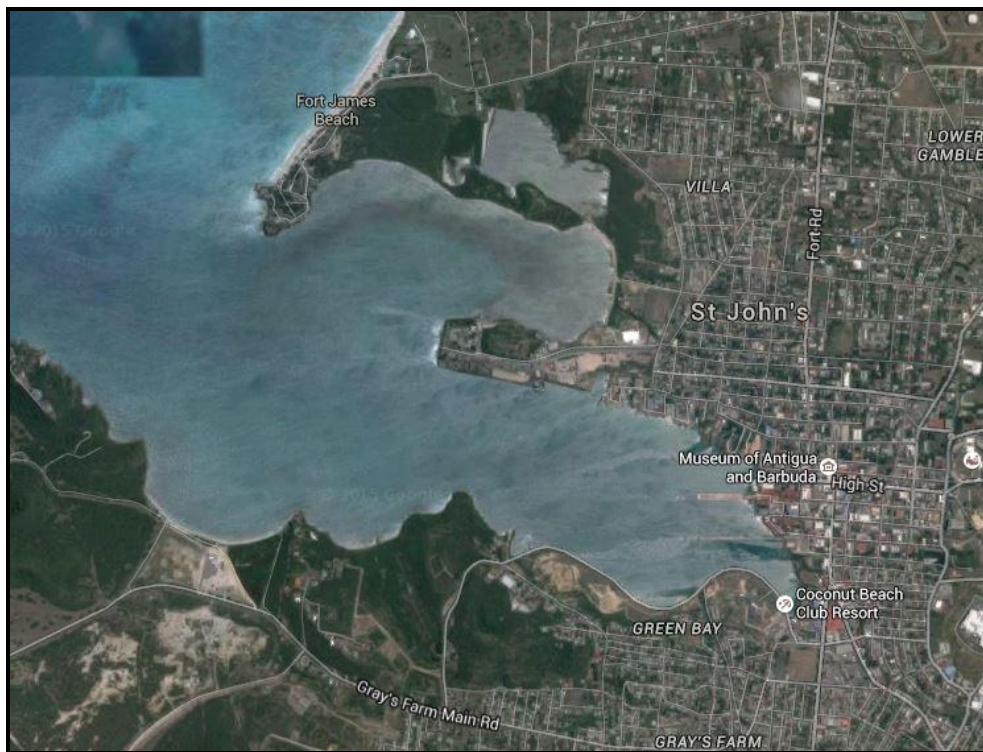


OF SOLDIERS, LEPERS, LUNATICS, RUM MAKERS, AND THE HISTORY OF RAT ISLAND

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Antigua, West Indies, 2019

Rat Island, located on the north side of St. John's Harbour, has a long and storied history, one that should not be forgotten in the face of gradual encroachment by a growing modern harbour facility.

Immediately after the British arrived in Antigua in the 1600s, they established a fort that grew over the years until it was abandoned in the mid-1700s. It then became a signal station, a home for lunatics and lepers, and, by the early 1900s, the site of a rum distillery. In what follows, we describe the different phases, with particular emphasis on the period when Rat Island was home to a small number of lunatics and lepers. The information on the phase when the island housed a fort comes courtesy of Dr. Reginald Murphy. The information on the rum distillery comes from Agnes Meeker. The story of the lunatics and lepers comes from my own research.



