

STANDARD TIME HAD A ROUGH TIME IN BANGOR*

In November 1883, the nation took an important step in modernizing its transportation and communication systems when cities and towns across the country adopted a uniform system for telling time. Previously, every major city had kept its own "local time," based on its particular position relative to the sun. Thus, when it was noon in Philadelphia, it was 11:52 AM in Washington, but already 12:04 in New York and 12:16 in Boston. This situation had caused no particular difficulty in the horse-and-buggy age, but as rails stretched across the country this multiplicity of local times began to play havoc with train schedules. After some attempts to adjust to the needs of their situation, the railroads finally decided in 1883 to adopt what was then a radical innovation: "standard time." Following their lead, most municipalities soon thereafter adopted the new standard time as official.¹

There were holdouts, however. Stewart Holbrook, writing more than half a century later, gave this characterization of one of the more divisive incidents connected with the coming of standard time:

Up in Bangor, Maine, Mayor Dogberry was aroused as no other Maine man had been since Neal Dow fastened Prohibition on the Pine Tree State. Just what prompted Dogberry to his fury isn't to be known. He vetoed a city ordinance that provided Bangor should adopt Eastern Standard Time, and with great feeling shouted that "It is unconstitutional, being an attempt to change the immutable laws of God Almighty and hard on the working man by changing day into night." He went even further and threatened to have his constables prevent the sextons from ringing the church bells on the new and unspeakable time.²

*With research assistance by James B. Vickery, III.

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Downtown Bangor before the turn of the century. A commercial center for outlying farm communities as well as a busy lumber port and manufacturing city, Bangor was at times torn between prevailing conservative values and a progressive political outlook. The move to adopt standard time in 1883 reflected this dichotomy. Bangor Historical Society.

Holbrook's account was not entirely accurate. Not only does the record show no evidence that the mayor resorted to shouting and threats, but his name wasn't even Dogberry. Holbrook borrowed the appellation — most appropriately — from Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. Nevertheless, the story itself is authentic, and, as Holbrook suggests, there was indeed much ado about Bangor's fleeting attempt to hold back the tides of modernism.

To a nineteenth-century audience, the Bangor mayor's moral outrage might not have appeared quite so misplaced. The change to standard time required some very basic shifts in thinking about local society and its place in the universe. To most people, local time was both natural and logical. After all, what determines time? Is it not the (apparent) movement of the sun in the sky? When the sun is at its highest, it is noon; but as

everyone knows, the sun reaches its zenith above Bangor before it does so over Boston. By this definition, therefore, noon moves westward by degrees, arriving at New York before coming to Philadelphia and then to Pittsburgh. In subtle ways, this concept of time had reinforced a parochial outlook that was comforting to a nation of small, self-contained "island" communities in which lives revolved around local issues, local industries, and local cultures. In nineteenth-century America, patterns of living and working moved to the rhythms of the natural day or to the progress of the agricultural season.³ The "outside" world was often so remote that discrepancies of minutes or even hours counted for little. Local time was a social as well as a natural reality to most nineteenth-century Americans.

New inventions, however, changed all that. A telegraph operator jiggled a key in one place, and another operator hundreds of miles away got his message at the same moment. The railroad appeared on the scene, and travelers rushed at unprecedented speeds across the miles. In a number of ways the inner stability of small-town cultures was shaken as changing transportation and communication systems knit the country into a much larger unity. For many, standard time not only violated natural ways of thinking about time but seemed to reinforce the fact that local values were becoming less relevant as this new national outlook emerged.

It was the railroad that served as the most prominent symbol of this national outlook, and it was indeed the expanding railroad system that spearheaded the movement for standard time. Those who operated and those who used the system found the hodgepodge of "local times" most troubling. It was increasingly difficult to maintain schedules and avoid collisions while every station operated on a different time. Before long, therefore, each railroad system adopted a uniform time for its whole line, usually based on its headquarters city. A railroad station might have two clocks, one for "train time" and the other for "city time." Larger terminals serving more than one road sometimes had several clocks, each with hands pointing in different directions. The traveler took his choice, depending on where he was going.

