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The New York Irish in the 1850s: Locked in by Poverty?

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THE NEW YORK IRISH IN THE 1850s: LOCKED IN BY POVERTY?¹

Cormac Ó Gráda

Their numbers in mid-nineteenth century New York suggest that the city acted as a kind of irresistible magnet for Irish immigrants. Contemporary commentary cited the lure of friends and community, but also counselled immigrants against clinging to the east coast cities. Throughout the 1850s, but particularly at times of high unemployment such as in 1854-5 and in the wake of the Panic of 1857, philanthropists, labour and ethnic activists, and the local press urged the westward movement of labour. In June 1855 the *New York Times* even called on the city to finance such movement. Irish newspapers such as the *Citizen* and the *Irish-American* also advised people to move. In the wake of the financial panic of October 1857 Irish philanthropist Vere Foster prevailed on the Women's Protective Emigration Society to pay for the westward journey of about seven hundred unemployed Irishwomen. During the decade the New York State Commissioners for Emigration helped about thirty thousand indigent immigrants to move west, and for a time operated a labour exchange on Canal Street linking prospective employers with recent arrivals in the city. Yet the sense that too many Irish failed to grasp the opportunities awaiting them in the interior by remaining close to their ports of arrival pervades the historiography. That 'failure' was put down in part to fecklessness, in part to a poverty trap that prevented settlers in the

¹This paper is based in part on a seminar presentation at NYU's Ireland House on May 13 2005. A longer version is due to appear in my *Ireland's Great Famine: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (University College Dublin Press, forthcoming 2006).

east coast ghettos from proceeding further.²

1. *A RESIDUAL POPULATION:*

The claim that the famine and post-famine Irish failed to take their chances like other immigrant groups needs qualification. First, it bears emphasis that throughout the 1840s and 1850s only a small fraction of those who arrived in the city stayed there.³ Between 1847 and 1860 1.1 million Irish immigrants landed in New York port. The rise in the Irish-born population of New York — from nearly 0.1 million on the eve of the Famine to just over 0.2 million in 1860 — was far from commensurate.⁴ Moreover, comparing the increases in the numbers of Irish, Germans, and British in the city between 1850 and 1860 with gross immigrant flows implies that the Irish were hardly any more inclined to remain than the Germans. An immigration of 841,000 from Ireland fuelled a population increase of only 70,000, while a German inflow of 761,000 helped boost the number of German-born by 64,000. In this respect the British were very different. Despite a gross inflow of over three hundred thousand the number of

² Maguire, 1868: 214-5; see also Ernst, *Immigrant Life*, 62; Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 315; Stott, *Workers in the Metropolis*, 71.

³ Purcell, 'Irish Emigrant Society', 593; Ernst, *Immigrant Life*, 61.

⁴ In Joseph Ferrie's sample of antebellum immigrants, which links passenger lists and manuscript census data, less than one-fifth of the Irish who arrived in the port of New York between 1840 and 1850 remained there on census day in 1850. See Ferrie, 'Up and out or down and out?'; *id.*, *Yankeys Now*; Ernst, *Immigrant Life*, 188; Mooney, *Nine Years*, 83-4, 93-4.

New Yorkers born in Britain rose by only six thousand.⁵ The implication of these numbers must be tempered the fact that they include both travellers and immigrants and the likelihood that a much higher proportion of the British arrivals returned to Europe.

Corroboration for the outward mobility of the New York Irish at a more micro level is found in Jay Dolan's well-known study of Irish and German Catholics in two Manhattan parishes in the 1850s. Dolan found that nearly two-fifths of a sample of Irish families present in the Transfiguration of Our Lord parish in the heavily Irish Sixth Ward in 1850 had left before 1860. Over the same period, a slightly higher proportion of German families living in Holy Redeemer parish in the Seventeenth Ward in 1850 had moved. Life expectation in the Six Ward was much lower, however; taking deaths into account, the German percentage remaining in New York exceeded the Irish by 57 to 41 per cent.⁶

Comparing the stock of Irish-born in New York in 1860 with the age-structure and gender of the inflow into the city during the 1840s and 1850s is also interesting in this respect. Table 1 describes the age structure of the New York Irish as reflected in the IPUMS 1860 U.S. census sample⁷ and that of a sample of over three thousand immigrants who arrived in ten shiploads in 1851. Note that while men dominated the immigration, women dominated the population of New York in 1860. Note too, judging from the sample, that the 1860 stock was rather

⁵ Albion, *Port of New York*, 353.

