

Lucy Burns: Brooklyn-Born Irish American Firebrand and Suffragist

BY GEOFF COBB



Every good journalist knows that scandal sells copies, and the November 18, 1909, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* ran a salacious story guaranteed to shock its readers. The headline proclaimed:

**MISS BURNS A MILITANT WOMAN'S SUFFRAGETTE
FORMER BROOKLYN HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER
SLAPPED LONDON BOBBY'S FACE;**

SENT TO JAIL IN SCOTLAND;

**IN DUNDEE SHE THREW INK BOTTLES THROUGH
STATION HOUSE WINDOW.**

The article also stated, "All of this has distressed her friends and relatives who have been unable to account for her prominence in the militant suffragist agitation." It was not just Burns' arrest that would have shocked Brooklyn readers, but also because Burns defied the stereotypes of the militant suffragist. She was genteel and very attractive with distinctive flame-red hair. Most importantly, she was also highly educated member of Brooklyn's social elite.

Lucy Burns was born in 1879 into a prominent well-to-do Irish Catholic family who

owned a large brownstone on posh President Street. One of eight children, she grew up with many strong family role models. Her father, Edward, was the vice president of the American Exchange Bank in Manhattan and served as a member of several prestigious Brooklyn organizations. He was also known as a public supporter of women's suffrage. Her mother, Anna (Anna Early Burns), was also an active leader in Brooklyn civic organizations, holding executive positions in Brooklyn charities and benevolent groups such as Brooklyn's Catholic Women's Association. Anna Burns was so civic-minded that she took up causes she considered socially important, even if they took time away from her considerable domestic obligations. Lucy's parents and her well educated sisters, several of whom supported and campaigned for women's suffrage, influenced Burns to place community, state, country, and society before personal concerns—a value characteristic of many other Brooklyn progressives of her day. Unusual for their era, Lucy's parents fervently believed in the importance of supporting the literacy and intellectual development of their daughters, educating them to be intelligent and cultured Brooklynites who were the intellectual equal of men.

THE PLACE AND THE TIME

Burns came of age in Brooklyn, and she did so at a time when many prominent women there were beginning to question the traditionally subservient roles of females. Lucy, like her four sisters, was educated at prestigious Packer Collegiate, a female academy where many of its graduates excelled academically, breaking numerous gender barriers. Packer, and the Brooklyn Heights neighborhood where the school was located, would have a profound effect, shaping Lucy's character and values.

Packer Collegiate was first established as the Brooklyn Female Academy at its present location on Joralemon Street in 1845, just

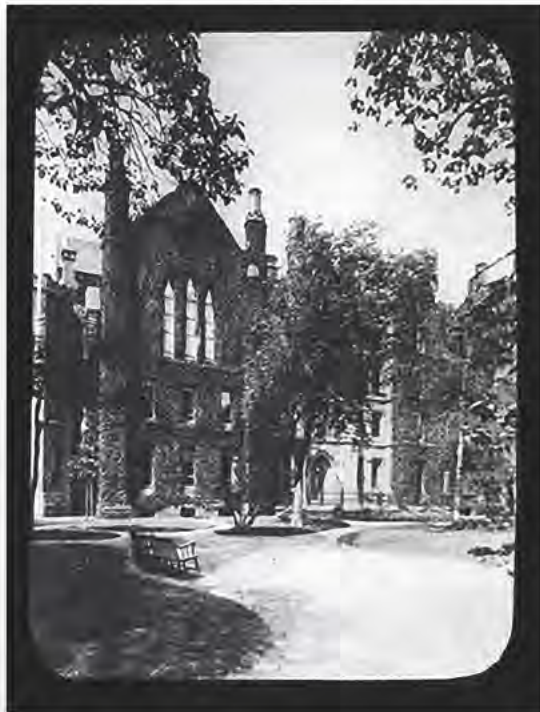
Photo:

Lucy Burns grew up in a large Irish-American family in Brooklyn during the 1880s and 1890s. Her involvement in efforts focused on women's suffrage was probably influenced by the attitudes and activities of parents and sisters. Her years attending Brooklyn's Packer Collegiate Institute also had formative influence on her. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

