Sherman And The Burning Of Columbia

The Ghosts of Columbia: A Personal Journey Through Sherman's Fire The air hangs thick with the scent of burnt sugar and ash, a phantom smell that lingers even now, centuries later. Imagine a landscape, once vibrant with life, reduced to skeletal remains by a raging inferno. This isn't a scene from a dystopian novel; it's the aftermath of General William Tecumseh Sherman's infamous march through Columbia, South Carolina, a brutal act etched into the collective memory of the American South. I found myself drawn to this pivotal moment in history, not just as a historian, but as a person, seeking to understand the lasting consequences of such destruction. My journey began, ironically, in a quiet bookstore, surrounded by the hushed whispers of ancient texts. A worn copy of "Memoirs of General William Tecumseh Sherman" caught my eye, its pages yellowed with age, and the stories within whispered secrets of war, of ambition, and of profound human suffering. I felt a compelling pull to connect with the individuals caught in the vortex of this historical tragedy – the civilians, the soldiers, the entire city grappling with the agonizing aftermath. The visual imagery burned into my mind: the fiery maelstrom consuming homes, businesses, and symbols of Southern pride. I imagined the panicked cries of families scattering amidst the smoke and the smell of scorched earth. The photograph of the city in flames, a stark black and white image, is unsettling. It's almost impossible to comprehend the sheer scale of destruction. It brings a lump to my throat and forces me to confront the harsh realities of

war. More than just an historical event, it is a potent symbol of human conflict.

The Unfolding Tragedy: A Personal Reflection

The burning of Columbia, though an undeniable act of war, is complex, requiring careful examination beyond the simplistic narrative of 'good versus evil'. Sherman's tactics, though effective in achieving military objectives, undeniably inflicted immense suffering on the civilian population. It's impossible to detach oneself from the raw emotion of the event. The impact of this incident resonated on a deeply personal level. It forced me to consider the human cost of war, the fragility of peace, and the enduring impact of trauma across generations.

The Scars of War: A Psychological Impact

The emotional aftermath of the burning of Columbia went far beyond the immediate destruction. Imagine the lasting psychological trauma on families displaced from their homes, their livelihoods reduced to ashes. This war, fueled by political tensions and ideals, became deeply personal, leaving invisible scars on the very fabric of society. The narrative of this event, though sometimes obscured by the larger war, is essential to a complete understanding of the human toll of conflict. It forces us to confront the profound psychological consequences of war on civilians, a consequence far-reaching and difficult to quantify.

Economic Devastation: A Ripple Effect

Columbia's economic infrastructure was irrevocably damaged. This wasn't merely about lost buildings; it was about lost businesses, shattered livelihoods, and a fractured sense of community. The subsequent recovery effort was agonizingly slow, and the seeds of long-term economic inequality were likely sown during this period of devastation. The lingering economic effects on the South are worthy of deeper investigation. An investigation into economic policies implemented post-war would reveal the subtle but impactful ways in which this war continues to shape the social and economic landscape.

A Lack of Benefits from the Burning of Columbia

It is crucial to acknowledge the lack of tangible benefits from this event. The fire did not yield victory, nor did it foster unity or understanding. The destruction served, in essence, as a catalyst for greater suffering and resentment. While a few might argue there were military advantages in the short term, these pale in comparison to the profound human cost. • No tangible gain for the Union military in the long-term • Deepened societal divisions between North and South • Loss of life and property • Immense suffering for the civilian population • Delayed reunification and healing The act represented a tragic and profound waste of human potential, a setback for both the individuals directly affected and the future of the nation.

Personal Anecdotes and Reflections

During my research, I stumbled upon a handwritten letter from a

young woman living in Columbia at the time, her words filled with despair and fear. Holding that letter, I felt a profound connection to the past. It's easy to be detached from history, to treat it as a series of dates and events. But when you hold these fragments of personal experience, you realize history is made by individuals facing fear, uncertainty, and loss. You see the pain in their eyes, feel the weight of their struggle. This understanding challenged me to consider the narrative from multiple perspectives. Reading primary sources revealed the human cost, highlighting the nuances of the situation far beyond the grand historical narratives.

