

# The Historic Dimension Series

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## Conserving American Treasures: Progressive & New Deal Era murals

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This brief will provide a short history of early twentieth century Public Art Murals; pictorial examples to show the variety & artistry of the murals; and a discussion of current conservation efforts; challenges & techniques used during two notable mural restoration projects in Chicago, IL & Norwalk, CT.

Mural painting in the United States has a long history dating back

to the 1700's, with the early 1900's being the most prolific period of mural creation. Because they were federally funded, these murals can be found in virtually every state in the Union. Fortunately, many of these murals survive today, albeit in various stages of repair. As a result, every citizen can easily view and enjoy these great works of art made by American artists at the dawn of the twentieth century. The U.S. government is the owner and caretaker of all existing Progressive and New Deal murals housed in federal buildings. Post offices and school districts house and own thousands of additional murals from this time period.

In order to establish the historical context, this brief will highlight the two great "eras" of federal public arts projects in the United States. The first era is called the Progressive Era. It took place between 1904 and 1933. The second era, called the New Deal Era, took place during the Great Depression and ended during the early years of World War II. Two important mural restoration projects from these eras exemplify how conservation of these murals is technically demanding, expensive and time consuming. In order to discuss the complexity and painstaking care that mural preservation requires, this brief will discuss the Progressive and New Deal Era mural programs and two restoration projects. Finally, the various conservation techniques that were used on these collections will be discussed. The two collections are those owned by the Norwalk

Transit Authority in Norwalk, Connecticut, and by the Chicago Public School System in Chicago, Illinois.

Between 1935 and 1941, the city of Norwalk, Connecticut had over 50 works of art produced for its public schools, libraries, and post offices. (These murals are currently owned and maintained by the Norwalk Transit Authority). The majority of the works were funded by the Works Progress Administration's Fine Art Program (WPA/FAP). In 1984, the city of Norwalk, in conjunction with its Historical Commission, decided that private funds would be solicited for the restoration of the Norwalk High School murals. Appointed by the mayor in 1987, the WPA Murals Restoration Committee was granted the authority to oversee the restoration process and to solicit the necessary funds for this endeavor. The scope was later expanded to include all of the remaining murals in the city of Norwalk. To raise funds and awareness, the "Adopt-a-Mural" program was launched in August of 1987. In all, government agencies paid half of the \$518,000 total cost of restoring 46 murals. To celebrate this collection, the Norwalk Transit Authority published a book on the subject called, *Norwalk's Collection of WPA Era Art Commissioned for Public Buildings, 1935-1941*.

In 1994, Flora Doody, a teacher at Chicago's Lane Technical High School was concerned about a deteriorating mural in her building. As a result, she contacted the Chicago Conservation Center. This led to the discovery of what is now thought to be one



Fig. 2: Merlin, Justin Gruelle, c1936, oil on canvas, Norwalk City Hall, Norwalk, CT.

of the largest early-twentieth-century mural collections in an American school system. Thanks to Ms. Doody, the Chicago Conservation Center personnel Barry Bauman and Heather Becker, and concerned citizens, nearly 440 murals produced between 1904 and 1943 have been restored and reinstalled in the Chicago Public School system. Together these works comprise one of the largest mural collections remaining in the country. Since 1995, 437 of these murals in 68 locations have been catalogued and restored. This amazing story and effort are documented in Heather Becker's book, *Art for the People: The Rediscovery and Preservation of Progressive- and WPA-Era Murals in the Chicago Public Schools, 1904-1943*.

## History of US Mural Painting

### Progressive Era: 1904-1933

The Progressive Era started with President Theodore Roosevelt. He ran for office on a platform proclaiming a "Square Deal" for the American people. He used public art as a means to create jobs and communicate the administration's policies dedicated to the concerns of workers, women, the poor, the natural environment, and this country's role in the world. Mural painting flourished after 1904, and murals reflected outstanding social issues of the day. The depiction of social issues, industrial themes, and proto-social realism as well as women's issues was a marked transition from the neoclassical murals of the previous century.

