



GRAVE HAPPENINGS



FIX / GERRBER / BIRTHING

Micah Thomas assists caretaker Neil Thomas (no relation) in Memorial Day Cleanup. See page 6 for story Photo by Lara Thomas

- Contributors Staff/
Photos this issue**
- Betty J Burdan
 - Alan Griesemer
 - Karla Hummel
 - Gary Koenig
 - Jen Nein
 - Les Rohrbach
 - Keith Schaffer
 - Paul Schumann
 - Lara Thomas
 - Anne Wagner
 - Rod Wagner

Harry Deem

Considered possibly the oldest private cemetery in Reading, the Fix Gerber Biting (sometimes Garver in place of Gerber) is literally a stone's throw from Rt 422 and Rt 10. There is a significant percentage of veterans interred, including Sargent Harry Deem of Reading.

Sgt Deem was a veteran of the Spanish American War, the Philippine American War, and World War I. According to an article in the Reading Times of 1938, he also served during the Boxer Rebellion and the Mexican Expedition, which most people might know of as the search for Pancho Villa.

Sgt. Deem was born October 29, 1877, to Charles Deem and his wife Sophia nee Endy. This is confirmed with paperwork completed by Sgt. Deem in 1934 when he filed for veteran's compensation. The 1880 Census combined with epitaphs of stones next to Sgt. Deem's show he was the ninth child but sixth living to parents who ran a hotel. His brother closest in age, George, died at age seven. At least one other child, a girl named Mayme, followed him.



When Harry was 20 in 1898, he enlisted with the US Army. A Register of Enlistments survives, describing him as ruddy in complexion, with blue eyes and brown hair; his enlistment officer wrote "excellent" in the comments section. Prior to his enlistment he was a polisher in one of Reading's many foundries.

On February 15, 1898, a battleship the USS Maine blew up in the Havana, Cuba harbor. Newspapers speculated on the cause and "Remember the Maine, To Hell with Spain" helped pressure the US into a war with Cuba's owner, Spain. The Philippine American War resulted from Spain giving the Philippines to the US as part of the treaty, along with Puerto Rico and Guam.

Sgt Deem saw parts of the world that even now would necessitate a map or search engine and with exotic names like Calulut, Angeles, Tarlac and Samar. I couldn't find documentary proof of his stationing after 1902, but he was not discharged until 1904, two years after the Spanish American and Philippine Wars. Perhaps he did see China and the Boxer Rebellion as well. He changed assignments from 12th US Infantry to Battery F, 22nd Artillery.

Home must have seemed to be a bit too tame. He joined the Pennsylvania State Police in 1909, but by 1910 he was ready to return to military life and spent time out west in Fort Douglas, Utah. With 1918 and the news of the Great War, he served in the 43rd Infantry until the end in 1919.

The years following the wars must not have been kind to Sgt. Deem. The 1930's brought the Great Depression. In 1934 he gave his address as the southwest corner of 3rd and Franklin Streets in Reading. Luckily, Roosevelt had started a Civilian Conservation Corp to provide jobs for men with no means and a unit specifically for veterans had a camp in Sinnemahoning, Cameron County, PA, building a state park.

However, by the summer of 1938, Harry Deem was back in Reading. On the morning of July 8, a workman coming home found a body in the Schuylkill Canal. An identification was made with the help of a friend from his days at the CCC Camp, it was determined that Sgt Deem was seen the night before in "an intoxicated condition." The coroner found that he must have fallen asleep on the bank, rolled down to the canal and "stunned by the fall" drowned in a foot of water. Sgt Deem's sister Mayme completed the application for Harry Deem to receive a proper marble military marker for the previously unmarked grave at "Garver Cemetery, Reading, PA."

Harry Deem left no children and appears to have never married. He is buried next to several of his siblings who died in childhood, in a section of the cemetery with earlier Deems, including other veterans. Looking to learn about Harry was a bit of a fascinating challenge as the name Deem was a common one in Reading and appeared in multiple censuses in multiple districts.

His story could be retold today, substituting time in the Middle East for the South Pacific and a homeless shelter for time at a CCC camp. He may have not fought in any famous battles, but Harry Deem's story is still relevant in 2020.

