INTERVIEW I

DATE: February 15, 1972

INTERVIEWEE: ROGER L. STEVENS

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

PLACE: Mr. Stevens' office in the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

F: I think to start, when did you first meet Lyndon Johnson?

S: I met Lyndon Johnson back in the fifties when he was majority leader.

F: In what capacity? Just social?

S: I called on him because Mrs. Stevens was working on the Humane Slaughter Bill and I was hoping that he would support it.

F: Did you have any luck?

S: It went through, yes.

F: Did he take an active role, as far as you know?

S: I think it would be reasonable to say that if he hadn't been behind it, it wouldn't have gone through.

F: Did you have continuing relationship with him or was this just the one shot sort of situation?

S: I was chairman of the finance committee of the Democratic Party at that time and we would meet from time to time, and also when he was vice president, we would run across each other in various situations.

F: Just mainly socially and politically?

S: There were no political meetings involved.

F: How did you get into politics?

S: Well, I used to be chairman of Adlai Stevenson's finance committee during 1952 and 1956, and from 1956 to 1960 I continued as head of the finance committee.

F: Did the finance committee have much of a relationship with the Senate Majority Leader at that time?

S: He attempted to help us on several occasions. I was very active in 1958 in helping a number of senators for the Democratic Party. Fortunately, many that were elected in that year are still with us.

F: Could you use Johnson to go out and help you raise money?

S: No, I never did that. I remember he did come to a fund-raising affair with Sam Rayburn in New York once, for the purpose of raising money for the party.

F: He was just one of the luminaries to attract a crowd.

S: Exactly.

F: Did you see much of him while he was vice president in an official capacity?

S: No, I was in New York most of the time, except when I would come down here to work on the Kennedy Center.

F: You didn't have really, then, any relationship with him until he became president, as far as fine arts was concerned.

S: That's right.

F: You were of course active in soliciting funds and trying to get something passed in the way of an arts foundation, and to get

the Kennedy Center going.

S: You can't combine the two things here. They are completely separate. The Kennedy Center was started in 1958 and had nothing to do with the arts council at all.

F: Let's take them one at a time then. Let's start with the Kennedy Center. On the Kennedy Center, how much of a role did Johnson have in renaming that?

S: Well, he backed it after the assassination of President Kennedy and urged that Congress provide enough funds to get the project finished, but with inflation and so forth it wasn't enough.

F: Did he take an active interest in the plans for it?

S: No, they had all been made before he came into office.

F: His was more a role of endorsement in this case?

S: Right.

F: Now did he ask you to stay on on that project, or did he really have any hand in that project?

S: He really never had any hand in the project. It's sort of a peculiar arrangement of half public members and half administration members. I would say of course that if the President of the United States didn't want me in this position, I would not be holding it, even though, as chairman, I am elected each year by the Board of Trustees. I was designated by President Kennedy in 1961, and so far no one has seen fit to change my role.

F: You've been a longtime advocate that the arts are too much centered in New York and ought to be dispersed, or at least the

strength of them should be. Did you ever discuss this with Johnson?

S: I don't know that that's exactly accurate.

F: All right.

S: I'm very much in favor of the arts being taken to the country and provisions made for the people throughout the country to enjoy the fine arts, but I also am a very strong believer in excellence and quality in the arts, and I think that is centered in New York, like it or not; it happens to be a fact of life. . . .

F: Yes. Did you ever talk with Johnson about this dispersal of our cultural resources?

S: He asked me to be assistant to the President on the arts, before there was an arts council. I of course worked with Abe Fortas and Myer Feldman, who at that time was an assistant and legal counsel for the President. We discussed ways and means of getting a bill through Congress to start an arts council. At that time it was hard to get that much done, even without appropriations, to say nothing of having appropriations.

Then when Johnson was elected into office we put a new arts council bill through which called for funding.

F: Did you have any sort of beforehand information that Johnson was going to ask you to be his arts adviser?

S: No.

F: How did he bring up the subject?

S: It was done by several people. Some members of the committee appointed to choose someone for the job asked me if I would be interested in taking it, which, of course, is usual procedure with presidential appointments. You're approached first to see if you will accept, so no one is put in the embarrassing position of having it turned down.

F: Did the President then come to you directly?

