

Promoting Community Well-being through the Restoration of the South Asheville Colored Cemetery

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Abstract:

Community engagement is the process by which community members build ongoing, permanent relationships in the hopes of building a collective vision for the betterment of the community. Historically relationships between institutions of higher learning and their surrounding communities are strained, due to students' lack of interest in the community beyond their campus. This lack of student investment results in poor community well-being. Community well-being or wellness is a concept measured by local involvement, economic prosperity, market participation and the outcome of good social policy. A Gallup poll showed that areas with poor community involvement tend to have higher incidences of chronic disease. There was an average difference of 10% on the physical health index (measures incidences of ill health) between those who had a strong sense of community well-being compared to those who did not, along with a difference in physical health. In this project we strove to improve community well-being between UNC Asheville and the Kenilworth neighborhood through the maintenance of a local historic site, South Asheville Colored Cemetery. This was achieved through the organization of regular workdays throughout the year and events that allow students to engage with community members in a capacity that celebrates the achievements of the Asheville community, highlighting a piece of local history that is central to the African American narrative in Western North Carolina. In addition to restoring the grounds, students learn more about local history and the important implications of community engagement and community relationships.

Key Words: Community Engagement, Community Well-being, South Asheville Colored Cemetery,

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Origins of the Project

Historically higher education was limited to universities, focusing on true education, giving the local surrounding communities the view that college students and faculty members were stuck in the proverbial ivory tower. The subjects learned focused on abstractions and further exacerbated inequalities. Over time higher institutions of learning became more involved in their localities and started to play an important role in the human, social and economic development of their surrounding areas through teaching, research and service. Development did not solely focus on fiscal growth but on the improvement of the individual and collective human condition “increasing choices and participation, equality, standards of living and wellbeing, the environment and sustainability, and [on another level] development as a human and ways of being.”¹

According to the United Nations, universities help instill certain values and a specific understanding of issues in youth that will continue to facilitate social and economic development in their local communities.² Universities are considered to be mediums of change in all aspects of development including increasing awareness on environmental sustainability, human rights advocacy, health care issues and cultural preservation. Universities encourage local through global well-being by encouraging student involvement in the community and the dissemination of information, encouraging interest in policies and practices that will promote participation in the local community.

In 1907 John Henry Newman wrote *The Idea of a University* which encompassed the idea that a higher education institution should cultivate social and moral values in students and their surrounding communities. UNC Asheville strives to fulfill this idea through continuation of “service characterized by an informed, responsible, and creative engagement with the Asheville area, the southern Appalachian region, the state of North Carolina, and a diverse and increasingly connected world.”³ With this vision and these core values in mind I chose to partake in the Community Engaged Scholar Program and picked the South Asheville Colored Cemetery in Kenilworth neighborhood as my service site.

The South Asheville Colored Cemetery is located within the Kenilworth neighborhood and is currently cared for by members of the South Asheville Colored Cemetery Association, Kenilworth Residents Association and volunteers from the Asheville area including students from Warren Wilson College and UNC Asheville. The South Asheville Colored Cemetery was first opened in 1840 by the McDowell family, and is the oldest African American cemetery in Western North Carolina. The land was the designated slave burial ground. Private George Avery took care of the cemetery from when he returned from the Civil War until the time of his death in 1917. He tracked grave locations by memory, and “marked gravesites with wooden planks, boulders or rough shaped stones.”⁴ The cemetery was the only Black cemetery in Asheville, and members from St. John A. Baptist and St. Mark’s AME church buried their dead there until the late 1920s and 1930s, when Riverside Cemetery desegregated and allowed black people to bury their dead at that location. In 1943 the South Asheville Colored Cemetery closed. Most of the people that buried their dead did not have the finances to procure a headstone or other permanent markers, so they made do with metal and glass markers or mahogany crosses. It is estimated that between 2000-4000 people are buried in those grounds.⁴

