

Western State Lunatic Asylum:

Past to Present

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Intro to Public History

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In January of 1825 Virginia founded its second institution for mental health.<sup>1</sup> Located in the city of Staunton, it was called the Western State Lunatic Asylum. Virginia saw its need after the success of their Eastern State facility in Williamsburg and wanted to extend the availability of such care further within the state. The facility consisted of 18 buildings on an 80 acre campus<sup>2</sup>. The large picturesque grounds were meant to be a factor in the patients' wellbeing and care. Patients could garden, exercise, and work on the hospital's tranquil grounds.<sup>3</sup> The grounds were so nice that a wrought iron fence later had to be erected to keep local picnickers off the institution's grounds.<sup>4</sup>



The original main buildings were designed by Baltimore architect William Small.<sup>6</sup> He used both Greek and Roman revival elements in the design. The two-story end pavilions that

<sup>1</sup> Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services. "Western State Hospital". *History*. <http://www.wsh.dbhds.virginia.gov/history.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Staunton, Virginia; "Western Lunatic Asylum," blog entry by Terry. January 1, 2011. <http://travelwithterrytaunton.blogspot.com/2011/01/western-lunatic-asylum.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Virginia Heritage: Guides to Manuscript & Archival Collections in Virginia. "A Guide to the Records of Western State Hospital." *Historical Information*. <http://ead.lib.virginia.edu/vivaead/published/lva/vi00937.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Staunton, Virginia; "Western Lunatic Asylum," blog entry by Terry. January 1, 2011. <http://travelwithterrytaunton.blogspot.com/2011/01/western-lunatic-asylum.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services. "Western State Hospital". *Architect Drawing of Virginia Lunatic Asylum at Staunton*. 1838. <http://www.wsh.dbhds.virginia.gov/historic.htm>.

border the large main building were constructed approximately ten years later.<sup>7</sup> In 1847 the buildings were modified by Thomas Blackburn with a distinct Jeffersonian style. Blackburn had previously worked under Thomas Jefferson during the construction of the University of Virginia campus.<sup>8</sup> Over a century later, in 1969, five of the original buildings were added to the National register of Historic Places.<sup>9</sup>

The Asylum itself opened its doors to patients on July 24, 1828. Both male and female patients were accepted.<sup>10</sup> Samuel Woodward served as the facility's Keeper, and his wife Mary served as Matron. Dr. William Boyes, a visiting physician, provided patient care.<sup>11</sup> Operational staff was also hired to tend to the buildings and grounds of the campus.<sup>12</sup> The facility filled with patients quickly after opening. The Court of Directors then had to begin implementing a screening process for admitting patients. This would limit patients admitted to only those "who were either dangerous to society from their violence, or those who were offensive to its moral

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<sup>6</sup> City of Staunton, Virginia. "Planning & Inspections". *Draft Comprehensive Plan, 2010-2030*. <http://www.staunton.va.us/directory/departments-h-z/planning-inspections/images%20and%20files/history>.

<sup>7</sup> City of Staunton, Virginia. "Planning & Inspections". *Draft Comprehensive Plan, 2010-2030*. <http://www.staunton.va.us/directory/departments-h-z/planning-inspections/images%20and%20files/history>.

<sup>8</sup> Staunton, Virginia; "Western Lunatic Asylum," blog entry by Terry. January 1, 2011. <http://travelwithterrytaunton.blogspot.com/2011/01/western-lunatic-asylum.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Staunton, Virginia; "Western Lunatic Asylum," blog entry by Terry. January 1, 2011. <http://travelwithterrytaunton.blogspot.com/2011/01/western-lunatic-asylum.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Virginia Heritage: Guides to Manuscript & Archival Collections in Virginia. "A Guide to the Records of Western State Hospital." *Historical Information*. <http://ead.lib.virginia.edu/vivaead/published/lva/vi00937.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services. "Western State Hospital". *History*. <http://www.wsh.dbhds.virginia.gov/history.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> Virginia Heritage: Guides to Manuscript & Archival Collections in Virginia. "A Guide to the Records of Western State Hospital." *Historical Information*. <http://ead.lib.virginia.edu/vivaead/published/lva/vi00937.html>.

sense by their indecency and to those cases of derangement where there is reasonable ground to hope that the afflicted may be restored.”<sup>13</sup>

In 1840 the institution received its first director, Dr. Francis T. Stribling.<sup>14</sup> This position replaced the previous position of “keeper” with a more professional and official role of running the hospital. Ten years prior, Stribling was the first graduate of the University of Virginia’s Medical School, as well as one of the original thirteen founders of the Association of Medical Superintendents of American Institutions for the Insane, which was later known as the American Psychiatric Association.<sup>15</sup> Stribling was a strong supporter of the concept of “moral medicine,” which made him an ideal candidate for Western’s director. The original concept of Western’s design was to be very scenic and open, which was supposed to be good for one’s mental wellbeing. A director who was a strong supporter of human patient treatment was a good fit for this facility. Stribling served as director at the asylum until his death in 1874.

