Mary Brewster’s Seaweeds

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January 2008

HISTORY 84C: CONFRONTING OBJECTS
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For as long as there have been famous artists, they have had fans. They draw towards artistic luminaries in much the same way that insects draw towards electric ones, and their presence testifies to the powerful emotional charm which the artistic imagination extracts on its audiences. By the 1870s, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow certainly had fans. He was a canonized member of the New England literary establishment, one of the most recognized poets of his generation, and a central figure in the cultural imagination of the American people. He had always enjoyed the company and correspondence of a circle of impressive friends, but as he grew older he often found complete strangers peeking into Craigie House, and his correspondence swelled with hundreds of letters from readers enthralled with his work.¹

Longfellow’s birthday became a special cause for celebration amongst his admirers. On his 72nd birthday on 27 February 1879, the schoolchildren of Cambridge presented him with an armchair made from a blacksmith’s horse-chestnut tree to honor his poem “The Village Blacksmith.”² Remark ing on the gift, the New York Evening Post noted that Longfellow “held a position of as unquestionable honor and supremacy as that of Goethe at Weimar … He was the First Citizen,—the man whose name had weight beyond all others not only in social but in civic affairs.”³

That same birthday, Longfellow received a letter from Mary H. Brewster of Bristol, Connecticut. “My dear honored Sir,” she wrote, “Seventy-two’ years, Ah! what feelings stir my heart as I recall your ‘Natal’ day, one of God’s best gifts, to our country and the world.” On the first pass, it is tempting to categorize Brewster as one of the many well-wishing fans who wrote Longfellow to praise him on his birthday, and, in doing so, to slightly dismiss her. There is something derivative and cloying about slavish fandom—the word itself is a truncation of fanatic—and we tend to assume fans exhibit only a secondhand agency at best. Brewster, however, was anything but an ordinary fan. For her letter was no ordinary letter. She included twelve carefully-pressed seaweed specimens, labeled and mounted, as a birthday gift to Longfellow. These specimens are at once high-quality scientific objects and incredibly beautiful fragments of the natural world. Their delicate filigrees tell the story not only of an amateur woman naturalist from Connecticut but also of the interplay between nature and science in the second half of the nineteenth century.

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In transcription, most of Brewster’s letter seems standard fare for a fan letter from a housewife to a famous poet. It is ebullient, adoring, and filled with all sorts of mystifications about Longfellow’s life, interspersed with personal anecdotes. “I shall be ‘fifty-two’ tomorrow the 28th, and from girlhood have read and reread the charming thoughts, that from time, to time, have flowed pass your brain in Story and Song,” she writes. “I feel if I could but ‘touch the hem of your garment’ or have a leaf from the Vaise at your side, I should be content.” It is a fairly unremarkable piece of writing, and it pictures Brewster more as caricature than as character.

When the letter is read in its original copy, however, an immediate visual clue suggests that it contains something special. It is not written on the blank paper or lined paper which were the most typical stationeries for nineteenth-century correspondence. Instead, it is written on square-rulled graph paper. The paper is printed in brown ink with 31

¹ Charles C. Calhoun, Longfellow: A Rediscovered Life, 245.
² Ibid., 246.
³ Qtd. in W. Sloane Kennedy, Henry W. Longfellow: Biography, Anecdote, Letters, Criticism, 118.
vertical rules and 24 vertical rules, creating a grid of even half-inch squares across the sheet. Brewster folded it in half in the manner of a greeting card, and filled three sides with neatly-written text, using the horizontal rules as baselines and ignoring the vertical rules completely.

The first recorded use of graph paper for scientific drafting can be traced back to another American, Jefferson, who ordered custom-made paper from an engraver after making some drawings on a type of square-ruled paper that was used for pattern-drawing by French silk weavers. It became a staple tool for the technical professions and in math and science classrooms during the nineteenth century. By 1908, the *School Review* noted that “the constructional methods of the square-ruled paper [are] exceedingly simple and powerful, and of far-reaching significance in theoretical and applied mathematics.” Graph paper was (and is) an important scientific tool, and the very fact that Brewster had it in her home indicates at least that somebody in her household must have had some technical interests. The fact that she elected to use it for an important letter to her favorite poet on his birthday suggests that it was not merely lying around the house, but an integral part of her own stationery collection.