During the time the cemetery was in use, family members, members of St. Mark’s AME and St. John A Baptist Church maintained the grounds. The two churches organized two clean up days a year, at which the men cleaned up the cemetery and the women prepared food. These workdays were major community events and served to renew community ties. After the cemetery closed in 1943 and the deed was handed to the city of Asheville, it unfortunately fell into disrepair. Due to the lush North Carolinian spring and summer months nature had its way with the cemetery. The graves were entangled with weeds and trees grew through the ground disrupting this hallowed space. In 1983 after almost forty years of dormancy the South Asheville Colored Cemetery was reawakened in Asheville citizens’ minds and the South Asheville Colored Cemetery Association (SACA) was formed to protect and preserve the property.⁴ In the same spirit as the community workdays held by the churches in previous decades, SACA started community workdays to help restore the physical condition of the cemetery. With the help of AmeriCorps groups, local volunteer efforts from the community and volunteer groups from UNC Asheville and Warren Wilson College, SACA was able to beat back some of the overgrowth on the land and discover forgotten graves. This gesture of caring for the history of African Americans in Asheville and the uncovering of graves elicited a reaction of gratitude and appreciation from people who had personal connections to the cemetery.

Through learning more about the significance of the South Asheville Colored Cemetery from Dr. Ellen Holmes Pearson, Mr. David Quinn and Mr. George Taylor and further understanding the important roles that institutions of higher learning can have in the development of well-being in their local communities, I chose to focus my project on building the ties between UNC Asheville and the Kenilworth neighborhood. We began to formulate a plan that would combine the sense of community imbued in the workdays started by St. John A. Baptist and St. Marks AME and the aspect of learning found in a university setting. Using this combination of service, community engagement and presentations, I hope to increase UNC Asheville’s students’ awareness of opportunities to become involved with the Asheville community in a meaningful and educational way. The project is still in progress at the time of publication of this paper.

Methods and Work Undertaken

The project took the format of a service learning class, incorporating regular workdays, tours of the cemetery and presentations explaining the spiritual, historic and educational importance of the South Asheville Colored Cemetery. We defined community engagement as the process by which community members build ongoing, permanent relationships in the hopes of building a collective vision for the betterment of the community. The project occurred in three stages: the first step was the development of a relationship with members of St. John A. Baptist; the second step was the organization of regular workdays; and the third step was the organization of presentations from people involved with the cemetery.

The first step of the process involved meeting members of St. John A. Baptist and the South Asheville Colored Cemetery Association to determine the needs of the Cemetery. At this stage I had only been to the cemetery once, during the 2013 MLK Day of Service. We determined what I could do within my one year timeframe that would have the greatest impact on the cemetery. This was narrowed down to the organization of workdays, reminiscent of those organized by the St. John A Baptist and St. Mark AME congregation, with a focus on building community ties between UNC Asheville students and the Asheville community. For the past three semesters we have organized two workdays each semester. In the early spring time the workdays involved moving the pile of collected debris, fallen branches and weeds to a location at which the city could safely collect it. The pile was turned into mulch by the city and reused in other areas.

To plan these workdays we used resources provided by the UNC Asheville History Department and the UNC Asheville French Club. French Club is a student organization on campus that seeks to promote the appreciation of French and Francophone culture. As part of Student Activities, Involvement and Leadership the French Club is required to perform 20 service hours each semester. The members of the organization agreed to take on the South Asheville Colored Cemetery as their project, sponsoring publicity and snacks, and serving as a liaison between the cemetery and the student population. As part of our preparation for the workdays, we created and put up posters in common areas around campus. The common areas included, residence halls, academic buildings, Highsmith Student Union and the dining hall. In addition to the posters we created Facebook events and posted the posters in the UNC Asheville Student Organization's Presidents' page. We also used some of the French Club budget to purchase the ingredients to make vegan and non-vegan granola to appeal to all participants. In the winter time we also provided hot cider. The History department provided contacts with the community, sponsored the lunches and tied the cemetery to the academic circuit at UNC Asheville. Dr. Pearson in the History department made announcements to her humanities and history classes to drum up student participation. She is instrumental in making connections with members of the community to further the work done at the cemetery, whilst also a member of the South Asheville Colored Cemetery Association. The History and Humanities department helped fund the supplies used to make the famous chili lunches that were had after each workday