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twelve years after the incorporation of the City of Brooklyn. The school was in Brooklyn's richest and most exclusive neighborhood, Brooklyn Heights, the home to many of Brooklyn's progressives. Packer was one of the first schools in the United States that provided women with a first-rate education, opening with 23 educators and 350 students who came from nineteen states. It was renamed Packer Collegiate in honor of a benefactor who rebuilt the school after a fire destroyed the original school. Housed in a majestic gothic revival

Photo: Buildings and gardens of the Packer Collegiate Institute around 1900. The school was founded in 1845 in Brooklyn Heights as an academy for young women. In 1890 Lucy Burns was enrolled in Packer where she proved a gifted student. After graduation she moved on to Vassar College and graduate studies before beginning a short period as a high-school teacher. Courtesy of Packer Collegiate Institute.



building, Packer Collegiate Institute was coeducational through the fourth grade and for girls only from the fifth through twelfth grades.

Brooklyn Heights and Packer have had a long history of opposing oppressive laws and advocating political reforms. Many of the early parents of students in each place were abolitionists. During the Civil War, Packer girls knitted socks for Union soldiers and raised money for the war effort. Some parents worshipped nearby at the famous Plymouth Church where many of the congregants were actively involved in the Underground Railroad. Abraham Lincoln came to the

Church to hear its famous abolitionist pastor, Henry Ward Beecher, preach against slavery.

Religious studies were an integral part of the school's curriculum. Young students took courses on the Bible, while older students controversially explored the philosophy of natural theology, which emphasized reason and evidence-based arguments to prove God's existence. Most importantly, Packer prided itself on "teaching girls to be ladies," emphasizing religious education, but also stressing more progressive beliefs such as educating "the mind to habits of thinking with clearness and force." While Packer's curriculum may have been progressive for its time, it was not radical. The pedagogy did not challenge the idea that even an upper-class woman's place was ultimately in the home.

Lucy first enrolled in Packer in 1890 and quickly proved herself to be a first-rate student. She was also an active member of her class, holding leadership positions in important school clubs, such as *Pi Delta Kappa*, while acting in school theater productions. A reporter who knew Burns as a teenager recalled her years later as a boisterous and lively child who generated humor and attention. The writer stated that Burns was "thoroughly jolly," a "mischievous youngster, up to all sorts of pranks." In later years a fellow suffragist recalled Lucy as:

...a woman of twofold ability. She speaks and writes with equal eloquence and elegance.... Mentally and emotionally, she is quick and warm.... She has intellectuality of a high order; but she overruns with a winning Irishness which supplements that intellectuality with grace and charm; a social mobility of extreme sensitiveness and swiftness. (qtd. in Marino 5)

Packer's motto is "Think Deeply; Speak Confidently; Act with Purpose and Heart." Burns and several of her contemporaries at Packer lived lives that reflected these words. One of them, ahead of Burns at Packer, was Mary Ovington White who would become a nationally recognized progressive. Ovington, whose parents were Brooklyn Heights abolitionists, later penned a ground-breaking sociological study of African Americans and became



a co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. While at Packer, Burns modeled herself on an older student who thought deeply, Anna Wiley, who became one of the first women to receive a doctorate from Yale University. A few years behind Burns was the renowned painter Emma Eilers, who co-founded the Women's Art Club of New York, which later became the National Association of Women Artists (NAWA). Burns was a classmate of Elisabeth Antoinette Irwin, the progressive educator and founder of the celebrated Little Red School House in Greenwich Village. Irwin, who became a member of the feminist intellectual club, Heterodoxy, received her bachelor's degree from Smith College in 1903, and her master's from Columbia University in 1923. Quite shocking for the time, Irwin was a declared lesbian, living with her life partner Katharine Anthony and the two children they adopted.

REVOLUTION ON BROOKLYN STREETS

While Burns was at Packer, there was a quiet revolution that was taking place on the streets of Brooklyn, led by one of the school's parents. According to *The New York Times*, Doctor Fanny Oakley became the first woman to ride a bicycle in New York City. She was the leader of the very popular tricycle club in Brooklyn Heights, but when Oakley dared to abandon her tricycle for a bicycle, many women joined her including her own daughter, Frances Oakley who was a year ahead of Burns at Packer. Together, they would ride defiantly through Brooklyn streets, ignoring the insults

being hurled from the sidewalks by more conservative Brooklynites who thought they were abandoning their "ladyhood" to participate in a sport which promoted "devilish" tendencies. (Knowing Lucy's temperament, it would not be surprising if she joined the Oakley's on their rides through Brooklyn Heights.)