In a sense, this was a compromise between the individual rail lines' need for uniformity and the desire for some retention of local time. Yet it was far from satisfactory. "The inconveniences of such a system, if system it can be called," the *American Railroad Journal* complained in 1857, "must be apparent to all."⁴ Nevertheless, it was not until 1883 that the railroads finally adopted a uniform system of standard time agreeable to all.⁵ At noon on Sunday, November 18, 1883, the date agreed upon, most railways changed their clocks so that the minute hands all pointed in the same direction at the same time. Only the hour hands varied, depending on whether the clocks were in the Eastern, Central, Mountain, or Pacific time zones.

The action by the railroads presented a challenge to the whole country. Since there was no legal mandate for standard time, municipalities could join the new timekeeping plan or retain the old "local time." A good many cities voted to change their clocks. In Boston, for instance, a special committee of the City Council deliberated and then submitted a lengthy report urging the council to "place upon record its official endorsement of the change."⁶ The recommendation was accepted. In Chicago, on the other hand, the City Council hesitated because, as the *New York Times* explained, "some of the clerks at the City Hall were violently opposed to any change, imagining that because the time is nine minutes slower [than local time], they will have to work longer." Despite pockets of resistance, the *Times* editorialized, "in a short time, the new standards will be accepted everywhere between the Atlantic and the Pacific, and then all intelligent persons will ask why the change was not made years ago."⁷

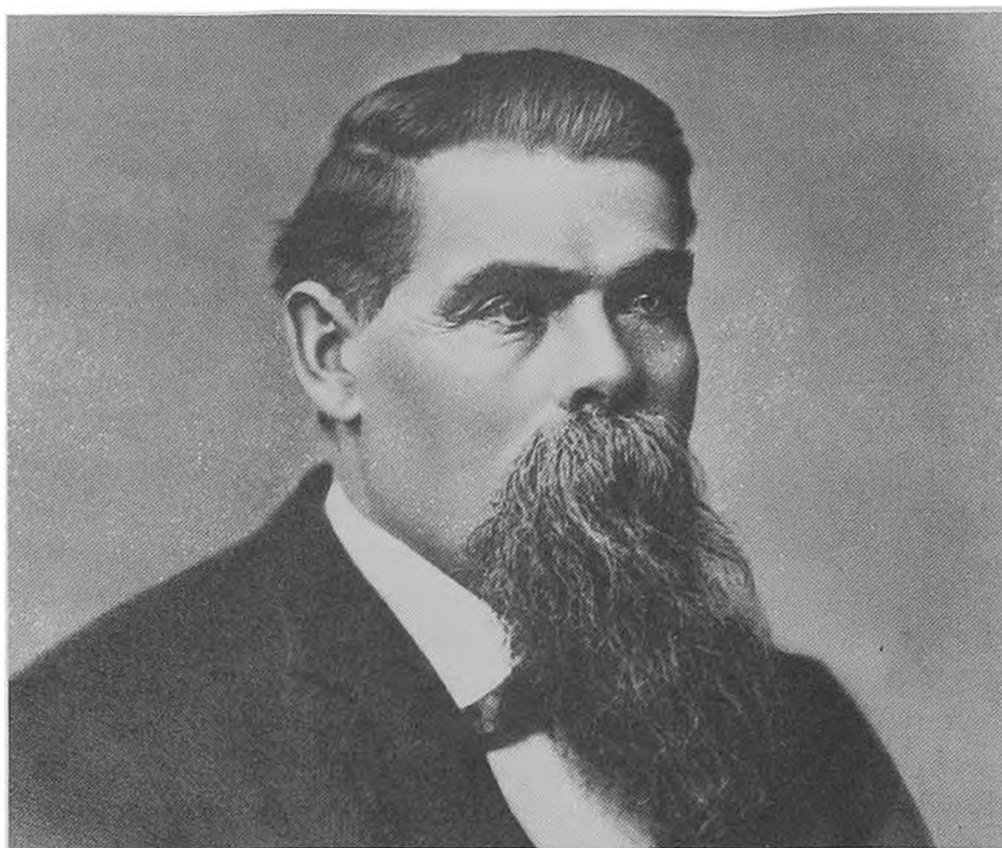
That brings us back to Bangor, where the issue became a cause célèbre. Bangor at that time was a lumber town with a "rather country atmosphere." Like many cities of the age, Bangor held a comfortably provincial view of the world. Yet it had its cosmopolitan side as well, symbolized by the number of factories along the banks of the Penobscot and Kenduskeag and its thriving worldwide trade in lumber and timber. As a port of entry, Bangor boasted consulates from Brazil, Uruguay, and