The first 33 years of the twentieth century were a time of experimentation for muralists. Murals included a wide variety of subjects and themes. It would be difficult to define one particular style or subject of the murals painted during these years. Subjects could be academically allegorical (Fig. 2), modernistic, narrative of the human condition, or pro-technology and industry (Fig. 4). Muralists often focused on land and labor in America. U.S. artists in the 1920's were just as likely to follow the lead of artists in the Mexican muralist movement and use the medium to spread social



Fig. 3: City Activities with Dance Hall, Thomas Hart Benton, 1930, distemper and egg tempera with oil glaze and gessoed linen, New School for Social Research, NY.

consciousness and public concern. Yet, U.S. industrial might was widely recognized as the basis of its prosperity and artists were also open to celebrating this on the walls of public buildings. In general, the murals of this period glorified work but stopped short of social commentary about harsh working conditions or white supremacy over black workers (Fig. 9).

Stylistically, the look of murals changed dramatically during this period due to Mexican and European influences. There is no one style that epitomizes murals from this era. Initially, artists in the early part of the twentieth century followed their classical European training. It was not until after 1920 that artists began to use an Art Deco style of mural painting. By the late 1920's muralists were influenced by European Cubism. At first, American muralists adopted the cubist style but then made it their own. This style became known as Regionalism. As artists were often instructed to focus on land and labor in America, over time they adopted a fundamentally realistic style, which was to greatly influence the look and subjects of murals in the New Deal era.

### New Deal Era Art Projects: 1933-1943

In 1932, President Teddy Roosevelt's distant cousin, Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR), was elected president. FDR did a great deal to promote the arts (just as he had done when governor of New York) during his record three terms as president of the United States. His government spawned four major public art projects. The works of art created under the federal art programs of the 1930's and 1940's are called New Deal artwork, as they were created during the era of FDR's "New Deal" economic recovery programs.

The New Deal art programs all created works of art for public use but differed in the way they operated. Each public art project had a slightly different focus and time period. Some programs were set up to





Fig. 4: Steel Mill, Margaret Hittle, 1909, oil on canvas, Lane Technical High School, Chicago, IL.

provide economic relief and paid artists an hourly wage, while other programs administered competitions to commission murals and sculptures for specific sites within public buildings. The Department of the Treasury created the first federal art program in 1933 when it initiated the Public Works of Art project. Two subsequent programs, the Treasury Relief Art project and the Section of Fine Arts, also originated under the Department of the Treasury. In 1935, the Works Public Administration (WPA), an independently operating federal agency, established the Federal Arts Project. All of the programs had different goals and different artistic levels of performance.

The breadth and magnitude of the WPA effort, aside from its ancillary FAP, is astounding. During its existence, the WPA built 350 airports, more than 500,000 miles of road, 40,000 new buildings, 78,000 new bridges, and 8,000 new parks. It provided work for 8 million people at a cost of over \$5 billion. On a national level, the FAP funded the creation of 2,566 murals, 108,099 easel paintings, 17,744 sculptures, and 350,000 fine prints, (from 11,285 original designs), all at a cost of \$35 million.

**The "New Deal" Public Works of Art Project: 1933-1934**  
The goal of the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) was to furnish work for unemployed artists in the decoration of public buildings and parks. Artists were selected on the basis of their need for employment plus their professional ability. The PWAP was funded as a part of the Civil Works Administration under the auspices of the Treasury Department as one of the agencies to extend relief to the professional class during the Great Depression.

The PWAP was the first federal relief program for artists. Its objective was to employ unemployed artists in the decoration of public buildings and parks. Almost 14,000 artists were on the PWAP payroll and received weekly salaries. When the program ended in 1934, over 15,000

works of art had been created, with many of them being lent to government officials or public institutions such as orphanages, libraries, schools and museums.

#### The Section of Fine Arts: 1934 -1943

The Section, as it was commonly known, worked with the Public Building Service, also under the Treasury Department, to put art, both paintings and sculpture, in federal buildings constructed during the Depression. The goal of the Section was to decorate new federal buildings with work of the highest quality. The Section was not a relief program. Artists were selected through regional and national competitions. The Section awarded commissions and paid artists a lump sum for their work. In addition, the competitions were open to all artists, regardless of economic status, and typically required entries to follow a certain theme relating to the building's function and geographic location. The Section, in particular, required the artists to visit the community for which they were producing art to talk to people about the subject of their work. Regionalism was often the central theme of the piece of art. In total, the Section commissioned over 1,300 murals and 300 sculptures.

