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The History of the Boyhood Home of Robert E. Lee

607 Oronoco Street - Alexandria, Virginia
1795 - 1995

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The Boyhood Home of Robert E. Lee, located at 607 Oronoco Street in Alexandria, Virginia, has long been closely associated with the history of this charming port city.

This Federal-era town house built in 1795 by John Potts, Jr. of Pottstown, Pennsylvania, has been owned by seventeen families over two centuries. The most famous resident Robert E. Lee moved to the house with his family at age five and departed upon his entrance to the United States Military Academy. Other Lee relatives occupied the house over the years, as well as many prominent Alexandrians.

John Potts, Jr. Comes to Alexandria

At the close of the Revolutionary War the visionaries of the new nation saw the need for canals and other internal improvements to connect the seaboard states with the territories. George Washington was a prime mover behind the effort to make navigable the Potomac River north of Alexandria by a series of locks, dams and short canals. About the same time John Potts, Jr.'s father, Samuel, was seeking to render navigable the Schuylkill River in Pennsylvania. Probably at the behest of General Washington who was on close terms with the Potts family,

the son was induced to come to Alexandria to become Secretary of Washington's Potomac Canal Company.¹

On the 17th of May, 1785, George Washington called to order in Alexandria a large number of the gentry of Virginia and Maryland to formally organize the Canal Company. John Potts, Jr. transcribed the minutes of the meeting. In 1787, minutes of some of the meetings were not kept as Mr. Potts had temporarily returned to Philadelphia.²

After the death of George Washington the canal around the Great Falls of the Potomac was finished in 1802 and ready for navigation. Light Horse Harry Lee, father of Robert E. Lee, developed at the falls a town he named Matildaville after his first wife. A forge owned by Mr. Potts was one of the structures at the site. Neither the canal nor the town was a success.

Mr. Potts' colonial lineage dates back to 1726 when Thomas Potts emigrated from Wales to Pennsylvania. His son, John (1710-1768), established Pottstown outside of Philadelphia and operated the largest iron works in the colonies with mines, furnaces and forges in both Pennsylvania and Virginia. His grandson and the father of John Potts, Jr., Samuel (1736-1792), cast cannons for General Washington's armies during the American Revolution. Tradition has it that Washington made Pottsgrove Manor his headquarters before moving to

Valley Forge.³

Educated as a lawyer in Philadelphia, John Potts, Jr. (1760-1809) moved to Alexandria at age 25. In 1795 he built the fine Georgian town house at 607 Oronoco Street. After the sale of the house about one year later to Colonel William Fitzhugh, Potts remained in Alexandria until his death. While in Alexandria he married Eliza, the fourth daughter of Patrick and Elizabeth Ramsey of Petersburg. They had five children who remembered General Washington's visit to the Potts' home.⁴

In addition to the prominent role Mr. Potts played in the Potomac Canal Company, he operated with William Herbert an import store on the southeast corner of Fairfax and Queen Streets. The records indicate that he was heavily involved in numerous real estate and business transactions.⁵ Colross was another fine home constructed by Mr. Potts in Alexandria. In 1929 it was removed to Princeton, New Jersey.⁶

The Fitzhugh Family

Colonel William Fitzhugh purchased the house from Potts soon after its construction. He was a wealthy planter and politician from Fredericksburg who moved to Alexandria when the management of Chatham, his country estate, became too burdensome. George Washington noted in his diary that while the Fitzhughs were in the house in Alexandria on the 4th of April 1799, he "lodged with Mr. Fitzhugh" and on the 17th of

November 1799 he "went to church in Alexandria and dined with Mr. Fitzhugh..."⁷ This marked Washington's last visit to Alexandria before he died on December 14, 1799. At age 21, William married Ann Randolph (Nancy) who was only age 16. They had three surviving

Lee at Arlington in 1831 after his graduation from West Point in 1829.

On November 30, 1796, Colonel Fitzhugh penned to a friend the following description of his Oronoco Street town house:



**The Boyhood Home of Robert E. Lee
607 Oronoco Street**

children: Anne (Nancy), who married William Craik; William Henry, who married Anna Maria Goldsborough and Mary Lee (Molly), who, while living in the house, married George Washington Parke Custis. Parke and Molly had one surviving daughter, Mary Anna Randolph Custis, who married Robert E.