S: No, actually, I was in Europe at the time the decision was made. There had apparently been some delay due to some premature publicity. I think it was Abe Fortas who called me in France and asked if I was still interested in the job.

F: Originally this was rumored in January in the New York Times I know particularly. Did someone leak it along the way?

S: Apparently someone did, because I didn't know anything about it.

F: You mean you read about it, too!

S: Yes, I read about it, too.

F: Did this cause Johnson then to hold up?

S: Well, everyone in his administration knew that he was annoyed when things were leaked, and I don't blame him. It's an unfortunate fact of life in this country that people feel that they have to leak things or get the information before it is the proper time to release it.

F: How did Johnson approach the matter of your being his arts advisor? Just what did he tell you and give you in the way of

a commission?

S: I had a meeting with him, and the main purpose of which was to talk about getting an arts bill through Congress that had been introduced many times and had never been able to get a rule from Judge Smith.

F: What kind of rule are you looking for?

S: A rule that would get the bill on the floor. Judge [Howard W.] Smith had prevented it for years and years and years. And I was able to work out an arrangement whereby we were able to get a rule from Judge Smith.

F: How did you do that?

S: By asking the right people to ask Judge Smith.

F: This is the senator from Virginia?

S: No, he was the congressman in charge of the Rules Committee; he was notoriously conservative.

F: What did you do, work on friends of his?

S: I talked to friends who persuaded him that it was a good thing to let this come on the floor. And once it came on the floor, it went through.

F: Did Johnson take a personal interest in the bill?

S: Oh, by a personal interest, his legislative assistants helped push the bill through.

F: Did he suggest people that ought to be talked to?

S: Well, we never had to go that far. I was working on it pretty much on my own because the administration was very much interested in the re-election at that time; it was in the summer of 1964.

F: Of course you had the advantage of knowing most people politically.

S: That's right.

F: Let's go back just a moment. Did you drop the job of Democratic national finance chairman, so Kennedy could name his own people?

S: No. When the Kennedy machine came in, they came in with their own people. I dropped out of all fund raising completely and have been out of it ever since.

F: Johnson never talked to you about being a fund raiser?

S: No. I contributed every year personally, but there's nothing as obsolete as an ex-fund raiser in politics.

F: Where did he get Arthur Krim? Did you have any hand in that?

S: Arthur Krim used to work very closely with us in the Stevenson campaigns,and I suppose he just continued his interests in the Democratic Party.

F: He wasn't a suggestion of yours?

S: No.

F: When Johnson named you then the chairman of the national arts council [National Council on the Arts], did he give you some sort of a mandate or was it pretty well spelled out by Congress?

S: That was spelled out by Congress in the act,and,of course,he approved the act.

F: Did you have any particular struggle while the act was being considered in Congress, once you'd gotten it out of committee.

S: It was quite difficult.

F: What did you do?

S: The way bills usually get through, you talk to a lot of important people and try to persuade them that what you are doing is the right thing to do.

F: Were you ever accused of sort of promoting yourself?

S: I haven't been, but maybe I have been behind my back.

F: But that wasn't a charge you had to face?

S: No. Most of these jobs were very thankless jobs, and I guess that no one feels that they are doing me much of a favor by offering them to me.

F: There never was a conflict of interest question raised on this?

S: Well, as a matter of fact when I was first nominated, there was somebody who fed a congressman a crazy story. He then got up on the floor and made a big point about how I stood to benefit from all the plays I had produced on Broadway. After I met with the congressman and proved to him how false the statement was, he realized he had been had by someone that was feeding him some false dope.

F: This was just a voice in the wilderness then?

S: Well, he realized he was wrong once I explained the facts of life to him. There is no way one could benefit from the arts council in the way he thought. It was started by an assistant to another congressman who was very opposed to the Kennedy Center and who used to try to cause me as much trouble on the Center as possible.

F: Were the objections to the Kennedy Center pretty largely on economy, or was it again a fear of federal intervention in the arts?

S: No, I think it was just a question of timing. It has taken a long time for Congress to become educated to the importance of the arts and they are, pretty well now. Now today they're giving forty million to the arts and anything they might give to its support, it is just a drop in the bucket.

F: Yes. Did Johnson ever talk over amounts with you?

S: No, we never discussed it.

F: Did you have a fairly free hand in nominating the other members for the council or did he do that?