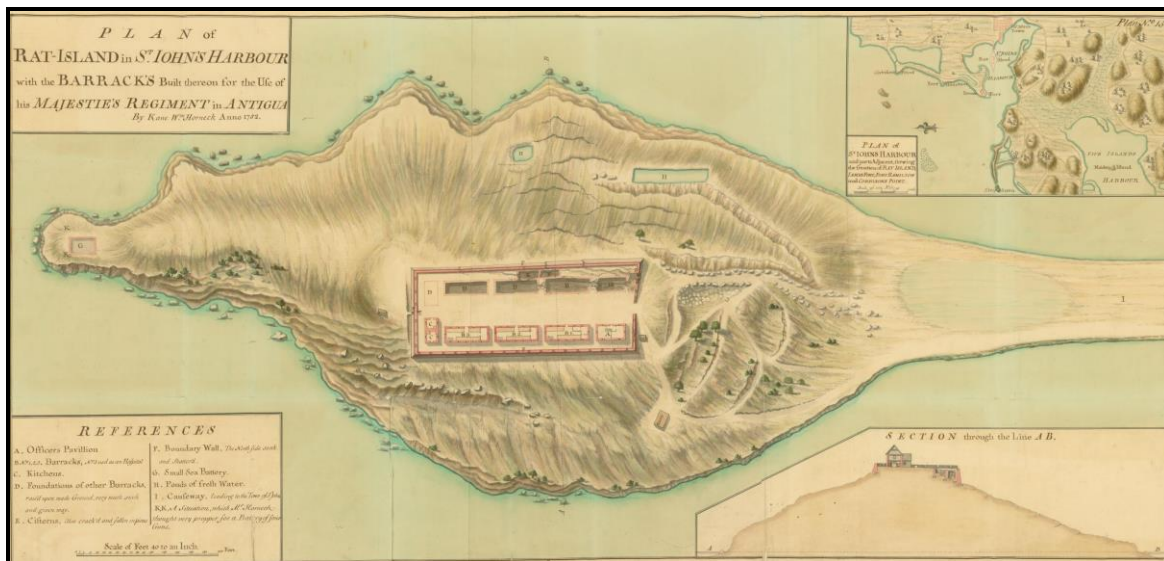
Google Map photo of St. John's Harbour c. 2014, with Rat Island in the middle.

Phase 1: The Fort

In 1672, Sir William Stapleton reported that he had built a small fort on what he called “Fort Island,” at the edge of St. John’s Harbour. Each plantation owner was ordered to provide “one slave in eight with axe and bill” to help clear the land. By 1702, there were 13 mounted and 6 unmounted guns, of which four were 12-pounders. In 1704, Captains Oliver and Home “were willing” to take charge of this fort and another below it, in case of emergency.

In 1739, probably precipitated by the outbreak of war, 100,000 bricks were ordered from England to build a barracks specifically to accommodate the 38th Regiment of Foot (1st Staffordshire), which had been posted to Antigua in 1707 and was scattered in billets around the island. The regiment moved into the barracks in 1741 and a causeway to the mainland was built in about 1748.

It was around this time that the fort itself became known as the Citadel. The top was flattened with fill, but the land must have been somewhat shaky because by 1752 the buildings on the north side had collapsed. At that point, there were 17 guns, as well as a small Sea Battery on the west point of the island. Stables were placed half way up the hill on the St. John’s side. There was a swamp on one side, a burial ground on the other. Many died from fevers spread by mosquitos, leading the fort to be abandoned in 1755. The troops were moved to a new barracks that was built at the top of St. John’s, the site of the present prison.



Horneck Plan for the Barracks at Rat Island, 1752. Image courtesy Dr. Reginald Murphy.

After the troops left, the island served as a signal station. The flagstaff displayed flag signals giving movement of vessels approaching Antigua. Signal stations on Goat Hill reported movements of ships approaching from the west wide of Antigua, while signal stations on Monk’s Hill and at Shirley Heights reported ships approaching the English Harbour area. In 1843, the old fort had become known as the Rat Island Signal Post and John Bennett was the officer in charge. Mrs. Lanaghan, in *Antigua and the Antiguans*, written in 1844, describes the flagstaff on Rat Island as being “gaily

decorated with various flags, and with a beating heart my eyes have often sought it, for there I learn the tidings that another packet has arrived from my native land..."

Phase 2: Lunatics and Lepers

In the 19th century, the British Colonial government had as one of its responsibilities the well-being and care of those inhabitants of its colonies who had been diagnosed as lepers and those they considered to be lunatics—their term for those of unsound mind. At that time little was known about the causes of leprosy and it was thought to be both highly contagious and hereditary. Although lunacy was viewed more benignly, it was nevertheless considered that both lepers and lunatics should be isolated from the general population.

This became an issue after Emancipation in 1834. Impoverished lepers lived with others in the Poor House until 1837, when the government decided to move them into their own building in the lower part of town. The lunatics were moved to a new building on Rat Island that officially opened in June 1838. It was described by Mrs. Lanaghan, who was in Antigua at the time, as being for those inmates "as have shewn symptoms of aberration of mind." It had six three-person rooms for males and six more for females, with an enclosed yard that was used for provision plots. The living quarters were enlarged in the following year in order to build a separate ward for male patients, adding ten apartments capable of accommodating four persons each. There was also a house for the superintendent, a chapel, and a 7,000-gallon iron water tank imported from England. According to Mrs. Lanaghan, who waxed enthusiastic about the "delightful situation" because of the sea breeze, there was also an enclosed yard where the inhabitants kept chickens and grew provisions. She also noted that the causeway was only passable at low tide.