Performing physical work at the South Asheville Colored Cemetery was one form of service. The second part of this was interacting with the community. As our work at the South Asheville Colored Cemetery flourished we continued to build our ties with the St. John A Baptist Church and the Kenilworth community. We attended the annual MLK Jr. Day service at the Kenilworth Presbyterian Church, the annual Black History Month ceremony at St. John A. Baptist and

worship services at the church. This was fundamental to the progress of the project as it reinforced the importance of the work we were doing. Having time to meet Mr. George Gibson and Mr. George Taylor, members of the Kenilworth neighborhood who worked with George Avery at the cemetery was profound. It demonstrated the immediacy of the history this cemetery held and its importance as a symbol of Asheville's history and its effects on our present day lives. These dapper, elderly gentlemen continue to be part of the process of restoring the cemetery, as founding members of the South Asheville Colored Cemetery Association they have spent a large part of their lives raising awareness of the cemetery. The contacts made at these events were vital in the creation of the South Asheville Colored Cemetery Speaker Panel.

The second stage of my public service involved the organization of a speaker panel to disseminate information about the Cemetery to UNC Asheville students and faculty. At each workday Mr. David Quinn gives a tour of the cemetery, humanizing the grounds and the graves. The panel included David Quinn from the SACA, Dr. Ellen Holmes Pearson from the UNC Asheville History Department, Mr. Marvin Chambers, Dr. Jeff Keith and Dr. David Moore from Warren Wilson College, Ms. Nadiya Marrengulye from AB Tech, Ms. Patricia Griffin from the YMI Cultural Center and Reverend Allen Smith from Kenilworth Presbyterian Church. The panel covered the intersectional nature of the work done at the cemetery. It started out with a focus on the building of community ties and wellness between institutions of higher learning and their local communities, specifically between UNC Asheville and Kenilworth. This delved into the history of service between UNC Asheville students and the Kenilworth Community. The panel discussed the historical importance of the South Asheville Colored Cemetery and the archeological work Dr. David Moore did in collaboration with the SACA to rediscover the people buried in the cemetery. This led to the effects of the work done by students from the university and the positive impact it had on present day members of the neighborhood, as well as it being a place of great spiritual magnitude. It closed off with Ms. Marrengulye talking about the life of George Avery, the differences in slavery and the treatment of African Americans in the piedmont compared to the mountains. Overall the panel showed that work at the cemetery was not simply a physical labor but an educational piece, an act of healing and rekindling of faith. It is a beacon of community and togetherness in Asheville, bringing together educators, spiritual leaders, community leaders and students.

The third stage of my project will include a collaboration with Warren Wilson College to organize a community day. This stage of the project is still in progress, but we hope for it to be an event that will bring in many members of the Asheville community, strengthening the bonds between UNC Asheville and the Asheville community. This event will include a short workday and a community event featuring foods from West Africa and traditional African American foods, live, local music and tours of the cemetery. It will showcase the work that the South Asheville Colored Cemetery Association, UNC Asheville and Warren Wilson College have done in the cemetery, and the work that will continue to be done once I graduate. This work will include the placement of a fence around the property and further research into the implications of having the cemetery registered as a national historic site.

Ties to Academia

My areas of study during my undergraduate years at the University of North Carolina at Asheville were Health and Wellness and French. During this public service project I utilized skills obtained from my Health and Wellness Promotions major, my Undergraduate Research project and information learned in my Humanities courses. This project directly ties to my coursework in Humanities 324, LS 479 and my Health and Wellness classes, specifically Health Parity, Health Communications and Health Community Outreach and Promotions. The disciplines cross into the sphere of the project through the concepts of community wellness, intersectional nature of health, program development and intellectual capacity. Community wellness

“... Is a concept measured by local involvement, economic prosperity, market participation and the outcome of good social policy. It is one of the integral determinants of health, these include medical care and the social and physical conditions in which people live, work, learn and play.”⁵

As health and wellness majors our focus is not just on physical health, or pursuing a reactionary approach to health, but rather we look at preventative measures. The Health and Wellness Promotions major teaches us to consider the intersectional nature of health. Health is not simply one’s physical manifestation at a specific time, but a combination of their mental, spiritual, environmental and community well-being. Finding a balance between these factors will result in positive health, however when one of these factors is not met or undervalued, the body falls into disequilibrium. My project with the cemetery focused on improving the environmental and social factors of health through the restoration of the cemetery.