⁶ Dolan, *Immigrant Church*, 38. Presumably unmarried parishioners would have been more mobile.

⁷ Available at <http://www.ipums.org/>

‘old’ – with one third of the men aged over forty (compared with only 22 per cent of the women) – while the migrant inflow tended to be very young. The passenger lists suggest that well over two-thirds of the inflow were aged under 25 years and that – in common with migrant flows in other times and other places – women tended to leave home sooner than men.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Although nothing specific is known about the mortality patterns of immigrants, the bulk of those arriving in 1851 would have been still alive in 1860.⁸ A plausible if hardly rigorous reading of Table 1 would therefore be that a disproportionate proportion of New York’s Irishmen had arrived before 1850, and that younger women were much more likely to remain on than men. Our discussion of the prospects facing women immigrants below implies that this was a ‘rational’ outcome in the economic sense.

The Irish who left the city fared better than those who remained, but the selection bias aspect of the onward migration must not be forgotten. It was widely understood that the ‘pith and marrow’ of Irish immigrants – those with skills and capital – were most inclined to move on. Bishop Hughes, who was in a good position to know, commented:⁹

⁸ Herscovici, ‘Migration and economic mobility’, 932n15.

⁹ Stern, ‘How Dagger John saved New York’s Irish’; Degler, ‘Labor in the economy and politics of New York City, 1850-1860’, ch. 9.; *The Irish-American*, 26 August 1849, cited in Ernst, *Immigrant Life*, 62; Maguire, *The Irish in America*, 214-5, cited in O’Donnell, ‘How

Most move on across the country – those who have some means, those who have industrious habits... on the other hand, the destitute, the disabled, the broken down, the very young, and the very old, having reached New York, stay. Those who stay are predominantly the scattered debris of the Irish nation.

Clearly, concentrating only on those who stayed in New York and other eastern cities is likely to produce an overly gloomy picture of the fate of Irish immigrants. Overlooking the likelihood that those who moved on were better resourced than those who remained will bias any assessment of their relative progress. Moreover, taking account of their gender breakdown influences the assessment of those who stayed. Whatever of the men, it is far from obvious that the women who remained – and they represented the majority of the New York Irish – would have fared better elsewhere.

2. A FEMALE IMMIGRATION:

The popular historiography of mid-nineteenth century New York's, with its focus on topics such as Tammany Hall, the Bowery Bhoys, gang rivalries, prostitution, and the draft riots of July 1863, highlights its 'maleness'. Yet insofar as early adulthood was concerned New York was very much a 'city of women'. In 1855 56 per cent of New Yorkers aged 15-29 years were women.¹⁰ The very

the Irish became urban', 271.

¹⁰ Stansell, *City of Women*, 83-4; Hough, *1855 Census*, 38-9.

female character of antebellum New York's Irish population is sometimes lost sight of. The female share of New York's Irish-born population in the 1860 IPUMS sample was 60.9 per cent, compared to 41.4 per cent of the German-born, and 52 per cent of the New York-born. In Philadelphia too the female share of the Irish-born population was very high (58.4 per cent). In Boston Irishwomen also outnumbered Irishmen, though by less (51.1 to 48.9 per cent). The age-by-gender distribution of the New York Irish-born population is striking. Both Irishmen and Irishwomen were less likely to be part of a family group than either German- or New York-born. 'Other non-relatives', nearly all single and childless, bulked large in the Irish immigrant population, accounting accounted for 20.5 per cent of all the males and 30.7 per cent of the females. By comparison 'other non-relatives' represented 15.5 per cent of German-born males and 13.9 per cent of German-born females, and 11 and 6.5 per cent, respectively, of the New York-born.