*Causeway leading to Rat Island, with Keeper's House in foreground and signal station in background.
Date unknown.*

Rod Edmond details how, in the mid-to-late 1800s, there was considerable controversy over whether leprosy really was contagious. In 1863, the Colonial Office approved the recommendations of the Royal College of Physicians of London that it was not and recommended that any laws affecting the personal liberty of lepers be repealed and that confinement should cease. At that point, both of the medical doctors in Antigua who were familiar with leprosy were also convinced that it was not contagious and that the lepers would be best served if they were moved near to the Poor House in St. John's. However, the public was not convinced and outcry at this idea was so loud that the idea was abandoned. The lepers were instead sent to join the lunatics on Rat Island, but given a small wooden building that was separated from the lunatic asylum by a brick wall.



*Leper Asylum with grounds and signal station in the background.
National Archives UK Photo Collection, 1880-1929 (CO 1069).*

With confirmation that leprosy was spread by a bacterium in 1873, treatment by isolation again became the solution of choice. In that year the British Consul in Jamaica expressed the common view in the West Indies when he wrote the Colonial Office recommending that “lepers in the West Indies should be confined ... and guarded by severe quarantine laws: that all marriages should be forbidden among lepers, and that as much as can be managed the sexes should be separated ... and that all Negro lepers should without exception be sent to these isolated hospitals or Lazarettos, there to live.” An investigative visit for a report to the Colonial Office that year noted that there were 21 inmates and that the present attendants had only been there for a few months because it had been very difficult to get anyone to accept the job.



*Leper Asylum showing female wards, with signal station in the background.
National Archives UK Photo Collection, 1880-1929 (CO 1069).*



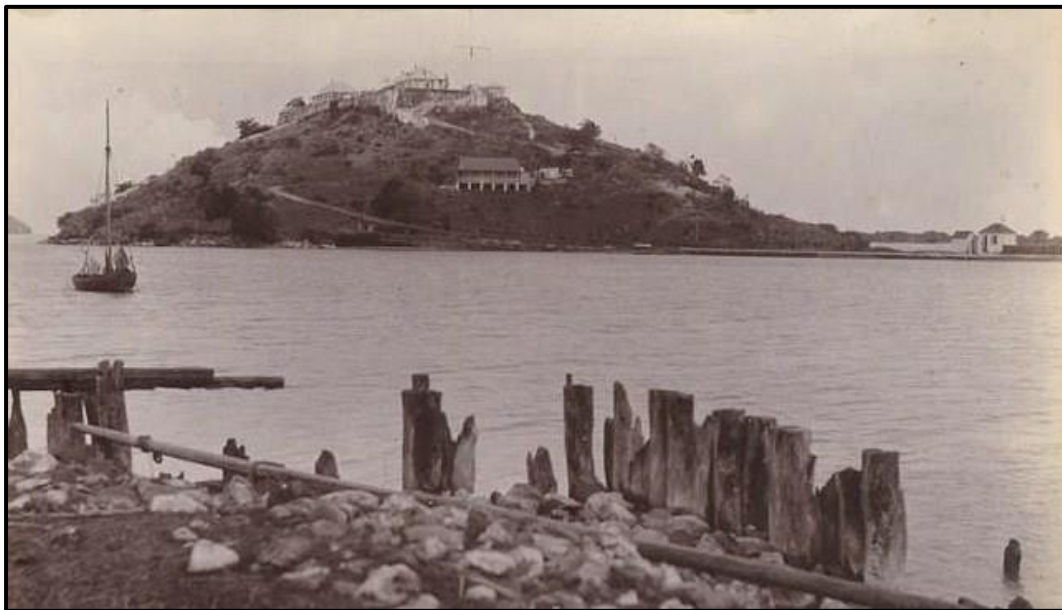
*Leper Asylum, showing male wards and part of the grounds.
National Archives UK Photo Collection 1880-1929 (CO 1069).*