In Health and Wellness 250: Health Parity, we learned about the determinants of health. These included the social and economic environments, the physical environment and the person’s individual characteristics and behaviors. According to the WHO,

“The context of people’s lives determines their health, and so blaming individuals for having poor health or crediting them for good health is inappropriate. Individuals are unlikely to be able to directly control many of the determinants of health.”⁶

This idea of social and economic factors affecting one’s physical health intrigued me. If an individual perceives their environment to be unsafe, unfulfilling and undesirable they are more likely to suffer from poorer health. As well as physical environment, providing a communal social support network greatly improves one’s holistic health. This is an area of study I explored and wanted to contribute to during my work with the South Asheville Colored Cemetery. In the Ontario Health Promotion E-Bulletin it was determined that “the role of friendship and social cohesion” were one of the top ten social determinants of health.⁶ Social cohesion involves the linking of individuals within a group and links between individuals and their communities. The development of cohesion is a multi-faceted process, involving social relations, task relations, perceived unity and emotions. With the development of these goals, social and environmental determinants of health are more positively affected thus improving group pride and communal wellbeing. With the improvement of community wellbeing, marked improvements in health (psychological and physical) are noticed. The premise for my work at the cemetery ties into these

determinants. Institutions of higher learning have a large impact on their surrounding communities. This influence can be positively used to improve our community wellbeing and hopefully translate into the improvement of individual health. UNC Asheville as an institution of higher learning is in a prime position to positively impact these determinants of health. The use of the cemetery may seem obscure but when one takes into account the significance of the South Asheville Colored Cemetery in Asheville's history, the reasoning becomes clear.

The South Asheville Colored Cemetery is a physical reminder of the disparities faced by African Americans in Western North Carolina, and its restoration provides a communal healing for all members of the community. The cemetery dates back to the days of Chattel Slavery (1800s-1943). It tells the story of a young slave named George Avery who cared for the cemetery before and after the Emancipation Proclamation, and is now buried in its hallowed grounds. During the years of the cemetery's use, the congregations at St. John a. Baptist and St. Marks AME cared for the grounds. Once it closed in 1943 and was given to the city of Asheville, it fell into disrepair. The cemetery and its dead were forgotten, until 1997 when the South Asheville Colored Cemetery Association was formed and took control of the grounds. A poignant story told by Mr. David Quinn is the day he and a group of his found a new grave. This grave was special because it belonged to Reverend Workman, the great-great grandfather of his (David Quinn) son's good friend, Michael Workman. These are the kind of events that ensue from working at such a rich site. This work has reunited local families with their loved ones and has allowed them to pay their respects to their ancestors. This is the work that I have proudly been a part of for the past year. Rebuilding the ties within the community and creating stronger bonds between the UNC Asheville student body and the Kenilworth neighborhood. This is an example of building the social cohesion that leads to better community wellbeing, an important determinant of health.

The development of this project was a direct result of the skills learned in the Health and Wellness Community Outreach and Health Communications classes. As this was a project that already had an organization working on it, we had to discuss a way that my work would further supplement the South Asheville Colored Cemetery Association's efforts. The project I created would have to be sustainable, raise awareness of the cemetery and not be repetitive. The sustainability of the project was of utmost concern when starting the project. We did not want to create an interest in the South Asheville Colored Cemetery only to have it taper off once the students involved graduated. A lack of sustainability in community service projects has been found to be one of the premier causes of mistrust between local communities and individuals/organizations that appear to have more "power" (such as institutions of higher learning).⁷ Therefore, we tied the project to a student organization, the UNC Asheville French Club. To increase publicity around the cemetery I looked at literature on social marketing. Social marketing is defined as "A process for influencing human behavior (on a large scale), using marketing principles for the purpose of societal benefit rather than commercial profit."⁸ This literature provided me with a foundation to create promotional materials that would appeal to my targeted audience. To ensure that the posters, social media groups and other promotional materials were appropriate I considered the readability of the text, visibility of materials and appropriateness of the subject.