If the letter the letter is written on hints at Brewster’s depth beyond an everyday fan, the enclosures confirm it. Brewster did not want words to serve as the only testament to her appreciation of Longfellow’s work. She wanted material proof. “I long to send some token of this life long regard,” she wrote, and “thus Venture to send a few ‘Seaweeds of the deep’ of my own collecting from Various locations.” The envelope which Brewster’s letter and its enclosures arrived in has been lost, so it is impossible to know exactly how the items were bound together in the mail. However they were attached, twelve delicately mounted seaweeds made it to Cambridge. These are striking objects; although Longfellow may well have read the letter first and then looked at the attachments, the quality of these specimens totally overwhelms the letter which refers to them. It may be more appropriate, then, to say that it is the *letter* which is the ‘attachment,’ and the seaweeds the principal transmission of Brewster’s birthday wishes to the poet.

Each seaweed is pressed onto a piece of cut paper trimmed to the correct dimensions, usually in the vicinity of ten centimeters by fifteen centimeters. The mounting paper is thicker, more rigid, whiter, and less glossy than the graph paper on which the letter is written; it has retained its quality even more than a century later. No visible adhesive has been applied to the paper, and it has not been cut to provide a slip for the stalks. In a few contained places, the paper has developed very faint brown stains, but otherwise it is completely unblemished. So well-preserved are the specimens that it feels uncanny to find them packaged inside the archival envelopes of the National Park Service. It is difficult to tell where the twentieth-century archivist’s work ends and nineteenth-century one’s begins.

On the back of each card, a pencil inscription gives the specimen’s Linnaean name, the location of its collection, and, on seven of the specimens, the date of the collection. The handwriting appears to match that of Brewster’s letter, and, since in her letter she underlines the fact they are items of her own collection, it is quite likely that the identifications are her work.

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6 The orthography of the word ‘seaweeds’ is indeterminate in Brewster’s letter. In either case, whether she has written ‘seaweeds’ exactly or a word referring to the seaweeds, the item indicated is undoubtedly the seaweeds. For a full transcription of Brewster’s letter, see Appendix 2.
The mounting and labeling, however, are only services to the primary attraction: the seaweed itself. Each one is a different species, ranging from fiery red *Grinnelia americana* to the integrate, almost evergreen-looking *Rypilocha frutiososa* *(see Appendix 1 for a full list of species)*. They are so flat and delicate that at first glance it seems as though they are not actual objects but images which have been printed on the cards. The major stalks are typically no more than seven or eight millimeters wide, and trichomes no thicker than a human hair are still intact. Observe a card from the side and it is difficult to tell that there is anything pressed onto it at all. It would be impressive to see such specimens produced today; to see them and know that they were produced in the nineteenth century—and held up in the intervening time—is staggering.

What’s more, it appears that Brewster identified the seaweed species correctly. For many of them, exact discrimination of a certain species within a genus requires the use of a microscope, so it is difficult to test the exact accuracy of her claims without destroying the specimens. A contemporary pocket guide to seaweed identification cautions that the *Polysiphonia* genus has “few gross morphological characters helpful in species recognition;” only a microscopic examination of the number of pericentral cells.7 For the *Cladophora* genus, it warns that “only an expert with the aid of a microscope can properly identify them.”8 From a visual assessment, however, Brewster seems to have identified the genera correctly, and we may take her on credit for the finer details. The seaweed she identified as *Bryopsis plumosa* perfectly fits the modern guide’s description of “miniature ferns or clusters of light to green olive feathers.”9 *Grinnelia americana*, which the guide calls “one of the most beautiful of all the red seaweeds,” is found from Georgia to northern Massachusetts.