The Section was not funded directly by the federal government. Instead, an agreement with the Public Building Service gave it approximately one percent of the funds appropriated for new federal buildings. Most of The Section work is in post offices and can be found in towns and cities of all size in all of the 48 states of the time. The number of commissions awarded to each state depended in large part on the size of the state and its need for federal buildings. Hence, New York and Illinois, received large numbers of art work, while Wisconsin and Montana received very few. The Section was to have been a permanent project, but it was ended in 1943 because of U.S. involvement in World War II.

#### The Federal Arts Project: 1935-1943

The goal of the Works Progress Administration/Fine



Fig. 5: Before restoration, historical scene, untitled, James Edwin McBurney, 1926-8, oil on canvas, Wentworth Elementary School, Chicago, IL. Mural has separated from the wall due to severe water damage.



Fig. 6: After restoration, historical scene, untitled, McBurney, see figure 5.



Fig. 7: Evidence of water damage.

Arts Program (FAP) was to provide jobs for unemployed artists. Work done by WPA/FAP artists was available for allocation to tax-supported and partially tax-supported institutions. This was a relief program and 90% (later 75%) of the artists had to come from the relief rolls. Under this program, murals were painted in many public buildings. Schools were among the public buildings that were recipients of murals and sculpture.

The FAP was the largest of the New Deal art programs in both its scope and the number of artists employed. Its most productive period lasted until 1939, when a massive reorganization of all New Deal relief programs resulted in the FAP being renamed and reduced in size. Upon its discontinuation in 1943, the WPA's Art Program had produced over 108,000 easel paintings, 11,300 fine prints, 2,500 murals and 18,000 sculpture works. Completed works of art were either loaned or allocated to federal, state, and local governmental entities, tax supported organizations, or non-profit organizations.

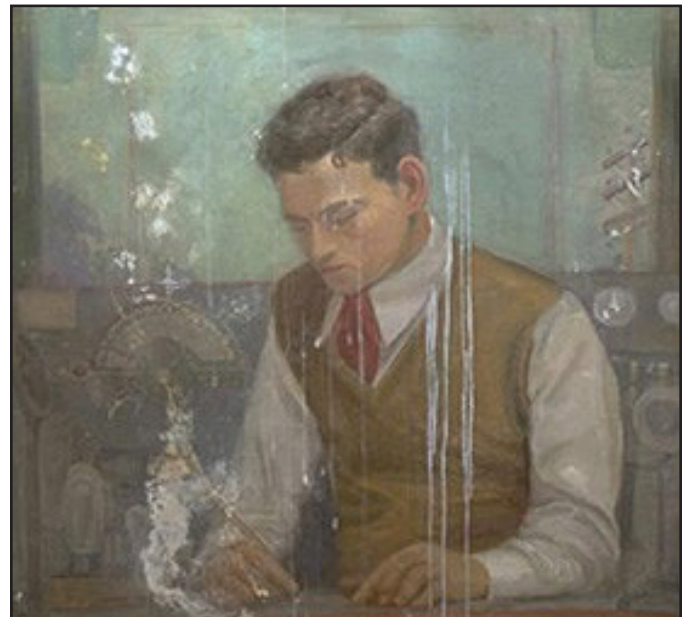


Fig. 8: Evidence of structural damage to the wall.

#### The Treasury Relief Art Project: 1935-1939

The goal of Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP) was to commission art from unemployed artists to decorate federal buildings such as post offices, courthouses, and U.S. embassies. This was a relief program, and 90% (later 70%) of the artists on TRAP had to come from relief rolls. TRAP was directed by the Treasury and financed by the WPA. The work done through this project was somewhat limited, but works included easel paintings, murals for existing buildings, and sculpture. Most of the art was oil on canvas, so that even murals were usually done in a studio and transported to the site by the artist for installation. However, unlike the WPA, TRAP only loaned art to federal government agencies. During its three year tenure, TRAP employed over 400 artists to create paintings, murals, and sculptures.





Fig. 9: Shucking Oysters, Alexander J. Rummler, WPA/FAP era, oil on canvas, Maritime Aquarium, Norwalk, CT.

