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The McCunes and Staffords, the Proposed Catholic Church in Beverly, Ohio, and the Catholic Church in Keokuk, Iowa

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(Part 3 of 3, continued from Vol. XXXVI, No. 2)



The Visitation Convent in Keokuk, Iowa, as it looked in the Twentieth Century.

John McCune built the first floor of the long section on the right.

(Courtesy of Sr. Miriam Rose, V.H.M., Archivist, and Sr. Mary Emmanuel, V.H.M. Tyringham, Mass.)

The McCunes and the Visitation Convent

In 1852 Bishop Loras of Dubuque, desiring to obtain assistance in the work of education in the diocese, sent Father Villars to Europe in quest of some religious. Villars applied to the Visitation Sisters of his native city, Montluel, France.⁵⁵ By March of 1853, after repeated refusals, after much

persuasive eloquence and fervent prayer the Visitation Sisters agreed to come to Keokuk, provided that they would be presented with a suitable site to build on, and that they be furnished with a dwelling house for a year rent-free until they could build, and that the congregation assist them in building.

On March 23, 1853, John McCune wrote to

Bishop Loras advising him of their agreement to these terms, as he had been informed of them by a letter from Father Villars, and asking the Bishop to allow the Sisters to have half of his block of land in Keokuk, which had been donated to him by two pious ladies, for the building site. The Bishop replied on March 29 that he would donate the requested land. On April 2 McCune again wrote to the Bishop, responding to a question about Father McGinnis, who had been taking the place of Father Villars. He also wrote, "Mrs. McCune joins me in best Respects to you. She is making every arrangement to receive the Sisters. And has your Room all arranged in hopes you will favour us with a viset about the time of their arrival. Wee would be happy If you could arrange so as to be here and surprise them on their arrival." The letter has a notation by the Bishop that Mr. McCune was told to build the convent.⁵⁶

On July 9, 1853 Bishop Loras visited Keokuk. In Father Villars' room, in the presence of John McCune, the bishop noted in a subscription book for the new convent that he would donate eight lots to them.⁵⁷

The Sisters arrived in Keokuk on August 12 and stayed with the McCune family until the 16th, when they moved into a small, rented house, partially furnished by Mrs. McCune.⁵⁸ "During those three or four days, this most respectable family has welcomed us most kindly. Several of their family and friends have also showed us attention; especially their children surround us, with a look of satisfaction and contentment that was a pleasure to see. Mr. and Mrs. McCune do almost everything for us, so we do wish, if you do agree, to give them the title of founder and foundress, a title that confers them privileges in our institution..."⁵⁹ This designation by the Sisters explains why both Mary McCune's obituary and the book *Distinguished Converts to Rome in America*⁶⁰ say that she was the founder of the convent.

By October of 1853 the convent, at Seventh and Timea streets, was all but complete. According to Father Villars, "it towers magnificently from atop the hill! Without a doubt, it is one of the biggest and most beautiful houses in Keokuk! The view is

superb. Missouri, Illinois, the Mississippi, the city of Keokuk...all seem to lie prostrate before it." He also told the Bishop (in French), "Others do not cease to speak ill of Mr. and Mrs. McCune. For my part, I can only praise their piety, their kindness, their generosity. God reward them! They regularly join me, with their children, to obtain our blessing from God. Without their help, I simply could not have undertaken and accomplished so much." The cost of the convent was \$7,600, of which amount John McCune had advanced \$3,400 without the security of a mortgage.⁶¹

John and Mary's love of Father Villars is demonstrated in the middle name of their daughter, Margaret Villars McCune, who was born on April 11 and baptized on May 5, 1853 at St. John Church, (Mary's maiden name is recorded as O'Dill.)