The Oakley's were not the only Heights residents challenging gender roles and demanding equality during the years Lucy Burns was growing up nearby. Anna C. Field (1822–1912) became Brooklyn's original suffrage pioneer. In her home on nearby Hicks Street, she held the inaugural meeting of The Brooklyn Equal Rights Association in the fall of 1868. The Organization's stated goal was "the promotion of the educational, industrial, legal and political equality of women, and especially the right of suffrage." This was Brooklyn's first suffrage association, and one of the first women's groups in the nation. Field later teamed with Brooklynite Celia Burleigh, a trailblazing female journalist who, along with twelve other women, formed America's first female association of journalists. Later she and Field founded Brooklyn Women's Club at 196 Pierrepont Street, just around the corner from Packer Collegiate. Burleigh later became first President of Brooklyn Women's Suffrage Organization.

Another leading woman holding meetings on Pierrepont Street was the "Brooklyn Portia," Cornelia K. Hood (1868–1917). Hood graduated from NYU Law School in 1893, part of the first class of women in American to do so. Hood believed that:

...the laws of the land do not protect the natural rights of women sufficiently; nor do they seek to place her on a mental or moral equivalent with man. Women must bring about this elevation, which they sorely need. To do this, they must organize, and the legal advisors among themselves are indispensable. (qtd. in "Brownstones and ballot boxes")

In 1894, Hood became president of the Kings County Political Equality League, which also held its meetings nearby on Pierrepont Street. Probably no other neighborhood in the United

Illustration:

During Lucy Burns's years at Packer, Dr. Fanny Oakley set a social precedent by becoming in 1897 (according to news reports) the first woman to ride a bicycle in public on the streets of New York. Courtesy of New York Times.

States could rival Brooklyn Heights for its advocacy for women's rights, and a perceptive young Burns must have absorbed the progressive spirit of the area.

EDUCATION AFTER PACKER

After graduating from Packer, Burns chose to attend one of the elite seven sisters women's colleges, Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York. Perhaps she went to Vassar in the footsteps of another Packer graduate, Ida Thallon Hill who had been a brilliant student of classical languages. Hill had a strong interest in the relationship between classical history, geography, and archaeology. She studied at The American School of Classical Studies in Athens before returning to Vassar where she received her M.A and began to teach classics. Like Hill, Lucy excelled at languages and received her degree in 1902. Following her graduation from Vassar, Burns went on to graduate studies at Yale University, where she took courses in etymology. She then returned to Brooklyn where she began to teach at the Borough's preeminent public high school, Erasmus Hall, where she taught English from 1904

to 1906. Although Burns was a popular teacher, she felt unfulfilled in the classroom and yearned to return to academia. She decided to go to Germany to study languages at the prestigious University of Berlin from 1906–1908 and at the University of Bonn from 1908–1909.

While attending graduate school in Germany, Burns traveled to England where she

met suffragists Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Christabel and Sylvia. A charismatic militant suffragist, Pankhurst argued famously that deeds were more important than words in winning the vote. Pankhurst used incendiary tactics such as smashing windows, heckling politicians, and committing arson. Pankhurst is credited with creating the movement that helped British women achieve the right to vote. In 1999, *Time* magazine named her as one of the hundred most important women of the twentieth century stating that "she shaped an idea of objects for our time" and "shook society into a new pattern from which there could be no going back."

Burns enrolled at Oxford to study literature, but she

was so enthralled by Pankhurst and her movement that she set aside her academic plans, becoming an enthusiastic suffragist and employing Pankhurst's militant tactics with great enthusiasm. Burns decided to work in the Women's Social and Political Union, an organization dedicated to fighting for women's rights. She started selling their newsletter, "Votes for Women," and took part in many controversial demonstrations. One

of her first major contributions was organizing a parade in Edinburgh as part of the Scottish suffrage campaign in 1909. That same year Burns was forcibly removed from a political banquet at the Guildhall for waving a banner in Winston Churchill's face and asking, "How can you dine here while women are starving in prison?" (qtd. in Atkinson 151.)