The majority of New Deal murals were studio works of oil painted on canvas. The canvas was then transferred to the site and adhered to a plaster wall with various types of glue. Some oil paintings, because they were moved or originally on loan, were canvas mounted on wooden stretchers. However, a small percentage of the murals were frescoes (oil paint applied to wet plaster), and the fate of each fresco was often linked with the condition of the wall on which it was painted.

#### Mural Ownership Today

The General Services Administration's responsibility for administering New Deal works of art came from the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949. The Act established the General Services Administration (GSA) and in the process transferred "all records, property, personnel, obligations, and commitments of the Federal Works Agency, including those of all agencies of the Federal Works Agency." Included in the mandate was the stewardship of the portable artworks created under the federal government's New Deal art projects.

There are numerous New Deal works of art in post office buildings nationwide. In most cases, the works of art are the property of the U.S. Postal Service, which has responsibility for their care.

#### Causes of Damage to Murals

Progressive and New Deal murals were intentionally created for and placed in public places, federal office buildings, court houses, schools, hospitals, libraries, and post offices. Their very locations exposed them to all manner of physical and environmental dangers over time. As with many historic buildings, water damage, from leaks or excessive moisture from badly placed

heating or AC vents, is the overall leading cause of damage to murals (Fig. 7). The causes and degree of damage vary depending on the exact location of each mural but include the following: abrasions, graffiti, pencil, ball-point pen, spit-balls, and various types of food (many murals are in public school cafeterias and post offices) (Figs. 8, 11, 12). Damage from nails used to hang posters, public address systems, and frames, resulted in missing mural sections. Light, air pollution, and tobacco smoke (especially in the south) are also leading culprits in the aging, fading and darkening of many murals (Fig. 10). Other problems include mildew and over-painting; murals were sometimes whitewashed because they were thought to be controversial, passé, or just plain unattractive.

#### Mural Conservation Approaches

There is no defined recipe or prescription for restoring murals. The best advice is, it depends. However, mural conservation can be divided into two fundamental divisions: visual and structural repairs. Visual repairs require testing the paint surface using aqueous or organic solvents to determine whether or not it is safe to remove overlying discolored films. The conservator has to understand the techniques and styles of painters from the period. He must also understand the chemical composition of paint films and solvents necessary to remove veiling varnish and dirt. This is the most critical part of any treatment.

The goal of a conservator is to return a work of art to its original pristine condition so as to preserve its cultural value. He or she attempts to reverse years of damage while paying homage to the artist's intent at the time of creation. The first step for a conservator is to thoroughly examine and evaluate an object. This involves restoring the structure, materials, and