Mrs. Mary C. McCune died on March 3, 1855, aged 38 years, 5 months, and 17 days. She had received the Sacraments and died surrounded by her husband, children, and numerous friends at the home in Keokuk.⁶² It was said that her last thoughts and cares were of the Visitation convent, where she hoped her five little girls would find another home and a solid Christian education. Indeed, the 1856 Iowa census found all five girls living at the convent. Three of them, Mary Ann, Kate, and Addie, though living at home, were still among the 43 students at the Visitation Academy in 1862.⁶³

By 1865 the Visitation Sisters in Keokuk decided they must seek a home elsewhere. Parents had withdrawn their children from the school; the death of Bishop Loras had left the diocese without a shepherd; and the scarcity of priests deprived the Sisters of the services of a regular chaplain, and consequently the consolations of religion.⁶⁴ Great trials also came in the form of a man who settled in Keokuk and started a newspaper there. "At the time the Visitation Academy was the only private school in the town and he sent his daughter there. When she declared she was going to become a Catholic he was angry. However, his daughter had a mind of her own and she not only joined the Church, but later the community. When she was nineteen years old she became a postulant... A few years

later came a cholera epidemic and the daughter died. In his newspaper the father hinted that the sisters had neglected his daughter and implied that they had left her to die without care. He hammered on this theme in editorial after editorial so that many alarmed families took their children from the school. This caused a financial crisis..." In addition, the people of the parish wanted a parish school, which was not in keeping with the charism of the Visitation Sisters.⁶⁵

One group of the Visitation Sisters moved to Maysville, Kentucky in June, 1865 (and later moved on to Rock Island, Illinois). The remaining group moved to Suspension Bridge New York later that year (and later moved on; their present home is in Tyringham, Mass.). They were replaced in Keokuk by Sisters of Charity.

St. John Church Property

Full title to the church and graveyard in Keokuk had never been secured. Some time between 1852 and 1856 the church was razed or moved from lots 5 and 6 onto lot 3 and partly on lot 4. John McCune purchased lots 4, 5, and 6 in the 1850s. He paid \$1,400 about 1852 for lots 5 and 6 and \$600 or \$650 for lot 4 in 1855. Father Villars wrote to the Bishop in March, 1856 that McCune would sell the lots to the diocese for his cost plus interest, amounting to \$2,470, whereas he could sell them on the market for \$5,000 or more. And, he said, "the time is now or never: you have the opportunity to protect the bones of the dead resting there. ...Mr. McCune is getting old, his health is declining. He won't live very long. His heirs will ask for \$10,000 or \$15,000 in two or three years."⁶⁶ The Church apparently never did have clear title to the property.

John McCune's offer to sell the lots to the bishop was not taken up immediately and after returning from a trip to Cincinnati he seemed "ill-disposed" to sell the lots under the conditions he had set earlier.⁶⁷

At this same time, 1856, Bishop Loras sent Father W. Emonds to Keokuk with money to buy land and start to build a new church for the German Catholics. Emonds wrote to the Bishop (though later it was said that he had been deceived) that the lots

at Second and Blondeau were on ungraded streets, down river from the town, while the town was growing upriver; and the lots would be 30 to 40 feet above the street when graded. He mentions McCune's "beautiful stone house" that would be 46 feet above its street when graded in the near future.⁶⁸ The grading did not take the streets anywhere nearly as deep as Emonds had been led to believe.

St. Peter's Church for the German Catholics was opened on the Feast of the Assumption, 1856,⁶⁹ but in 1861 St. John's was razed and St. Peter's entirely replaced it. Martin and Bridget's daughter Miss Mary Stafford was the organist at St. John's and at St. Peter's and later at St. Francis de Sales Church (founded 1870). She expended great efforts "in keeping up the choirs in these different churches, only and solely to aid in the solemnity of the divine services."⁷⁰

The cemetery, the lots that had been owned by John McCune, "was dug up by the city in April of 1857, and the remains not claimed were piled up in back of the Church."⁷¹

Patrick A. Largey

John McCune's trip to Cincinnati in 1856 may have been connected with a steamboat business, as mentioned in a biographical sketch of Patrick A. Largey. Largey was born near Somerset, Ohio in 1836, to immigrant parents who like the McCunes were from County Armagh. He graduated from St. Joseph's College near Somerset in the mid-1850s. His life during the next few years changed often. "After leaving college, he taught school for a time, then went to Cincinnati and became bookkeeper for a commercial house. A year later, he was employed by John McCune, who owned steamboats on the Ohio river. Through this employment and what it led to, he ultimately reached Keokuk, Iowa, where he worked in a dry-goods store two years, when the firm failed and he returned to his home town, in Ohio. Here he again took up the profession of teaching, and during the vacations, between terms, worked as a farm hand." John McCune had introduced Largey to the West, and in 1861 he and his two single sisters moved to Des Moines, Iowa.