Photo:

Lucy Burns with Emmeline Pankhurst in a photograph taken in 1913. Burns is identified as a representative of the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage. This American organization was founded by Burns and Alice Paul to campaign for a constitutional amendment guaranteeing women the right to vote. It was inspired by the British suffragette movement led by Pankhurst. Courtesy of Library of Congress.





Photo:
Alice Paul in academic robes in a 1913 photograph. She and Lucy Burns met in London while participating in the British suffragette movement. Paul was five years younger than Burns but the two women formed a long-term friendship and partnership in the general effort on behalf of voting rights for women. Returning to America in 1912 Paul headed the Washington chapter of the National American Woman Suffrage Association and led notable demonstrations there. She later helped to form the National Woman's Party. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

She was arrested and incarcerated repeatedly in the United Kingdom, actions which Burns claimed as honors. She later worked for the Women's Social and Political Union as a salaried organizer from 1910 to 1912, becoming the party's organizer in Scotland. In London, someone dropped a large dictionary from a high window on Burns' head while she was campaigning, almost knocking her out—but this only increased her ardor to fight for women's suffrage.

MEETING HER GREAT PARTNER

It was in a London police precinct during one of Burns' many arrests when she met her great partner in the suffrage movement, fellow American Alice Paul, who introduced herself after noticing Burns' American flag pin on her lapel. They began to chat, and their mutual passion and defiant bravery in protests quickly created a strong bond between the two women. Historian Eleanor Clift notes that Burns and Paul "were opposites in appearance and temperament... whereas Paul appeared fragile, Burns was tall and curvaceous, the picture of vigorous health.... [And] unlike Paul, who was recalcitrant and

difficult to work with, Burns was more flexible and able to find common ground with people." (Clift 97). Clift depicts Paul as the militant and Burns as the diplomat. But despite their differing personalities, Paul and Burns worked together so effectively that other activists described them as having "one mind and spirit." Paul, however, disputed this claim and described Burns as "always more valiant than I was, about a thousand times more valiant by nature." (Atkinson 153).

Paul was forced to leave England in 1910 due to illness following a thirty-day imprisonment while Burns stayed on. Despite their separation, the two women kept in touch. In 1912, Burns returned home and reunited with Paul. They both joined the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Unlike the association's more conservative leadership, Paul and Burns believed that a militant approach to campaigning was a necessary jump-start for the movement. The association leadership appointed Burns and Paul as the leaders of the NAWSA's moribund congressional committee in Washington which had had little success in convincing the federal government to pass

Photo:
 Lucy Burns addressing
 a crowd around 1915.
 Alice Paul described
 her as "always more
 valiant than I was,
 about a thousand
 times more valiant
 by nature." Labeled
 by newspapers as
 Washington's "first
 militant suffragette,"
 Burns credited her
 militancy with what
 she learned and
 practiced during her
 participation in the
 British movement
 led by Emmeline
 Pankhurst. Courtesy of
 Library of Congress.



national suffrage legislation. Starting in November 1912 Burns and Paul, with little financial support from NAWSA, sought to energize the suffrage movement in the nation's capital. Short on money, Paul and Burns had to live in unheated rooms, but the women were so committed and engrossed in their work that they often forgot to eat meals and frequently could not remember when they had last eaten.

By 1913, the women had reinvigorated the movement in America by employing Pankhurst's tactics. In November, newspapers labeled Burns "the Capital's first militant suffragette" after she was charged with controversially chalking the White House sidewalks with "Votes for Women." The arrest earned Burns an interview in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, which in a June 21st piece patronizingly described her as a "highly intellectual appearing girl with a quiet, refined manner, which completely hides the indomitable will and undying determination of the extremist." The paper quoted Burns as saying "I have always been a suffragist at heart, but it was not until I went to England that I became interested in militancy." The *Eagle* article explained that Burns found that the British leaders of the

movement were women of exceptional refinement and education. And it quoted her as stating, "I was very much impressed by their moral ardor, optimism and buoyancy of spirit. Militancy springs from the realization by the women that there is absolutely no hope of attaining the franchise by peaceful means."

