



Reproduction of Concordia Cemetery's original wrought-iron lychgate, installed in 2006.

# HISTORIC CONCORDIA CEMETERY: WHERE EVERY STONE TELLS A STORY

by **Bonnie Fleischauer**

*[All Images Courtesy Concordia Cemetery]*

**B**ehind a large Victorian wrought iron fence, nestled below a canopy of gnarled ancient trees, stand thousands of tombstones, silently honoring many of the forebearers of today's Western New York families. For over 160 years, historic Concordia Cemetery has served the people of Buffalo during their time of loss, recording their lives and legacies and preserving their memories and heritage. Located at the corner of Walden Avenue and Sycamore Street on Buffalo's East Side, Concordia Cemetery was founded in 1859. While in 1879 there were 40 other cemeteries in the city of Buffalo, today it is one of only four still in existence within the city limits.

The land on which it sits was originally part of lot 51 on the Holland Land Survey and was owned by prominent German businessman John Stellwagen. Therefore, it is not surprising that the cemetery's roots are traced to the early Germans who settled in Buffalo. Driven by the need for more burial space due to Buffalo's rapidly growing population, land was acquired for a burial ground to be shared by three German Protestant churches: St. Peter's German Evangelical Church founded in 1835, First Trinity Lutheran Church founded in 1839 and St. Stephen's Evangelical Church organized in 1853.

The term "concordia" means harmony and references the coming-together of the three church congregations to share this property, which in and of itself was quite a unique approach. The plan was to have three separate but adjacent graveyards, each laid out by its governing church, to be overseen by one caretaker. The founding churches must have had a close relationship, which is borne out by the fact that pastors presided over burials of people not of their own congregation when the deceased's pastor was away.

It is a common misconception that a person had to be a congregant to be buried in a church's specific section. Research has shown, however, that some of the people interred in one section actually attended one of the other two churches, and many people buried at Concordia did not attend any of the three founding churches at all. Encompassing a little over 15 acres, the cemetery is the final resting place for thousands of early – and not so early – residents of Buffalo, including over 500 veterans (150 from the Civil War) and a Congressional Medal of Honor recipient.

## BUFFALO'S GERMAN COMMUNITY

A large influx of people arriving in Buffalo in the 1820s were from various German states. Many Evangelical Lutherans fled following the introduction in Prussia of the United Church Agenda by Friedrich Wilhelm III. The United Church was an attempt to bring together the various Protestant belief

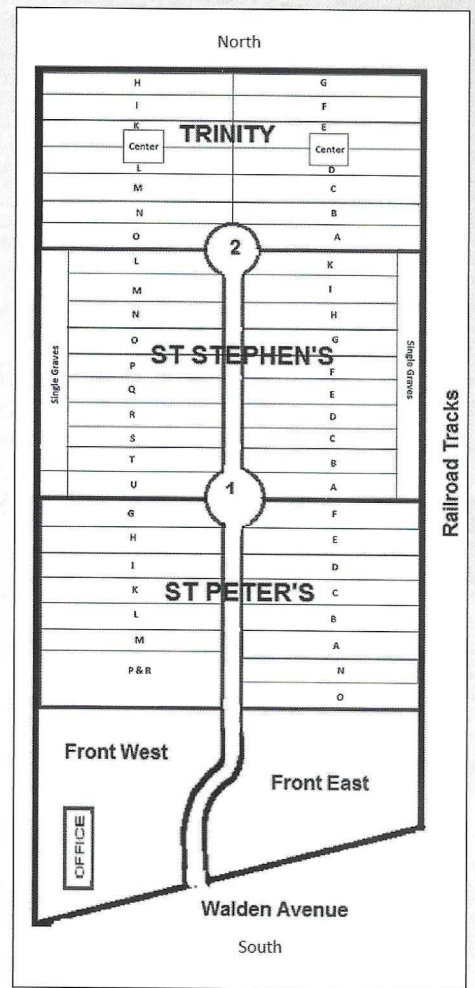
systems under one church. Thus, during the 1830s, many Protestants who wished to remain true to their own beliefs emigrated to America.