Patrick A. Largey (1836-1898)

In 1862 he moved to Omaha and began a career of several years duration, working for Edward Creighton (son of the James Creighton whom the McCunes had known in Ohio), freighting and building telegraph lines.⁷² He ended up a wealthy banker in Butte, Montana. Largey was a liberal contributor to the construction of Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Butte and to other causes.

Later Years

On April 10, 1858, John McCune married again, his third wife being Mary Anne Brady. They would have only one daughter, Grace McCune. John had several business interests and had become wealthy. In 1859 he was partner with Martin Stafford in a wholesale liquor business at 62 Levee; was a partner in a timber concern with H. W. Sample and B. Bartlett at the corner of Timea and Sixth; and with the same partners he dealt in dry goods and clothing on the northeast corner of Main and Second, the property he owned.⁷³ (This perhaps was the dry goods business for which Patrick Largey worked, which failed about 1859.) In 1856 Hugh W. Sample had completed the Logansport, Peoria

& Warsaw Railroad between Hamilton and Carthage, Illinois. In 1859 Colonel Hornish, Guy Wells, and John McCune undertook to extend that line from Carthage south to Clayton, Ill., to provide an eastern connection for Keokuk. Because of the war, this line was not completed until 1863.⁷⁴

During the Civil War John was a civilian captain of a steamboat carrying supplies for the federal government. He was captured by the Confederates and spent several months in prison, being in the jail in Monticello, Arkansas in the spring of 1864.⁷⁵ Following the war John continued working as a contractor and his wife ran a boarding house in their home.

In 1870 a separate congregation, apparently English-speaking, was formed in Keokuk. John McCune was credited with securing the former Presbyterian church that became St. Francis de Sales Catholic Church. He was, according to his obituary, one of the pillars of this congregation.

John McCune died on August 2, 1871, aged 63 years and 6 months, and was buried in what now



Mary Ann (McCune) Bartlett (1847-1913)
(Courtesy of Dan H. Bartlett)

is called the Old Catholic Cemetery in Keokuk. His obituary noted, "Mr. McCune was throughout life an exemplary member of the Catholic Church. He was an honest man and a sincere Christian."

His survivors were his wife Mary Anne and daughters Rosa, Mary Ann, and Grace. Rosa married the widower Morris Sellers and had three children. Sellers was a railroad engineer and railroad equipment inventor and manufacturer; they soon moved to Chicago, where Rosa died in 1899. Her step-daughter Lulu Sellers married Patrick A. Largey of Butte, mentioned above.

The second surviving daughter, Mary Ann McCune, in 1870 married N. Gray Bartlett; they lived in Chicago and had four children, of whom Allyn and John survived her. She was famous as an early female photographer. She died in 1913.⁷⁶ Her son John Bartlett graduated from the University of Michigan and became a mining engineer in Butte, Montana; he had four children.

Grace McCune, John's youngest daughter, married George Butler and lived with him in Montana for a time, where their daughter Rosemary was born. Grace and Rosemary later lived with the Bartletts and then the Sellers in Chicago, then in Los Angeles, and finally in Salt Lake City where Grace died in 1938. (The Butlers are buried in Butte.)

Bridget McCune Stafford died on May 8, 1881, at the age of 63. Her funeral was from St. Francis de Sales Church. Martin continued in the liquor business until a prohibition law was passed in 1884. He went to his eternal recompense on October 13, 1886, at the age of 85 years. He was noted to have been a man of great business integrity and honesty, and very successful in business.

Margaret and Mary were the only two of the nine Stafford children who survived their father. Margaret married William D. Steele and lived in the old house on Blondeau Street. After her demise, her daughter Elizabeth (a secretary for the Iowa State Insurance Co.) and her sons William J. Steel (shoe clerk) and Charles (meat packer) and lastly William's widow lived there until the 1950s.⁷⁷

There appear to be no representatives of the McCune or Stafford families in Keokuk today and

their story has been almost forgotten there. Some knowledge exists among McCune's descendants in California, Illinois, and Connecticut, but no photograph of him can be found. We have been able to demonstrate here his devotion to the Catholic Church, his prominence among the Irish immigrant contractors in Ohio, and, we hope, his love of his family. Beyond that, as for all of us, his story is known to his Maker, the only One whose knowledge truly matters.