Lara Thomas
Secretary, BEAGP



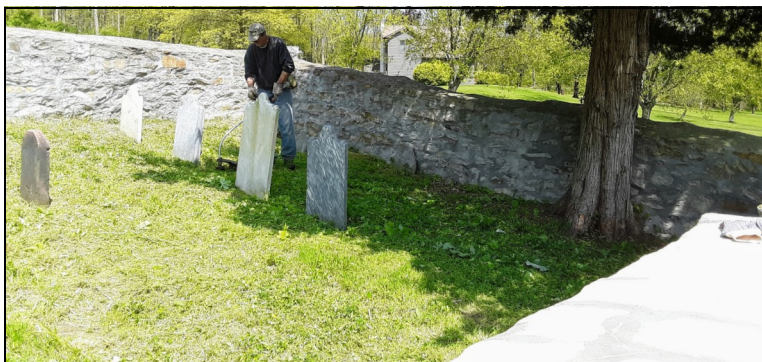
Reber

A second wall has been completed thanks to the donations of many Reber family members and the Jacqueline Nein Trust. Without the trust we could never do the amount of major restorations we have done in the last decade. The strong support of Reber family descendants is the driving force to make this whole again.



The property where the **Keim** burial ground is located has again been sold.

Alan Griesemer will be building his new home there. As it turns out, what prompted him to seal the deal on this sale was the burial ground, which is the resting place for Barbara (Keim) Griesemer and Abraham Griesemer. Alan and his family will maintain this burial ground going forward. His father **Eric Griesemer** (pictured) did the first of the season clean up in May. A few years ago we completely repaired the entire burial ground so we are extremely happy to see someone who has an interest in not just the land but the burial ground as well moving in!



Letter from Les

As with all other aspects of our lives covid-19 has disrupted customary BCAGP spring activities. Our March meeting was cancelled after the stay at home guidance came down and new meetings were not scheduled. Except for an early March burn of debris at St Henry's graveyard (Richmond Township), our normal spring cleanups did not occur.

This year we had planned to return to St Henry's in May and also the Grim graveyard (Maxatawny) to do follow up cleanups and treat the ailanthus trees which are a problem in both graveyards. To effectively remove ailanthus the treatment needs to be administered soon after the shoots have been cut so that it gets absorbed into the tree's system. Hopefully, we will be able to do this in the fall. However, the tree must be actively growing so cleanups would have to be done in warmer weather than we usually do them. We could also have debris disposal issues since crops normally surround both graveyards.

Besides other cleanups, which would have been done this spring, we were deprived of Oley High School's Day of Caring when about 20 graveyards are made presentable through the diligent efforts of Oley students. Probably a few hardy members of BCAGP will tackle some of these this summer, but other graveyards will have an extra year to get out of hand.

Looking ahead, BCAGP will have to operate given the uncertainties of living with covid-19. Our next meeting targeted for June will be for Board members only, the first time this has happened since I am a member. Among my questions for the Board will be how willing they are to interact with others and in what sort of environments. The Oley American Legion Hall has always been adequate for our meetings, but it is small and social distancing is impossible. I also wonder how the Legion or other organizations will feel about permitting groups in their facilities when the possibility of spreading the virus to them exists.

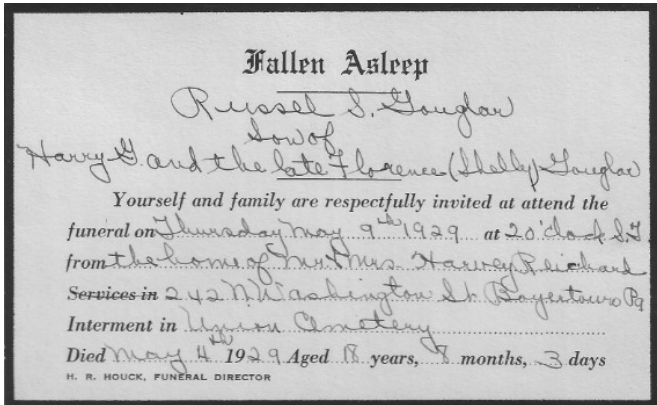
Still, the real work of BCAGP will continue. The stay at home directives are easing. Work groups will be scheduled for the fall. While we have spent much of our funds for graveyard repairs, enough remains for several small projects until our next infusion from the Nein Trust arrives. And, nominations for officer and board members will occur in some fashion toward the end of the year.