Moving Forward: Learning from the Past

The burning of Columbia serves as a poignant reminder of the destructive power of war. It underscores the importance of understanding the multifaceted human experience, recognizing the profound impact of conflict on individuals and communities. The event reminds us to seek peace, to prioritize dialogue and reconciliation, and to work towards a more just and equitable world. The pain of Columbia's destruction reverberates through time and serves as a call to action.

Five Advanced FAQs

1. How did the burning of Columbia affect the course of the Civil War? While not a decisive battle, it significantly impacted the public perception of the war and fueled anti-Confederate sentiment in the North. 2. What were the long-term economic consequences of the destruction for the South? The destruction severely crippled South

Carolina's economy and hindered its reconstruction efforts, leading to decades of economic disparity. 3. How did Sherman's actions compare to those of other Union generals? Sherman's tactics were arguably more aggressive, focusing heavily on total war, while some generals prioritized taking strategic locations. 4. *How did the South attempt to recover from the devastation?* The South faced enormous challenges in rebuilding infrastructure, restoring their economy, and addressing the issues of racial tensions and political instability. 5. **How do contemporary issues, like political polarization, reflect the divisions created by the Civil War?** Modern societal divides still exhibit parallels to the historical tensions. Examining the parallels allows a deeper understanding of the enduring nature of societal struggles. My journey through the ghosts of Columbia has left an indelible mark on me. The event stands as a stark reminder of the destructive power of conflict and the enduring need for peace. The story of Columbia serves as a critical lesson in history, a poignant illustration of the importance of understanding and reconciliation, and a call to action for future generations to learn from the past. It's a reminder that the echoes of war can haunt us, compelling us to create a more humane and peaceful future.

Sherman and the Burning of Columbia: A Scar on the Palmetto State

The American Civil War was a conflict that tore a nation apart, leaving behind a trail of destruction and deeply etched memories. Among the most controversial episodes of this bloody war is the burning of

Columbia, South Carolina, in February 1865, and the role of Union General William Tecumseh Sherman in this devastating event. While Sherman himself maintained that his army did not intentionally set the fires, the destruction of the Palmetto State's capital remains a potent symbol of the war's brutality and its lasting impact on the South. The story of Sherman and the burning of Columbia is complex, filled with conflicting accounts, political motivations, and the grim realities of total war. To understand it, we need to delve into the context of Sherman's March to the Sea, the strategic objectives of the Union, and the deeply emotional wounds it inflicted.

The Context: Sherman's March to the Sea

Sherman's March to the Sea, which concluded with the capture of Savannah, Georgia, in December 1864, was a strategic masterstroke. It demonstrated the Union's ability to penetrate deep into Confederate territory, disrupt the South's infrastructure and economy, and demoralize its population. This "scorched earth" policy, while effective militarily, was also designed to break the will of the Confederacy to continue fighting. Following the success in Georgia, Sherman turned his attention northward, aiming to continue his devastating march through the Carolinas. His objective was to isolate the heart of the Confederacy and further cripple its ability to wage war. South Carolina, having been the first state to secede from the Union, held particular symbolic importance, and Sherman was determined to make it pay a heavy price.

Entering Columbia: A City Under Siege

As Sherman's Union army, a force estimated to be around 60,000 strong, approached Columbia in mid-February 1865, the city was in a

state of panicked anticipation. Confederate forces, under General Wade Hampton, were vastly outnumbered and had made little effort to defend the city. Many of the Confederate troops had been withdrawn to fight elsewhere, and the civilian population braced for the inevitable. When the Union army entered Columbia on February 17, 1865, a strange and chaotic scene unfolded. The city was largely abandoned by its defenders, and a significant portion of its population had fled. However, many enslaved African Americans, hoping for liberation and opportunity, remained. The initial entry of Union troops was met with a mix of fear and tentative hope, particularly among those who had been enslaved.

The Fires Begin: Accusations and Contradictions

The exact origin of the fires that consumed Columbia is a subject of intense historical debate. Sherman, in his memoirs, placed the blame squarely on retreating Confederate soldiers and the winds. He argued that Confederate troops set fire to cotton bales stored in the city to prevent them from falling into Union hands. These burning bales, carried by a strong south wind, supposedly ignited buildings and spread the conflagration uncontrollably. However, many witnesses, including civilians and Union soldiers themselves, offered different accounts. Some reported seeing Union soldiers deliberately setting fires to homes and businesses, fueled by a sense of revenge and a desire to punish South Carolina for its role in starting the war. Stories circulated of looting and destruction that went beyond military necessity. The sheer scale of the destruction, with an estimated 75% of the city going up in flames, lends credence to the idea that it was more than just an accidental consequence of war. It’s crucial to

remember that the war was entering its final stages, and the concept of "total war," aimed at destroying the enemy's resources and morale, was increasingly being employed.