The famine of 1846 and 1847 and the resulting revolution of 1848 led to increased numbers fleeing the German states and by 1850, nearly 7,000 Germans were living in Buffalo. By 1855, the city was half German and by the turn of the century, the group made up 60 percent of the city's population. The Buffalo Germans held fast to their "Germanness" as they did in other parts of the country, remaining a close-knit community well into the first decades of the 1900s. They consciously avoided melting into American culture and used their language as the carrier of their traditions.

Children of these immigrants remained bilingual, usually being more fluent in German than English. In fact, demands to teach the German language in Buffalo's high schools led to the Common Council hiring 10 teachers to do so in 1874. The German community's influence grew as did its population: in 1878, of the 3700 children born within this city, 2000 were of German descent.

Despite their allegiance to their own community, these early Germans were quick to come to the defense of their new county when called upon. As soon as the Civil War began, Buffalo's German Americans filled the ranks of Western New York-based regiments, answering the call to protect and defend their new fatherland. One of these was Battery I of the First New York (Light) Artillery, better known as "Wiedrich's Battery." Under the command of Michael Wiedrich, the unit served with distinction in many battles, gaining notoriety for their successful defense of the Union position at Gettysburg against the fierce "Louisiana Tigers." Today, a monument at Gettysburg memorializes their bravery.

One of these soldiers was Sergeant William Moeller who was born in 1826 in Hesse. He enlisted in Wiedrich's Battery in December 1861, after which he fought three battles in four months. On August 29, 1862, at the Second Battle of Bull Run, his arm was mangled by a cannonball. Taken prisoner, his



Map of Concordia Cemetery, with the sections originally assigned to the three Germany churches indicated.

wound was not attended to for 8 days, after which he was returned to the Union forces and admitted to a hospital in Washington, DC. There his left arm was amputated. Released from the hospital in December 1862, Moeller returned to West Seneca to his wife Martha and son John. Buried in Concordia Cemetery, his descendants still live in Western New York.

Though the earliest of those buried in Concordia were mostly of German descent, Buffalo's ever-changing diversity is mirrored in the people who are interred here. For example, the Great Migration brought African Americans from the rural South to northern industrial cities in the early 1900s, and thousands of these individuals have been laid to rest here. Today, Concordia contains the remains of about 20,000 people of all backgrounds, cultures and religions.

One of the non-German Civil War veterans who rest at Concordia is



Sergeant William Moeller lost his left arm at the Second Battle of Bull Run in 1862. He is one of 150 Civil War veterans interred at Concordia.

Pvt. John McHugh. The son of Irish immigrants Cornelius and Mary McCue, he was a soldier for most of his life, enlisting in the U.S. Army at least 10 times from 1861 to 1898. His first enlistment occurred in May 1861 at the age of 17 under the name Michael McCue, but he was discharged a month later “on account of being a minor.” He reenlisted in December 1861, claiming to be 22 years old. Over the course of his extensive military career, he is usually reported as being a private, although for brief periods he achieved the ranks of corporal and sergeant. In 1875, he reenlisted as a private in Company A, 5th U.S. Infantry, and fought under Major General Nelson Miles in the Indian Wars until 1877. His courage at the Battle of Cedar Creek, MT, resulted in his being awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for “Gallantry in Action.”

Seemingly a humble man, when he passed away on May 28, 1910, there was no fanfare nor accolades. In fact, his death was not even reported in the news and his death certificate records his occupation simply as “old soldier.” Two stones mark his grave – one for his Civil War service and one for his service in the Indian Wars.

## UNIQUE MEMORIALS

Concordia contains many beautiful and unique memorials. These range from

monuments made of cast zinc or red Medina sandstone to a metal cross and an obelisk with a curse on the murderer of the interred. Many contain epitaphs, poetry and biblical passages in German, or display biographical information such as a birthplace in Germany. The artwork on the tombstones reflect the Victorian perception of death as a peaceful sleep. Carvings of flowers, cherubs, angels, ivy, willow trees, religious symbols and lambs are common. In addition to tablet-shaped headstones, there are many obelisks common to Victorian-era cemeteries.

