straight pins were found within this example, but no other items were identified in the vicinity of its find spot.

By coincidence, Martha Schiek (who recognized the Horn Point witch bottle) had been working with the excavation team and later reported the find to this author (Schiek, personal communication, 2005). The find site appears to be behind a building dated to the period from 1800 to 1850, but the witch bottle may have been associated with an earlier structure that stood on the site. The author speculates that original location may have been associated with the rear door of a structure; a common location for the placement of witch bottles.

Virginia Beach Witch Bottle
On a point of land near Virginia Beach, Virginia, specifically identified as Great Neck, a light green glass phial was reported to have been found by Mr. Keith White in the fall of 1979, while he was surface collecting the area. White reported this find to Floyd Painter (1980:65, 67), noting that it had been “buried bottom up in the soil a few inches from the edge of a thirty-foot cliff.” Painter recognized the inversion of the phial and the “mass of brass pins” inside the phial as characteristics of a witch bottle. The 20 or more oval headed brass pins, plus 4 or possibly 5 spherical headed pins (n=24?), were mixed with 3 or more iron nails. Painter reports that the heads of the majority of the pins appeared to be oriented toward the base of the phial.

Painter (1980) suggests a date of 1690 to 1750 for this phial, but, in the author’s opinion, the regularity of the shoulder and lip suggest a later date. The area of the find is near that of a 17th century house said to have been owned, but not necessarily occupied, by Ensign Thomas Keeling. No surface remains of that house were seen and no research was conducted to locate the building foundations or a chain of title.

The Market Street Witch Bottle
Other than the Essington Witch Bottle (Becker 1978, 1980), the author is aware of only one other witch bottle recovery in Pennsylvania. The second bottle was found in 1981 by the Market Street Site District Urban Archaeological Project, which was initiated to recover data from two city blocks in Pittsburgh prior to the excavation of this area for the construction of the corporate headquarters of PPG Industries. The Market Street area is within that section of downtown Pittsburgh that covers the original 18th century village that had grown around Fort Pitt at the confluence of the “three rivers”. The historical importance of this area is well recognized, leading to this archaeological project.

Alexandrowicz (1986) relates that this witch bottle was identified from the thousands of bottles recovered from cisterns, wells, and other contexts during archaeological excavations in downtown Pittsburgh. The Market Street witch bottle was recovered from a brick-lined cylindrical cistern (Feature 15, in Area 1), 11 feet in diameter and dug 15 feet into sterile soil. The witch bottle was recovered from Stratum 2, immediately over the sterile soil at the bottom of the cistern; however, the precise location of the witch bottle within F-15 is not noted.
The Market Street witch bottle (Fig. 4) is a small free-blown glass cylinder of aquamarine color, commonly known as a “porter-type” bottle. Alexandrowicz (1984) describes the bottle as being a “mallet shaped, open pontiled specimen” that was manufactured at the O’Hara and Craig Glassworks established in 1797. This factory was directly opposite the newly forming city of Pittsburgh, on the other side of the Monongahela River. These bottles were produced in the Monongahela District between 1797 and 1850 (Innes 1976). This example is a small version of its type, measuring less than 3” (75 mm) in diameter and 7 1/4” (184 mm) long and holding less than a pint.

The Market Street witch bottle was found still sealed with a cork and containing “a murky fluid” along with fragments of felt, 9 brass pins, 3 needles and 2 shoe “insole patterns” (Alexandrowicz 1986:125-126). In his letter of 1984, Alexandrowicz describes the felt taken out of the bottle as being “brown colored” and he noted that a volunteer laboratory worker discarded the cork. Apparently, the project volunteer who unsealed the bottle also poured the liquid down a drain. Some residue remains in the bottle and could be tested.

Unique to the Market Street witch bottle are the two nearly complete shoe insoles or insole patterns (Fig. 5) that were wrapped inside the piece of felt. The unusual nature of these items merits a brief note. If, as the author believes, witch bottles were not simply generic magical charms, but made as charms to reverse a bewitchment, then the insoles may provide a clue as to why this particular bottle was made. The author speculates that the victim of the bewitchment may have had some type of foot disorder, possibly with bilateral symptoms, and attempted to use these patterns as a means of counteracting its effect.