The information garnered in the Humanities classes was integral in determining an appropriate approach to working at the cemetery and marketing the project. Learning about the devastations suffered before the Emancipation Proclamation and the Civil Rights movement gave the appropriate context as to the relevance of the South Asheville Colored Cemetery. The information allowed me to understand the lives of the individuals buried at the cemetery, providing me the necessary psychological perspective when conducting workdays or participating at the speaker panel. Many of the grave sites at the cemetery are marked by deep depressions in the land, showing where their coffins, which were sometimes no more than wicker baskets, sunk in. Pre-1863, the majority of African Americans in the United States of America were slaves. During this time they worked most of the day and were allowed minimal time for rest and burial services. Slaves were prohibited from gathering in large groups, out of fear that they would revolt. Thus, communal mourning for the dead was also stifled. As Christianity spread from master to slave, slaves were given permission to bury and mourn their dead, however as they had no income, they could not afford the proper wooden coffins. As a result the wicker baskets these people were buried in could not hold the dirt placed on top of them and caved in over time, creating the depressions we see today. Developing this understanding of a life before desegregation allowed us to treat the cemetery and the community with the respect it deserved.

Challenges Faced and Responses to those Challenges

The first and most evident challenge of this project was participation. Obtaining student support was difficult. With the exception of three workdays the average number of volunteers was eight people. The workdays were scheduled on Saturday mornings from 9am-12pm, a lunch of vegetarian and meat chili sponsored by the UNC Asheville History department was included as well as granola from the UNC Asheville French Club. Carpooling was made available for students that lived on campus. We started publicizing the workdays at least a week in advance to the Key Center, UNC Asheville student organizations and the Residential Education program, in an attempt to pique student interest. However, this proved to be ineffective, as we received emails demonstrating interest but very few students showed up on the workdays. In response to the low turnout Dr. Pearson from the History department also made announcements in her Humanities and History classes. This did result in a few new students signing up to work at the cemetery, but still not as many as we had initially hoped. We expanded our advertisements to social media, creating Facebook events and posting on different student organizations walls. Again this idea gained theoretical support, as people signed up for the event on Facebook, but did not show up on the scheduled workdays. For future volunteers or organizers of events at the cemetery, I recommend adding the South Asheville Colored Cemetery to pre-organized days of service such as Martin Luther King Day of Service and PreRendezblue in order to increase student participation on individual workdays. Other successful (participation-wise) workdays occurred when we worked in conjunction with Warren Wilson College. Partnerships with the community and other schools resulted in highly effective and fun events, similar to the ones described by St. John A. Baptist and St. Marks AME in the early 1900s.

The second challenge was a personal challenge involving time management. From the time I started the project through to today I have been highly involved with student organizations, on top of having a rigorous academic and employment schedule. As such my physical commitment

to the cemetery was limited to organizing and participating in 2-3 workdays each semester, and attending between 1-2 community hosted events each semester. The beauty of working with such a helpful core group of people invested in the wellbeing of the Kenilworth community and the restoration of the South Asheville Colored Cemetery was, they were able to cover for me. The division of labor worked well, giving me responsibility over student participation, Dr. Pearson conducted refreshments, transport and coordination between UNC Asheville and community members, whilst Mr. Quinn took care of contacting the members of St. John A. Baptist Church, Kenilworth Association and other community members, as well as proving to be an invaluable resource in all matters related to the South Asheville Colored Cemetery.

The third challenge was not losing sight of my original vision for the cemetery, to help in its restoration and to use the cemetery as a conduit for increasing community well-being between the Kenilworth and UNC Asheville community. During the first few months, I focused solely on the workdays, working on the physical restoration of the cemetery ground, without regards to looking at the educational or communal implications of the work we were doing. Once we started to immerse ourselves with the community members of Kenilworth, the big picture came back into focus. With this renewed focus we created the speaker panel and are currently planning a community event with the students of Warren Wilson that will be open to all members of the Asheville community.

The fourth challenge was that at this stage of the project, there was no quantifiable way to measure the improvement of the community member's health. We relied on anecdotal evidence provided by members of the St. John A. Baptist Church and other members with whom we interacted with at community events. If the project continues a survey should be provided to community (UNC Asheville and Kenilworth) members to quantifiably measure whether the work has improved social cohesion, and the community well-being of the area. These would take into account whether the area has benefitted from the work done at the cemetery as well as the individuals having significantly more interactions with the UNC Asheville student population through increased workdays, tours and the orchestration of community events.