The “white bronze” marker for the Wright family is a fine example of the

hollow metal markers that were actually made of cast zinc. Manufactured by Bridgeport Castings in Connecticut, the name white bronze was used to make the material sound more attractive. Popular from the mid-1870s until the second decade of the 20th century, these markers were often ordered from a catalog and are visually unique and very durable. The Wright monument displays an inscription on only one side; the other three sides display decoration.

Concordia also contains many monuments made of Medina sandstone from quarries in Orleans County. Its beautiful red color made it a much sought-after



John McHugh – aka Michael McCue – served in both the Civil War and the Indian Wars of the late 1870s, where he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.



The Wright family monument is an example of the visually unique “white bronze” monuments popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Actually made of zinc, these durable monuments were often ordered through catalogs.

architectural material and it was shipped all over the country. Medina sandstone can be found in the steps of the State Capitol in Albany, in the streets of Rochester, Chicago, St. Louis and even as far away as Havana, Cuba. The sandstone was also used in the construction of Buckingham Palace and Toronto City Hall.

The Schmand family’s Medina sandstone marker at Concordia is unique in that it is believed to be the only one in Western New York with a curse inscribed upon it. Louis Schmand, son of Buffalo paint and wallpaper store proprietor Charles Schmand, was only 17 when he was clubbed to death in Euclid, OH, in

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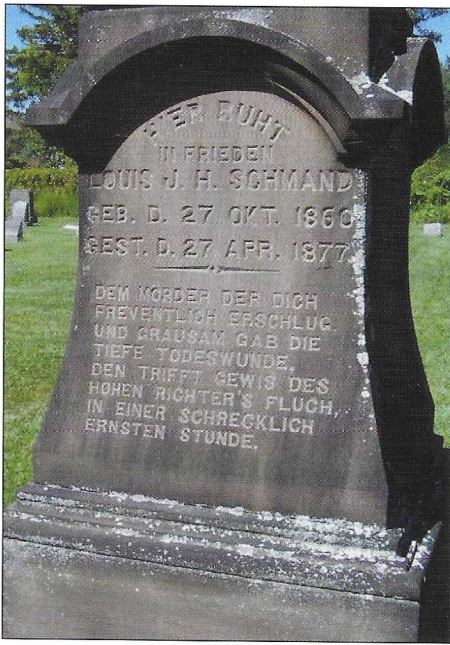
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The Schmand family's Medina sandstone monument is thought to be the only one in Western New York that is inscribed with a curse.

1877. The marker's curse addresses the killer:

*Hier Ruht in Frieden  
 Louis J.H. Schmand  
 Geb. D. 27 Okt. 1860  
 Gest. D. 27 Apr. 1877  
 Dem Morder Der Dich  
 Freventlich Erschlug  
 und Grausam gab die  
 Tiefe Todeswunde,  
 Den Trifft Gewis Des  
 Hohen Richter's Fluch,  
 in Einer Schrecklich  
 Ernstein Stunde*

Translation:

*Here Rests in Peace  
 Louis J.H. Schmand  
 Born 27 Oct. 1860  
 Died 27 Apr. 1877  
 To he who killed so violently  
 By striking down cruelly  
 From deep within my heart  
 You will be judged by a higher power  
 You are wished a curse on your soul*

The translator believes the inscription was likely written by a woman, based on the wording, probably the boy's mother. In trying to understand why the mother would write such an epitaph, we have only to look at the other sides of the stone.

On other faces are listed the names and death dates of five of her other children, three of whom predeceased Louis: Wilhelm, who died January 6, 1860, age 9; Heinrich, who died July 7, 1871, age 5; and Katharine who died August 6, 1872, at the age of one.

The people at rest at Concordia were not the politicians, businessmen nor powerful people of Buffalo, but hard workers who literally built the city and who have stories to share. Some stories are inspirational, like Lura Bennett's. Born in Fort Scott, KS to Rosienelle "Nellie" (Shook) and James M. Garret, Lura was destined to be a "knockout." Her mother was an accomplished female boxer and a vaudeville performer, and when Lura and her sister Crystal were in their teens, they toured as a vaudeville act known as The Bennett Sisters, performing gymnastics, boxing and wrestling. Nellie retired in 1907, but Lura became a star when she was named only the third recognized Women's World Wrestling Champion in history. She later toured as part of "Miner's Americans," whose advertisements boasted a challenge of a "\$25 forfeit to all opponents she fails to throw in 15 minutes."