Ernst's cross-tabulations of the 1855 census do not disaggregate by gender, but their clear implication is that the proportion of women in the Irish immigrant labour force was relatively high. Exclusively female occupations such as domestic servant (23,386), dressmaker and seamstress (4,559), and laundress (1,758) accounted for a much higher proportion of the Irish labour force than of other immigrant groups. Moreover, the labour force participation rate of Irishwomen was much higher than that of German women. In the 1860 IPUMS census sample women accounted for 45 per cent of Irish-born labour force, but only ten per cent of the German.

In the IPUMS sample each worker's occupation is assigned two measures

of skill, *OCCSCORE* and *SEI*. *OCCSCORE* is an IPUMS-constructed variable that assigns occupational income scores to each occupation representing the median total income (in hundreds of 1950 dollars) of all persons with that particular occupation in 1950. *SEI* (for Socioeconomic Index) is also an IPUMS-constructed index of occupational status, based upon the income level and educational attainment associated with each occupation in 1950. Applying measures that relate to mid-twentieth century conditions to 1860 data is clearly rather crude and ahistorical, since skill premia and the relative ranking of occupations are unlikely to have stood still in the interim.¹¹ Irishwomen in New York held low-status, low pay jobs with an average *OCCSCORE* of 8.7 and an average Duncan *SEI* of 12. These low scores reflect the fact that more than two employed women in three were domestic servants. Several points need stressing here. First, domestic service as an occupation was held in low esteem in the U.S. in the nineteenth century. Yankee women rarely worked as servants, and the same went for second generation Irish-American women.¹² Servants were often prey to boorish treatment by their female employers, and to sexual harassment and worse from male household heads. The hours were long and the work dull. Yet socioeconomic measures such as *OCCSCORE* and *SEI*, which are based on mid-twentieth century relativities, probably undervalue the attractiveness of domestic

¹¹ For details see Ruggles and Sobek, *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series*; Duncan, 'A Socioeconomic Index for All Occupations'.

¹² Stephen Steinberg, *The Ethnic Myth*, ch. 6, admits the role of marital status, but also claims that Irishwomen's choices were 'far more limited'. Service was merely 'a temporary expedient to allow them to forge new lives' (p. 166).

service in the mid-nineteenth century relative to alternatives such as sewing, laundering, and factory work. Though comparisons are made difficult by the big in-kind component in the wage, domestics seem to have been relatively well paid. One of the earliest detailed studies of women's wages in the US refers to Massachusetts in 1872. A study by that state's Bureau of Statistics of Labor, based on a survey of over twenty thousand women including 1,220 domestic servants, suggests that the annual earnings of servants exceeded those of most other women workers, without even taking into consideration that servants got their board free. Other studies from the late nineteenth century confirm this pattern. Historian David Katzman concludes: 'the overall pattern, then, suggested that women in unskilled and semiskilled work received no higher earnings than domestics, and when widespread unemployment occurred during hard times, probably they earned significantly less.' Contemporary Stephen Byrne suggested an average wage of about \$10 a month with board for female servants, while Stott states that in antebellum New York servants were better paid than other working women.¹³ Note that New York's Irishmen were more likely to be found in wards like the First, Fourth, and Sixth, and Irishwomen in the wards north of Fourteenth Street. The high proportion of Irish in the more middle-class Fifteenth Ward was a reflection of the high number of Irish servants resident there.¹⁴

¹³ Byrne, *Irish Emigration to the United States*, 160; Stott, *Workers in the Metropolis*, 62-3; Katzman, *Seven Days a Week*, 314.

¹⁴ Ernst, *Immigrant Life*, 193; Hough, *Census of the State of New York for 1855*, 8; Stott, *Workers in the Metropolis*, 62, 204.

Thus it may not be correct to see these Irishwomen as 'locked in' to the city and domestic service by poverty. Though it is true that domestic service was widely frowned upon by others, it may well have been the occupation of choice of many Irish immigrant women. The stigma that deterred both Yankee women and first generation Irish-American women from service did not apply. Irishwomen therefore paid a lower psychic price for the higher wages and safer work environment that domestic service conferred. Domestic service held out several advantages. It offered a healthier life-style than factory or needlework, and also steadier employment. It involved living in private dwellings on middle-class streets rather than in tenements.¹⁵ It facilitated saving and remitting funds home, and evidence discussed in Chapter 4 suggests that servants did indeed save.¹⁶ It was an occupation in which most immigrant Irishwomen had a comparative advantage by virtue of being English-speaking. The high proportion of the Irish among domestics was a function of the high share of young unmarried females in Irish immigration. For most domestic service was a temporary avocation. New York, populous and rich, offered more opportunities for this kind of work than virtually anywhere else.