S: The first arts council was pretty well set up once more by meetings with Abe Fortas and Myer Feldman and myself. And if I say it myself, it was about as fine a group of people as you could have gotten together.

F: Did you have any turndowns?

S: No, not that I remember. I know that David Brinkley left after about a year; he felt he didn't have the time to come to the meetings.

F: Well, the people in the arts council that I know have always looked on this as sort of a summa cum laude in their careers in a way. Did you ever discuss the status of the arts with President Johnson?

S: He had left me pretty much alone to work on the arts council. Of course I always kept him informed of everything that I felt was important to him in those famous one page memoranda to the President. I think everyone that was at all close to the administration knew that he read them very carefully. So on anything I thought might be announced in the papers or anything I felt he'd be interested in, I kept him informed.

F: Did you have any unfortunate incidents that occurred with regard to the council?

S: No, during my time everything went very well. We'd have the usual attacks of the anti-art people in Congress like Hall and Gross, but you just had to take it with a grain of salt.

F: Did you have a feeling that Johnson had a strong commitment to the arts program, or that this was just one more piece of legislation?

S: Well, of course, you must remember that as he became more involved in the war, it was much harder for him to pay attention to domestic programs. But he certainly backed me up on anything that I felt was important. And, of course, I used to see a great deal of Mrs. Johnson who was interested in the arts. She used to come to me for advice on many subjects in that field.

F: Were you a sort of unofficial White House adviser also on the sort of entertainment to have for parties?

S: I became one after that first unfortunate party, on which I was not asked my advice.

F: Is this the one that Eric Goldman put together?

S: Yes, the Eric Goldman party. Then after that they usually did ask me about people.

F: What were the questions: the type of entertainment or the type of people?

S: Well, the type of entertainment and the type of people, and of course we didn't want any more incidents of the type we had at the Goldman party. If there was someone I had my doubts about, I'd call them up and say, "If you're invited to the White House, you must remember you're a guest. If you are going to come and make political capital of it, I think you ought to stay home." I never had anyone fail me. If I knew they were really what you might call "kooks," I would say stay away from them.

F: I suppose you worked most with Bess Abell on this?

S: That's right.

F: She had a fair knowledge of who people were?

S: Oh, she had an excellent knowledge, but, as I say, after that Goldman party she availed herself of my knowledge. I might add that the only time that I was not asked my advice after that party was the famous Eartha Kitt incident.

F: Which wasn't supposed to be an entertainment party anyhow, and wasn't. Was there anything in Eartha Kitt's background that would indicate that she'd pull such a stunt?

S: Yes, there was. She is notorious for trying to get publicity of that kind. It was just a public stunt to get her name in

front of the public.

F: You weren't advised when Ray Conniff came to the White House recently.

S: No, I don't have anything to do with the present administration.

F: Yes, I know that. But I suppose this is going to pop up once an administration to embarrass someone.

S: It's just that if you invite as many people as they do to the White House, you're bound percentage-wise to have instances.

F: Did you ever get any idea of President Johnson's musical taste or entertainment tastes? I mean, was he as dedicated to the string band as is popularly depicted?

S: During the period we're talking about, he was under such terrific pressures and he was working so hard that Bess Abell tried to keep the entertainment down to about a half an hour. But we had every type of entertainment there.

F: Did he seem to enjoy all types?

S: He seemed to, yes.

F: You said you worked rather closely with Mrs. Johnson. Was this on the entertainment in the White House?

S: Not so much that, but--

F: I'm going to come to the trips later.

S: Well, the trips, but the arts in general or people. She'd call me up and ask about people they were entertaining in the White House. She wanted to know some background information. And she had various decisions to make related to the arts which

she used to ask me about.

F: Now I notice from time to time people like Helen Hayes would appear at a White House dinner. Was that sort of a Johnson initiative just because she wanted nice people there?

S: I think mostly Mrs. Johnson took care of [that]. It was under her auspices that the parties were arranged.

F: Did Johnson show any interest in where the Kennedy Center was going to be located? I know this was still somewhat in doubt at the time he became president.

S: It never was in doubt, except in the minds of people that didn't know anything about it. President Kennedy was very firm about it being in that location. And I never heard any indication that Johnson had any other thoughts. The only group that seemed to be doubtful about it was the Washington Post. I always felt they were more interested in trying to bring activity down by the department stores that advertised so heavily than in the merits of the case.