Lura also trained some of the women who would advance wrestling into the professional realm, continuing until she retired in 1933 at the age of 44. Later, she would set world records for parachuting from the highest altitude and for most jumps by a woman. Lura passed away in 1968 at age 79.

Other stories are tragic, like the story of the three Mund children buried together in the St. Stephen's section, plot P11, in an unmarked grave. When Fred Mund left his home on Clinton Street shortly before 7:00 a.m. on April 24, 1907, for his job on the wrecking crew at the Pennsylvania Railroad yard near Fillmore Avenue, all seemed well. That all changed two hours later when he was surprised by a visit from his wife Bertha who walked up to him and said, "Fred, I have killed the children. It was not right for them to live and they're better off dead." Accompanying his wife back to the house, he found his son Christof (8), and daughters Helen (2) and Freida (8 months), dead. His wife had suffocated the boy and strangled the girls with rope.

Bertha, whose maiden name was Enterman, was born in what is now Germany in February 1870. There was a history of insanity in the family, as both Bertha's father, who committed suicide, and her grandfather suffered from it, and she felt it was better for her children to die than to live with the probability of going insane. The *Buffalo Courier* reported that a crowd of over 2,000 people jammed the church and overflowed into the street outside for the children's memorial service and funeral. Bertha was judged insane and committed to the Buffalo State Hospital. She died in 1935 at Matteawan State Hospital for the Criminally Insane in Beacon, NY. Fred died in West Seneca in October 1954.



Members of the Zelinske family tend to Concordia's graves, ca. 1910. Gottfried Zelinske was the cemetery's caretaker in the early 20th century.



Volunteers work to unearth sunken grave markers as part the effort to restore and preserve the cemetery, beginning in 2003.

## PRESERVING THE PAST – AGAINST THE ODDS

Concordia is truly a place where “Every Stone Tells A Story.” All are part of the history of Western New York, but preserving the unique artifact that is Concordia Cemetery is not a simple undertaking. Once a showplace and the pride of the community, the cemetery boasted many large urns overflowing with flowers located in large rotundas, with a large, wrought-iron lychgate sign greeting visitors.

The urns and original signage are gone now. In 2001, an embezzlement scandal saw the arrest of the cemetery’s treasurer and the resignation of its board. Concordia was thus abandoned and left to fall into disrepair. Vandalism ran rampant and the grass grew waist high.

Then, in September 2003, the New York State Division of Cemeteries called a meeting and a handful of volunteers came forth. Recognizing the historical importance of the property, they committed to ensuring its renovation and preservation. A new, all-volunteer board of directors took over and began the task of finding records, mowing the lawn and caring for the grounds. They organized others to locate and repair tombstones that had tipped over or sunk beneath the surface of the soil. Gardens were planted, the wrought-iron fencing was

repaired and a reproduction of the original lychgate nameplate was installed in 2006. Since that time, volunteer researchers have spent countless hours creating, maintaining and updating an interment database.

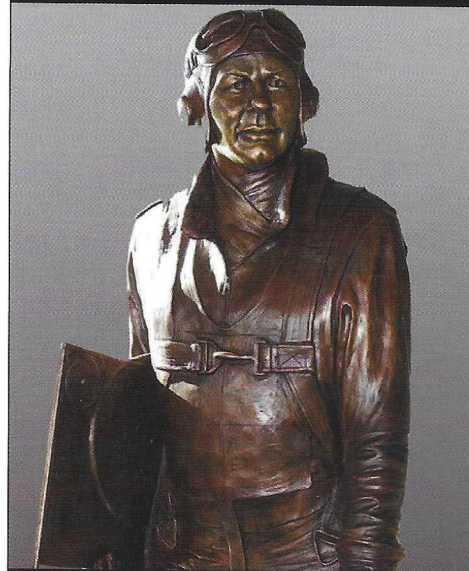
In 2008, these efforts were recognized when the cemetery was added to the New York State Register of Historic Sites and the National Register of Historic Places. But the following year the board had to face the fact that funds were running out and they could no longer afford to have the grass mowed. Thankfully, in 2010, the Erie County Sheriff’s Community Service Program offered help and they have provided invaluable assistance in maintaining the grounds ever since.