Italy and a custom house that accommodated a considerable shipping trade from foreign shores.⁸ A blend of old attitudes and new, Bangor found its options in November 1883 by no means clear. At the center of the time controversy stood Frederick A. Cummings — Holbrook's "Mayor Dogberry." Cummings was not at all a reactionary; he was a prosperous and able businessman who, during the Civil War, had served with great distinction as an officer in the 1st Maine Heavy Artillery.⁹

It all started quietly enough. On Tuesday evening, November 6, the Bangor City Council voted unanimously to adopt standard time for the city, never imagining the controversy they would thereby set in motion.¹⁰ The bombshell fell the following Monday, November 12, when Cummings, to the amazement of the council, vetoed the standard time ordinance. The *Bangor Commercial* printed the full text of the mayor's veto message, with a sidelong comment that His Honor's speech contained "some rather original, if not very forcible reasons, against the adoption of a progressive step which has long been demanded and which is certain to be taken sooner or later by this and all other intelligent communities."¹¹

And what were these "original, if not very forcible" reasons? Cummings's basic thinking was summed up in an argument bristling with data and scientific fact: "If we do cause all of our clocks to point a certain hour at high noon, it is not so, but twenty-four minutes, fifty-six and three-quarter seconds from that time" (the odd minutes and seconds being the difference between Bangor local time and Eastern Standard Time).¹² There were other matters, such as the constitutional right of a city council to tamper with "the customs of a people handed down from time immemorial," but Cummings's central theme was the preservation of what he regarded as "genuine" time. He stood with the forces of nature, opposed to the intrusion of the railroads' system of "arbitrary" time.

The irony of the situation is that the supposedly true time was not so true. Because of seasonal variations in the length of the solar day, the sun is rarely at its zenith when "local time" shows noon. On the day before the proposed changeover, for



Mayor Frederick A. Cummings — Stewart Holbrook's "Mayor Dogberry."
Bangor Public Library

instance, when clocks were all on local time, the sun was actually at its highest over Bangor about fifteen minutes before the clocks struck twelve. (In the middle of February, on the other hand, actual sun time was about fourteen minutes later than local time, and so it varied from day to day.)¹³ The day scheduled for the adoption of standard time was fast approaching, however, and the future of Bangor's time still hung in the balance. All depended on whether the City Council would sustain the mayor's veto or override it, and the next meeting of the council was not to be held until Monday evening, some thirty hours after the changeover was scheduled to go into effect.

In the interim, arguments on both sides grew in intensity, partly because Bangor was situated near the edge of the newly

devised Eastern Time Zone and faced a relatively large alteration in its timekeeping. For this and other reasons, the controversy grew bitter. Nevertheless, the Maine Central Railroad, unaffected by Bangor's internal politics, prepared to change its clocks all along its line. Portland, less than 150 miles from Bangor, planned to have its courts, businesses, and schools adopt the new standard, and there was strong pressure in Bangor to do likewise regardless of the council's action — or inaction.¹⁴

At the same time, there was a good deal of support for the mayor's stand against the newfangled, unnatural innovation. Since the strongest local proponent of standard time was Payson Tucker, general manager of the Maine Central Railroad, the standpatters argued that they were defending "God Almighty's time" from the threat of "Payson Tucker's time."¹⁵ By Sunday, the opposing forces had been lined up. There were four principal clocks in the city, three on churches and one on a bank building. At 11:05 AM, local time, the clocks on the Congregational and Universalist churches were stopped, so as to be restarted later on standard time.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the bank clock at Mercantile Square continued to show the old time, oblivious of all that was transpiring around it.

