

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name U.S. Chamber of Commerce Building
other names/site number N/A

2. Location

street & number 1615 H Street, N.W. not for publication N/A
city, town Washington vicinity N/A
state District of Columbia code DC county DC code 001 zip code 20062

3. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	Contributing	Noncontributing
<input type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input type="checkbox"/> district	<u>1</u>	<u>0</u> buildings
<input type="checkbox"/> public-State	<input type="checkbox"/> site	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u> sites
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u> structures
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u> objects
		<u>1</u>	<u>0</u> Total

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A
Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.

Robert L. Mallett
Signature of certifying official STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER Date 5/17/92

State or Federal agency and bureau _____

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official _____ Date _____

State or Federal agency and bureau _____

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register.
 See continuation sheet.

determined eligible for the National Register. See continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the National Register.

removed from the National Register.

other, (explain:) _____

Patrick W. Andrus 5/13/92
Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

fort

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE/TRADE: organizational

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE/TRADE: organizationalINDUSTRY/PROCESSING/EXTRACTION: communications facility

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(enter categories from instructions)

LATE 19th AND 20th CENTURY REVIVALS: Beaux Arts

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation granitewalls limestone

roof N/Aother N/A

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

SUMMARY DESCRIPTION

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Building is a four-story limestone Beaux Arts classical revival building. Designed by Cass Gilbert, it faces south onto Lafayette Park and the White House. While the colonnaded corner building has been altered over the years, its appearance from the street is virtually unchanged. Most of its significant interior spaces and finishes are also intact.

DESCRIPTION

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Building occupies a prominent corner site across from the northwestern edge of Lafayette Park. To the east is the Hay-Adams Hotel, an elegant Beaux Arts building constructed in 1928, separated from the Chamber of Commerce Building by a recessed limestone porte-cochere. The Chamber of Commerce Building adds an imposing presence to the predominantly low-scale 19th century buildings surrounding the Park. It echoes the form of the earlier U.S. Treasury Annex, designed by the same architect, across from the southeastern edge of the Park.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Building exhibits two principal facades, each 11 bays wide, on Connecticut Avenue (west) and H Streets (south). The building displays the tripartite vertical organization and symmetry typical of Beaux Arts design. Rusticated limestone above a granite waterable forms the one-story base of the building. The three-story shaft rises above a simple belt-course and is composed of a colonnade of 10 engaged Corinthian columns framed by pilasters. A full Corinthian entablature supporting a balustrade crowns the building. Small lion heads enliven the fascia of the cornice.

Massive entries are set within the center of the first floor of both the south and west facades. Architraves surmounted by rectangular pediments form the entry surrounds. The pierced openings in the first floor create a pattern of solid and void emphasizing the solidity of the base of the building. Window openings on the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th floors are set behind the engaged columns creating a more unified wall surface. The height of the window openings diminishes with the height of the building. The 2nd floor windows are topped by a Greek key beltcourse that extends behind the columns; recessed panels separate the 2nd and 3rd floor windows. The 4th floor openings are undetailed. All windows are composed of eight-over-eight sash within metal frames.

 See continuation sheet

8. Statement of Significance

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally statewide locally

Applicable National Register Criteria A B C D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions) A B C D E F G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

ARCHITECTURE
COMMERCE
POLITICS/GOVERNMENT

Period of Significance

1925-1941

Significant Dates

1925

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Significant Person

N/A

Architect/Builder

Gilbert, Cass

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Building, designed by Cass Gilbert in 1925, is an excellent example of Gilbert's work and of the influence of the City Beautiful movement and the MacMillan Commission Report on the city of Washington. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which continues to occupy the building, embodies the institutional role of 20th century government lobbying organizations in Washington. The Chamber of Commerce Building meets National Register Criterion C because it represents the work of Cass Gilbert, one of the most accomplished architects of the early 20th century. It also meets National Register Criterion A because of its association with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, an organization that has represented American business interests in Washington since its inception in 1912.

HISTORIC CONTEXT

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce exemplifies the institutional role played by voluntary associations in national government in the 20th century. These organizations reach well beyond lobbying to play an important role in coordinating membership participation in government. The associations not only provide a voice for their members, they inform them about common concerns as well. They clarify public policy issues for members, provide technical information to legislators and public officials, and educate the general public. As the role of government has increased during the 20th century, the importance and influence of these organizations has grown proportionally.