That same year, Burns helped to organize the first-ever national suffrage school in Washington. The school trained activists and arranged large suffrage parades and processions in the nation's capital including, prior to Woodrow Wilson's inauguration, a controversial suffrage march demanding recognition of their demands. The march featured a fellow Brooklynite and Vassar alumna, Inez Milholland, a strikingly beautiful lawyer who led the parade on a white horse down Pennsylvania Avenue. She later made a famous speech asking, "Mr. President, how long must women wait?"

TACTICS CRITICIZED BUT CONTINUED

The conservative leadership of the NAWSA was becoming increasingly more uncomfortable with the high-profile militant tactics of Paul and Burns. Paul and Burns also refused to endorse

the NAWSA's "anti-party" political strategy and aggressively lobbied for, and against, political candidates and parties that did not support their cause. Burns was particularly infuriated with President Wilson because he had promised to announce his support for suffrage, but never mentioned it in his Congressional Address. When a delegation of women from NAWSA attempted to meet with him to express their discontent, Wilson ducked the meeting by claiming to be ill. A few days later, Wilson reneged on his promised support for suffrage, saying he would not impose his private views on Congress.

Increasingly at odds with the passive NASWA leadership, Paul and Burns broke for good with the organization and formally launched the National Women's Party in Chicago in June, 1916. Burns and Paul were committed to direct action in fighting for women's rights and particularly their right to vote. In January, 1917, dozens of NWP women stood outside 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, protesting as "Silent Sentinels." The pickets continued six days a week, and their protest soon caught the attention of the national press. Jennifer Krafchik, executive director of the Belmont-Paul Women's Equality National Monument, the party's former headquarters that now serves as its museum, stated:

What was militant about the NWP was that no group had ever picketed the White House before. They used Wilson's words against him in their banners. Nobody had ever seen this before especially in a group of women. They were much more aggressive than any other suffragette group. (qtd. in McArdle)

Each day, the picketers faced harassment and violence from men on the street, but they received no police protection. Their banners were torn to shreds, and in one instance the women were attacked and a hundred pickets were injured.

For the first three months, Burns and the other picketing suffragists were tolerated, but upon America's entry into World War I, attitudes changed as people increasingly saw the suffragists' actions and banners as controversial distractions from the war effort. Rather than backing down in the face of opposition, suffragists raised even more



contentious banners. At one point, Burns held a banner stating "We, the women of America, tell you that America is not a democracy." Soon after, Burns carried an even more shocking banner calling the president "Kaiser Wilson," a reference to America's enemy. The police warned the women that they would be arrested if they continued. Nevertheless, they persisted.

The authorities determined to stamp out the protests, and the first arrests started in June, 1917. The picketers received three-day sentences, mostly for obstructing the sidewalk. The judges also fined the picketers \$25, which they refused to pay. After serving the three days, the women promptly returned to their sites in front of the White House. Angered now, the authorities determined to clamp down. Those arrested in August were sentenced to sixty days—at the Occoquan workhouse in Lofton, Virginia where the warden would try to intimidate Burns and other suffragists into ending their picketing.

The women would go through extreme treatment in the workhouse, but it was also here

Photo:

A 1909 depiction of force-feeding a suffragette in the United Kingdom's Holloway Prison. By the end of 1913 the practice had been prohibited in the U.K. by Parliament. However, in the United States force-feeding continued. Because of their protest activities in Washington, D.C. during 1917, Lucy Burns and other women were harshly imprisoned in a Virginia workhouse where Burns and others began hunger strikes. Burns was ultimately subjected to force-feeding. Courtesy of Wikipedia.