That same year, the “Friends of Concordia Cemetery” was established on Facebook as an outlet to exchange information about the people, history, events and community of the cemetery. Historical records have been sorted and indexed, while genealogies, photos and narratives donated by descendants and families of those interred are kept on file at the cemetery office, to be shared with others seeking information. Thousands of memorials have also been entered on Find a Grave to help genealogists find their ancestors at Concordia.

In 2011, the Concordia volunteers’ extraordinary efforts were recognized by Preservation Buffalo Niagara when they were awarded PBN’s Neighborhood Conservation Award. On September 11 of that year, the cemetery dedicated its Remembrance Garden. Located next to the equipment barn, it is a shady and serene space for people to rest and reflect. Also dedicated that day was the stunning, hand-carved wooden sign, which was installed on the cemetery’s farmhouse office, proudly proclaiming historic Concordia Cemetery’s placement on the National Register of Historic Places. The sign was made and donated by Mr. Richard Reimers, whose wife was the granddaughter of Civil War veteran Sgt. William Moeller.

Despite these successes, with only a few lots left for sale, the cemetery had no real source of income. Recognizing the need for financial support, the board of

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directors created the non-profit Concordia Foundation, Inc. in 2012. Its mission is to support the cemetery in “preserving its heritage, grounds and buildings through promotion, community outreach, education and events and to encourage and support cultural, heritage and historic tourism for Concordia Cemetery and its neighborhood and community.” Because of its non-profit status, the foundation can apply for desperately needed grants and funds not otherwise available.

In addition to the grounds and monuments, Concordia also maintains a pre-Civil War farmhouse and a two-story barn. The latter is used for storage while the Greek Revival house serves as the office for the cemetery and an event meeting space. Although no record of the date the house was built has been found, experts estimate it was built between the late 1840s and 1855 due to construction method, style and materials. Both were built prior to the churches



In late 2018, an out of control car crashed through the original wrought iron fence, destroying sections of it and sending a fence post through a window, which damaged the farmhouse and destroyed antiques and furniture in the front room. To add insult to injury, the downed fence sections, which were chained together, were stolen a few days later.

purchasing the land, as an 1859 survey drawing shows both the house and barn located on the lot, but nearer the road. They were moved to their present location sometime after 1884, as a map from that year still shows them near the road. The Concordia Foundation has applied to the City of Buffalo to have the cemetery and its structures designated as a local historic landmark. In the future, the foundation is planning on applying for a historic structure grant to further research and then restore the buildings for use as a museum and to host community educational events.

As part of the cemetery's heritage efforts, volunteers have presented tours and events focused on the lives of the people who rest there. Costumed actors have related the stories of Louis Schmand, Sergeant Moeller and many more. Other events and presentations have focused on Wiedrich's Battery and the Battle of Gettysburg, tombstone iconography, the Great Migration, the impact of anti-German propaganda on the German community during WWI and the extraordinary life of Rosa Jackson Lumpkin who, when she passed away in 1991 at the age of 115, was one of the oldest living Americans. Born to former slaves in Georgia on July 17, 1876, Rosa came to Buffalo during the "Great Migration" of African Americans

from the rural southern United States to the industrial cities of the Northeast, Midwest and West. In addition, local African American historian, columnist and educator Eva M. Doyle has shared the story of her family, which came from Alabama to Western New York in the 1940s. Her parents James and Gertrude Townsend are interred at Concordia.