SPECIAL THANKS

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NOTES

- 55) *The Catholic Church in the United States of America*; New York: Catholic Editing Company, 1914; Vol 2, pp 508-509
- 56) Otting, pp 560-561
- 57) Otting, p 881
- 58) Hayes, Jean K., *The Merging Years: A History of St. Peter Parish, 1832-1982*, 1982, p 41
- 59) Letter from Mother Marie Mectilde Pernaud to Bishop Loras, Aug. 19, 1853. Otting, Rev. Loras C., *Letters to a Pioneer Bishop*, pp 895-896
- 60) Scannell-O'Neill, D. J., *Distinguished Converts to Rome in America*; St. Louis: B. Herder, 1907, p. 101
- 61) Otting, pp 872-873, 882
- 62) Tombstone in Old Catholic Cemetery, Keokuk; *The Catholic Telegraph*, March 24, 1855
- 63) Hayes, p 46
- 64) *The Catholic Church in the United States of America*; New York: Catholic Editing Company, 1914; Vol 2, pp 508-509
- 65) Burton, Katherine, *Bells on Two Rivers*; Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Co., 1965, p 16
- 66) Otting, 219 and 885
- 67) Otting 890
- 68) Otting, p 219, note 13

- 69) Otting, p 221
 70) *The History of Lee County, Iowa*, p. 637.
 Hayes, pp 30-31
 71) Hayes, p 31
 72) Sanders, Helen Fitzgerald, *A History of Montana*; Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1913, pp 972-974
 73) 1859 Keokuk directory
 74) *History of Lee County, Iowa* p 511
 75) *Keokuk Daily City Gate*, Aug. 3, 1871. *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records...* Washington: Government Printing Office, 1899; Series II Vol. VII p. 414,

- letter from Maj. Gen. Frederick Steele seeking his release
 76) See *The Story of Lee County, Iowa*, eds Nelson Commins Roberts and Samuel W. Moorhead; Chicago: S. J. Clarke, 1914; Vol 1, pp 286-287. Census of 1880, Chicago, ED 19, p. 8D; 161 25th street. Census of 1900.
 77) *Portrait and Biographical Album of Lee County, Iowa*; Chicago: Chapman Brothers, 1887; p. 565. Garrison, Raymond E., *Tales of Early Keokuk Homes*; Hamilton [Ill.]: Hamilton Press, 1959; p 6.

Abstracts from the *Catholic Telegraph*

(Continued, from Vol. XXXVI, No. 1)

December 4, 1858

(For the Catholic Telegraph.)

SOMERSET, November 24th.

Messrs. Editors:

DEAR SIRs: Permit me...to refer briefly...to an exhibition which I...had the pleasure of witnessing at St. Mary's Academy, on the evening of the 22d, being the festival of St. Cecilia. The exercises, consisting of plays, music, tableaux, etc., were highly creditable, and elicited unrestrained applause. ...The young ladies who participated among whom I am constrained to mention, were: the Misses Magevney, Miss Lizzie Tiner, Miss E. Bates, etc., displayed a refinement and skill which reflects great credit upon the institution, their solicitous tutors, and themselves. ...The last scene was grand beyond conception. It consisted of a beautiful tableau, in which Miss Mary Magevney, personating St. Cecilia, read, in a "firm, sweet tone," the closing address, in which elegance and grace were predominant.

The location of St. Mary's Academy is most beautiful. It is situated on an eminence commanding a most delightful view of the very pleasant little village of Somerset, and also a vast and romantic rural scenery. In fact, everything surrounding tends to augment and vivify the happiness of those amiable young ladies, who have assembled within those hallowed walls, from different parts of the Union, to sip from choice fountains of literature. The discipline

of the institution is mild and parental. The rules are enforced with rigor, but not with that severity which always extorts from the gentle youth involuntary imprecations.

The school, so far as I could learn from appearances, is in a flourishing condition, and is conducted by the good Sisters of the Dominican Order, under the supervision of the most excellent Mother Columbia, whose amiability, humility, and superior talents do honor to the institution over which she presides with so much dignity, and to the order of which she is a most distinguished member.