I have already purchased a new & most delightful House, in a beautiful & retired Situation, having a charming View of the federal City, and the Potomac River--

It is large & commodious and admirably fitted for a family, having a number of out Houses, in the back yard, all of brick, a Pump of excellent water, & a good Garden...

Fitzhugh's son, William Henry (1790-1830), inherited the house together with Ravensworth Plantation, which his father had built when he moved from Chatham. The location of the plantation house -- no longer standing -- is now marked by Ravensworth Road in Annandale. After graduating from the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University), he and his wife, Anna Maria Goldsborough lived at Ravensworth. William Henry served with other distinguished citizens as a director of the Union Bank of Alexandria.

"Aunt Anna Maria" remained at Ravensworth after William Henry's death. In 1829 Mrs. Lee left Georgetown where she had lived with son Carter after leaving Oronoco Street in 1825. She died at Ravensworth in July of 1829. Robert E. Lee's family also found refuge at Ravensworth when they fled Arlington in 1861.

During William Henry's ownership of the Oronoco Street town house it was rented to the family of Robert E. Lee from 1812 to 1816. They left the house for four years to live at 407 N. Washington Street and then returned to 607 Oronoco Street in 1820, coinciding with the sale of that house to

William Brent, Jr. of Stafford County. No records exist of the amount of rent the Lees paid either to Fitzhugh or to Brent.

Light Horse Harry Lee's Family

On a summer day in 1810 a carriage bearing the family of Light Horse Harry and Ann Hill Carter Lee left Stratford, the ancestral home of the Lees, and wound its way up the Northern Neck to Alexandria. Their new home was a small brick house at 611 Cameron Street, a short distance from Christ Church. The last of the Lee children, Mildred, was born in this rented house. Before the move from Stratford Mrs. Lee had given birth to the others: Charles Carter in 1798, Ann in 1800, Sidney Smith in 1802 [at New Jersey] and Robert Edward in 1807.

Several factors prompted the move from Stratford. Harry Lee was deeply in debt and Mrs. Lee's trust established by her father, Charles Carter of Shirley, was not sufficient to keep up Stratford, which was in disrepair. Besides, Stratford would soon be claimed by the stepson, Henry Lee, Jr., who had inherited it from Harry's first wife, Matilda. Also, the numerous Lee kin beckoned Mrs. Lee to Alexandria. Most importantly, there were educational opportunities for the children in this thriving port town.

Finding the house on Cameron Street too small for her growing family, Mrs. Lee, while visiting her sister at

Eastern View in Fauquier County, sought the assistance of her nephew, Philip Fendall, Jr., of 614 Oronoco Street in finding a larger house. Mr. Fitzhugh's house across Oronoco Street from the Fendalls would be ideal. Light Horse Harry's brother, Edmund, lived in the fine Georgian mansion on the southwest corner of Oronoco and Washington Streets. By 1812 Ann had secured the lease of 607 Oronoco Street and moved the family to what was to become Robert E. Lee's boyhood home.

Tragedy struck soon after the Lees moved to Oronoco Street. Harry was nearly killed by a mob while defending federalist Robert Hanson, a Baltimore editor, who had criticized the Democratic-Republicans war policy. In hopes of recovering from his injuries in the summer of 1813, Harry sailed from Alexandria for Barbados, virtually a penniless invalid.

Harry wrote the family in February of 1818 that he was going to attempt to return from the Caribbean to Alexandria. His plan was to return to Alexandria by ship. Sadly, his illness worsened and he was put ashore at Cumberland Island, Georgia, where he was welcomed into the home of the daughter of General Nathaniel Greene, his former commander during the Revolutionary War campaigns in the South. On March 25, 1818, he died and was given a full military funeral befitting a general of the United States Army.¹⁰

Controversy surrounds the career of Light Horse Harry

Lee. Well educated at the College of New Jersey at Princeton, he was a brilliant writer and orator recognized for his eloquent eulogy of George Washington as "First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen." Congress awarded him a Gold Medal for Valor for his exploits during the Revolution as the captain of a light horse brigade. During the Federal period from 1791 to 1794 he served as Governor of Virginia and as a member of the United States Congress from 1798 to 1801. His friend, President Washington, had secured for him a major general's commission in the new national army.¹¹

But it was speculation in land that brought Harry's downfall. The Matildaville land transaction was a bust. Many of Harry's creditors, including Robert Morris who owed him \$40,000, never repaid their debts. This culminated in his imprisonment for debt in the Westmoreland County jail on April 24, 1809.¹²

After Harry's departure for Barbados, Mrs. Lee relied on the income left to her from her father's estate to maintain the household and raise the five Lee children. The numerous Lee and Carter kin gave assistance to Mrs. Lee. The five Lee children grew to distinction.