Photo:

A photograph of Burns in jail during 1917. Three years later, the nineteenth amendment giving women the right to vote would be ratified. And around the same time Burns withdrew from the movement, despite expectations of some that she would continue on to fight for an equal-rights amendment. A colleague would later comment that it was difficult for Burns to give all her power and energy to a social movement because of her many interests. Courtesy of Library of Congress.



that Burns and her sisters demonstrated their resolve and turned public opinion in their favor. The incarcerated suffragists were middle- and upper-class women, most of whom had never seen the inside of a jail before. Conditions at Occoquan were notorious. Burns and other women complained about poor ventilation and experienced difficulty breathing. The uniforms authorities gave them in the hot summer months were heavy, and of an irritating coarse material that made movement difficult, dangerous, and painful. Their prison shoes often did not fit and resulted in sore feet that made their daily duties hard to perform. Created from pressed paper, the shoes wore through easily when the women worked. The women were forced to perform penal labor and sewing, which they argued was unjust because they regarded themselves as political prisoners not criminals. Rats ran in and out of the unlit cells, and prisoners held contests to count the number of maggots in their food. And the prison denied the women a most basic human dignity—their privacy. One of the suf-

fragists was Dorothy Day, author, and founder of the *Catholic Worker*. She recalled:

In the morning we were taken one by one to a washroom at the end of the hall. There was a toilet in each cell, open, and paper and flushing were supplied by the guard. It was as though one were in a zoo with the open bars leading into the corridor. (qtd. in McArdle)

The horrible conditions weakened the inmates but did not dampen their resolve to winning women's suffrage.

Believing that violence would break the women, the authorities decided to terrorize the prisoners. On the night of November 14, 1917, known as the "Night of Terror," the superintendent of the Occoquan Workhouse, W.H. Whittaker, ordered nearly forty guards to brutalize the suffragists. They beat Burns, chained her hands to the cell bars above her head, and left her there for the night. They threw Dora Lewis into a dark cell and smashed her head against an iron bed, which knocked her unconscious. Her cellmate, Alice Cosu, who believed Lewis to be dead, suffered a heart attack. Dorothy Day was slammed repeatedly over the back of an iron bench. Guards grabbed, dragged, beat, choked, pinched, and kicked other women. Prison officials denied the protesters counsel, and many of the women, including Burns, began hunger strikes. The guards tried to tempt the women with fried chicken, but this was only viewed as an insult. Burns told the other women:

I think this riotous feast which has just passed our doors is the last effort of the institution to dislodge all of us who can be dislodged. They think there is nothing in our souls above fried chicken. (qtd. in "Lucy Burns")

Fearing that Burns would starve, the warden ordered forced feeding for her. Five guards had to hold her down, and when she refused to open her mouth, they shoved a feeding tube up her nostrils. This treatment was extremely painful and dangerous, causing Burns severe nosebleeds.

TREATMENT BACKFIRES

The violence and inhumane treatment though backfired against the authorities. The suffragists had a sympathizer in the Wilson White House. Dudley Field Malone, an attorney who had been a Wilson campaign adviser, was the collector of import duties. He was also married to suffragist Doris Stevens, one of the Occoquan prisoners. He resigned his position to represent the Silent Sentinels in court. Malone also gave his jailhouse correspondence with Stevens about the ordeal to the women's party newsletter, *The Suffragist*, outraging women in the movement and turning public opinion in their favor. By November 28, two weeks after the Night of Terror, the Occoquan prisoners were released on bail. In March 1918, the D.C. Court of Appeals declared that all the suffragist arrests had been unconstitutional.

The suffrage movement continued to gain strength and garner support. Within three years of the Night of Terror, the nineteenth amendment was ratified on Aug. 18, 1920, giving women the right to vote. Burns' colleagues were certain that she would continue to work with the women's movement to ensure that the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, but Burns had grown tired of activism. She stated "I don't want to do anything more. I think we have done all this for women, and we have sacrificed everything we possessed for them, and now let them fight for it now. I am not going to fight anymore." All her time in jail and her experiences as a suffragist had also left her bitter towards married women and others who didn't take action during the suffrage movement. Burns shocked her colleagues by retiring from the movement and returning to Brooklyn where she focused on raising an orphaned niece and working for Catholic charity groups.

Burns' retirement from the movement stung many of her colleagues, especially Alice Paul, who said of Burns many years later "She was never as committed as we would have liked." Fellow suffragist Doris Stevens also stated that it was "always difficult" for Burns "to give all of her energy and power to a movement" because she had other interests, including family, leisure, and learning. She died on December 22, 1966, in Brooklyn. Today, the Occoquan prison where she suffered

has been renamed the Lucy Burns Museum, a fitting tribute to the indomitable fighter from Brooklyn.

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