An 1889 report noted that although there was currently no law requiring the segregation of lepers, one was currently under consideration. Dr. John Freeland, in a letter in the *Lazeretto* that was republished in the *Antigua Observer* in 1890, advocated a number of restrictions, including

forbidding lepers to leave Rat Island, while the *Antigua Standard* published a petition for compulsory segregation. Over the next few years, there was a constant flow of missives from the Governor to the Colonial Office regarding the state of the facilities at Rat Island, which were called “deplorable,” and reiterating a local concern about the lepers appearing in town, with editorials in the *Antigua Times* also protesting this wandering. This panic was the backdrop for the role that leprosy played in Frieda Cassin’s novel *With Silent Tread*, presumed to have been written in 1890.

The need for isolation seemed to be confirmed by the fact that while there had been 20 lepers in the asylum in 1875, by 1888 the number had grown to 28 and by 1890 to 31, with 53 lepers in the colony as a whole. Certificates of cause of death were compulsory beginning in 1856 so there are records of deaths from leprosy, but they are probably underestimates since doctors often attributed death to other causes. However, the records show that death attributed to leprosy peaked between 1887 and 1926, falling dramatically after that. The greatest percentage of leprosy deaths were at a fairly young age for males, mostly between 15 and 34, but older for females, between 35 and 64.

In 1888, a branch lunatic asylum was completed at The Ridge, relieving Rat Island of crowding and also creating space for inmates from other Leeward Islands. The Ridge, for “quieter” inmates, was described as a hill near English Harbour “some 330 feet in height.” However, a number must have remained at Rat Island because in 1894, as a result of a worrisome death rate, the facilities were rebuilt into a collection of five well-ventilated and “spacious dormitories.”



*Rat Island from St. John's, with quarters of the signalman in foreground.
National Archives UK Photo Collection 1880-1929 (CO 1069).*

In 1898, the West India Royal Commission recommended that the Lunatic Asylum be moved, leaving only the Leper Asylum at Rat Island. There followed a number of proposals for moving the two asylums. One was to move the lepers to The Ridge and move Holberton Hospital and the Poor House to Rat Island—primarily because the smell was bothering the inhabitants of Government House. But the Legislative Council turned down this idea, arguing that it would cost too much.

Beginning in 1895 Antigua's finances had taken a steep dive due to a poor weather, declining demand for sugar in Europe, and a consequent drop in sugar production. Since finances were constrained, it was decided instead to install a gatekeeper. This apparently did stop the lepers from coming into town so the Colonial Office agreed to let the legislature pass an act to forbid lepers to roam—continuing a tendency, going back to the immediate post-emancipation period, to pass a punitive act if the population was not behaving in ways deemed appropriate by the authorities.



Rat Island causeway. Date unknown but note the gate houses.

In 1902, Governor Strickland inspected Rat Island and was upset by the conditions he saw—but in this case it was not the living conditions but the “promiscuous intercourse” of male and female lepers. Even though he acknowledged that there had only been one birth to date, he ordered that an existing quarantine station across the harbour at Keeling's Point (known now as Keeling Point, in Greenbay) be converted into a Female Leper Asylum. This was approved by the Colonial Office, which however noted that it was well known that intercourse among lepers is seldom fruitful.



*Inhabitants of the Leper Asylum at Rat Island.
National Archives UK Photo Collection 1880-1929 (CO 1069).*

By 1903, the old Poor House had become the Lunatic Asylum, the Ridge had been closed, and the lepers were still at Rat Island and Keeling's Point. The Poor House must have proved an unsatisfactory setting for the lunatics because buildings at Skerretts, previously used as a training school, were now converted into a lunatic asylum for the entire Leeward Islands colony and in 1905 all the lunatics remaining at Rat Island were moved there. At that point there were 124 inmates.