Les Rohrbach is President of BCAGP and very active in both the organizational aspects and the hands on "down and dirty in the graveyard" activities of the group. Les travels from Pottstown to his "roots" in Berks and is an avid hiker and genealogist.

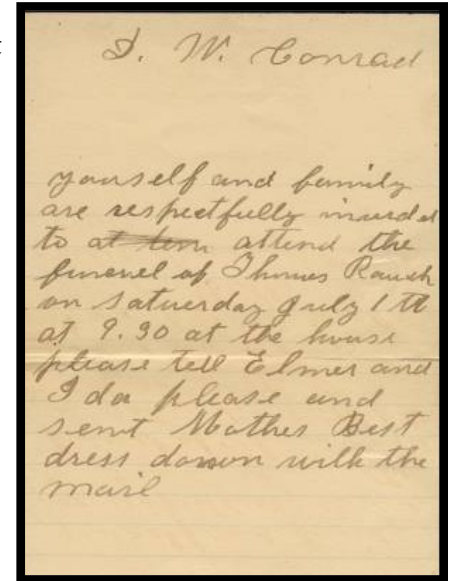
Invitation to Mourn

Funerals are difficult for everyone and especially painful for the grieving family. At a very trying time they are required to adhere to the funeral customs of the day. Unless otherwise directed by the deceased timely notification must be made to family and friends.

In frontier days it was very likely a single rider who went house to house to make the notification and extend an invitation. Much later the funeral invitation, a notice in the form of a black trimmed stationery or embossed card, was sent to share the bad news. Whether it was hand written, typed or printed by a professional, it was the practice for decades.



These invitations might be a brief handwritten note on the black trimmed paper, a stock invitation with blanks to fill in, either hand written or typed, or professionally printed. Printers were pressed into service, burning the midnight oil, to typeset, print and provide these black letters in time for them to be delivered.

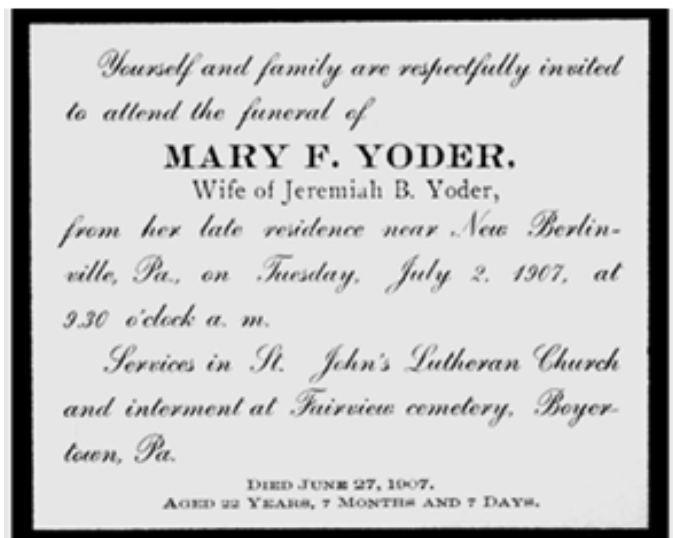


and the funeral, often no more than 4 days. Assisting in this task often offered friends and extended family another way to help the grieving family.

Some invitations included only a minimal amount of information, such as name of deceased and date, time and location of services. Others were more detailed, giving the day and time of the death, name of spouse, parent names and a maiden name for married females. Some invitations also included train schedules and information on transportation from the railroad station to the home or church. Whatever was included everyone knew when one of these black trimmed envelopes arrived it carried sad news.