The history of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce clearly illustrates how these organizations have become an important part of the political process. The need for a national organization that could speak with one voice for business interests in the U.S. became apparent during the reform movements of the late 19th and early 20th century. Business organizations had a predominantly local focus that made it difficult for business to command the institutional presence of labor or agriculture in government deliberations. At that time, businessmen with access to government often propounded conflicting views on issues.

See continuation sheet

9. Major Bibliographical References

Please see Continuation Sheet

See continuation sheet

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository: _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of property less than one acre

UTM References

A 18 323260 4307480
 Zone Easting Northing

C _____

B _____
 Zone Easting Northing

D _____

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

Square 186, Lot 808

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

Square 186, Lot 808 has been historically associated with the subject property.

See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Betty Bird
 organization Betty Bird date April 15, 1991
 street & number 2025 Eye Street, N.W., Suite 801 telephone 202-463-2033
 city or town Washington state D.C. zip code 20006

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In keeping with 1920s traditional American architecture, ornament is simplified and clearly subordinate to the overall form and composition of the building. The restrained use of rich ornamental detail produces an elegant, formal building that exemplifies the interest in aesthetic values in early 20th century academic architectural design. Decorative detail has been concentrated at the two entrances, which feature full Corinthian entablatures surmounted by rectangular pediments supported by consoles. Massive ten-panelled wood double doors are set within each entry. The entrance on H Street, which is presently the only working entrance, also has interior doors beyond the wood doors. A transom set within a bronze frame embellished with a Vitruvian scroll rests above the interior doors. The transom is screened by rope molding executed in bronze. To either side of this entrance are two free-standing metal lampposts featuring a design of oak leaves and grape clusters. The lampposts are surmounted by round globes. There is limited visibility of the north and east facades of the Chamber of Commerce Building. A taller building has been built up against the western end of the north facade; the portion of the facade that remains exposed is located on an alley in the center of a built-up block. A 1958 one-story roof top addition, which cannot be seen from the street, is visible from the alley. Although detailed in ochre brick as a secondary facade, the north wall of the building displays the skilled design and attention to detail that distinguishes the building. The tripartite composition of the building is expressed by simple brick and limestone cornices above the 1st and 5th floors. The 1st floor features arched openings with keystones set between brick pilasters. Brick panels enframed by soldier courses relieve the large surface of the brick wall at the first floor.

The east facade faces the Hay-Adams Hotel across a narrow alley. The buildings are joined by a rusticated limestone porte-cochere recessed one bay back from the plane of the south facade of the Chamber of Commerce Building. The east facade of the building is a slightly simplified version of the primary facades on Connecticut Avenue and H Street. Executed in limestone, the east facade is articulated with a rusticated base and a colonnade of engaged Corinthian columns framed by pilasters. The Greek key stringcourse above the 2nd floor windows has also been carried through to this facade. While the form of the column capitals is identical to those on the major facades, the capitals are uncarved. Recessed panels have also been eliminated on this facade.

The interior of the building, which is trapezoidal in shape, is disposed about a central court that was infilled in 1981. The first floor consists of a lobby and various public rooms; the upper floors consist of offices located along a double-loaded corridor. The floor plan of the original portion of the building is little changed. With the exception of covered beams, Memorial Hall, the entry lobby on the south of the building, is unaltered. The room, finished in Pouillenay rose marble, is dominated by arched openings framing the windows and the marble arcade that forms its north wall.

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A large bronze memorial plaque occupies the east wall. Memorial Hall features travertine marble floors and elaborate coffered ceilings. The stairhall, elevators, and corridor are located four steps above Memorial Hall. The stair lobby is separated from Memorial Hall by the marble double arcade that articulates the southern, front portion of the first floor corridor. A ceremonial marble stair is located at the east end of the stair lobby. Both the corridor and the stair lobby feature the same elaborate coffered ceiling as Memorial Hall.

The Board Room, now used as a library, has been altered by the addition of a glass-walled conference room set in the center of the space. The decorated beamed ceiling and wall finishes remain. The room is further distinguished by Daniel Webster's desk, which has occupied the room since the building was constructed. The National Council Chamber, an assembly room 60 ft. wide by 110 ft. deep located at the northern portion of the first floor, is also little changed. While earlier light fixtures are gone, the original wall finishes and decorated ceilings remain. Upper floor corridors still display marble wainscot and architrave molding around door openings. Pendant light fixtures on the upper floors appear to be original to the building.