¹⁵ Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America*, 79-94; compare Lintelman, 'Our serving sisters'. See also Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants*, 66-7; Byrne, *Irish Emigration*, 37; Maguire, *The Irish in America*, 319. Infant mortality in tenements was twice that in private dwellings in which most servants lived (Citizens' Association of New York, *Report of the Council of Hygiene and Public Health* (New York, 1865).

¹⁶ Christine Stansell (in *City of Women*, 157) claims that 'servants were, in fact, the only women workers who saved money'.

3. HUMAN CAPITAL:

One of the benefits of immigration to the receiving country is that it saves on the cost of bringing up and educating part of the labour force. The age-structure of immigrant flows means that immigrants typically arrive as 'instant adults'. Irish immigration was no exception. In terms of skills and education, however, Irish labour was inferior to American. Moreover, the disadvantage persisted into the next generation. This was partly because in antebellum America poverty and religion militated against the Irish sending their children to school. David Galenson has shown how in Boston in 1860 Irish attendance lagged behind in an elementary school system still controlled by a native Yankee elite, while Dennis Clark has described the rapid growth of a parochial school system in Philadelphia in response to nativist bigotry. New York was also the locus of a protracted struggle between church and state about schooling. After fighting and losing the battle for state funding for Catholic schools in the 1840s the church embarked on a programme of private school-building. Within a decade there were twenty-eight Catholic schools catering for ten thousand pupils, but teachers were in short supply. In 1860 about three-fifths of Irish-born children aged between six and fifteen were attending school, better than for German-born children (38 per cent) but far behind New York-born children (77 per cent). However, 79 per cent of children with two Irish-born parents had attended school in the previous year.¹⁷

The literacy data in the 1855 New York state census provided no

¹⁷ Galenson, 'Ethnicity, neighbourhood, and the school attendance'; Herscovici, 'Ethnic differences'; Clark, *The Irish in Philadelphia*, 93-9; Ernst, *Immigrant Life*, 140-1.

breakdown by nationality, but the correlation across city wards between Irishness and adult illiteracy is a striking +0.674. In the city as a whole the illiteracy rate was about seven per cent, but in the heavily Irish Sixth Ward it reached nearly one-fifth. The information on literacy and age-heaping in the 1860 IPUMS confirms that the New York Irish were relatively poor in human capital. The question on literacy in the census referred to those aged twenty years and above only. Not surprisingly, the New York Irish emerged as less literate than either the German-born or native New Yorkers. Eight per cent of Irishmen and fourteen per cent of Irishwomen were illiterate, compared to rates of zero and three percent for German immigrants, and zero and one per cent for the New York-born. Yet significantly, too, illiteracy rates among the New York Irish were much lower than in Ireland itself in 1861. In the 1861 Irish census 28 per cent of males and 31 per cent of females aged 16 to 25 years were unable to either read or write, and for the 46 to 55 year age cohort the ratios were 35 and 51 per cent, respectively.

It is well known that people with low literacy and numeracy rates are prone to age-heaping (i.e. are more likely to record their ages in years ending with zero or five, or with even rather than odd numbers) in official documents. Sometimes age-heaping may reflect mainly the carelessness of those charged with taking down the information. Too busy or lazy to ascertain exact ages, they may have resorted to rounding. Between-group differences within a given area, however, presumably reflect genuine gaps in educational levels among those being counted. One very simple measure of age-heaping is the proportion of people aged 20-4, 30-4, etc. who reported their ages as 20, 30, etc. The higher this ratio, the greater was the degree of age-heaping. Table 2 shows that by this measure in 1860 the

New York Irish were much more likely to age-heap than the German or the New York born.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

The arrival of the mid-nineteenth century Irish cannot have made New York a healthier place. How the Irish fared health-wise is unknown, however. In mid-century admissions into the city's Bellevue Hospital, a long-established public institution located on the northern outskirts of the city at Twenty-fourth Street and First Avenue, were predominantly Irish. Between 1846 and 1858 the Irish-born accounted for 71 per cent of all admissions to Bellevue, and for 84 per cent of foreign-born admissions.¹⁸ But comprehensive, reliable data on mortality and morbidity in antebellum New York are lacking.