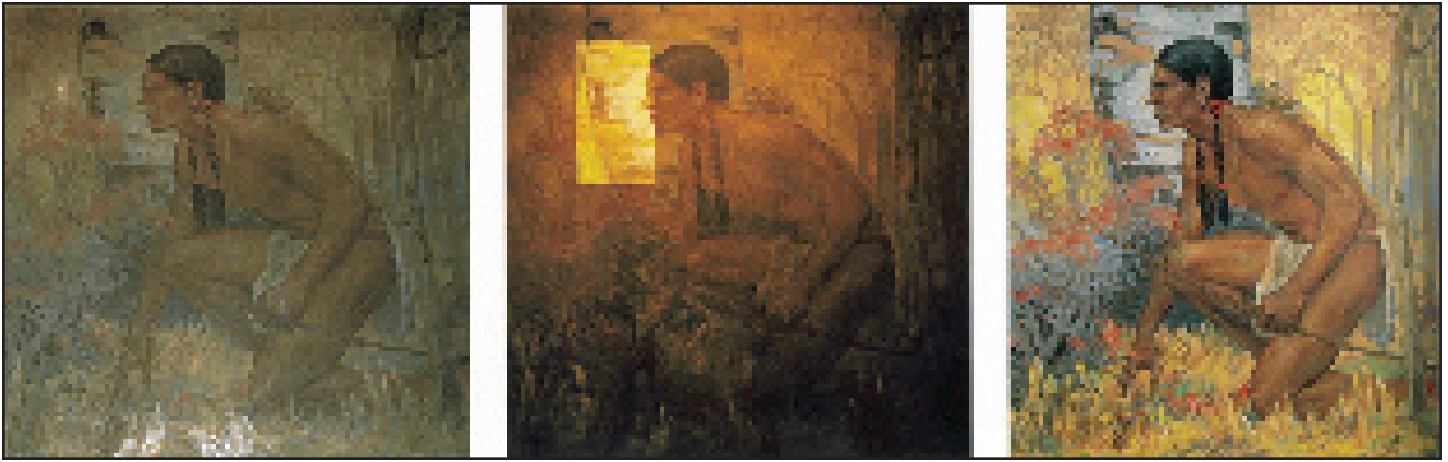


Fig. 10: Before, during and after conservation views of a James Edwin McBurney mural. The mural was coated with a heavy soot film. Untitled, 1926-8, oil on canvas, Wentworth Elementary School, Chicago, IL.

condition of the object and understanding the historical context in which it was created. Scientific analysis may be conducted as well as research into records and photographs. The conservator identifies the extent and causes of any damage and takes into consideration the environment in which it is to be maintained and the owner-intended use of the object.

The conservator then prepares a written condition report of his findings and proposes a specific treatment. Some typical treatment steps include:

- Removal of surface dirt and old coatings such as discolored varnish.
- Stabilization of deteriorating materials.
- Repair of damaged areas.
- Improvement of the appearance of the object, often by adding new materials.
- Display or storage of the object in such a way as to optimize its appearance and minimize any future damage.

Once the treatment is finished, the owner is provided with complete documentation: the condition report, proposal, and a treatment report on what was actually done including photographs of other visual materials from each stage of the treatment. This documentation is important to the history of the object and should be available to future owners and conservators.

### Mural Conservation Techniques

In the book, *Norwalk's Collection of WPA-Era Art Commissioned for Public Buildings, 1935- 1941*, Paul Gratzand and E. Eugene Bechtel, conservators at Greenwood Studio, describe their process. The approach taken by the Greenwood Studio involved a number of steps. Painted in oil on canvas, the murals were attached to the walls with water-soluble glue. Fortunately, this meant that the bond holding the murals to the walls could be broken. "Our technique for removing the murals involved a process called 'facing'. This is done by adhering cotton duck canvas to the face or front of

the painting with a hot wax-resin compound, ensuring the integrity of the painted surface. We then physically separated the painting from the wall, rolled them face out on 14 inch diameter tubes, covered them with heavy plastic, and stored them vertically until future restoration." The restoration process involved lining the paintings with heavy cotton duck canvas using hot wax resin, removing the facing canvas, cleaning the surface of dirt, grime and foreign materials, filling and in-painting missing areas, and finally protecting the paintings with two coats of varnish. The paintings were then attached to heavy-duty wooden stretchers, which enabled them to be hung as paintings rather than as murals adhered to a wall.

After restoration, the murals were hung for the first time with preservation in mind. To ensure their longevity, murals hung in the new Norwalk City Hall were given a one-inch space behind each canvas to allow air to circulate. In addition, the murals were no longer exposed to sunlight but rather installed on safe interior walls with appropriate lighting.

The Rediscovery and Preservation of Progressive and WPA-Era Murals in the Chicago Public Schools, 1904-1943, describes three different unique conservation processes used by the conservators on Chicago Public School murals. The approach taken by the Chicago Conservation Center, exclusive conservators for the Chicago murals, varied depending on the unique challenges presented at each of the 68 locations.

### Lucy Flower Career Academy High School

The 1938-40 WPA/FAP fresco paintings at Lucy Flower Career Academy High School by Edward Millman had been painted over with two paint layers. A white oil film was resting on top of a red calcimine layer. In addition, the mural was 54 feet wide by 9 feet tall. After many tests and much time, it was determined that a poultice paste of sodium hydroxide and magnesium hydroxide would remove the two layers of paint without



Fig. 11: Before and after conservation of Pilgrims, Janet Laura Scott, 1911, oil on canvas. The mural was over-painted with several layers of oil based paint. Tilton elementary School, Chicago, IL.

damaging the original paint. The paste was mixed in a 60:40 mixture and left on the mural for 85 minutes to produce the desired result. The top oil layer was softened so that it could then be removed with a spatula and palette knives. Remnants of the calcimine were removed using isopropyl alcohol. Areas no larger than two feet by four feet could be treated at a time. As the work progressed additional damage was discovered on the mural from nails that had held posters to the wall. These areas were filled with gesso (marble dust and rabbit-skin glue) and retouched to match the original in both value and hue with reversible colorfast and lightfast conservation pigments.