*Grounds of the Lunatic Asylum at Skerretts, with male wards in the background.
National Archives UK Photo Collection 1880-1929 (CO 1069).*

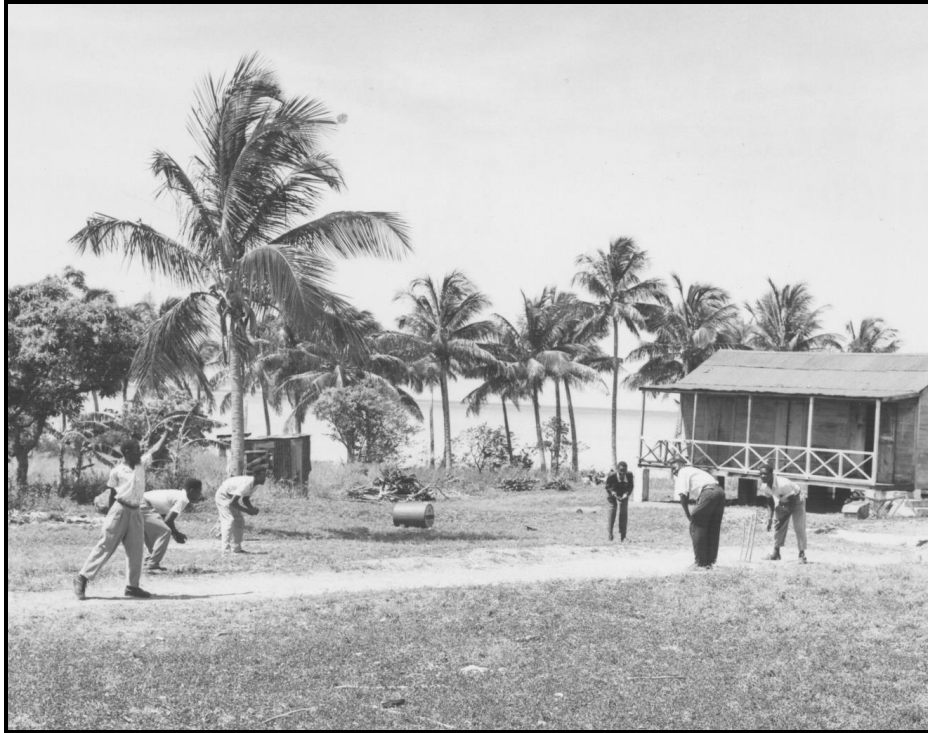
The Keeling's Point outpost must have closed because starting in 1907 and continuing through 1919, only one leper asylum, at Rat Island, is listed in the Colonial Office reports. However, a 1912 Act that restricted lepers to the Leper Home and also restricted their interactions with the local population referred to a Leper Home at Pearn's, so it is likely that the lepers were moved to the much more isolated Pearn's Point site at around that time and that the Colonial Office reports were simply copied from year to year.

The Leper Home remained at Pearn's for many years. In early 1942, Dr. Ernest Muir toured the West Indies to review the situation with leprosy, visiting Antigua in late January of that year. He reported about 50 cases of leprosy in Antigua, with 38 patients in the Leper Home. He also noted that the Leper Act had been amended in 1937 making provision for compulsory segregation, and that the leper colony that had originally been located at Rat Island had been moved to the west coast, south-west of St. John's—in other words, to Pearn's.

In 1956, Cary Ward took a series of photos of the inhabitants—not all of whom were lepers because they had their families with them. The photos show houses, a church, and a cricket pitch near the beach. In 1958, Commander Tom Miskill from the U.S. Naval Base had a generator installed, bringing electricity to the site.



Lepers at Pearn's Point, c. 1956. Photo courtesy of Cary Ward.



Cricket pitch at Pearn's Point, 1956. Photo courtesy of Cary Ward.

It is not clear when Pearn's Point was closed, but by January 2014, the vestiges of a large set of cisterns were all that remained—although they may well be gone by now, given the large reengineering of the terrain then underway at the site.



Cistern at Pearn's Point, 2014. Photo courtesy Susan Lowes.

A Side Note: Disputes over Staffing at the Lunatic and Leper Asylums

In 1856, a Dominican named Lewis Benjamin was appointed the keeper of the lunatic and leper asylums and in 1878, his wife Mary F. Benjamin was appointed matron. Lewis had been a private in the Dominica police force, became a sergeant and then keeper of the gaol until he was appointed to the Lunatic Asylum in Antigua. Lewis served for 18 years at the same salary—despite repeated pleas for an increase and despite the fact that the Keeper of the Prison (a white man with a similar job) did get an increase. Lewis had at least seven children and Rat Island became the family's main source of work. Two children were signalmen; two were sub-keepers at the Lunatic Asylum; and one was appointed Superintendent of the Lunatic Asylum when it moved to the Ridge. One son, Roderick, was the father of Lewis and Edgar Benjamin, the founders of Benjie's, and of David, the father of Milton.