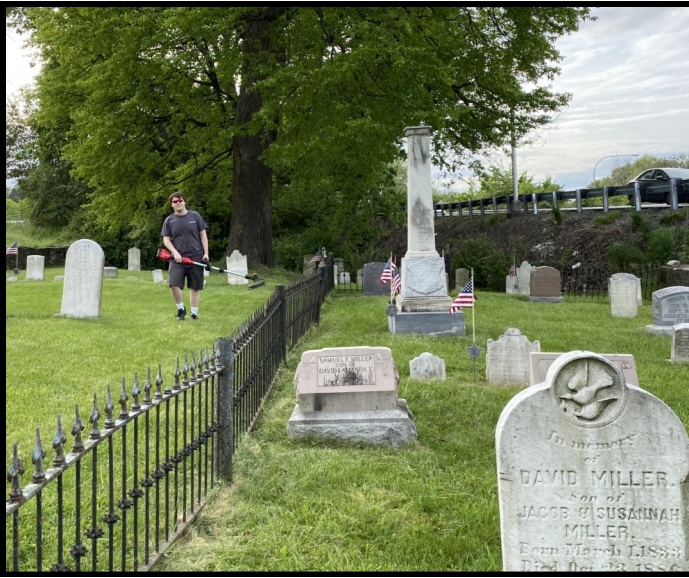
There is no clear timeline of when the funeral invitation went out of fashion, but it did. The most recent date in my collection is 1961. Most of them are dated between 1900 and the 1950s. As more and more homes subscribed to daily newspapers and there was a telephone in every home, a formal written invitation was no longer necessary. The phone provided voice communication both near and over long distances. Classified death notices and obituaries were published daily.

Holding onto the invitations for many was a remembrance of their loved one. Today, the funeral invitation is a thing of the past and the little folder given out at funerals serves as a keepsake for many. Either collection would be a valuable research tool to the genealogist in climbing the family tree.



By: Betty J Burdan

Fix/Gerber/Bitting



BCAGP had shared with our readers that two young men from Hamburg Area School District were donating time and energy to helping preserve our area cemeteries.

Before the stay-at-home order and pandemic, **Micah Thomas and Aidan Emerich** were meeting in the colder months and sorting and labeling images of work, tombstones and cemeteries taken by various BCAGP members over the years.

They aren't able to meet right now, but Micah Thomas has started to help in a physical way at the Fix Gerber Bitting cemetery off of Route 10.

This cemetery has seen some hard times and is much reduced from its original 200 graves. It is bordered by Lancaster Avenue, Rt 10 and Rt 422 and bears the brunt of litter and traffic from its surroundings. But on any given day, you would never know it thanks to the dedication of

Neil Thomas, Grand Patriarch of the Grand Encampment IOOF of PA.

Mr. Thomas has kept this cemetery beautifully maintained - mowing, trimming, picking up trash and painting the steps and bench there. Mr. Thomas is also approaching his 80th birthday and recently asked if there was anyone who could help him now and then, especially with the trimming. Enter Micah Thomas (no relation) and his weed-whacker, just in time for Memorial Day.

Mr. Thomas, a veteran himself, was hoping to have the Fix Gerber Bitting looking particularly sharp for the holiday. Micah says he was happy to help and they have worked out an arrangement for going forward.

Hoch

BCAGP partnered with The **Mark Hoch** Family to redo the caps on the Hoch burial ground wall in **Oley Township**. Although this is not exactly the way it was before, it will preserve the walls for quite a while without breaking the bank. This is a very large burial ground and full restoration is costly. Thank you to Mark and his son for moving this forward! Mark offered to split the costs which we were happy to do, especially considering we recently received a grant to use in the Oley Valley. The **DTE Midstream** provided a grant to the **Oley Valley Heritage Association** to administer in accordance with the guidelines of the grant. They distributed \$5,000 for our use in Oley.