F: I remember somewhere in there Robert Kennedy was rumored as having some reservations on this Potomac River site.

S: Well, maybe Robert Kennedy did, but he was not interested in the center per se and especially after he became senator. Senator Ted Kennedy was sort of designated by the family as my contact as far as the Kennedy family was concerned.

F: He went right along with your plans?

S: He always went along very nicely with them.

F: How active were you in getting the Hirshhorn collection set up here?

S: Well, I sort of started it.

F: Tell me a little about that.

S: I knew through my position in the arts that the collection was going to be offered to some museum. I knew many people were after it, including the Rockefellers, the city of Baltimore, the city of Los Angeles, the English government, Israeli government and the Italian government. So, I arranged an appointment through a friend of mine that knew the Hirshhorns for Dillon Ripley to visit Mr. Hirshhorn up in Connecticut to start the negotiations. I could not be there because I was out on the West Coast at a meeting. Then I worked very closely with Sam Harris, who was Mr. Hirshhorn's attorney and probably more responsible for it coming here than any one of us. He felt it was the right thing to do, that it belonged in Washington. Sam Harris and I were old friends from the Stevenson's days. But then as time went on, and it became apparent that Hirshhorn would go along with giving it to the Smithsonian, there was no point in my wasting my time on the project. President Johnson and Mrs. Johnson were very helpful in arranging it. We had a luncheon at the White House, in which it was evident to Mr. Hirshhorn that the President was interested. That's why I got very annoyed by an article by Jack Anderson saying the President and Mrs. Johnson had been duped; far from being duped, we were all actively seeking it, because without question it was

the finest collection of modern sculpture in the world. I had had it checked out before I even brought the Johnsons into it. Alfred Frankfurter who was regarded as the number one art expert in the country at that time gave me an opinion that it was the best. Unfortunately he died. I suppose if I'd been around Washington a little longer I would have probably asked him for it in writing which, of course, he would have given me. But I didn't have it documented, but it wasn't important.

F: Did Johnson take a sort of active hand with Hirshhorn once he got him down here, more than just saying, "We'd like to have it?"

S: Oh, he was very helpful, exceedingly helpful.

F: In what way?

S: Well, just in telling Mr. Hirshhorn we wanted it here in Washington. What more can you ask than to have the President of the United States say to a man, "We would like it here in Washington."

F: How do you put together a luncheon like that so that you give the proper evidence of interest and at the same time you don't give the impression that you're just trying to overpower a man.

S: Well, once more I enlisted the help of Abe Fortas, who was very interested in the arts. I think Dillon Ripley, Abe Fortas and Sam Harris and our respective wives, along with President and Mrs. Johnson, convinced Mr. and Mrs. Hirshhorn that the collection should be in Washington.

F: The luncheon was really what you would call an intimate luncheon?

S: That's right.

F: No trotting out the--

S: Oh no, it was up in the second floor in his private dining room.

F: Which is more impressive than a state dinner, I think.

S: That's right.

F: Did the President make any sort of promises to Mr. Hirshhorn about housing?

S: No, I don't recall at that time that he did. I just think it was generally assumed that if the gift came, it would be housed and it was up to the Smithsonian then to make arrangements with Congress.

F: And the ball, from that point as far as the actual display and so forth, was carried by the Smithsonian?

S: That's right. Mr. Ripley did a great job on this.

F: Did Mr. Johnson show any particular interest in getting the Kennedy Center opened before he went out of office?

S: He dedicated it back early in his administration. I was involved in a great number of problems with strikes, overruns and all that, and of this I kept him informed. I know he would have liked to have had it finished during his administration, but it just wasn't possible.

F: Did he show any interest in the fact that you had commissioned Leonard Bernstein to do the opening?

S: No, that was entirely separate.

F: Your experience with the arts council was that, of course, Congress then cut budgets on you.

S: They never would give us our full authorization, that's right.

F: Right. Nonetheless, the sixties are vital in that we did change an attitude. We established a principle that the federal government did have a stake in the arts of the country. How do you educate a whole people, and particularly their representatives? To me, this is significant.