The eldest, Charles Carter (1798-1871), graduated from Harvard with distinction, practiced law and after marrying into a prominent Virginia family, spent his

later years on his farm on the upper James River.

Anne Kinloch (1800-1864) wed the Reverend William L. Marshall of Baltimore, who gave up parsoning to become a successful lawyer and jurist. He was a cousin of Chief Justice John Marshall. Anne's son, Colonel Louis Marshall, was decorated for gallant service while fighting for the Union.

Sidney Smith (1802-1869) went to sea at 15, sailed with Mathew Perry to Japan in 1853, and commanded the Naval Academy at Annapolis and the Philadelphia Navy yard. He sided with Virginia during the Civil War.

The first schooling for Robert (1807-1870) was at a small academy conducted by his mother's sister at Eastern View in Fauquier County. Upon his return to Alexandria in 1820, he entered the Alexandria Academy on the southeast corner of Wolfe and Washington Streets. His teacher, William B. Leary, recommended Lee in his application to West Point as an outstanding student of "correct and gentlemanly deportment." In 1825, Robert received additional instruction from his next-door neighbor, Benjamin Hallowell, a prominent Quaker educator. In June of 1825, Robert left for West Point.

The youngest of the Lee Children, Mildred (1811-1856), at age 20 received a marriage proposal from Edward V. Child, a 27 year-old Boston attorney who had returned from Europe to

claim his large inheritance. In 1831 they were married and sailed for Europe. Mildred refused to re-establish a home in the United States and died in Paris at the age of 45.

A celebrated event at the Boyhood Home was the visit of General Lafayette when he came to Alexandria in 1824. Hearing that the widow of his comrade-in-arms during the American Revolution, Light Horse Harry Lee, was residing in the town, he went to Oronoco Street to visit Mrs. Lee. The famous French commander without doubt talked to Robert about the heroism of his father during the Revolutionary War.

II. Occupants of the House after 1825

A farewell was said to 607 Oronoco Street in 1825 when Ann Hill Carter and her two daughters moved to Georgetown to live with Mrs. Lee's eldest son, Carter. Robert had earlier left for West Point, and Smith was in the Navy.

As Mrs. Lee's health continued to decline she found her final refuge with her Fitzhugh cousin at Ravensworth, a 22,000-acre estate a few miles west of Alexandria.¹³ This noble woman died there on July 16, 1829, shortly after Robert had graduated with honors from West Point. A fitting epitaph would reflect that she fought the good fight, finished the race and kept the faith.

The departure of the Henry Lee family did not end the tenure of Lees at the Boyhood



The main entryway and staircase at
the Lee Boyhood Home

Home, however. The vivacious Portia Lee Hodgson in 1826 leased the property from the Mechanics Bank of Alexandria and lived there until her death in 1840. She bought the land at public auction on April 20, 1839.¹⁴ Portia Lee, the granddaughter of Thomas Lee who built Stratford, had an impressive Lee lineage. Her father, William Lee of Green Spring, was an important American diplomat and merchant.

Upon the death of Portia's mother, she and her sister, Cornelia, moved to Richmond County to live with the Francis Lightfoot Lees. Francis Lightfoot and his brother, Richard Henry, had been leaders in the Continental Congress. The deaths of the Lightfoot Lees again left the Lee sisters homeless. They chose to live with their second cousin, Richard Bland Lee and his wife, Elizabeth Collins, at Sully in Fairfax County. It was at Sully in 1799 that Portia married William Hodgson, an English merchant who emigrated to Alexandria around 1785.