With both sides thus represented, the fourth clock — on the Unitarian Church steeple — became a pawn in a game played by the clashing factions. By agreement among the three churches, all their clocks were to be changed to standard time, *provided* that their respective parish committees agreed. Since one member of the Unitarian committee dissented, the Unitarian clock remained on local time even after the fateful noon hour. That evening, however, a prankster surreptitiously set it according to standard time. Back to local time it went in the morning.¹⁷

The problem of the Unitarian clock was not to be settled easily. Back in 1852 the City Council had authorized procurement of "a clock with four dials" to be placed in the tower of the Unitarian Church at a cost to the city treasury not to exceed \$500. The order had been duly carried out and the bill paid as

stipulated. It seemed, therefore, that the city was the owner of the clock.¹⁸ But did that give the municipal government the right to determine how it was to be operated? The Gordian knot was finally severed on Monday when the church's Standing Committee voted unanimously to relieve the city of further responsibility for the care of the clock. Now, having taken control of the timepiece, the Standing Committee announced that it would be run on standard time.¹⁹

The crucial moment came on Monday evening, November 19, when the City Council met to consider the mayor's veto. The meeting room was crowded with citizens, and a petition was presented by an influential group of signers urging the council to override the veto. After a heated discussion the vote was taken, and it became clear that the issue was now firmly in the grip of partisan politics. The four Republican aldermen voted to override the Democratic mayor's veto, while the three Democrats voted to sustain. Since a two-thirds majority was necessary to overturn the veto, the effort failed and the bid for standard time collapsed — at least officially.²⁰

This did not mean that standard time itself was dead in Bangor. Far from it. The trains, the post office, and the banks all operated in accordance with the new system. Although schools opened and closed by local time, most businesses were planning to shift to standard time. The register of deeds announced that he would continue to use the old time, but opera lovers were informed that the doors of the Opera House would be opened at 7 o'clock by standard time, corresponding to 7:30 local time.²¹ People making appointments had to specify whether the meeting time was to be standard or local. Then, if they were to be prompt, they had to remember which town clocks showed them the agreed-upon time.

The city's recalcitrance became a subject of interest around the country. The *Railroad Gazette* commented that Bangor, despite the mayor's veto, would "probably have to go by United States time after a while, and if it does not, it matters little to the rest of the world. It will have to travel by [Eastern Standard Time] whether it eats and sleeps by it or not."²² The *Boston*

Advertiser, on the other hand, published an editorial endorsing Mayor Cummings's stand. The *Bangor Commercial* reproduced the Boston editorial under the heading, "The Mayor's Single Newspaper Supporter."²³

Among those caught in the bind was a group of businessmen whose firms occupied the buildings around Mercantile Square. Linked to a broader network of outside commercial contracts, they hoped to conduct their businesses by standard time. Directly in their midst, however, stood the prominent bank building clock, still marching serenely to the drumbeat of local time. The clock was beyond the control of the businessmen since it was directly owned by the city which had long controlled and paid for its operation. On January 1, a month after the first assault on local time, several prominent citizens made a formal request to the City Council to change the clock's time. Predictably, the four Republican aldermen voted for the petition and the three Democrats voted against it. The Republican majority in the lower house (Common Council) also supported the petition, nine to six. But then, just as predictably, Mayor Cummings vetoed the order.²⁴

The veto message is worth quoting in full, since it expresses the full vigor of the mayor's determination to champion the Old Order against the inroads of impious newfangled ideas. The message (later attributed to Mayor "Dogberry") is a classic defense of all that is familiar, natural, and indeed democratic, and an indictment of the outside forces — the railroad and its arbitrary system of time — that threatened local traditions. "It is one of the immutable laws of God," Cummings explained,

that the hours of noon, sunrise, and sunset should occur at different periods of the day at different localities on the earth's surface. The law was undoubtedly established at the creation and has remained upon Nature's statute book since that day. Therefore, I do not believe that any municipal regulation or railroad laws have power to change it. In this locality there seems to be a very small majority of well meaning

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Bangor's controversial clocks: the Mercantile Square clock (above), and the Universalist Church steeple clock (next page). Bangor Public Library and James Vickery Collection.

citizens who are imbued with the infatuation that fiat time would better satisfy themselves than true or solar time and they therefore persist in their attempts to force an obnoxious and ridiculous measure upon this community: that is, to set back the public clock twenty-five minutes to correspond with solar time at Philadelphia. This farce is styled Standard Time.