However, the city was not quite as unhealthy as might be expected from congestion and poor housing conditions. Rejection rates of men drafted by the Union Army were greater in mainly rural upstate New York than in the city in 1863-4. Hardly surprisingly, draftees were more likely to be rejected for tuberculosis and heart ailments in the city, but general debility and digestive ailments were much more common in rural areas.¹⁹ Mean adult height, a common measure of nutritional status during childhood and adolescence, was greater in New York (at nearly 67 inches or 170 cm.) than anywhere in western Europe in

¹⁸ Ernst, *Immigrant Life*, 200.

¹⁹ Stott, *Workers in the Metropolis*, 184.

mid-century. Stott also notes that physicians ‘were impressed with the health of city residents’.²⁰

4. CRIME:

Antebellum New York had a reputation for lawlessness. The reputation was exaggerated by sensationalist contemporaneous reports, and by many accounts in history and in fiction since then. The preposterous claim that a single notorious building in the Sixth Ward had ‘averaged a homicide a night for fifteen years’ tells its own story. The true murder rate (an annual 2.5 per one hundred thousand inhabitants in the late 1840s, rising to 4.4 per thousand in the 1850s and 1860s) was considerably lower, but still higher than obtaining in pre-famine Ireland (2.4 per thousand in 1836-40, including manslaughter but not justifiable homicide or infanticide; much lower in the 1850s) or in England and Wales (1.7 per thousand in 1834-50, also including manslaughter).²¹

Nativists blamed immigrants for the high crime rates in American cities—in the same way that Irish people today often blame immigrants for a

²⁰ Stott, *Workers in the Metropolis*, 185.

²¹ Isabella Bishop (*The Englishwoman in America* (1856), cited in Richardson, *The New York Police*, 53) declared that ‘probably in no civilised city of the world is life so fearfully insecure’. See too Snyder, ‘Crime’, 298; Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 637-8, 757-7, 838-40; Gorn, ‘Good-bye boys’, 402-3; Monkkonen, ‘New York City homicides’; *id.* *Murder in New York City*; Gerrard, *London and New York*; Silberman, *Criminal Violence*; Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 107-8; Gurr, *Violence in America*. For England and Ireland see Gatrell, ‘Decline of theft and violence’, 342-3; *Irish Census 1841*, ‘Report upon the tables of death’, 192-3.

disproportionate share of Irish crime. The raw correlation between immigration and crime has long been a key component of anti-immigrant rhetoric. There is no denying the over-representation of immigrants, and especially Irish immigrants, in New York's law courts and prisons. In the 1850s most of those committed to prison in New York were foreign-born, and the bulk of the foreign-born were Irish. The children of Irish-born parents who had arrived before the post-1846 influx constituted the bulk of juvenile delinquents in the city. In one well-documented year, 1858, over half the city's 35,172 prison commitments were Irish-born, with women accounting for nearly half the Irish total. Most Irish crime was directed at Irish people, however, not native New Yorkers; assaults of women by men of the same name were common.²²

In mitigation poverty often breeds crime and, as we have seen, the Irish were the most marginal group in New York in these decades. The high crime rate was also in part a reflection of the demographics of the immigrant population and of how the authorities defined 'crime'. Those who commit crime are always more likely to be young, and the New York Irish were disproportionately young and unmarried. Historian Eric Monkkonen estimates that 'demography alone' would have doubled the homicide rate for the Irish relative to native born whites. The young were a particular target of George Matsell, the city's chief of police in the 1850s, and Christine Stansell has suggested that the doubling in the number of juvenile commitments in that decade sprung in part from 'the tendency of the police to see a child on the streets as inherently criminal'. More of the 'crime' was

²² New York Municipal Archives, Police Court Cases Dismissed, 21 July 1854-30 September 1854 (Roll no. 165).