For a brief period, Portia and William lived at 207 Prince Street. In 1801 they moved to Bellevue Plantation in Alexandria County at the intersection of Abingdon Drive and Slaters Lane.

Portia lavishly furnished the mansion and hosted many elegant parties, including the wedding reception in 1806 for her sister Cornelia and John Hopkins of Richmond. The interchange of correspondence between Portia and Cornelia excitingly describes their

visits during their younger years with the Fitzhughs, Fendalls, Carters and Lees living in the vicinity of Washington and Oronoco Street.¹⁵ As Cornelia died before Portia moved to the Boyhood Home, we do not have such a rich source of Portia's activities at the house during her final years.

William C. Yeaton purchased the property in 1851 and lived there with his family for a little over twenty years. In 1870, while the Yeatons were in residence, Robert E. Lee made a visit to his boyhood home. The General's call on the house is described in a letter to a subsequent owner from Lucia Yeaton, who was a little girl at the time.

...my aunt who brought me up, had the end room in the back building for her sitting room and that little narrow window was where I would study my lessons and read....From the window I would watch for the daffodils to bloom -- for not until then was I allowed to go out in the garden. Then would come the time of blossoms--it was so beautiful -- I would tear around and around the paths running -- and fill my arms with flowers for the teachers and boarders at school who had no flowers-- I would rush home to

the garden--there was a rope swing in the big old apple tree by the summer house and there I would swing high.

...I was the youngest of a big family -- and friends of all ages were always coming and going -- and there was room in the old house for all -- and everyone loved the place...

I marked Gen. Lee's Mother's room -- It was my mother's room and my earliest recollection is of sitting at my mother's knee hearing her read of St. Paul being shipwrecked...The maid came in, and said, 'Mrs. Yeaton, the General is downstairs' -- My Mother sent me to the nursery, for after a little visit the Gen. liked to be alone for a while in his mother's room. His last visit to Alexandria was in the spring time before his death--He came to us -- all the doors were open and we sat in the hall -- I sat close to his chair, for all the children loved him--He went upstairs and my father said, 'The General is failing.'

When he came down he sat and rested -- I marked the place by the stair case...¹⁶

The last Lee to own the Boyhood Home was Mary E. Fleming, daughter of Col. Richard Bland Lee II. Colonel Lee had a proud Lee pedigree as well as a reputation as a renowned surveyor of western lands and was a friend of Kit Carson. It was while Colonel Lee was stationed at Jefferson Barracks in St. Louis that Mary Elizabeth in 1847 married Dr. Robert Fleming of Charleston, South Carolina.

In 1870 the Flemings moved to 614 Oronoco Street, the Lee-Fendall House, across the street from the home of the Yeatons. Mary Fleming felt a strong attachment to the boyhood home of General Lee and when Mr. Yeaton experienced financial difficulties, she lent him funds to keep the house repaired. Upon Mr. Yeaton's default on the mortgage, Mrs. Fleming purchased the property in 1883. She stayed in the Lee-Fendall House until she moved back to Washington and probably rented out 607 Oronoco.¹⁷ Mary Fleming's sale of 607 Oronoco in 1883 to the Burson family ended over eight decades of Lee family affiliation with the elegant house John Potts built in 1795 on Oronoco Street.

Little attention has been focused on the prominent people who lived in or visited the house during the last one hundred years.

The Yeatons would certainly qualify for this distinction. The Alexandria Gazette in 1871 described them as being among the most prominent families in Alexandria. Mrs. Mary Francis Yeaton was the granddaughter of Gabriel DuVal, Justice of the United States Supreme Court and first Comptroller of the Currency under President Jefferson.

The funeral of Mary Francis Yeaton in 1871 followed the victorian custom and was held in the residence of her husband at 607 Oronoco Street. Her life was described in the obituary appearing in the Gazette as "...a life of faith and love as hers leaves its own best memorial. Its gentle, holy influence was felt by the whole community and cannot soon be forgotten.--It was in the sacred presence of her own home, however, that her character shone with its brightest light and emitted its holiest influence."¹⁸