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In 1912, President William Howard Taft instructed Charles Nagel, the Secretary of Commerce and Labor, to convene a conference of commercial organizations to discuss the establishment of a National Commercial Organization. Taft himself addressed the 700 delegates stating, "We want your assistance in carrying on the government in reference to those matters that affect the business and the business welfare of the country, and we do not wish to limit your discretion in that matter. We wish that your advice should be as free and unrestricted as possible, but we need your assistance and we ask for it" (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, "Seventy-Five Years of Achievement," p. 2). The conference then founded the U.S. Chamber of Commerce with Harry A. Wheeler as president and John Joy Edson as treasurer. The national purpose of the organization was "to create a better understanding of the philosophy of competitive enterprise, and to work to strengthen the voluntary organizations of the country" (*Ibid.*, p. 5). The Chamber attempted to mold a consensus among the various competing American business constituencies by referendum of its member organizations. A proposal required a 2/3 vote to carry ("Proposed Home of National Business Organization on Old Corcoran Site, *Washington Post*, August 15, 1920).

The Chamber established their offices at 15th and G Streets. At the end of their first year, membership was 878; by 1914 it had risen to 2,258 and by 1920, to 13,106 (*Ibid.*, pp. 2-5). Having outgrown their offices, the Chamber began to plan for a headquarters building. Conceived as a memorial to the war effort by the Chamber and its members, construction began in 1922 and was completed in 1925. By 1929 membership totaled 16,257, growing to over 180,000 in 1986 (*Ibid.*, pp. 5 and 17).

The building constructed by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce is among the significant institutional structures in Washington and ranks with buildings like the DAR Headquarters (1910-1929), the American Pharmaceutical Association (1934), and the Pan-American Union (1910). The Chamber of Commerce Building represents the ideals of the City Beautiful movement embodied in the 1902 MacMillan Commission Report. The Commission, established by Senator James MacMillan, set out a plan for Washington based on visions of grandeur and monumentality embodied in the Chicago World's Fair of 1893. By promoting classical architecture as the style appropriate for the national capital, the Commission established the architectural language of the city for the early 20th century. The Chamber of Commerce Building is an edifice worthy of its location across Lafayette Park from the White House.

The Chamber of Commerce Building echoes the form and articulation of the U.S. Treasury Annex designed by Cass Gilbert in 1919. Both buildings conform with the MacMillan Commission's plans for buildings facing Lafayette Park. Renderings show the park surrounded by colonnaded classical revival buildings with uniform cornice lines deriving their architectural expression from Robert Mills' great colonnade for the U.S. Treasury Building. While this plan was never completed, the Chamber of Commerce Building and Treasury Annex survive as reminders of the urban design philo-

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sophy of the period, an ethos that would later be incorporated into the Commission of Fine Arts' schemes for the Federal Triangle.

The Chamber of Commerce Building had an impact on both the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the city. Contemporary newspaper articles place great emphasis on the building's function as a permanent national headquarters, clearly no small achievement for an organization barely 15 years old. The building, with its temple form and relationship to the Fine Arts Commission's plans for the square, symbolized the institutional voice the U.S. Chamber of Commerce had come to provide.

It is the architectural expression of a modern development of American business activity, just as the Woolworth Building in New York, designed by the same architect, Cass Gilbert, is the architectural expression of another and somewhat different phase of American business activity. The latter has been called the 'cathedral of commerce.' By the same analogy the National Chamber building could be called a 'temple of commerce.' It will, at least, probably stand for many decades to come as a monument typifying the present period in national industrial and commercial development, as the old guild halls in European capitals bear witness to the existence of an industrial and commercial order of things long since obliterated in the dust of centuries (*Book of Washington*, p. 344).

The building itself facilitated the unified business community envisioned by President Taft. Because the first floor consisted of meeting halls and conference rooms, member organizations were encouraged to hold conventions and gatherings in Washington, "a common center for all branches of industry and commerce, the innumerable threads of which are drawn together in the National Chamber's membership" ("New National Home of American Business," n.p.).