In 1864 the hospital was renamed the Central Lunatic Asylum. This name change did not last for long though, and the original name was returned in 1865. Then in 1894 the General Assembly passed legislation to change the name to Western State Hospital.<sup>16</sup>

In 1889 Dr. Joseph DeJarnette was hired at the hospital as a physician, and then in 1905 he was made director.<sup>17</sup> He served until his retirement in 1943, making his 38 year term the

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<sup>13</sup> Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services. “Western State Hospital”. *History*. <http://www.wsh.dbhds.virginia.gov/history.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services. “Western State Hospital”. *History*. <http://www.wsh.dbhds.virginia.gov/history.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> Virginia Heritage: Guides to Manuscript & Archival Collections in Virginia. “A Guide to the Records of Western State Hospital.” *Historical Information*. <http://ead.lib.virginia.edu/vivaead/published/lva/vi00937.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Virginia Heritage: Guides to Manuscript & Archival Collections in Virginia. “A Guide to the Records of Western State Hospital.” *Historical Information*. <http://ead.lib.virginia.edu/vivaead/published/lva/vi00937.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Virginia Heritage: Guides to Manuscript & Archival Collections in Virginia. “A Guide to the Records of Western State Hospital.” *Historical Information*. <http://ead.lib.virginia.edu/vivaead/published/lva/vi00937.html>.

longest of any of the hospital's 16 directors since its opening.<sup>18</sup> DeJarnette is responsible for the founding of the DeJarnette State Sanatorium, which housed wealthier patients who were capable of paying for treatment.<sup>19</sup> After retirement from Western, DeJarnette served as superintendent for the sanatorium from its formation in 1932 until his full retirement in 1947.<sup>20</sup> DeJarnette is also the most well-known director of Western State, though not for the best of reasons. He was one of the United States' largest supporters of the practice of eugenics, which in recent years has earned him a less-than-favorable reputation.

Eugenics is the involuntary sterilization of persons deemed unfit to reproduce due to feeble-mindedness, insanity, criminal behavior, disease, deformity, dependency, epilepsy, or being deaf or blind.<sup>21</sup> In the early 1900s this was an increasingly popular procedure. Indiana was the first to officially allow sterilization on the grounds of eugenics in 1907.<sup>22</sup> Connecticut followed suit soon after. Years later, a man by the name of Harry Laughlin published a Model Eugenical Sterilization Law that outlined suggested guidelines for its practice.<sup>23</sup> They were not very strict. By the time this document was published in 1914, twelve states had enacted sterilization laws, and by 1924 approximately 3,000 people had been subject to sterilization in

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<sup>18</sup> Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services. "Western State Hospital". *History*. <http://www.wsh.dbhds.virginia.gov/history.htm>.

<sup>19</sup> Virginia Heritage: Guides to Manuscript & Archival Collections in Virginia. "A Guide to the Records of Western State Hospital." *Historical Information*. <http://ead.lib.virginia.edu/vivaead/published/lva/vi00937.html>.