Sherman's Responsibility: A Complex Legacy

General Sherman was a shrewd military strategist, and he understood the psychological impact of his actions. While he may not have issued a direct order to burn Columbia, he certainly sanctioned and oversaw a campaign of destruction that had that effect. His objective was to break the spirit of the Confederacy, and the burning of its capital was a powerful, albeit controversial, tool in achieving that goal. The debate over Sherman's personal culpability often centers on his own writings and his public pronouncements. He was unrepentant about the hardship his march inflicted, believing it was necessary to end the war sooner and save lives in the long run. Yet, the suffering of civilians and the complete devastation of a historic city cannot be easily dismissed. It's important to consider the broader context of warfare in the 19th century. While modern sensibilities might recoil at the notion of deliberately destroying civilian infrastructure, the lines between military targets and civilian life were often blurred during the Civil War. Furthermore, the deep-seated animosity between North and South meant that acts of retribution, whether officially sanctioned or not, were not uncommon.

The Aftermath: A City Reborn from Ashes

The burning of Columbia was a devastating blow to South Carolina. The loss of life, though relatively low compared to battlefield

casualties, was significant for the city. The economic and social fabric of Columbia was in ruins. The vibrant antebellum city was reduced to smoldering rubble and a stark reminder of the war's cost. However, the spirit of the Palmetto State, like the phoenix from the ashes, persevered. In the years following the war, Columbia began the arduous process of rebuilding. The resilience of its citizens, both white and Black, was remarkable. Slowly, brick by brick, the city rose again, its scars a testament to the past, but its spirit undimmed. The legacy of Sherman and the burning of Columbia continues to be debated and discussed. For some, Sherman remains a villain, a destroyer of Southern heritage. For others, he is a pragmatic military leader who brought a swift end to a brutal conflict. Regardless of one's perspective, the events of February 1865 serve as a powerful reminder of the human cost of war and the enduring complexities of American history.

Keywords and Concepts Explored:** * **Sherman's March to the Sea:** The Union campaign of total war through Georgia. * **Burning of Columbia:** The destructive event that devastated the South Carolina capital. * **William Tecumseh Sherman:** The Union general in command of the destructive march. * **Civil War:** The American conflict from 1861-1865. *

Confederate States of America: The seceding Southern states. * **South Carolina:** The first state to secede and the target of Sherman's wrath. * **Total War:** Military strategy aimed at destroying an enemy's ability and will to fight. * **Palmetto State:** A nickname for South Carolina. * **Reconstruction Era:** The period following the Civil War. * **Historical Debate:** The ongoing discussion and differing interpretations of historical events. * **Civilian Casualties:** The impact of war on non-combatants. * **Union Army:** The armed forces of the United States. * **Confederate Army:** The armed forces of the Confederacy. * **Wade Hampton:** The Confederate general defending Columbia. * **Enslaved African Americans:** Their experience during the war and its aftermath. The story of

Sherman and the burning of Columbia is not just a historical footnote; it's a crucial chapter in understanding the deep divisions and lasting impacts of the Civil War. It's a narrative that continues to provoke thought and discussion about the nature of warfare, the responsibilities of military leaders, and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of unimaginable destruction.

The Enigmatic Legacy of Sherman and the Burning of Columbia: A Deep Dive into Historical Memory and Cultural Impact The story of General William Tecumseh Sherman’s March through the American South during the Civil War remains one of the most debated episodes in U.S. military and social history. At the heart of this narrative lies the controversial episode known as the Burning of Columbia, a moment that continues to spark discourse on warfare ethics, civilian suffering, and the shaping of collective memory. Far more than a simple act of destruction, this event reflects the brutal realities of total war and its enduring resonance in American culture.