The *Washington Post* described the proposed building as follows:

the new building ... will be a veritable work-shop for American business. The entire first floor will be given over to conference rooms, memorial halls and libraries, and an auditorium where business men's conventions will be held. In the large memorial hall and libraries every unit of American business that placed itself at the disposal of the government during the war will have its services permanently recorded, and the records of all business men who put service to their country above personal profit will also be kept there ("Proposed Home of National Business Organization on Old Corcoran Site").

Cass Gilbert (1859-1934) was one of the foremost American architects of the early 20th century. He was among a group of New York/Chicago architects who enjoyed a national practice in the first

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decades of the 20th century and his work is representative of their influence on public buildings in this century. Gilbert began his practice in St. Paul, Minnesota in partnership with James Knox Taylor, who later became Supervising Architect of the U.S. Treasury in 1897. In 1896 Gilbert won the competition for the Minnesota State Capitol, a commission that brought him national attention. Around 1905, after winning the competition for the U.S. Custom House in New York, Gilbert moved his practice to that city where he designed the Woolworth Building (1913), an "architectural masterpiece ... the Mozart of skyscrapers" (Paul Goldberger, *The City Observed*, pp. 13-14). Gilbert's other work includes the City Art Museum in St. Louis, the St. Louis Public Library, the Detroit Library, the Ives Library in New Haven, the Federal Reserve Building in Minneapolis, the West Virginia State Capitol, and the U.S. Supreme Court Building. He also produced campus plans for the University of Texas and the University of Minnesota. The Chamber of Commerce Building is specifically cited as one of Gilbert's noteworthy buildings in both Withey's *Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased)* and the *Dictionary of American Biography*.

Gilbert's professional activities and interests were typical of architects of his time. In addition to founding the Minnesota chapter of the American Institute of Architects (Henry-Russell Hitchcock and William Seale, *Temples of Democracy*, p. 215), Gilbert was active in the national organization, serving as its president in 1908. In keeping with the City Beautiful movement's Renaissance ideals, Gilbert was involved with fine arts organizations as well. He was a founder and president of the Architectural League of New York, president of the National Academy (Academy of Design), and president of the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

Cass Gilbert was distinctly qualified to express the design principals of the MacMillan Commission. Steeped in the background that brought forth the City Beautiful movement, Gilbert was closely involved with all stages of its development. He was educated at M.I.T., the first school to offer the Beaux Arts curriculum in the United States, and apprenticed at McKim, Mead, and White (*Dictionary of American Biography*, p. 341). Gilbert also served on a Jury of Fine Arts for the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 (Sally Tompkins, "The Quest for Grandeur: Charles Moore, the Commission of Fine Arts, and the Federal Triangle, p. 28). Active in the American Institute of Architects (A.I.A.) at the time it was advising the MacMillan Commission, Gilbert headed the A.I.A. delegation that provided the guidelines President Theodore Roosevelt used when he established the Council of Fine Arts, the precursor of the present Commission of Fine Arts, in 1901. When President Taft created the Commission of Fine Arts in 1910, Cass Gilbert was one of the original seven members; he was reappointed to a second term by President Woodrow Wilson.

The Chamber of Commerce Building embodies Gilbert's aesthetic concerns. Along with the U.S. Treasury Annex, it incorporates the uniform cornice line, consistent classical style, and monumentality the Fine Arts Commission deemed appropriate for Lafayette Park. Typical of Gilbert's work, the interior of the building displays decorative elements that illustrate how

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architecture united with other fine arts during the American Renaissance at the turn of the century. Given the City Beautiful movement's goal of transforming civic life through architecture and planning, the close association between the program of the building and the organizational development of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce is surely no coincidence.

On a different level the Chamber of Commerce Building also embodied the Chamber's civic ideals. The building that they constructed exemplified their dedication to institutionalizing planning in Washington. Despite the Chamber of Commerce's general position of opposition to government intervention and social legislation and promotion of individual property rights, the Chamber played an important role in establishing planning and zoning legislation in Washington and the United States. This role further illuminates the connection between the program of the organization and the building they commissioned as their headquarters. Their activity in planning and zoning issues also illustrates the way the Chamber of Commerce functions through education and political activity.