Accurate as ever, Brewster located this specimen at the old fort South Haven.10

Who was Mary Brewster, this devoted reader of Longfellow who had enough knowledge and skill to produce such miraculous scientific objects and catalog them correctly? As she indicates in her letter, her birthday was the day after Longfellow’s; she was born on 28 February 1827 and died on 19 May 1891. She was born Mary Helen Candee in Southbury, Connecticut to Woodruff and Minerva Riggs Candee. Her father Woodruff, originally baptized under the name Riverius, was a “well-known farmer” on Chippen’s Hill in Bristol;11 her mother Minerva was a descendent of the prominent Alling family.12

On 1 August 1850, Mary married Noah Lewis Brewster, an eighth-generation descendant of William Brewster, one of the original leaders of the Plymouth Puritans. He was born ????, and as a young man moved to London to work as an agent for the Bristol clock manufacturers. It was in London that he married Mary, although it is not clear whether he brought a young fiancée with him to England or if she was already there on her own accord.

8 Ibid., 16.
9 Ibid., 22.
10 This likely refers to Fort St. George in South Haven, Long Island, where Major Tallmadge raided a garrison of British soldiers on 22 November 1780. See Jared Sparks, ed., *Writings of George Washington*, 293 footnote.
Mary and Noah lived in England for at least the next fifteen years, and had three children there. The eldest daughter, Mary Elizabeth, was born on 28 July 1852 in London. She married Wilbur Forrester Brainerd in 1873 and later joined the Daughters of the American Revolution as member number 5344. Mary Elizabeth had three children. One died young; the other two boys, Clifford and Irving, graduated from Yale to become doctors. Mary and Noah’s younger son, Louis LeBlond, was born on 19 April 1854, also in London, and married Mary Beckwith in 1878. The couple had two sons and two daughters. Mary and Noah’s third child, William Woodruff, was born in 1860 in Kingston, England, but died there two years later.

By 1870, Mary and her family had returned to Connecticut, possibly as a result of the death of their third child. She appears in the Bristol census of that year as a 43-year-old white female who was “keeping house” and had assets of $450. By that time, Noah had become a United States assistant marshal, and held $1700 in assets. Mary Elizabeth was a music teacher with $102 in assets; and teenage Louis had $375. The family also lived with a 20-year-old Irish servant, Bridget Egan.

Mary, then, was fairly well-to-do; her husband was a clock merchant and a member of an important Connecticut family, and her household, while hardly fabulously wealthy, had significant assets. She was also worldly; it is likely that she had some formal education given her parents’ social status, and her years spent living in England no doubt contributed to a cosmopolitan intellect. Yet there was very little for a Victorian woman to do with her time after the demands of child-rearing and homemaking had been met. Extra time opened up by servants and nannies, coupled with easy access to books and lectures to whet the mental appetite, only sharpened the problem. Many women during this era joined voluntary organizations or dabbled in amateur writing. Mary, who lived in a foreign country for most of her early adulthood, chose seaweed collecting.

Her social position was in many ways the perfect condition for an amateur scientific interest to thrive, and many of the more-famous women naturalists of the nineteenth century came from fairly similar backgrounds. This was a period of great change for women, littered with difficult choices between domesticity, cultural engagement, political agitation, progress, and tradition. Genteel, upper-class women were at the forefront of these changes, partly because the effects of ongoing social reconfigurations reached them first. A few turned to the sciences as a way to express themselves amidst a tangle of cultural, class, and gender threads. Eleanor Anne Ormerod, a British entomologist, received a “conventional, upper-class female education,” and began her studies in private after watching her brothers. Suzanne Le-May Sheffield, another daughter of an old and respected American family, used her walks in the forests and fields of New York as a source for her proto-ecological work *Rural Hours*.

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13 As indicated by her *Ceraminum fastigiatum*, collected at the Isle of Wight in 1865.


Of all the natural objects to collect, though, why seaweed? Brewster was not only woman who collected seaweed in order to express both an admiration of natural beauty and a serious scientific ability. Ormerod wrote in a diary how her sister and she would go to the seashore at low tide, where they “searched for seaweed, &c., &c.” A woman named Elizabeth Anne Allom published a book called *The Sea-Weed Collector* in 1841, noting that it was a good activity for even “the most scrupulously delicate lady.”