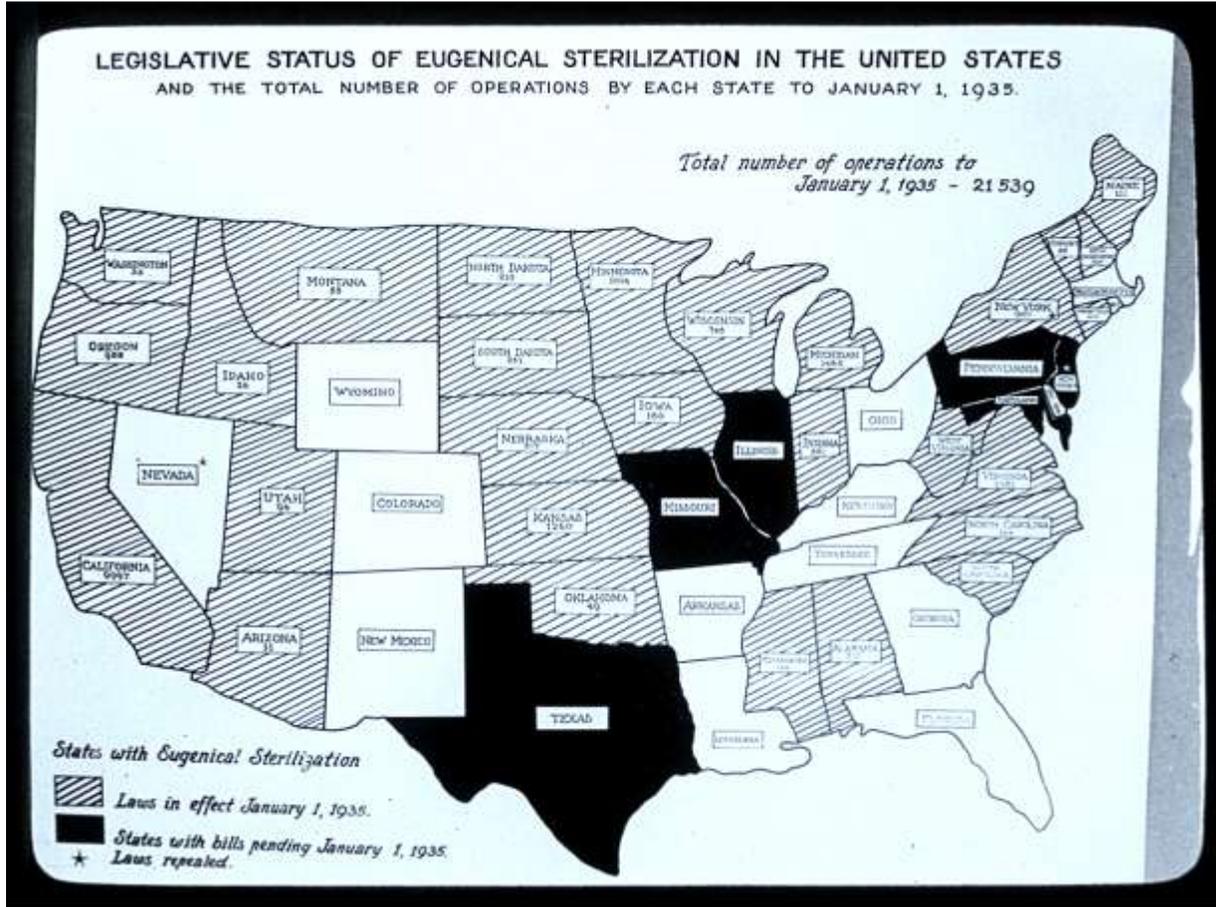
<sup>20</sup> Virginia Heritage: Guides to Manuscript & Archival Collections in Virginia. "A Guide to the Records of Western State Hospital." *Historical Information*. <http://ead.lib.virginia.edu/vivaead/published/lva/vi00937.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Lombardo, Paul. Dolan DNA Learning Center. "Image Archive on the American Eugenics Movement." *Essay 8: Sterilization Laws*. Page 2. [http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay\\_8\\_fs.html](http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay_8_fs.html).

<sup>22</sup> Lombardo, Paul. Dolan DNA Learning Center. "Image Archive on the American Eugenics Movement." *Essay 8: Sterilization Laws*. Page 1. [http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay\\_8\\_fs.html](http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay_8_fs.html).

<sup>23</sup> Lombardo, Paul. Dolan DNA Learning Center. "Image Archive on the American Eugenics Movement." *Essay 8: Sterilization Laws*. Page 1. [http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay\\_8\\_fs.html](http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay_8_fs.html).

the United States; most of these occurring in California.<sup>24</sup>



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It was this same year that Virginia passed its Eugenical Sterilization Act, based on Laughlin's publication. Virginia's reasoning for this law was to save money from the rapid growth of public mental health facilities, as well as to protect physicians from malpractice lawsuits.<sup>26</sup> The first person chosen to be sterilized, a seventeen-year-old girl from Charlottesville, resulted in a

<sup>24</sup> Lombardo, Paul. Dolan DNA Learning Center. "Image Archive on the American Eugenics Movement." *Essay 8: Sterilization Laws*. Page 2.

[http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay\\_8\\_fs.html](http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay_8_fs.html).