S: I've always said there is no substitute for footwork when you are trying to get your bill through Congress. If you feel it's important, especially when there's no vested interest behind it, you go around and talk to a lot of people. Of course, with due credit to the present administration, they can deliver the one hundred and twenty-five Republican votes that used to beat my brains out, or to put it more politely, used to be opposed to me. Eventually it became an accepted political issue with both the Republicans and Democrats.

F: Once you got the arts council set up and got the machinery in motion, did you get much congressional pressure for little pet projects in Opelousas, Louisiana or somewhere from the local people?

S: Oh, we'd get it, but we didn't pay any attention to it. Fortunately, that was the good part of not having too much money.

F: You can plead a certain poverty on these cases where there are just not enough funds.

S: Which was true, we had very little money. I always found that when we got unhappy letters from the congressmen, it was better to go over

and see them personally. I always thought that that was important. So they knew at least that attention was being paid to their concerns and opinions.

F: My observation from the outside, and I am very vitally interested in this particular work, has been that the council has not been split along political lines or ideological lines, geographical lines. Am I correct in that assumption that they may disagree on certain momentary things, but there are no hard and fast factions?

S: Well, during my regime there were some Republicans on the council; it wasn't a completely Democratic group. However, I barely had a dissenting vote. In other words, unless there was very substantial agreement among members of the council, I didn't try to put a project across. I felt we had so many things to do and so little money to do it with that there was no point in getting into a project that the council wasn't really sold on.

F: If you got an 11 to 9 vote, then, you wouldn't have taken it.

S: I wouldn't take it if I had gotten a 20 to 3 or 4 vote. I had practically unanimous approval of everything I did.

F: Did the President show any interest in your decision or was he too occupied?

S: He was too occupied to become involved in the smaller issues. After all, these were very minor decisions on the part of a great big operation. Although I do like to say that, having been involved in the political life and in government, I doubt if there ever was or ever will be a president that had his finger on the government operations as closely as President

Johnson did. I don't think it can ever happen again nor has it happened in the past.

F: You mean he knew what you were up to, too?

S: He knew what everyone was up to, literally. He had an amazing grasp of what was going on in government. Not that he would know my specific projects or anything like that, but he had an amazing grasp of the overall picture, probably because of his background. I don't think that's ever been recognized, that's the reason I make this point.

F: When you talked to him, did you find him someone that you didn't have to talk down to on the arts, someone you could talk straight to?

S: We did not have too many discussions. As I say, as he got into the war more and more, he was too involved. I would talk to him about possible appointments and important policy matters.

F: In the late summer of 1967, you took a trip with Mrs. Johnson, a four-day swing through the Midwest. Mrs. Humphrey was along, Secretary Weaver, Secretary Freeman. What's this all about?

S: Well, the purpose for my being around was to point out some of the arts-related activities of the administration.

F: Did you advise on the itinerary?

S: I made suggestions. I think there were three of those trips as I recall where I was present. There was one special example: I felt that Mrs. Johnson should go to Columbus, Indiana, where there are an unusual number of fine examples of architecture. This was

due to the involvement of the Cummins-Engine Company, which searched out the best architects in the country to design buildings in Columbus.

F: Did you find her genuinely interested in the things you had to show her?

S: Oh she was very interested, terribly bright about everything. She absorbed information like a sponge and always briefed herself thoroughly on any project she was undertaking.

F: Did she use you as sort of an information almanac?

S: Well, most of the time for the arts; I imagine she used other people too.

One of the incidents on the trip to Minneapolis was rather interesting.

F: Was that for the Tyrone Guthrie?

S: Yes. There was a newspaper ad signed by all the members of Guthrie Theater, anti-war and so forth. It came out just before we went to the Guthrie Theater. I talked to the people up there whom I knew. I said, "I don't want any trouble. After all we've done for you, I don't think you should be impolite to the wife of the President of the United States." I think one of my more uncomfortable moments was that night in the theater when after I suggested that she go back stage to meet the actors lest they feel hurt she said, "I'll go because I have faith that you know what you're doing." Then I got to thinking that if just one out of those thirty actors acted up, it would be terribly embarrassing. But none of them did. They were all very nice and all very glad to meet Mrs. Johnson.

F: Did she seem to have just rather straightforward taste? Did she like the innovative things? Or did she have any opportunity to there?