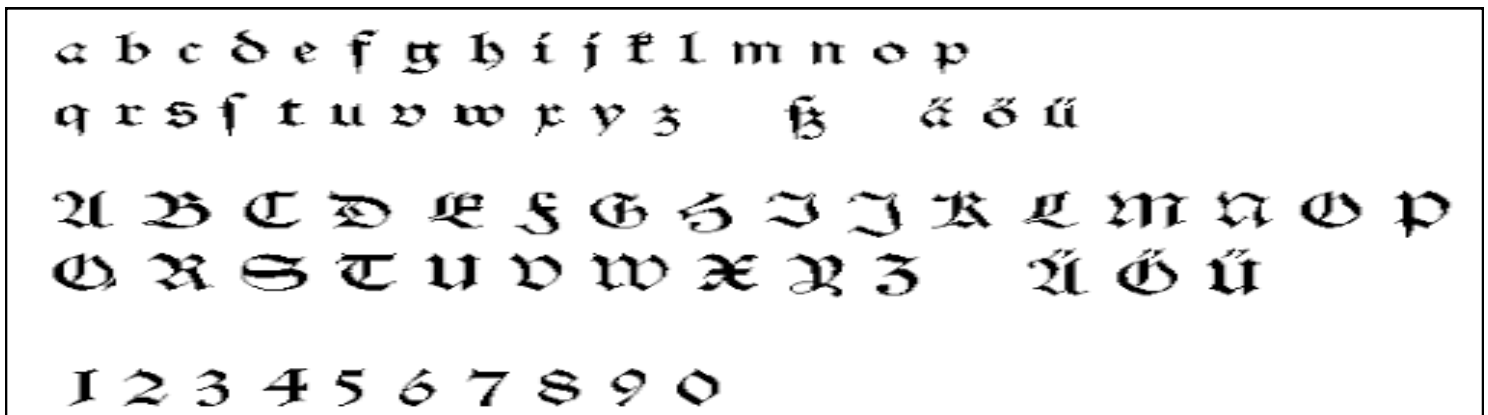


SET IN STONE

Many of the tombstones in Berks County's historic family graveyards are not readable to most visitors – even descendents. While cleaning them enables us to more easily see the inscribed lettering, reading anything other than the interred's name and birth/death years often remains a challenge. There are several reasons for this, starting with erosion and wear of the stone, but it's the manner in which they were carved that causes the most difficulties.

The primary reason is that German *fraktur* was the most commonly used font for inscription and few people today are familiar with it. Fraktur has a 27 letter alphabet, 3 ways of writing the letter "s" (one of which is nearly identical to our "f"), and many strong similarities between letters (see lower case m, n, u, v & w, and capital I & J in the example below). When you add to those the fact that each individual carver had his own interpretation and style of lettering, the fraktur becomes impossible to read for most people.

This is just one example of the many versions of German fraktur. Each individual craftsman had his own "handwriting" when carving a stone.



Of course, German was the most common language in our area so it was used in stone carving. Now it is no longer spoken by most Berksians. In addition, the language itself has changed significantly over time and so we frequently find inscribed words that are out of usage and considered archaic (thank goodness for 100+ year old dictionaries). Latin appears on some stones as well, especially relating to biblical verses. Spelling was not standardized, frequently adding to yet another layer of possible confusion (for example, I've found leid – suffering - spelled as leid, leyd and lide). All these considerations make tombstone reading a challenge, even for experienced preservationists!

Karla Hummel
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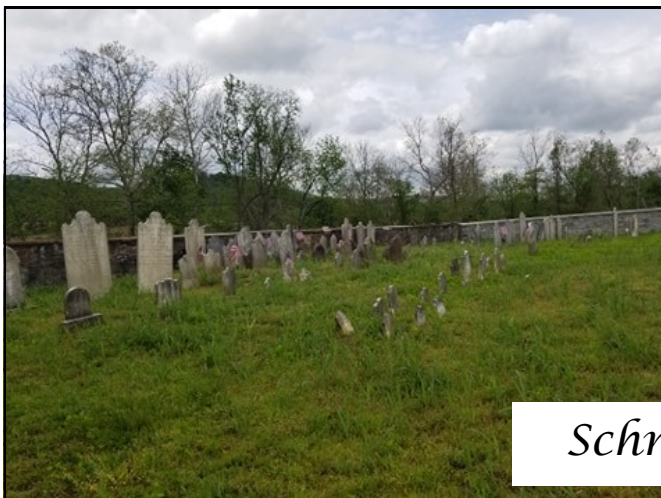
Several of our members have been out on their own doing clean ups. **David Schlegel** has done a few like the **Kauffman** and **Rothermel** in Maiden creek, both **Schlegels** in Fleetwood and the **Reichard Dum/St Henry's** (but he doesn't take pictures) and **Gary Koenig** has been moving his way around the Oley area.



Jean Bertolet



Nein



Schneider

A portion of the wall fell in at the **Schneider** burial ground in Oley. This became an unplanned priority because not fixing it promptly would lead to a bigger repair job.