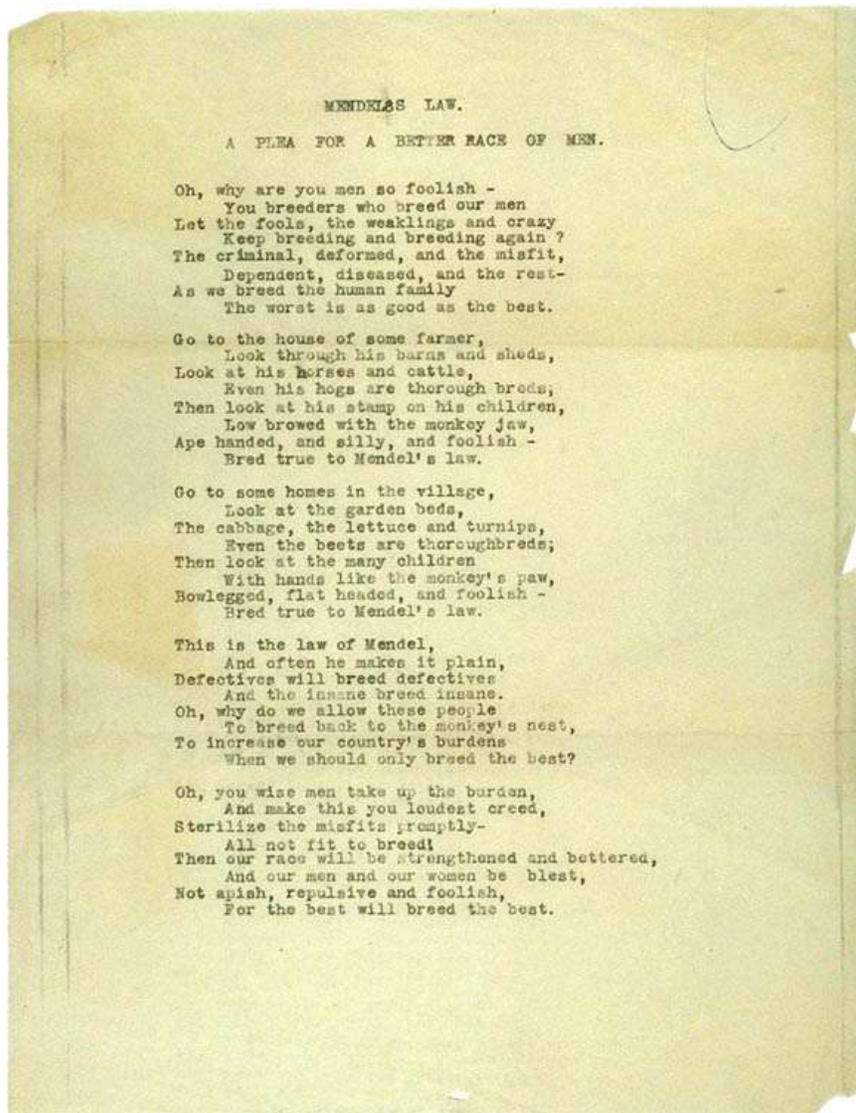
<sup>25</sup> Truman State University. The Harry H. Laughlin Papers. "Legislative status of eugenical sterilization in the United States." Lantern Slides, Black Case, Section 12. 1935.

[http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/view\\_image.pl?id=951](http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/view_image.pl?id=951).

<sup>26</sup> Lombardo, Paul. Dolan DNA Learning Center. "Image Archive on the American Eugenics Movement." *Essay 8: Sterilization Laws*. Page 2.

[http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay\\_8\\_fs.html](http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay_8_fs.html).

Supreme Court case to debate the validity of the claim that she had inherited her mother's traits of "feble-mindedness" and promiscuity.<sup>27</sup> The case is known as Buck v. Bell and the court eventually ruled in favor of sterilization. DeJarnette actually testified at the hearing, in favor of sterilization. He even wrote a poem on the subject of eugenics entitled "Mendel's Law."



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<sup>27</sup> Lombardo, Paul. Dolan DNA Learning Center. "Image Archive on the American Eugenics Movement." *Essay 8: Sterilization Laws*. Page 3.

[http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay\\_8\\_fs.html](http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay_8_fs.html).

<sup>28</sup> Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory. *Mendel's Law Poem*, by Joseph DeJarnette, MD, witness in Buck vs. Bell case. 1921. [http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/view\\_image.pl?id=1235](http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/view_image.pl?id=1235).