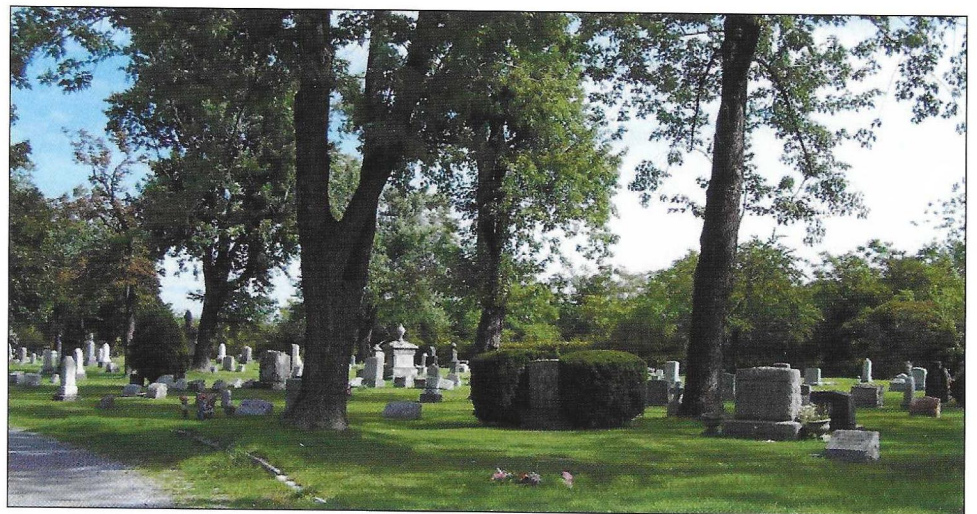
As with most efforts of this kind, however, inspirational steps forward have been met with a few steps back over the past decade. Vandalism has continued to be a problem. Significant incidents in 2010 and 2018 resulted in damage and theft to the grounds, tombstones and surrounding fencing. In response to the



Faced with labor restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a herd of goats was brought to the cemetery for two days in July 2020 to help combat the tall grass and weeds.

former incident, the Erie County Sheriff's Community Service Program pitched in and reset the stones. And following the second incident, Concordia president David Speth observed that "This place is just too loved to die. ... We have been entrusted with the care of the almost 20,000 souls who are interred here, so we will fix this too and move forward."

In the summer of 2019, Concordia Cemetery celebrated its 160th anniversary with presentations and the recognition of their community partners. Soon tragedy struck again, however, when burglars broke into the facility and stole virtually all of the equipment, leaving the cemetery unable to care for the grounds.



Concordia's volunteers and community partners continue to work to ensure that this important piece of regional history survives to memorialize and educate into the future.

In a moving gesture of support, many Western New Yorkers donated used equipment while some local businesses donated new equipment, proving that Buffalo is indeed the City of Good Neighbors. The cemetery will continue to add equipment as funds are raised to cover the costs.

So far in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented new challenges for Concordia, like everyone else. Due to health-related restrictions, the Erie County Sheriff's Community Service Program was unable to assist the cemetery's grounds crew. Despite many people coming forward to help Concordia's few volunteers, the rapidly growing grass won out. Looking to the past for inspiration, on July 16 and 17 the cemetery hosted a "Throwback Thursday (and Friday)" event, bringing in a herd of goats to tame the tall grass. In the 1800s, it was not uncommon for the cemetery caretaker and his neighbors to graze their

goats, sheep and cows on the property. This year, "Let's Goat Buffalo's" herd munched their way through weeds and overgrowth to the delight of visitors, who came out just to watch.

Concordia Cemetery's driving force continues to be the passion of its volunteers. But additional volunteers are desperately needed if the cemetery is to continue to be a part of the region's historical legacy. Board and committee members, as well as people to assist with landscaping, tombstone repair and renovation, historic research, fundraising and grant writing are needed. This living museum – a significant symbol of Western New York's proud heritage – needs support if it is to continue to survive.

"We must remember ... those who came before us and walked where we now walk," says Concordia Foundation president Diane Pesch-Savatteri. "Hearing these stories from Concordia stirs within us a sense of appreciation, gratitude and

patriotism and also strengthens us and gives us resolve in wanting to overcome obstacles in our own lives and to seek a better life for ourselves and our families, and also to serve others in our community and nation. That is what Concordia does and what we as volunteer caretakers are striving for."

More information on Concordia Cemetery and volunteer opportunities are available at [Concordiabuffalo.org](http://Concordiabuffalo.org). Current information is also available through Facebook at Friends of Concordia Cemetery. 📧

Bonnie Fleischauer is a 1978 graduate of Buffalo State College and holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Journalism, Broadcasting and Speech Communication. She has been the public relations and promotion coordinator as a volunteer at Historic Concordia Cemetery since 2004.

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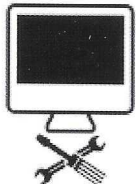
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