Brewster’s most important contemporary, however, was Margaret Gatty, a British woman who not only collected seaweed but also published a book entitled *British Sea-Weeds* in 1863. Gatty was an intelligent and strong-willed daughter of a clergyman; she once wrote a humorous list of qualifications for a future husband which included “must be prepared to allow the young lady to talk as much as she pleases to.” After a marriage, ten child births, and at least three stillbirths, Gatty ended up in convalescence near the coastline, where a doctor lent her a copy of William Harvey’s *Phycologia Britannica*. The book sparked Gatty’s interest. She collected seaweeds while in recovery, and continued collecting them after she returned home. It was not until three more pregnancies, however, that she got around to serious publishing work. Suddenly “her family found themselves knee-deep in seaweeds, seaweed books, and seaweed correspondence.” For Gatty, the seaweeds were a way to liven up the routine of domestic life and, at the same time, a way to assert her own position in the scientific world which fascinated her. Collecting struck a compromise between gender norms and gender aspirations: it was close enough to craftwork or rudimentary gathering to seem feminine, but well-established enough in legitimate literature to offer a glimpse at professional independence. Writing to her sister-in-law, Gatty noted “I am very sure if you once get into the pursuit you will find it next to meat drink & clothing! I mean your seaweed hours will be a sort of necessary repast to you!”

It is not difficult to imagine Brewster as a sort of American version of Gatty, and, considering that Brewster was living in England at the time Gatty was publishing *British Sea-Weeds*, there is even a possibility that the two were in correspondence at some point. In any case, they were both collecting at a time when seaweeds enjoyed a fairly high status in the language of the natural science which began to explode around midcentury. In 1867, Samuel Octavus Gray wrote that phycology had formerly been “a comparatively neglected science” but that it had made “more rapid progress” than the other botanical subfields. In the introduction to an 1872 manual on seaweed collecting, Shirley Hibberd wrote:

…”amid the wealth of organic creation in the midst of which our lives are embedded, the vegetation of the sea may fairly claim a share of our attention, not alone for its variety and beauty, or the mystery that surrounds its life in the depths of the ever changing waters … but above all things, because it affords us one great, and, in a certain sense, complete expression of the will of God in things created.”

19 Sheffield, 142.

20 Qtd. in Stephen E. Hunt, “‘Free, Bold, Joyous:’ The Love of Seaweed in Margaret Gatty and Other Mid-Victorian Writers,” 8.

21 Sheffield, 15–17.

22 Ibid., 21.

23 Ibid., 33.


Clearly the seaweed business was not the domain of dilettantes; for Hibberd, it was tantamount to a religious experience. But, he was careful to point out, it could also be a “delightful recreation” even when it did “not happen lead to something higher.”

Brewster, then, would have had decent intellectual company in her seaweed-collecting exploits. She certainly was not a quixotic naturalist engaged in a lonely and bizarre pursuit of an obscure plant. Still, why did Brewster choose to send the seaweed she had meticulously collected and pressed to a man she did not know to commemorate his birthday? It seems curious to us today; most contemporary authors probably do not expect to receive plant specimens from well-wishers. Brewster was certainly adamant about the high value attached to the objects, even suggesting that they carried a symbolic grant of good luck and long life. The seaweeds were sent, she said,

… trusting you will not deem it a liberty but accept them, in the true spirit that promps me, to thrust them upon you, with the living earnest hope, and wish, that length of days may be yours for still greater restfulness, and that “He, who maketh rich, and addeth no Sorrow” may be Very near you, in the evening of life …

These were not a token gift, then, but a sort of quasi-religious charm object. They carried the deep and sincere wishes of a devout admirer. As such, they were not merely inert objects but receptacles of Brewster’s feelings for Longfellow.

One obvious reason for Brewster’s choice of seaweed lies in Longfellow’s own poetry. She references the November 1878 issue of *Scribner’s Monthly* in her letter, in which she could see Longfellow’s face, his study, the clock on the staircase, and the willow tree. That issue carried a feature retrospective on Longfellow which included selections of his poetry and illustrations of his home. Perhaps upon reading the article, and guided along by her own interests, Brewster recalled Longfellow’s poem “Seaweed.” It begins:

> When descends on the Atlantic  
> The gigantic  
> Storm-wind of the equinox,  
> Landward in his wrath he scourges  
> The toiling surges,  
> Laden with seaweed from the rocks …

“Seaweed” was first published in the magazine *Rover* in January 1845, and was later “transferred by Mr. Longfellow” to *The Seaside and the Fireside* when his *Complete Poetical Works* appeared. It was not the only time that Longfellow mentioned seaweed; he was, after all, a fairly salty poet, with a literary gaze often directed firmly seaward. In “The Bridge,” published in *The Belfry of Bruges and Other Poems* in 1848, one stanza runs:

> As, sweeping and eddying through them,  
> Rose the belated tide,  
> And, streaming into the moonlight,  
> The seaweed floated wide.