S: I don't think there was any opportunity. I'm not sure what was playing that night. I guess I was a little too nervous to pay any attention. If my memory serves me correctly, it was "The House of Atrias," which was quite innovative.

F: But you weren't the best viewer that night?

S: No, I felt like I had endorsed a blank note.

F: On a trip right at the end of the administration, she made a swing cross-country and she visited the French Quarter in New Orleans. I know you were there. Were you on the whole trip or just the New Orleans segment? She went to Florida and then to New Orleans and out to the Redwoods.

S: No, I was just on the New Orleans segment of that trip because we had a project down there that the arts council had done that we were rather proud of: a repertory theater, a project for high school students.

F: Whose inspired idea was it to have Duke Ellington and Marian Anderson along? They were there.

S: I don't recall whose it was at the moment. They were on the council, of course.

F: Did she react to the New Orleans development?

S: She thought the whole thing was rather good. Unfortunately, I didn't think the production that they were doing then was very good. It

was a Shaw play, as I recall, "Arms and the Man." I don't think it was very well done.

F: Did you ever have any real flaps on any of these trips with Mrs. Johnson?

S: Everything went very well. The only time of a flap, and I don't think it was on one of these trips, occurred in San Francisco. I happened to be there for the opening of the opera and was invited to go with her group. We did have an unpleasant time going through the picket line that was formed there. I think it was very badly handled by the San Francisco police. There shouldn't have been a picket line in front of the theater that Mrs. Johnson had to walk through. They can have picket lines, of course, but not right in her path. That was the only flap, but she took it in her stride.

F: It didn't seem to upset her unduly?

S: Well, if it did she did not show it.

F: She's a pretty well disciplined woman, it seems to me.

S: She certainly is.

F: Were you a witness to any of the President's celebrated blowups?

S: No, I never was. All my relations with the President were very pleasant and he always said very kind things about me, especially at the final White House dinner for the arts.

F: I was at that dinner. Did you pick the guest list, or was that pretty well [settled]. Part of it was obvious, I know.

S: We would recommend people, but we never picked the final guest list.

There was one instance which I think should be recorded that was very much to the credit of President Johnson. One time I was talking to him about some problems in the Kennedy Center and he said, "I hear you want Arthur Schlesinger to be reappointed to the Board of Trustees of the Kennedy Center." I said, "Yes, I do, Mr. President, he's been very helpful." And he was very helpful, especially at that time the relations with the then-Mrs. Kennedy, who was not quite the easiest person, you might say, to deal with, and had strong opinions of her own. He said "Well, he's been abusing me all the time and, if I reappoint him, they'll think I'm afraid of him." I said, "I don't think so, Mr. President, I think they'll greatly admire you if you appoint someone who has taken the position opposite from yours." Mr. Schlesinger's opinion was not necessarily mine, but I did think he was very good on the Kennedy Center. So the only and nearest thing [to a blowup] he ever said, and it really wasn't a blowup, was when he said, "That's not what my closest advisers say I should do." I was very interested to see that he did reappoint him in spite of the fact that Mr. Schlesinger had been saying very unfriendly things and continued to say them. It showed that if he felt the man was right for the position, he would appoint him regardless of his personal feelings.

F: This isn't quite on Johnson, except that it's in the period. I would be very interested in your feelings about whether the

charge or the claim is correct that so much of the information takes place away from the sort of art centers which are commercial and traditional.

S: I don't know what you mean by an art center.

F: I'm thinking of course necessarily of New York, but in opera in San Francisco, it would vary from place to place, Chicago, that you're more likely to get it out at the University of Minnesota or in New Orleans or on university campuses and so on.

S: I don't think that much innovation comes out of university campuses. The reason that opera is being put on in the universities is the fact that financially it doesn't cost them very much money; it's all done by amateurs. For professionals to do it costs too much money. At the same time you have very excellent facilities available in these university music schools. They have many artists in residence they can call upon to work in the operas, so it's more an economic matter than anything else.

F: Did you get the feeling that you pretty well laid to rest the fear that government sponsorship of the arts, even minimal, would bring a sort of a mediocrity and a sameness?

S: Well, I can say that at the end of our regime that was the feeling most of the artists had in the country. I won't comment after that.

F: All right. We won't pursue that then.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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