After a chance social media conversation with **Jen Nein**, she and her husband Chris went out to the Nein Burial ground and did a cleanup. This was a huge help as Karla (who adopted this burial ground) was unable to be here to do the clean up after Day of Caring had to be canceled for Covid-19. Chris is a descendant. June 3rd their son Andrew came and helped as well!

Gary Koenig did some tree/bush trimming at the Nein and some others this spring, and also did a second clean up.

NEIN



Our Mission

We strive to preserve and maintain the historic Berks County graveyards in Eastern Pennsylvania. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Historic Burial Places Preservation Act (1994) provides for the preservation of historic burial places, tombs, monuments and gravestones and imposes penalties for violations. Research supports the existence of over 300 historic graveyards in Berks County of which approximately 120 remain with some sort of visible surface evidence. The BCAGP is working aggressively to preserve these historic grave sites for future generations.

Due to the precautions being taken to prevent the spread of the COVID 19 Virus we will not be setting the next meeting until things are more clear. Some of our members will likely be doing individual graveyard maintenance, however no group projects are scheduled at this time. Watch our Facebook for upcoming events.



The National Park Service has a series of briefs dedicated to preservation of historic sites and properties. Number 48 is entitled *Preserving Grave Markers in Historic Cemeteries*. BCAGP follows these time-tested and scientifically proven methodologies because our membership recognizes Berks historic burial grounds as important parts of our familial and cultural heritages.

Note: there are quite a few “professionals” who offer services cleaning tombstones who, in fact, do not follow best practices. Likewise there are unknowing caretakers who do significant harm. Not a week passes that we don’t learn, usually via social media, of a site somewhere in the U.S. that has been disturbed by pressure washing, bleaching, or nylon brushing with power equipment. Stones treated in these manners are permanently damaged and will deteriorate at a noticeable rate.

Information is the key to preserving our historic stones!

<https://www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs/48-preserving-grave-markers.htm>

JOIN OR DONATE TODAY!

If you're not a current member, please join us in preserving and maintaining our historic graveyards. If you do not wish to be a member at this time but you are interested in contributing support for a specific graveyard, please indicate that graveyard on the form below. We also appreciate contributions to the general fund.

MEMBERSHIP FORM - 2020

NAME: _____

ADDRESS: _____

EMAIL: _____

PHONE: _____

\$ _____ Annual Membership, Individual \$15; Family (residing in the same household) \$25

\$ _____ Annual business or municipality membership, \$35

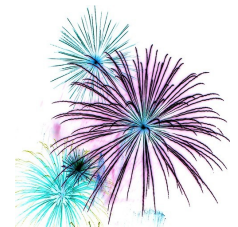
\$ _____ Donation earmarked for the *Association General Fund*

\$ _____ Donation to be used for the _____ gravesite

\$ _____ Donation to be used in _____ municipality

Total Amount enclosed

Date _____



Mail Checks to: B.C.A.G.P., PO Box 3707, Reading, PA 19606

Membership runs a calendar year January to December. Membership dues paid after October 1st will be applied to the next membership year. This form is also available on our website in the internet edition of the newsletters which can be printed.

The official registration and financial information of Berks County Association of Graveyard Preservation may be obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of State by calling toll free, within Pennsylvania, 1-800-732-0999. Registration does not imply endorsement.

Berks County Association for Graveyard Preservation is a registered 501 (c) (3). Please check with your tax advisor as to the deductibility of your contribution.

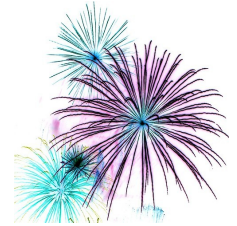
Please check our website www.bcagp.org
for meetings times



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(email addresses on the website)



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David Schlegel * Michael Angstadt * Ed Gensemer * Ron Smith * Keith Schaffer

Newsletter contact: Anne Wagner

"Grave Happenings," is a collection of member contributed articles written to keep everyone advised of recent and on-going preservation activities, BCAGP needs, and incidental graveyard related material. We are always looking for items of interest and are open to suggestions on future content.

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Our newsletters are archived online on our website in full color

Don't forget to check our facebook for updates and more photos!

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