The elder Lewis was forcibly retired, ostensibly because of age, in 1895. He was then 67 and had been in the Colonial service for over 40 years and Mary for over 17. Although the Governor had let it be known that he wanted a younger man in the post, it is equally likely that this was an excuse and that what he really wanted was a white man. In fact, two English people had been brought out in 1894, with the male paid almost as much as Lewis and the female paid twice as much as his wife, although they were Lewis's subordinates. When Lewis and his wife retired, the Governor suggested that they be replaced by the "two European attendants" who had recently arrived from England. There were protests in the local newspapers about the treatment of a "black man" and the entire elected side voted against the proposed candidates, but their protest was ignored: The Colonial Office response was that there was no need to take them seriously since the interests of the taxpayer were more "truly and directly" represented by the non-elective side. From the Governor's point of view, a black man in that position was problematic: not only was he convinced that a black West Indian could not discipline other black West Indians, but also that no white matron or nurse would consent to serve under a black man. For a black man to rise too high in an administrative post also created an awkward social situation, since no nonwhite Antiguans were invited to social events at Government House, no matter what their position, until the early 1920s, when Sir Eustace Fiennes became Governor.

Something similar happened to Albert at the Ridge. In May 1898, he was relieved of his duties because of "intemperate" habits and for stealing from the stores and a former acting superintendent at Rat Island was appointed in his place. Albert too protested, sending a petition to the Colonial Office that argued that he had been harassed by one of the doctors who wanted him to become a total abstainer and that he had not been repeatedly inebriated but was "nervous." In 1898, an anonymous letter writer named "Fair Play" wrote a long letter to the *Antigua Times*, a handwritten version of which was included in a dispatch sent to the Colonial Office, on behalf of Albert. The letter charged discrimination against a "native" and suggested that this may have been due to either religious or racial prejudice on the part of the Medical Officer. The letter writer suggested that this type of accusation had become common when brought by men who had "immigrated here apparently for the sole purpose of trampling under their feet the natives who groan under weight of heavy taxes to pay their terrible salaries and exorbitant charges." The

Colonial Office notes said that they felt he might have a point but refused to interfere, saying this was a matter for the Holberton Hospital Board.

Phase 3: Rum

In the 1920's a number of rum shops owned by the Portuguese community were providing their own blends of rum, such as Red Cock, Silver Leaf, Imperial, and Bolando. These men decided to band together and start a distillery that would make rum in Antigua. The result was the Antigua Distillery, founded in 1932. The distillery was given land at the base of Rat Island, where it was considered that the smell would not permeate St. John's. Ironically, the company purchased its molasses from Guyana—as it does to this day—because all the molasses produced at the Antigua Sugar Factory was exported to England. Only for a brief period between 1940 and 1951, when the distillery purchased the Montpellier Sugar Factory, was there a local supply.

In the 1940's, the distillery created its own brand of rum, called Caballero Rum. Cabellero was later renamed Cavalier. In 1992 it created English Harbour Rum, with 5-year-old and 10-year-old versions. The distillery continues to distill its rums at the Rat Island site, using copper stills. In fact, it has one of the only two copper continuous stills left in the Caribbean. Copper is considered to be a preferred metal for distilling a number of high quality spirits, such as malt whiskey, cognac, etc.



Rat Island causeway with Antigua Distillery at the base.

Phase 4: Rat Island Today

Rat Island has seen many changes, from simple fort to large-scale barracks to asylums for lunatics and lepers, to the site for a rum distillery. In 1969, the Port of St. John's opened to commercial traffic. Some years later, with the opening of piers at Heritage Quay and Nevis Street, it was redeveloped to handle containers and other cargo.



Rat Island from St. John's, 2011. Photo courtesy Susan Lowes.

It is currently being further developed both for cargo and to include a pier that will handle the huge Oasis class cruise ships. Although there have been rumours of plans to develop the top of the island—or even level it—all that remains are the ruins of the Leper Colony, gone for over 100 years. It is a sad legacy for such a historic site.



Google Map photo of Rat Island, c. 2014, showing distillery and remnants of the asylums.

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