#### Tilton Elementary

Three murals at Tilton Elementary school were painted over with a layer of lead-white paint. The overprint was carefully removed under binocular magnification. Due to the paint layer's fragile condition, numerous areas of lifting paint had to be reset into place using a 1:10 gelatin adhesive. A layer of aged dirt and grime was removed using detergent solvents. The canvas supports were weak and brittle. To offer long-term stabilization, the paintings were reinforced to secondary canvasses using a non-aqueous adhesive under controlled vacuum hot-table procedures at 1 degree mercury. The paintings



Fig. 12: Vandalism (attempts to tear the canvas from the wall).

were then restretched onto custom-made auxiliary stretchers to precisely accommodate their arch-shaped format. Several of the paintings showed large interior losses. These areas were filled with canvas inserts to reiterate the original canvas weave. Smaller losses were filled with marble dust and rabbit-skin glue. The varnish and losses were retouched using conservation pigments. A final non-yellowing spray varnish completed the repairs.

#### Wendall Phillips High School

The four Wendall Phillips High School murals were oil on canvas paintings and were glued to plaster walls, which had deteriorated, causing cracking paint, chip losses, and curling supports. To save the paintings it was necessary to remove them from their sites. The painted surfaces were first protected using Japanese tissue paper and a starch paste adhesive. Successful removal of the murals was carried out using mechanical tools. The paintings were then rolled onto protective tubes and taken back to the conservation laboratory.

Wall plaster had adhered to the verso of each canvas. The paintings were placed face down and the encrustations were removed with paring knives and scalpels. The applied protective Japanese tissue paper was then removed. A layer of dirt and grime rested on a layer of discolored varnish. Both of these layers were missing the original color relationship in the paintings with the effect of flattening the three dimensional quality of the scene. Conservation solvents removed these layers of dirt and grime. Once the paintings were cleaned, they were lined with Belgian linen using a non-aqueous adhesive to strengthen the weakened canvas.



Fig. 13: Outstanding American Women: Frances Perkins, Edward Millman, 1938-40, fresco, Lucy Flowers Career Academy High School, Chicago, IL.

Finally, they were restretched onto redwood spring-stretchers. These stretchers have the ability to expand and contract under varying humidity conditions, offering constant and even tension. Small losses were filled with marble dust and rabbit-skin glue. A layer of non-yellowing varnish was applied, and the loss areas were retouched to match original paint value and hues using conservation pigments. A final spray varnish completed the repairs. The four paintings were reframed and reinstalled in their original location at the school.

The Historic Dimension Series is a collection of briefs prepared by UCG students under the direction of Professor Jo Ramsay Leimenstoll. For information on other topics in the series, contact Professor Leimenstoll. email: jrleimen@uncg.edu, phone: 336/256-0303.

## Conclusion

New Deal murals are a national treasure of the United States. Not only do they represent American's overcoming the hardship of World War I and the Great Depression through art, but they tell a uniquely American story of vision and a changing populace and culture during the first 43 years of the twentieth century. The fact that many murals still exist in their original location, if not condition, is astounding. Sadly, many murals have been lost to neglect, changing tastes and the wrecker's ball. The Norwalk Transit Authority and the Chicago Public School System's efforts are nothing short of heroic in finding the funding and political will to save their murals for future generations. They have also added to the collective knowledge base on how to restore and care for murals, for there are still many more murals to be located and restored. Fortunately, murals still exist in all fifty states, so one does not need to travel far to see a Progressive or New Deal mural to appreciate the legacy left by these artists and the federal government's ongoing stewardship.

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Cover picture: The Months of the Year: July, John Warner Norton, 1924-1925, oil on canvas, Peirce Elementary School, Chicago, IL. Provided courtesy of the Chicago Conservation Center.

Interview with Audrey Entorf. Regional Historic Preservation and Fine Arts Officer, GSA/Professional Services Division, 77 Forsyth Street, SW, Suite 450 Atlanta, GA

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