Results

The immediate results of the work done at the South Asheville Colored Cemetery have been a raised awareness of its existence and significance in Asheville's history. On one of our trips a reporter from the Blue Banner attended and volunteered with us, to obtain information about the work done at the cemetery. Due to increased publicity students have shown more interest in the South Asheville Colored Cemetery, which resulted in Student Activities Involvement and Leadership including it in the PreRendezblue events and the Key Center including it in the 2013 MLK Day of Service.

The physical results include a suppression of growth of plants in the cemetery, also helped by the cold winter weather. The growth has not grown above knee height, since last summer, which will make it easier to continue to keep it down in the future. Two new possible grave markers were located by a Warren Wilson group, although verification on whether they are grave sites still needs to be done. The pile of fallen tree limbs, weeds and other debris was moved, and is ready for the city to pick up and turn into mulch. The South Asheville Colored Cemetery Association

received donations to build a fence around the cemetery grounds and will begin that project later on in April, 2014. The South Asheville Colored Cemetery also just won a grant to obtain an AmeriCorps team to help with the maintenance of the cemetery during the summer months.

The psychological healing has already started to take place, and will hopefully continue to grow in the coming years. In the Speaker Panel conducted in the Whitman Room on February 20th, 2014 Mr. Marvin Chambers spoke about the importance of the work at the cemetery. He talked about the bonds that were being rebuilt between UNC Asheville and the Kenilworth community. He recalled a time when UNC Asheville students used to take an interest in the Cemetery, when Bull Dog days still took place, but over time the interest died. The renewed interest in the Cemetery has shown that UNC Asheville is not simply “the school on the hill” but a school with students that are interested in the preservation of an important historic site. Pat Griffith echoed these sentiments stating that this work, if continued will continue to strengthen the bonds between UNC Asheville and the Kenilworth community. Mr. David Quinn, already sees tangible improvements, with increased awareness of the cemetery, a unification between the different student bodies in Asheville and the rest of the community has already began. The speaker panel was an example of that, where members representing different aspects of the Asheville community were able to come together and partake in a forum celebrating the different ways the cemetery had affected their individual lives and the collective Asheville identity. Rather than recognizing the Cemetery as only a marker for African American history in Asheville, NC, it is now a local historic site and is included in Asheville’s history, without adding any clarifiers.

Sustainability

Sustainability is an important concept in any community work, as it encourages the empowerment of the local communities involved. Sustainability requires an integrated view of the world it

“... Is the long-term, cultural, economic and environmental health and vitality with the emphasis on long-term, together with the importance of linking our social, financial, and environmental well-being.”⁹

With this definition in mind it was integral for the project to be sustainable, related to the immediate goals, the environmental and social aspects were addressed. The workdays and community events created a space for students and community members to interact freely and positively shape the environment. The students and community members built a stronger connection that promoted closer interactions in the development of future events related to the South Asheville Colored Cemetery. This will be beneficial for the development of future project with these communities.

In terms of developing a long-term project we tied the project to a student organization, the UNC Asheville French Club. As a student organization, the French club is required to complete 20 community service hours each semester, the work at the cemetery can work towards fulfilling those hours. Since its members have experience with organizing workdays, and have been to the cemetery before, it will promote cohesion between the two groups. The French club receives a budget from SAIL that can be used towards the creation, promotion and execution of community events, a portion of that budget will be allotted to providing resources for cemetery workdays

and events. The amount will be determined at the end of the semester when the budgets are assigned. Tying the cemetery to a student organization provides the project greater longevity than tying it to students. Student organizations remain active for longer periods of times, whilst students may transfer, travel or graduate.

Conclusion

The goal of this project was to promote community well-being between UNC Asheville and the Kenilworth neighborhood through the restoration of the South Asheville Colored Cemetery. The project implemented, increased communication between members of the South Asheville Colored Cemetery Association, Kenilworth community members and the students at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. This has set the foundation for future students to expound upon with regards to further projects with the St. John A. Baptist church, Kenilworth neighborhood or the South Asheville Colored Cemetery. Throughout the process we enjoyed the collaboration between UNC Asheville and Warren Wilson College in our efforts to preserve the history of the cemetery. The restoration of the cemetery resulted in numerous teachable moments with regards to the appropriate execution of a public service project, the history of Asheville and the intersectional nature of community work. A continuation in the relationship between UNC Asheville and members of the Asheville community will further improve social well-being, hopefully positively impacting our community health.

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