Roughly centered on the reassembled pieces of felt were nine embedded brass pins and, after a short gap, two iron needles. A third needle became dislodged from the fabric. Since no tiny holes or piercings were evident on the felt, we have no idea where the third needle was located or even if it was attached to the felt. The pins are drawn and have stamped heads, a process reflecting the use of the Lemuel Wright patent of 1824. The total number of “pins and needles” found in this bottle was 12, twice the number of pins in the Essington bottle and another multiple of the number six.
Dating the Market Street witch bottle is somewhat problematic. A firm date of 1824 is cited for one of the objects found in the cistern, leading Alexandrowicz (1984) to infer that all the material in the pit postdate 1824. However, this author believes this witch bottle was probably created decades earlier, and was deposited in the cistern when it was filled with construction debris around 1850. It is quite possible that the construction debris came from the demolition of one or more nearby houses, one of which likely originally contained the witch bottle.

From the readily available evidence, the author infers that this witch bottle was associated with a structure that John Irwin, or one of his neighbors, or predecessors, had erected in this area. Since businesses and residences were built all along Market Street from a very early date, and all the lots were narrow, a witch bottle buried behind one house would not be far from a lot boundary line. Pittsburgh’s extremely rapid urban development after 1800 led to larger structures frequently replacing smaller early ones (Cowin 1985), ending with the construction of the impressive PPG Industries building on this site. It seems likely that at some time after ca. 1850, a larger structure replaced an earlier one in this general area. In the excavation of a larger cellar for the new structure, parts of the previous building foundations were apparently dug up, with some of this material being dumped into this cistern as a fill. The removal of the upper levels of the foundation, as well as the earth immediately adjacent to it, likely unearthed the witch bottle that had been placed near the “wall roots” of that or some other earlier building. Consequently, the author speculates that the Market Street witch bottle was constructed ca. A.D. 1800.

The Market Street witch bottle, the most recent example known from an American context, has parallels in two 19th century witch bottles known from England (Copson 1995:142, Hume 1998:19). The existence of these artifacts demonstrates the survival of this tradition into the 19th century on both continents.
CONCLUSION

Witch bottles and other magical charms found in archaeological excavations shed light on the existence of folk magic in the colonies derived from European traditions. The two witch bottles recovered in Pennsylvania are notable as they come from both the eastern and western reaches of the state. It seems likely that other witch bottles were deposited at points in between, although none have been reported to date. This may reflect a lack of understanding of the artifact type by investigators rather than a paucity of examples.

It is interesting to note that in addition to the Pennsylvania examples, the Lewes, Delaware example (Bonine 1964) was from a Quaker community, as Delaware in Penn's time formed the lower three counties of his colony. Thus, three of the six confirmed examples likely relate to immigrants from the roughly the same area in England. The Lewes and Essington bottles may represent the earliest use of this custom, while the Pittsburgh example may be one of the last of these charms.

There is still much to be learned regarding witch bottles and the practice of magic in colonial America. For example, the color of the glass, the number of pins, the inclusion of particular objects, and the placement of the bottle may reflect ideas about witchcraft as yet unrevealed. A larger database is needed to properly address these questions.

Ironically, undiscovered witch bottles may continue to contain "powerful magic", this time in the form of analytic potential. Ancient urine preserved in a bottle could offer insightful clues to the health and diet of the charm's creator. For this reason alone, careful site excavation and laboratory handling of such artifacts is essential.

The popular appeal of all matters relating to folklore may lead some archaeologists, in England as well as America, to fanciful speculations regarding finds of any bottles. It is important to consider the bottle type, contents, location, and placement before categorizing an artifact as a witch bottle. It is hoped that the descriptions presented in this paper will help archaeologists recognize these intriguing artifacts, which will, in turn, result in improved understanding of the use and geographical distribution of these cultural traits. The author encourages other researchers who have encountered possible witch bottles to contact him at the address listed at the end of this paper, so that the database of witch bottles can be expanded.

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