As this scheme is not endorsed by one-fourth of the general public, as it does manifest injustice to all laborers and mechanics or others who labor ten hours per day, as it turns day into night, as it teaches wholesale falsehoods and deceptions, and is in no way adapted to the wants of the general public, for whose interests all is or should be; and last of all as only 16 persons out of 16 or 17 thousand asked for it, I therefore return the bill to change the public clock in [Mercantile] Square to so-called Standard Time, back to the Board where it originated without my official approval and signature. ²⁵



The city now found itself in an impossible situation. The Republican *Whig and Courier* declared that the mayor's "absurdly ponderous veto" had given the City of Bangor an "undue and annoying prominence in newspaper squibs all over the country."²⁶ The purpose of standard time had been to simplify matters, not to complicate them. Yet, as the *Whig and Courier* put it, the "acerbity and discordance" resulting from the attempt to adopt the system destroyed the "benefits to be derived from uniformity."²⁷ Therefore, at the instigation of the Republican majority, the council voted to let the people decide for or against standard time.²⁸

Municipal elections were to be held on Monday, March 10. The voters would choose the coming year's council and would

determine whether Cummings or one of his two opponents would fill the mayor's seat. At the same time, citizens would be given an opportunity to express their preferences in regard to how time should be told in their city.

The referendum confirmed the mayor's assessment of public sentiment, particularly his sense for the "manifest injustice" standard time was thought to impose upon the city's laborers and mechanics. The most decisive defeats for standard time came in wards with the heaviest numbers of working-class residents (who apparently feared that the change would lengthen their workday). But as it was, standard time had few supporters anywhere in the city. It was defeated by a margin of almost six to one. In wards that gave Cummings his strongest support, local time garnered 90 percent of the vote. But even where Cummings did his worst, more than three-fourths of the voters supported local time.²⁹ Keepers of the public clocks had no choice but to yield to *vox populi*. On Friday of that week, the clocks of Bangor once again spoke with a single voice — the voice of local time.³⁰

Mayor Cummings did not fare so well in his bid for reelection. Most citizens expected that feelings for or against local time would be translated into votes for or against the mayor. But Cummings came in second among the three contestants, trailing the Republican candidate by 21 votes out of 3,324 votes cast. At the runoff twelve days later, Cummings's defeat was confirmed.³¹

Despite his personal defeat, Cummings had the satisfaction of seeing local time perpetuated for three more years before it finally succumbed to a higher authority. In early 1887 the Maine Legislature voted to have standard time instituted in the entire state. Now, all the societies owning and controlling the public clocks petitioned the new mayor, Charles F. Bragg, to join the rest of Maine in the change.

Mayor Bragg, remembering the referendum, was circumspect. His city solicitor, Henry L. Mitchell, ruled that he had no choice but to implement the state mandate, but still Bragg was not satisfied. As he reported:

I took advice of several of the best legal advisers of our city, who all agreed that my plain duty was to grant the petition, and that it could not be avoided. I therefore allowed the superintendent of clocks to set the clocks as requested, and gave the people due notice of the intended action . . . Everything was done that could be to make the change as easy as possible. It necessarily caused some inconvenience, however, but I am pleased to find so many of our citizens who are willing to sustain an officer in the performance of his duty, even when it is contrary to their personal wishes.³²

Reluctant to the last, Bangor adopted standard time on April 17, 1887. Local outlooks, local politics, and "God's own time" could hold out only so long against the tides of modernism.³³

NOTES

The author wishes to express his appreciation to the Bangor Historical Society and particularly to its president, James B. Vickery, for providing photocopies of newspaper articles and other original source material on which much of this history is based, as well as for general assistance in the course of the research. Copyright by Arnold A. Lasker.

¹For the history of standard time, see Carlton J. Corliss, *The Day of Two Noons* (Washington, D.C.: Association of American Railroads, 1941); John S. Allen, *Standard Time in America* (New York, 1951); Derek Howes, *Greenwich Time and the Discovery of the Longitude* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 120-24, 152-59; William Peirce Randel, "They Didn't Know What Time It Was," *American Heritage* 34 (October-November 1983): 102-06; Arnold A. Lasker, "Once Upon a Time, There Was Chaos," *Miami Herald*, October 29, 1983. The library of the Association of American Railroads (Washington, D.C.) has prepared an extensive mimeographed bibliography of their material on standard time.