The ruling of this case meant that not only could patients be sterilized under the guidelines stated by the law, but so could any offspring that were decided to have inherited any of these same traits. Consequently, approximately 8,300 Virginians were eventually sterilized.<sup>29</sup> In 1933 the German Nazi government adopted a version of this same law, resulting in the sterilization of over 350,000 people. Laughlin was awarded an honorary degree from the University in Heidelberg as a tribute for his work in “the science of racial cleansing,” in 1936.<sup>30</sup> Later this association between eugenics and Nazi Germany put the practice out of public favor more so than ever before, and yet sterilization of the mentally ill in American institutions continued through the mid-1970s. At one point during which time 33 states allowed the practice, resulting in the involuntary sterilization of more than 60, 000 Americans.<sup>31</sup>

It was practices like this that gave these early institutions the bad names they have today. Another large issue was overcrowding. Western State opened a second site in 1950, the DeJarnette Children’s Center, a few miles down the highway from the original campus. The hospital’s population continued to grow through the 1950s and 1960s, with the patient population peaking at over 3,000 patients between the two sites. Such overcrowding was not unheard of at that time. In institutions all over the country conditions like these resulted in low quality of patient care, unhygienic living conditions, and chaotic surrounding that would likely give a perfectly healthy person reason to be committed.

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<sup>29</sup> Lombardo, Paul. Dolan DNA Learning Center. “Image Archive on the American Eugenics Movement.” *Essay 8: Sterilization Laws*. Page 6.

[http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay\\_8\\_fs.html](http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay_8_fs.html).

<sup>30</sup> Lombardo, Paul. Dolan DNA Learning Center. “Image Archive on the American Eugenics Movement.” *Essay 8: Sterilization Laws*. Page 6.

[http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay\\_8\\_fs.html](http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay_8_fs.html).

<sup>31</sup> Lombardo, Paul. Dolan DNA Learning Center. “Image Archive on the American Eugenics Movement.” *Essay 8: Sterilization Laws*. Page 7.

[http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay\\_8\\_fs.html](http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay_8_fs.html).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s Virginia began to move toward deinstitutionalization. In 1969 five of the campus' original buildings were added to the National Register of Historic Places, and one year later, the hospital relocated to a new campus. After the hospital moved to its new location the patient population was slowly declined until it stood at around 1,350 in the late 1970s.<sup>32</sup> Patient care standards and hospital operations have also increased drastically since that time. The original hospital site then became home to the Staunton Correctional Center, a medium-security men's prison.<sup>33</sup> It was during this time that the site fell into disrepair until 2003 when it was vacated entirely. The original buildings do remain standing today, on what has been referred to as the "Old Site," since the hospital's relocation.<sup>34</sup>

Today, the Old Site no longer stands vacant. In 2002 Bill Hamilton, Staunton's director of economic development, had the Department of Corrections transfer ownership of the site to the city of Staunton.<sup>35</sup> He then partnered with Robin Miller and Dan Gecker of Miller & Associates to restore the buildings and bring them back into use.<sup>36</sup> Miller boasts more than 30 years of preservation experience and planned to develop the site into a mixed residential and

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<sup>33</sup> Staunton, Virginia; "Western Lunatic Asylum," blog entry by Terry. January 1, 2011. <http://travelwithterrytaunton.blogspot.com/2011/01/western-lunatic-asylum.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Virginia Heritage: Guides to Manuscript & Archival Collections in Virginia. "A Guide to the Records of Western State Hospital." *Historical Information*. <http://ead.lib.virginia.edu/vivaead/published/lva/vi00937.html>.

<sup>35</sup> McNamara, Elizabeth. *Preservation*. "Institutional Change." National Trust for Historic Preservation. 2011. <http://www.preservationnation.org/magazine/2011/january-february/artful-restoration-1.html>.

<sup>36</sup> McNamara, Elizabeth. *Preservation*. "Institutional Change." National Trust for Historic Preservation. 2011. <http://www.preservationnation.org/magazine/2011/january-february/artful-restoration-1.html>.

commercial community called The Villages at Staunton.<sup>37</sup> Construction on the site began in 2007. By February 2010 the team had spent \$21 million, offset by \$1.2 million in historic tax credits. The plan for the community is for around 70 percent of the buildings to be condominiums, and the remaining 30 percent to be commercial. It is estimated that the completed project will cost around \$250 million.<sup>38</sup>

Local residents remember the buildings as they used to be, but are not against the restorations. Most see the project as bringing back the site's original purpose. The original institution was built on the idea of healing and wellbeing through beautiful architecture and landscape, and the new community is built on that same principal.

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<sup>37</sup> McNamara, Elizabeth. *Preservation*. "Institutional Change." National Trust for Historic Preservation. 2011. <http://www.preservationnation.org/magazine/2011/january-february/artful-restoration-1.html>.

<sup>38</sup> McNamara, Elizabeth. *Preservation*. "Institutional Change." National Trust for Historic Preservation. 2011. <http://www.preservationnation.org/magazine/2011/january-february/artful-restoration-1.html>.

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