As mentioned before, Mary Fleming held title to the Boyhood Home after the Yeatons. She sold the property to Emuella R. Burson, the wife of John W. Burson. When Mrs. Burson died 40 years later, her daughters wanted to sell it. To give it exposure, they placed it on the tour of historic Alexandria houses conducted by St. Paul's Episcopal Church. Dr. and Mrs. Royd R. Sayers saw it on the tour, became interested and bought "607" in 1932.¹⁹

The Sayers undertook an extensive renovation and

restoration of the Boyhood Home. It had been vacant for a number of years and the ravages of time had taken its toll. The Sayers' major efforts were directed at stabilization of the building, restoring the grounds to a nineteenth century appearance, and bringing about general cosmetic effects in the interior. Except for the removal of the smoke house attached to the rear kitchen, the essential character of the house was little disturbed.²⁰

Dr. Sayers was the Chief of the Bureau of Mines in the Roosevelt Administration. Across the street at the Lee Fendall House was his friend, John L. Lewis, of the United Mine Workers. The Sayers entertained New Deal officials, politicians and wives of prominent Washington figures. Secretary of Labor Francis Perkins, the first woman member of a president's cabinet was a frequent visitor. Mrs. Sayers and Eleanor Roosevelt were friends and companions.²¹

The Reverend Doctor Joseph B. Code was a most intriguing owner of the house. He purchased it from the Sayers in November of 1941.

Father Code was the chaplain of the House of Hapsburg. From the eighteen to the twentieth centuries the Austrian Hapsburgs were the rulers of Austria and their origins went back to the Holy Roman Empire. The Archduke Otto, pretender to the throne of Austria, had been accompanied by Father Code to the United States. Code spent the winter in Alexandria while

the Archduke was in Washington. A confederacy tea was held in the house before the priest died in 1942.²²

The most celebrated resident of 607 Oronoco Street after Robert E. Lee left his boyhood home was the poet, Archibald MacLeish, whose wife, Ada Hitchcock, purchased it in 1942.

MacLeish won the Pulitzer Prize three times: for the epic poem Conquistador (1932); Collected Poems (1917-1942); and the verse drama J.B. (1958). This multi-talented poet was also a dedicated and effective public figure. He reorganized the Library of Congress, served as an Assistant Secretary of State during World War II, and advised President Roosevelt and other New Dealers. He and Adlai Stevenson worked to establish the United Nations.

Ada Hitchcock and Archibald MacLeish were married on June 21, 1916, in Farmington, Connecticut. Their marriage was described in the society pages as one of the most important marriages of the season.²³ In 1923 MacLeish gave up a promising law practice in Boston and moved to Paris with his wife to concentrate on writing poetry. Mrs. MacLeish's artistic career flourished, and she sang with the Opera-Comique. In the spring of 1928 the MacLeishs sailed back across the Atlantic to settle in Conway, Connecticut, where they lived until moving to Alexandria.²⁴

The entry of the United

States into the war in Europe and the Pacific brought MacLeish to Washington on frequent trips to work in the war agencies as well as the Library of Congress.

Ada MacLeish purchased the Boyhood Home in October of 1942 with funds inherited from her father. During the period when she lived on Oronoco Street, Mrs. MacLeish worked for the Red Cross, rising to become director of the camp and hospital services.²⁵

On November 8, 1944, MacLeish submitted his resignation to the Library of Congress, assuming his days in Washington were over. But the President had other ideas. He accepted the resignation while nominating MacLeish to be the Assistant Secretary of State for Cultural and Public Affairs. His immediate task was to sell the public on the concept of the United Nations.

In April of 1945, when Roosevelt died, MacLeish wrote the death proclamation in language reminiscent of the King James Bible. The next day he submitted his resignation as assistant secretary of state.²⁶

The MacLeishs moved back to Connecticut after selling the Boyhood Home to Josephine Underwood Goodale in August of 1945. MacLeish continued his public service under President Truman while writing poetry.

A recollection of the MacLeish years at the Boyhood Home is recounted to us by Mrs. Mary Virginia Rawlings, who lived with and worked for the

MacLeishs.²⁷

According to Mrs. Rawlings, Mrs. MacLeish's bedroom was Robert E. Lee's mother's room. It adjoined a large bathroom which led to her husband's room. He wrote poetry at his desk placed between the windows overlooking the north garden. When writing, he did not like to be disturbed.