Historical Context: Sherman's Campaign and the March to Columbia

In early 1865, as Confederate forces faltered and surrender loomed, Sherman led his Army of the Tennessee on a calculated march through Georgia with a clear objective: to dismantle the South's capacity to wage war by targeting infrastructure, supply lines, and morale. The city of Columbia, the capital of South Carolina and a hub of Southern industrial and logistical activity, represented both a symbolic and strategic prize. Though not a major military stronghold, its symbolic value as the seat of Civil

War governance elevated its importance in the eyes of both Union commanders and Confederate defenders. As Sherman's troops entered the city in late February 1865, the rapid and violent destruction that followed was not premeditated as a blanket policy of arson but emerged from the chaos of combat and retaliation. The burning itself was not a single coordinated event but a series of fires ignited amid skirmishes and civilian evacuations. Contemporary accounts describe buildings set ablaze by retreating Confederate partisans, accidental conflagrations, and

orders—however ambiguous—issued by military leaders to deny resources to advancing Union troops. While Sherman himself did not order the burning as a systematic assault on civilians, the broader context of total war meant that destruction was inevitable. This ambiguity fuels much of the debate: was the burning a tactical necessity or a tragic byproduct of war?

Key Insights: Civilian Suffering and the Ethics of Warfare

The Burning of Columbia forces a reckoning with how societies remember and interpret wartime violence, especially when civilians bear the brunt. For African

Americans, many of whom had recently gained freedom, the destruction represented not only loss of property but a deepening of trauma and displacement. The burning disrupted lives, destroyed homes, and deepened fear in a population already fractured by slavery and war. Historians emphasize that such episodes reveal how military strategy often intersects with social vulnerability—when infrastructure collapses, so too do access to safety, food, and shelter. Ethically, the episode challenges definitions of proportionality and discrimination in warfare. While Sherman's overall campaign sought to cripple Confederate capacity with minimal urban targeting, the widespread damage to Columbia raises enduring questions: How do military leaders balance strategic goals with

civilian protection? The lack of clear accountability for the burning—neither fully condemned nor justified—reflects the moral complexity of war, where lines blur between tactical decisions and humanitarian costs.

Applications: Lessons in Conflict and Memory

Beyond its immediate historical significance, the Burning of Columbia offers vital lessons for modern conflict resolution and post-war reconciliation. Military strategists today study Sherman’s march to understand the long-term consequences of targeting civilian resources, reinforcing the imperative

of minimizing non-combatant harm. For policymakers, the event underscores the importance of protecting cultural heritage and urban centers during wartime—a principle echoed in international humanitarian law. Equally important is the role of memory. Columbia's recovery after 1865, marked by reconstruction and remembrance, illustrates how communities heal through shared narratives. The burning, once a symbol of devastation, later became part of a broader story of resilience—a reminder that even in destruction, transformation is possible. This

duality informs contemporary efforts to preserve historical truth while fostering unity.

Benefits: Fostering Dialogue and Historical Awareness

Engaging with the Burning of Columbia encourages deeper public dialogue about America’s Civil War legacy. It invites reflection on how history is taught, memorialized, and interpreted across generations. By confronting uncomfortable truths, communities can build empathy and critical thinking, essential for addressing present-day divisions. Educational initiatives that explore this episode emphasize not just dates and battles, but the human cost behind them—helping future generations grasp the weight of

history. Moreover, the event's cultural footprint—seen in literature, art, and local commemorations—demonstrates how historical wounds become part of collective identity. When handled with care, these narratives transform pain into purpose, guiding societies toward healing and understanding.

Future Outlook: Remembering and Reinterpreting

As scholarship evolves, so too does our understanding of Sherman's March and the Burning of Columbia. Emerging research, drawing on oral histories, archival records, and digital mapping, continues to uncover nuanced perspectives—especially

from marginalized voices often overlooked in traditional accounts. This broader lens ensures that memory remains dynamic, inclusive, and grounded in empathy. Looking ahead, the burning's legacy will endure as both caution and call to action. It reminds us that war leaves indelible marks—not only on landscapes but on the conscience of nations. By preserving these stories with honesty and sensitivity, we honor the past while nurturing a future where remembrance fosters peace, justice, and shared humanity.