After World War I, there was concern about developing models for housing and planning distinct from socialist social policy. The Chamber's Civic Development Department, headed by John Ihlder, was established in 1920 to provide a forum for expressing businessmen's interest in housing, then thought to be critical to business development in cities. The Civic Development Department promoted planning and zoning as a scientific approach to efficient city growth and development. Harry Wheeler, former president of the Chamber of Commerce, worked with former Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover on the 1931 President's Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership. Wheeler chaired the committee on "Slums, Large-Scale Housing, and Decentralization" showing illustrations of alley dwellings in the nation's capital. The conference, which drew thousands, met in several locations, including the Chamber of Commerce Building. Proceedings were carried over national radio. Washington served both as an example of what planning could accomplish and urban problems planning needed to address.

Just as the Chamber of Commerce encouraged local business organizations to promote civic planning in their communities, the Chamber became involved in Washington, D.C. planning issues. From the outset, heir building conformed to the goals of the MacMillan Commission and the Commission of Fine Arts for Lafayette Square, setting an example for private building in the District of Columbia. The Chamber also endorsed the 1922 draft legislation establishing the National Capital Parks and Planning Commission (NCPC). Because the combination of development pressures and the yearly appropriations process thwarted NCPC's plans to purchase land that would establish the park system, the Chamber of Commerce and the local Washington Board of Trade assisted NCPC in obtaining critical tracts of land. The Chamber and Board of Trade informally contacted wealthy individuals who then bought the land, reserving it for later purchase by NCPC at the original price. Thus the Chamber, working through local organizations like the Washington Board of Trade, has played an important part in the development of Washington as a community.

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Their activity in planning and zoning constituted only a small portion of the Chamber of Commerce's organizational functions. True to programmatic objectives of the building, the Chamber was able to provide space for convocations of businessmen and exchange of ideas. Over the years, the Chamber sponsored a variety of activities consistent with their basic policy that "the relation of government to industry is primarily that of preserving equality of opportunity for all" ("Seventy-five Years", p. 6).

Beginning with its coordination of business participation in the war effort during the first world war, the Chamber has provided a centralized focus for the voluntary efforts of independent businesses. Their legislative positions have ranged for support for the creation of the Federal Reserve system to the present system of uniform Monday holidays (*Ibid.*, p. 13). The Chamber has participated in an advisory capacity to various government and institutional bodies including the International Labor Organization (ILO), Atomic Energy Committee, and Committee on Science and Technology. The Chamber has also contributed to political dialogue through internal committees such as the one set up in 1956 to analyze the federal budget for excess spending (*Ibid.*, pp. 8-17).

Education and communications have always been a keystone of the Chamber's activities. The magazine, **Nation's Business**, was first published in 1912; and their monthly newspaper **The Business Advocate**, successor to **Washington Report**, was originally published in 1926. The Chamber also operates a vast telecommunications network that presents business issues on television. Its weekly television program "It's Your Business" first aired in 1979. The Chamber's network, Biznet, presents scheduled programming and special video conferences. The Chamber also produces programs that air on other networks. Training workshops, like the Institute Training Program for Organization Management, are another aspect of the Chamber's educational program (*Ibid.* pp. 6, 10, 16-17).

International activities are also an important component of the Chamber's work. The Chamber has participated in various international trade councils, United Nations advisory commissions, and other international bodies. The Chamber has also served as a forum to bring together foreign heads of state and leading U.S. businessmen (*Ibid.* pp. 8, 12, 13, 17).

While the expansion and evolution of the Chamber's programs have resulted in alterations to the building, the changes have not affected the essential form and integrity of the resource. In 1958, a rooftop addition was placed on the north end of the building and a basement was placed under the courtyard. The addition is visible only from an alley. In 1981 the interior courtyard was infilled to create television and radio studio space. Interior walls facing on the former courtyard retain their historic appearance, ensuring that the detailing and spatial configuration of significant interiors retain their original architectural character. Because the building's exterior appearance is virtually unchanged, it continues to communicate Cass Gilbert's vision for a "temple of commerce" set within

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one of the most significant precincts of the Federal City. The Chamber of Commerce Building still conveys the historic associations it embodies, further enriched by continued association with the organization for which it was built.

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"Hundreds Gather in Washington for Meeting of C. of C. **Evening Star**, May 15, 1922, p. 1.

"New Addition to U.S. Chamber." **Evening Star**. October 11, 1957, p. 28.

"New National Home of American Business." **Boston Ideas**, May 16, 1925, n.p. (Washingtoniana Division)

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