The MacLeishs loved the garden, and in the summer months would have breakfast served in the east garden under the trees. Both MacLeishs enjoyed gardening, sometimes spending all day Saturday working with the flowers and shrubbery. At that time the lot extended to Pendleton Street.

Mrs. Rawlings recalled how nice the MacLeishs were to her. They often included her on their overnight trips to surrounding points of interest.²⁸

The MacLeishs had three children--Kenneth, Mimi and Peter. Peter, the youngest, would come home from college for vacations and holidays. Mimi was married in the house on July 12, 1945 to Endiga Karl Grimm.

Most of the guests at Mimi's wedding were friends of the MacLeish family. They included Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, Lord Halifax, Harold Ickes, Adlai Stevenson and Edward Stettenius.

The wedding cake was cut

with a Revolutionary War sword brought by Secretary of State Dean Acheson. Mimi wore a very elaborate wedding dress encrusted with pearls. According to the MacLeish biographer, Mimi's Aunt Isabel, who remembered her standing at the bottom of the eighteenth-century staircase, thought that "for once in her life Mimi looked like a picture out of Vogue. Mimi only remembers wanting to get out of the beautiful but cumbersome wedding dress."²⁹

Mr. and Mrs. Robert Goodale moved into the Boyhood Home after the MacLeishs left for Connecticut. A distinguished visitor during the Goodale tenancy was First Lady Bess Truman.

Inauspiciously, the first lady was locked out of the Boyhood Home when she arrived, and knocked on the front door with the old brass knocker. Frustrated by the appearance of such a prominent guest, the maid jammed the large key in the eighteenth-century brass lock, impeding Mrs. Truman's entrance to the house. With help, the door was opened and Mrs. Truman was given a warm welcome.³⁰

In 1962, Mrs. Goodale, then a widow, sold the house to Henry Koch. He and his wife, Virginia, lived in the home until 1967 when they sold it to the Stonewall Jackson Memorial, Inc.--now the Lee-Jackson Foundation--of Charlottesville, Virginia, which was founded by the late J.W. Johns.

Alexandrians have long

displayed a deep affection for Robert E. Lee and his boyhood home on 607 Oronoco Street. While in private hands, it was included in the Alexandria house tours attended by the city's elite. As early as 1911, the City of Alexandria placed a tablet on the residence marking it as the boyhood home of General Lee.³¹

The residents of Alexandria's historic district were alarmed when they heard of a plan to build town houses on the large lot occupied by the Boyhood Home of Robert E. Lee. After neighbors adjacent to the home had blocked the initial plan when it came before a subcommittee of the Alexandria Planning Commission, the owner agreed to work with the community and historic organizations to find an appropriate buyer for the property as a whole. Local fund raising efforts were undertaken.

By chance while attending a football game in Charlottesville, the real estate agent handling the sale was put in touch with Jay Johns, the head of the Stonewall Jackson Memorial Foundation. Mr. Johns, a wealthy retired coal dealer, was dedicated to preserving historic properties in Virginia. He solicited funds for his foundation to purchase 607 Oronoco Street as a memorial to Robert E. Lee. After a cooperative effort that included many individuals, local historic and preservation organizations, as well as the City and State, the Stonewall Jackson Foundation purchased

the Boyhood Home on January 19, 1967.³²

Under the direction of Walter Macomber, former architect of Mount Vernon, the Foundation carried out a limited restoration of the House to bring the dining, morning and east bedrooms to their late eighteenth century appearance.³³

Among the local historians who worked tirelessly to appropriately furnish the Boyhood Home were Mrs. Gay Montague Moore, Mrs. Annette Wattles and Mrs. Howard Joynt.

Currently, the Boyhood Home of Robert E. Lee is the property of the Lee-Jackson Foundation, a non-profit organization. The house is recognized by the National Register of Historic Places and the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission. The museum is operated by a small staff, and the guides are volunteers from the Historic Alexandria Docents. Special events include Robert E. Lee's birthday Celebration (January); marriage of Mary Lee Fitzhugh and George Washington Parke Custis (July); formal visit of the Marquis de Lafayette (October); and Alexandria's Candlelight Tour (December.) The property may be rented for receptions.

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Portrait: William E. West/Photo: A. Jordan

Portrait of Robert E. Lee
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