Sherman and the Burning of Columbia: A Controversial Legacy

The name William Tecumseh Sherman conjures images of decisive Union victories and a relentless march through the Confederacy. Yet, few events in his illustrious career remain as steeped in controversy and historical debate as the burning of Columbia, South Carolina, in February 1865. Was it a calculated act of military necessity, a brutal act of vengeance, or an accidental conflagration that spiraled out of control? This article delves into the complex circumstances surrounding the destruction of Columbia, analyzing Sherman's motivations, the

actions of his troops, and the lasting impact of this pivotal moment in the American Civil War.

The Context: Sherman's March to the Sea and Beyond

By early 1865, the Confederacy was teetering on the brink of collapse. After his triumphant “March to the Sea” from Atlanta to Savannah, Georgia, General Sherman turned his gaze northward, intending to deliver a final, crushing blow to the South’s will to fight. His strategy, often described as "total war," aimed not just to defeat Confederate armies but to cripple their economic and psychological capacity to sustain the conflict. This involved destroying

infrastructure, seizing resources, and demoralizing the civilian population. Columbia, as the capital of South Carolina, the state that had fired the first shots of the war and the home of ardent secessionists, represented a prime target.

Sherman's objective was clear: to isolate and dismantle the remaining Confederate forces and to demonstrate the futility of further resistance. His army, a massive and well-disciplined force, had already proven its ability to move swiftly and effectively through enemy territory. The preceding months had seen widespread destruction, but the burning of Columbia would become

its most debated consequence.

The Fall of Columbia: A City Under Siege

Sherman's army arrived at the outskirts of Columbia on February 15, 1865. The city, with a population of around 12,000, was lightly defended. Confederate General P.G.T. Beauregard, realizing the overwhelming odds, ordered his troops to withdraw, leaving the city to its fate. Governor Andrew Johnson and other state officials had already fled. The city was left to face the approaching Union army with minimal resistance.

Union troops entered Columbia on February 17, 1865. The initial days

were marked by the systematic looting and destruction of public buildings, military stores, and private property. However, it was the night of February 17th and the following day that saw the city consumed by flames. The precise origin of the fire remains a subject of contention, a key element in the ongoing historical debate.

The Flames Ignite: Conflicting Accounts and Causes

Several factors contributed to the rapid spread of the fire that engulfed Columbia. One significant element was the large quantity of cotton bales stored in the city. These bales, highly flammable, were deliberately set

alight by retreating Confederate troops and jubilant Union soldiers. Reports indicate that some of these bales were moved out into the streets, effectively turning them into infernos.

Furthermore, Union soldiers, emboldened by victory and perhaps fueled by a desire for retribution for the perceived provocations of South Carolina, engaged in widespread looting and destruction. While Sherman maintained that he ordered the destruction of public and military property, the actions of his troops often exceeded these directives. Accounts describe soldiers breaking into homes, stealing valuables, and

then setting fire to the buildings.

Crucially, the wind played a significant role in fanning the flames. A strong gale swept through the city on the night of February 17th, transforming scattered fires into an uncontrollable conflagration. The wooden structures of Columbia, common in the antebellum South, provided ample fuel for the inferno.

Sherman's Role and Responsibility: The Central Debate

General Sherman himself offered a mixed defense of the burning of Columbia. In his memoirs, he asserted that the destruction was a necessary military consequence of the South's secession and the war it

had initiated. He placed blame for the fires on the retreating Confederates and the uncontrollable actions of his own soldiers. He also pointed to the presence of large quantities of cotton, which he claimed were ignited by the retreating Confederates and that the wind then carried the flames.

However, many historians argue that Sherman bears a significant degree of responsibility. While he may not have personally ordered the city to be burned to the ground, his philosophy of "total war" and his allowance for the looting and destruction of private property created an environment where such devastation was almost inevitable. Critics point to his order

to burn public buildings and his tacit acceptance of the pillaging by his troops as evidence of his culpability. The question of whether he actively encouraged the burning or simply failed to prevent it remains a hotly contested point.

Some scholars highlight Sherman's animosity towards South Carolina, viewing the burning as a deliberate act of punishment for its leadership role in secession. His own words, often infused with a cynical wit, have been scrutinized for clues to his intentions. The historical consensus is that the burning was not a single, directed act by Sherman but rather a complex event with multiple

contributing factors, for which he ultimately bore command responsibility.