simply the product of the rowdy, boisterous culture of the immigrant poor, and would have gone unpunished at home. It bears noting that most Irish ‘criminals’ were committed for no more than being drunk and disorderly or for vagrancy. For example, 57.8 per cent of arrests in the first half of 1854 were for ‘intoxication’, ‘disorderly conduct’ or both; another eight per cent were for ‘vagrancy’. Between 1850 and 1858 eighty-seven per cent of all those committed were ‘intemperate’, and more than half were unmarried. In Ireland such ‘crimes’ were not treated as such, and there was more sympathy for the drunk and the beggar. Nonetheless, it seems that in New York the Irish played a disproportionate part in more serious crimes too.²³

The high crime rate was also a reflection of the rapid growth of the city and the parlous state of law and order. In the mid-1850s New York was seriously under-policed, having about 1.2 policemen per thousand inhabitants compared to London’s 4.6 per thousand in 1851 and Dublin’s 3.3 per thousand in 1841. Moreover, New York’s police force was much more subject to political influence. Rates of pay were high, and connections mattered. Matsell, a supporter of pro-immigrant Mayor Fernando Wood, encouraged the hiring of Irishmen as constables, forging a link between the Irish and the NYPD that would last for generations. The city’s nativist board of aldermen sought to frustrate Wood’s policy. New York’s police force was also less well trained than, say, the Royal Irish Constabulary or the British bobby.²⁴

²³ Monkkonen, *Murder in New York*, 143; Ernst, *Immigrant Life*, 202-5; Board of Aldermen, *Documents*, 21(2) (Dec. 1854), 970; Stott, *Workers in the Metropolis*, 251-53.

²⁴ Ernst, *Immigrant Life*, 57, 240; Richardson, *The New York Police*, 90, 111-12; Gerrard,

CONCLUSION:

The 'popular' understanding of Irish New York on the eve of the Civil War, given a new lease of life by Martin Scorsese's gory and violent 'The Gangs of New York', stresses the hostility that met them, their *macho* image, their alienation, their lowly economic status, and their criminality. That understanding is obviously true in part. Yet it is based more on inferences from specific events and locales than on a comparative survey of the city's immigrants as a whole. Such a survey, based largely on statistical evidence, tells a more mundane story. It confirms the poverty of the New York immigrants, but in also highlighting their residual and female character, it is less condescending about their 'failure' to achieve and to be successful. If there was more to Irish America on the eve of the Civil War than Irish New York, it is also true that there was more to Irish New York than the Sixth Ward or the Five Points.

London and New York, 9; Monkkonen, *Murder in New York*, 128-30; *1841 Census*, 18, 22.

TABLE 1: AGE-DISTRIBUTIONS OF IRISH ARRIVALS AND RESIDENTS (%)

Age	1860 SAMPLE		IMMIGRANT FLOW	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
0-9	1.7	3.3	12.4	13.2
10-14	3.7	3.1	8.6	8.8
15-9	9.4	10.3	12.7	19.2
20-4	13.8	17.9	32.7	28.2
25-9	13.8	22.3	13.8	10.3
30-4	13.8	13.4	8.9	8.0
35-9	11.1	7.4	3.3	3.1
40-4	11.1	8.5	4.6	4.7
45-9	8.4	4.5	1.5	1.9
50-4	6.7	5.4	1.4	2.0
55-9	2.7	1.3	0.6	0.5
60+	4.0	2.7	0.2	0.2
Total	298	448	1,773	1,431

Note: immigrant flows based on [a] *Epimandias* (dep. 2 April 1851), *Infanta* (dep. 3 April 1851), *State-Rights* (dep. 3 April 1851), *Liberty* (5 April 1851), *Manhattan* (5 April 1851); [b] *Perseverance* (27 Dec 1851), *Constitution* (27 Dec 1851), *Panola* (29 Dec 1851), *Siddons* (29 Dec 1851), *James Fagan* (31 Dec 1851).

TABLE 2: AGE-HEAPING IN NEW YORK BY PLACE OF BIRTH

	Ireland		Germany		New York	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
20 to 24	0.24	0.25	0.25	0.16	0.28	0.20
30 to 34	0.51	0.53	0.32	0.45	0.33	0.50
40 to 44	0.73	0.79	0.43	0.43	0.57	0.58

Note: the entries show the percentage in each age-group reporting an age ending in zero. See appendix for underlying data.

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