Given the dates of the two poems, it is even possible that Longfellow had a determining effect on Brewster’s decision to take up seaweed collecting. “Seaweed” appeared just before her eighteenth birthday, and her letter makes reference to reading Longfellow’s works during “girlhood.”

In a certain way, Brewster was making a clever literary observation about Longfellow’s poetry by sending him seaweed. By implying that her seaweed collection

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26 Ibid., 4.


reminded her of him, and by turning the seaweed into a type of totemic gift to watch over him in his old age, Brewster was subtly, and perhaps only unintentionally, drawing an aesthetic equivalence between Longfellow and the seaweed. In retrospect, it is a compelling image. “Seaweed,” like many of Longfellow’s poems, is full of the washed-out and windswept colors of marine vegetation. Stocked with “tumbling surf that buries / the Orkneyan skerries,” and “desolate, rainy seas,” it exemplifies the sort of hale New England starkness that was a groundswell of imagery in Longfellow’s poetry. The chilly ocean is a kind of North American exotica, a way of harmonizing the Romantic fascination with far-off people and places with Longfellow’s role as a charter member of the American tradition. It is not accidental that the “seaside” comes before the “fireside” in the title of his famous collection. The ocean, in its symbolic value and aesthetic palette, is the iconic environment of Longfellow’s imagination, thereby making seaweed his iconic flower.

Brewster was not the only person who sent Longfellow natural mementos. He kept at least fourteen other seaweed specimens in his collection, although their provenances has since been lost. None are as impressively mounted and preserved as Brewster’s. Two of these were found in Longfellow’s papers together with Brewster’s seaweeds and her letter, but they bear the names of P. H. Phinney and Leida B. Phinney, who did not mark the species names but noted that the specimens were collected in 1879. Longfellow received other kinds of plants, too. His collections include A doctor, B. W. James, sent him nine specimens of moss from the Falls of Minehaha collected in 1875. These are prepared the level of quality of Brewster’s seaweeds, but, being mosses, they are not so visually striking. James did, however, label the species names in precise handwriting on each card, and included his name prominently on the front as well. Brewster’s were far less ostentatious.

The presence of all these natural objects in Longfellow’s collections hints at a semiotics of the natural world which placed far more significance on material objects as transmitters of value than we do today. The locket of a lover’s hair is a famous Victorian obsession, and its use is typical of the way that material goods were made to stand in metonymic relationships with larger objects of Romantic affection. A cut piece of hair “encased in a locket or ring or framed on the wall, became, through a Midas touch of imagination, something treasured, a totem, a token of attachment, intrinsically valuable.”29 That same operation of imagination could be used to transform a fragment of the natural world into a treasured proxy of a cherished place, an important trip, or a more abstract natural ambience.

To completely understand Brewster’s seaweed gift, then, it must be located not only in its material historical context, but in an epistemological mode which accorded natural objects very different values than does our own. Humans have always used objects from the natural world as both goods and symbols, two categories separated by a porous boundary. But, since one scalar of ‘naturalness’ is an object’s unmodification by human action,30 a thicker interpretive layer must be placed on top of such objects in order to register their value to participants in a cultural system. This can be a powerful mechanism for the transmission of value precisely because it occults the work of the human involved. It takes an object or a quality of an object which is presumed to exist prior to human interference

30 It is, of course, not the only scalar. The same epistemological system must also determine how ‘naturalness’ is arbitrated in objects which have been partially modified; a stone which has been cleaned, for instance, or a seaweed which has been pressed. Every object valued by humans has some natural and some human components, and different cultures determine what proportions of these are allowable in a ‘natural object.’
and activates it with value, eliding the social agency which activated it. Thus an epistemology of natural objects confers material facticity onto a cultural fabrication.