Wishing all success to St. Mary's Academy, and hoping that its succeeding exhibitions may be crowned with similar success, I remain,

Your most obedient servant,

"Adolecens."

December 18, 1858

Episcopal Visitation.

There were thirty-five persons confirmed in St. Francis de Sales' Church, Newark, last Sunday week; fifteen at St. Mary's, Mattingly's settlement; nine at St. Matthew's, Dresden; eleven at St. Nicholas'; and nineteen at St. Ann's; in all eighty-nine. Kilbuck and Jersey settlement were not visited as there were none in those places prepared for Confirmation. Rev. Mr. Toebbe, of St. Philomena's Church, Cincinnati, assisted the Pastor, Rev. Mr.

Bender, in those missions, in preaching, instructing in the Catechism and hearing Confessions. The house used for a Church in Coshocton being too small for the expected audience, the Archbishop preached in the Court-house. There are from 300 to 350 Catholic families in Coshocton. It is evident that one Priest has too much to do in attending to so many stations, as well as Newark and Dresden. "Pray ye the Lord of the harvest to send laborers into His Vineyard." And may all who read these lines reflect on the work that missionary Priests have to do, acknowledge their duty to lighten their toil by helping to educate Priests and provide more efficiently for the instruction, consolation and salvation of so many scattered Catholic families now deprived of the Sunday Mass.

December 25, 1858

Episcopal Visitations.

MILTONSBURGH, Dec. 18, 1858

There were twenty-nine persons confirmed at St. Mary's, Belmont co., on Sunday, 12th Dec. After the Mass, sung by Rev. Aug. Toebbe, Mrs. Jane Mott, who had been baptized in early youth, her parents being then as now of no particular religion, and her husband belonging to none, returned to the Catholic Church, from which she had lapsed into Methodism, and after a few remarks by the Archbishop, read aloud the Profession of Faith of Pope Pius IV. and received absolution of the excommunication for heresy. A severe illness was the occasion made instrumental by the grace of God in recalling this lady to the truth.

The improvements here since our last visit, are a beautiful new altar, an organ and a very convenient and substantial pastoral residence, stable, spring-house, etc., erected by Rev. Mr. Jacquet, Pastor, with the aid of his attached flock. The aged Mr. Edmund Gallagher, now in his 67th year, is still among the first even at a six o'clock Mass, and the unpretending and edifying model of his patriarchal family and neighbors.

Monday 13th, a heavy rain from dawn to noon, and very bad roads prevented not St. John's Church, near Miltonsburgh, from being crowded. After Mass

and sermon by Rev. Mr. Toebbe, twenty-one young persons, prepared by the zealous pastor, Rev. J. W. Brummer, received Confirmation.

St. Joseph's [Malaga], six miles from St. John's, was visited on the 14th.

At St. Joseph's, Wils creek, Monroe county, three were twenty-one confirmed on Tuesday, 14th Dec. And forty-four on the following day at the Church of the Immaculate Conception [Fulda]

(To be continued)

**St. Mary Parish, Lancaster
Baptismal Register, 1834-1843**

(Continued, from Vol. XXXVI, No. 2)

1839, continued

- 14 April, Thomas, son of Michael Miers & Margaret Fricker; spon. Barbara Nuninger? N. D. Young
 - 2 June, 1839, David Ignatius, born May 28 last, of lawful marriage of Richard James Lilly and Margaret Agnes Hughes; spon. Louis Augustine Blair and Theresa LittleJohn. Stph. Theod. Badin, ProtoSacerd. Baltim.
 - 2 June, 1839, Charles Mathias, born 10 May last, [page 30], of the lawful marriage of William Bedenheimer & Mary Pough; spon. Richard John Lilly and Martha MacManamy. Steph. Theod. Badin, Protosac. Baltim.
 - 13 Oct., Susan, daughter of A— Shur and Anna Shur?; spon. Catherine Shitbetzey & Joseph Shetezy.
 - [no date] Andrew Piper?, son of Andrew and Mary Ann Piper; spon. Valentine Winegardner and Mary Waltz. [N. D. Young]
 - [no date] Marianna, daughter of [blank, but Anthony written above the entry, which is the correct name] Groff and Mary Conglo [Kunkler]; spon. Martin Bish & Elizabeth Odoner? [N. D. Young]
- page 31
Same, Maria Magdalena, daughter of Wolfgang Wenninger and Magdalena Binder, spouses; spon. Christian Flamm & Mary Binder. N. D.