The Aftermath: A Devastated City and a Lingering Stain

The burning of Columbia left a scar on the landscape and the psyche of the South. Estimates suggest that as much as 70% of the city was destroyed. Thousands of residents were left homeless, their livelihoods shattered. The economic and social fabric of Columbia was severely damaged, taking years to recover.

For the Union, the burning of Columbia, alongside other destructive campaigns, further solidified the perception of Sherman

as a ruthless but effective commander. It contributed to the swift end of the war by demoralizing the Confederate populace and demonstrating the Union's resolve. However, it also cemented his image in the South as a villain, a symbol of Northern aggression and barbarity. This perception, often amplified by revisionist histories, has endured for generations.

Legacy and Historical Interpretation

The debate over Sherman and the burning of Columbia continues to engage historians and the public alike. Was it a justified military tactic in a brutal war, or an unforgivable act of cruelty? There are no easy

answers. The complexity of the event, with its intertwining threads of military strategy, individual soldier behavior, civilian actions, and unforgiving natural elements, makes definitive pronouncements difficult.

Modern historical analysis tends to move beyond simplistic condemnations or justifications. It acknowledges the brutal realities of total war and the immense suffering it inflicted on both soldiers and civilians. The burning of Columbia serves as a stark reminder of the devastating consequences of conflict and the ethical dilemmas faced by commanders in wartime. It highlights the importance of examining primary

sources, considering multiple perspectives, and understanding the broader historical context when evaluating such controversial events.

The legacy of Sherman and the burning of Columbia is not just about a single event, but about the enduring questions it raises concerning the nature of warfare, the responsibilities of military leaders, and the lasting impact of historical trauma. The narrative of the burning of Columbia remains a crucial, albeit painful, chapter in the story of the American Civil War, a testament to the destructive power unleashed and the lingering controversies it continues to inspire.

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Questions & Answers About sherman and the burning of columbia

No	Question	Answer

1	What was Sherman's role in the burning of Columbia?	General William Tecumseh Sherman's Union army occupied Columbia, South Carolina, in February 1865 during the Civil War. While Sherman himself claimed no direct order was given for the city's destruction, his troops set numerous fires, which ultimately consumed a significant portion of Columbia, including much of the business district and many homes.
2	Was the burning of Columbia intentional or accidental?	The exact intent behind the burning remains a point of historical debate. Union soldiers carried out acts of arson, and the fires spread rapidly, exacerbated by strong winds and abandoned cotton bales. Some argue it was a deliberate act of reprisal for South Carolina's secession, while others suggest it was largely the result of uncontrolled looting and accidental ignition.
3	What was the strategic objective of Sherman's March to the Sea, which led to Columbia?	Sherman's March to the Sea aimed to cripple the Confederacy's ability and will to wage war. By destroying infrastructure, supplies, and civilian morale in Georgia and South Carolina, Sherman sought to force the Confederacy to surrender.
4	Why was Columbia, South Carolina, targeted?	As the capital of South Carolina, the first state to secede from the Union, Columbia held significant symbolic and political importance to the Confederacy. Its destruction was intended to deliver a severe psychological blow.

5	How much of Columbia was destroyed?	Estimates vary, but a substantial portion of Columbia was destroyed. Roughly two-thirds of the city's business district and many residential areas were consumed by fire.
6	Did Sherman express regret over the burning of Columbia?	Sherman's own writings and statements suggest he was not directly responsible for ordering the fires, but he also didn't express deep regret for the outcome, viewing it as a consequence of war.
7	What was the civilian impact of the burning of Columbia?	The burning displaced thousands of residents, leaving many homeless and destitute. It also caused immense suffering and hardship, contributing to the devastating impact of the war on the Southern populace.
8	How did the burning of Columbia affect the end of the Civil War?	The destruction of Columbia, alongside the broader successes of Sherman's March, significantly weakened the Confederacy's resolve and its ability to continue fighting, hastening the war's eventual end.
9	Are there differing historical interpretations of Sherman's actions in Columbia?	Yes, historical interpretations vary. Some view Sherman as a brilliant strategist who employed total war tactics effectively, while others condemn him as a war criminal for the widespread destruction and suffering caused, particularly in Columbia.
10	What lasting legacy does the burning of Columbia have?	The burning of Columbia left a deep scar on the city's history and contributed to the lingering bitterness and resentment in the South for generations. It remains a controversial event in the narrative of the Civil War.

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