What is particularly unique about Brewster's seaweeds is the way they exhibit a *duplexed* transmission of value. On the one hand, they are aesthetically beautiful objects, and they draw a mystifying power from the Victorian imagination of the language, poetry, and symbolism of flowers and the natural world. According to this line of thinking, they belong to an epistemology which treats natural objects with a great deal of emotional import. On the other, they are clinical, exact scientific records. Their high quality attests to a preparation which was carried out with precise regulation and delicate archival care. The inscriptions on the cards are strictly classificatory, rather than descriptive or poetic. According to this line of thinking, they belong to an epistemology which treats natural objects as members of an ordered scientific catalogue valuable for its logic and utility.

As such, these seaweeds document a point in history where the aesthetic and scientific registers of comprehending drew coincident with each other. Since the nineteenth century, these registers have peeled apart, perhaps explaining in part the contemporary surprise at finding such objects in Longfellow's collection. It is somewhat ironic that the physical product of Brewster's sentiments has held up much better than the epistemological system which produced them. An exercise of intellectual conservation work is necessary.

The Victorian era is well-known for its obsession with the 'language of plants.' Much of this was rooted in an idolization of the ideal of beauty. As H. G. Adams, one of the era's authorities on the literary aspects of flowers, asked:

> And is not a flower "a thing of beauty?"—is it not a thing of surpassing loveliness? Who can gaze on its exquisitely perfect form, its unrivalled brilliancy of hue, without a thrill of admiration, and a sensation of pleasure?—pleasure which passeth not away, but dwelleth on the memory like a pleasant perfume … None, we venture to aver, can gaze on those beautiful "alphabets of creation," those adorners of earth's bosom, unmoved, but such as have hearts utterly corrupted, and rendered impervious to every sweet and gentle impression …\(^3^1\)

Hibberd’s collecting guide is a good example of how the writers of Brewster’s time could slip seamlessly back and forth between the two ways of thinking.

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Appendix 1. List of seaweeds in the Brewster collection.

Names given are from Brewster’s identifications on the backs of the specimens.

Callithamnion Americanum, Fort Hamilton, August 1856
Rylipleoa Frutiulosa, Guernsey English Channel, 1862
Ceraminum Fastigiatum, Isle of Wight, 1865
Polysiphonia Nigrescens, Gloucester, Mass., 1872
Callithamnion Byssoidenum, Glen Cove, July 1875
Grinnelia Americana, Old Fort, South Haven, 1878 (misspelled by Brewster as Grenellia)
Bryopsis Plumosa, Old Fort, South Haven, 1878
Griffithsis Secundiflorae, Brighton, England
Plaeacanium Coccinum, Jersey, English Channel
Cladophora Rupestris, Jersey, English Channel
Cladophora Glaucescus, Coast of France
Padina Pavonia (Peacock’s Tail), Jersey, English Channel

Appendix 2. Transcription of Brewster’s letter to Longfellow.

Brackets indicate orthography that is illegible or indeterminate. Entire letter sic.

February 27th 1879

Prof H. W. Longfellow

My dear honored Sir,

“Seventy-two” years, Ah! what feelings stir my heart as I recall your “Natal” day, one of God's best gifts, to our country and the world.

America’s Laureat, I shall be “fifty-two” tomorrow the 28th, and from girlhood have read and reread the charming thoughts, that from time, to time, have flowed pass your [???] brain in Story and in Song. So today, as the “Nov. number of Scribner’s” lies before me, I look into your face, and see you in your Study, the old clock on the Stair case, the A[???], the old Willow, all, are before me, and I feel if I could but “touch the hem of your garment” or have a leaf from the Vaise at your side, I should be content, and so I long to send some token of this life long regard, and have [????? ??] of any one gift (the [???] for Algology) and thus Venture to send a few “[Seaweeds] of the deep” of my own collecting from Various locations, trusting you will not deem it a liberty but accept them, in the true spirit that prompts me, to thrust them upon you, with the living earnest hope, and wish, that length of days may be yours for still greater restfulness, and that “He, who maketh rich, and addeth no Sorrow” may be Very near you, in the evening of life, is the prayer of

Your Very Respect friend
Mary H. Brewster

Address
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