Young
 Same, Juliana daughter of John Rice & Mary
 Woor; spon. William White & Bridget Martin.
 Same, Catherine Alla daughter of John Rice &
 Mary Diver; spon. Morris Wallace & Maria
 Tyder. N. D. Young.
 Nov. 3, Catherine, born Oct. 16, of Thomas W.
 Fleheven & Rosanna his wife; spon. John
 Sullivan and Frances O'Neil. J. M. Young
 page 32 1839
 Nov. 10, Sara Teresa daughter of George and
 Rosanna Hook, spouses; spon. Matthew
 Myers and Mary Utz.
 Same, Susan daughter of Matthew Meiner? and
 Euphrosina his wife; spon. Joseph Shetzley
 and Barbara Meringer.
 Same, Josephina Maria of Valentine and Maria
 Josephina Winegartner, spouses; spon. Joseph
 Wisan and Maria Peffer. J. M. Young
 Dec. 5, Louis son born Dec. 1, of Francis &
 Magdalena Stake; spon. Mathias Myers and
 Elizabeth Strickfeder. J. M. Young
 page 33 1839
 December 22, Ann Catherine daughter of Martin
 and Catherine Schop; spon. Martin Bish and
 Magdalen Deman.
 Same day, Eliza, daughter of James and Sabina
 Shannon; spon. Jos. Walt and Cath. Martin.
 25 December, Frederick son of Daniel and
 Barbara Schanse; spon. Frederick Nort and
 Eleanor Nort. Joshua M. Young
 Finis Anni 1839

 page 34 **Anno 1840**
 Jan. 6, Elizabeth little daughter of John & Justina
 Reinhard; spon. Francis Stake and Elizabeth
 Wilt. Josue M. Young
 Jan. 19, John, little son of Michael and Margaret
 Casey, spouses; spon. Thos. Bolan and Sara
 McElvee. J. M. Y.
 Feb. 7 at Tarlton, Bernard, son of Matthew Lyons
 and Anna his wife; spon. Michael Nolan and
 Margaret Manion. J. M. Young
 Feb. 23, Mary, little daughter of Timothy Howard
 and Margaret McCarty, spouses; spon.

Maurice Wallis and Catherine Morony. J. M.
 Young
 page 35
 27 Feb., Sara, about five years old, daughter of
 Charles Borland and Cynthia his wife formerly
 Hart; spon. Maria Ewing.
 Same, Samuel Henry about seven years old, son
 of Lumen Baker and Sara his wife; spon.
 Hugh Boyle Ewing.
 Same, Cynthia, about five years old, daughter of
 the same spouses; spon. Mary Redmond.
 Same day, Charles, lawful son of Isaiah Hart and
 Susan Reber; spon. Michael Garaghty and
 Mary Garaghty. J. M. Young
 March 22 Margaret, little daughter of Conrad
 Winter and Agatha Sailer?, spouses; spon.
 Joseph Phillips and Eliz. Winter. J. M. Young
 page 36
 March 22, 1840, Mary Alice, four week old
 lawful daughter of James Sanders and Frances
 Hicker [or Flicker?]; spon. Mary Lilly. J. M.
 Young
 March 31, Helen Maria daughter of John and
 Mehala Frances Kimball; spon. Maria Ewing.
 Jos. M. Young
 Same day, Elenor Elizabeth, five month old
 daughter of the lawful marriage of Louis J.
 Möller and Elenor Dittoe; spon. Elizabeth
 Dittoe. J. M. Young
 April 1 at Logan, Hocking County, James, son of
 the lawful marriage of Bernard Brady and Anna
 McCall; spon. Patrick Hanifen and Catherine
 Kennydy. J. M. Y.
 page 37
 Same day and place, Mary little daughter of John
 McCarty and Helen Conly, spouses; spon.
 James Kennedy and Anna Brady.

(To be continued)

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