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²Steward H. Holbrook, *The Story of American Railroads* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1947), p. 356.

³Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), p. 2.

⁴*American Railroad Journal* 30 (March 14, 1857).

⁵The history of standard time makes clear that the needs of the railroads were the main motivating force in its creation and development. Charles F. Dowd formulated his plan for time zones, basic to our present standard time, in a volume published in 1870. His *System of National Time and Its Application* showed how the plan would affect every station in the United States and Canada. It was William F. Allen, secretary of the General Railway Time Convention and editor of the *Official Railway Guide*, who hammered out the details of the system and kept after the leaders of the industry until the plan was finally adopted.

⁶Boston, City Council, Committee on Standard Time, *Report*, document 161-1883. On the basis of the committee's report, both houses of the council voted to institute standard time.

⁷*New York Times*, November 18, 1883.

⁸James B. Vickery, III, *Made in Bangor: Economic Emergence and Adaptation, 1834-1911* (Bangor: Bangor Historical Society, 1984); Vickery, letter to author, July 11, 1983.

⁹Horace Shaw and Charles J. House, *The First Maine Heavy Artillery, 1862-1865* (Portland, Maine, 1903), p. 393.

¹⁰*Bangor Whig and Courier*, November 7, 1883.

¹¹*Bangor Commercial*, November 16, 1883; *New York Times*, November 13, 1883.

¹²Cummings's reasoning was correct. With "noon" going around the earth (360 degrees) in twenty-four hours, it traverses 15 degrees of longitude each hour. Therefore, the local times along the meridians of 75, 90, 105, and 120 degrees (an hour apart from each other) are the bases for the Eastern, Central, Mountain, and Pacific standard times respectively. By the same token, the local times that existed before the change to standard time differed by four minutes (one-fifteenth of an hour) for each degree of longitude. Since Bangor local time was twenty-four minutes, fifty-six and three-quarters seconds later than 75 degree time, its time was based on a longitude of 68 degrees, 45 minutes, 48.75 seconds.

¹³The *World Almanac* shows, for each day of the year, the exact mean solar time when sundial solar noon occurs.

¹⁴*Commercial*, November 19, 1883. Bangor's two newspapers, the Republican *Whig and Courier* and the Democratic *Commercial*, contain numerous articles and editorials on the subject.

¹⁵The *Commercial*, November 13, 1913, summerized the controversy in an article titled "Bangor Agitated Over New Time 30 Years Ago."

¹⁶*Commercial*, November 19, 1883.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*, November 20, 1883.

¹⁹*Whig and Courier*, November 20, 1883.

²⁰Full reports of the meeting are to be found in the *Whig and Courier* and the *Commercial*, November 19, 1883.

²¹*Commercial*, November 19, 1883.

²²Editorial note in *Railroad Gazette*, November 23, 1883. In its very first issue (April 2, 1870), the *Gazette* had called for adoption of a uniform time standard for all U. S. railroads.

²³*Commercial*, November 21, 1883.

²⁴The petition and meeting were reported in the *Whig and Courier*, January 2, 1884. The controversy again generated a heated discussion in the chambers.

²⁵The veto message is printed in full in the *Commercial's* "Bangor Agitated Over New Time 30 Years Ago."

²⁶*Whig and Courier*, March 8, 1884.

²⁷*Ibid.*, November 29, 1883.

²⁸The *Whig and Courier*, although it supported standard time, editorialized (March 8, 1884) that "above all," Bangor needed "uniformity of time." The editor prayed for Bangor's "customary good sense and public spirit" in dealing with the question.

²⁹Complete returns for each ward are given in the *Whig and Courier*, March 11, 1884.

³⁰*Ibid.*, March 13, 1884.

³¹Cummings was defeated by Samuel F. Humphrey.

³²The petition, the opinion of City Solicitor Mitchell, and a public notice ordered by Mayor Bragg are set forth in an article titled "Uniform Time," in *Whig and Courier*, April 13, 1887. Bragg's statement is taken from "Mayor's Address," *Bangor Annual City Report*, 1888, p. 16.

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