

THE WRIGHT FAMILY FOR THE RIGHT TIME IN INDIANA

TIMOTHY PAUL WESTBROOK

Harding University

Some of the greatest influences in the Stone-Campbell movement in the nineteenth century came from Indiana. One commonly finds names such as Ovid Butler, J. M. Mathes, Elijah Goodwin, Joseph Hostetler, and John O'Kane in primary and secondary literature of antebellum and post-bellum Restoration history. Their dedication to developing the Churches of Christ and Christian Churches in their state left lasting effects, such as the lengthy history of the *Christian Record* and the establishment of North Western Christian University (later Butler University). However, they were not the only men who left their marks. They had co-workers in the fields who committed a lifetime of sacrifices for the cause of planting and nurturing churches in the Hoosier state.

One family stood out above the rest in southern and central Indiana. Amos Wright Sr. and five of his sons, John, Peter, Levi, Amos, and Joshua, established a cluster of Christian churches in that region and assisted in the growth of Indiana churches through their evangelistic campaigns. The Wrights have not been totally overlooked by historians, but few have given much treatment to their important influence. This present study is an effort to provide more details of this family's impact as part of the mosaic of the Stone-Campbell Movement.

The Birth of the Blue River Baptist Association

The Wrights' story began before the Cane Ridge revival of 1801 and outside the state of Indiana. Amos Wright Sr., born in Rowan County, North Carolina, in 1764, descended from Richard Wright, who had immigrated from England during the mid-eighteenth century.¹ The family had multiple religious influences, from the Quakers to the Dunkards; however, they eventually joined the Dependant Baptists before they started an independent movement of their own.²

¹ Herbert Arkin Jr., "Descendants of Richard Wright, Sr. of Rowan County, North Carolina, Four Generations," p. 45, 3 [article on-line]; available from <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~herbarkin>; Internet; accessed 14 April 2006.

² Madison Evans, *Biographical Sketches of the Pioneer Preachers of Indiana* (Philadelphia: J. Challen & Sons, 1862), 29.

Amos Wright Sr. married Elizabeth Lowe (1766–1807) in 1782. In the mid-1790s Amos and Elizabeth with their five children, John (1783–1851),³ Anna Patsy (1787–1833), Peter (1789–1857), Levi (1793–1869), and Joshua (1795–1863), moved to Virginia. After a few years they relocated to Wayne County, Kentucky.⁴ Elizabeth gave birth to Amos, Jr. (1804–1880) while they were living in Kentucky. In 1807, Elizabeth Wright passed away, and Amos Wright Sr. married Margaret Davis (1766–1842). After this time they began their move to Indiana.⁵

John Wright, now grown to adulthood, began showing an interest in ministry. In 1803, he married Peggy Wolfescale, who unfortunately died on John's birthday, December 12, 1805. Two years later he married Nancy Peleer (1792–1844), whom he loved deeply and welcomed as a devoted partner in his ministry.⁶ In 1807 John and Nancy moved from Kentucky to the Indiana Territory, and in August of 1808, they both decided to be immersed in the Ohio River. After their immersion, they joined the Baptist church; that same year John began to preach.⁷

The dates leading up to the Wrights' ministry in southern Indiana are significant. Thomas Campbell came to America in 1807, and Alexander Campbell followed two years later. Warder W. Stevens noted that John Wright actually heard Alexander Campbell preach a few times, inspiring him to become a preacher.⁸ Stevens must have had poor information since Alexander Campbell did not arrive in the United States until 1809 and Wright began preaching soon after his baptism. This does not mean that Wright never heard Campbell speak, but Campbell cannot be attributed to having inspired John Wright to begin preaching.

In 1810 John Wright moved to Blue River, four miles south of Salem, Indiana. His father, Amos, Sr., and his brothers also moved to Washington

³ Most secondary sources give 1785 as John Wright's birth date. This may be attributed to Evans, who wrote that John was born Dec. 12, 1785. Printed in 1862, Evans's book is one of the earliest authorities on the subject of Indiana preachers. However, John Wright stated in his own journal that on Dec. 12, 1844, he was 61 years old, making the year of his birth 1783. This agrees with his obituary written by H. T. N. Benedict, although Benedict said he was born on Oct. 12, 1783. In sum, the most likely date of birth was Dec. 12, 1783 (Evans, 29; John Wright Sr., "Record of the Life and Pilgrimage of John Wright Sr., 1844–1850," TMs [photocopy], 4, Washington County Historical Society, Salem, IN; H. T. N. Benedict, "Obituary," *Christian Record* 2nd series, 1 [May 1851]: 352; and Cox, 83). *Christian Record* hereinafter *CR*.

⁴ Arkin, 45–51; Evans, 29–30; Henry Wright, "Obituary," *CR* 4th series, 4 (April 1870): 190.

⁵ Arkin, 51.

⁶ Evans, 30. Arkin recorded Nancy's maiden name as Purlee (Arkin, 46), while Evans wrote Peleer.

⁷ Benedict, 352; Evans, 30; and David B. Eller, "Hoosier Brethren and the Origins of the Restoration Movement," *Brethren Life and Thought* 27, no. 1 (2004): 50.

⁸ Warder W. Stevens, *Centennial History of Washington County, Indiana: Its People, Industries and Institutions* (Indianapolis: B. F. Bowen & Co., 1916), 354.

County, where they began pioneering new ministries. That year the Wrights organized a Free Will Baptist Church⁹ just prior to Alexander Campbell's Brush Run congregation, which was established in 1811.

After the War of 1812, the Wrights' evangelistic efforts picked up momentum. Amos, Sr., John, and Peter actively preached in the county, resulting in the founding of ten Baptist churches. They also changed their name from Free Will Baptist to the Blue River Association.¹⁰ The Blue River Association gravitated toward ideology similar to that of the Stone-Campbell movement. In 1819 John Wright introduced a resolution that the Blue River church be called "Church of Christ," a designation that spread to the other congregations in their group.¹¹ As individuals, they were to be called "Friends," "Disciples," or "Christians."¹²

The Decade of Merging in Indiana

The Blue River Association served as a microcosm for several homegrown restoration movements in Indiana. Several associations and organizations emerged that sought a unified Christian front. The Silver Creek Baptist Church was considered the first Protestant congregation in Indiana, founded on November 22, 1798. In 1812 the Silver Creek Association was formed, consisting of nine congregations.¹³ It was considered a "respectable" and "large" Baptist association led by Absalom Littell, Mordecia Cole, and J. T. Littell.¹⁴ The Littells became avid readers of the *Christian Baptist*, which resulted in their forming break-away congregations that attempted to establish churches unified by the "Bible alone."¹⁵ Mathes recalled that in 1827, or 1828, these churches exchanged the name "Regular Baptist" for "Christian," and the "Confession of faith," for "the Bible alone."¹⁶

Key leaders from the Brethren church were also emerging as restoration preachers in Kentucky, eventually infiltrating southern Indiana as well. Adam Hostetler held independent meetings from Dunkard meetings, and he and Peter Hon were dismissed from the Brethren between 1816 and 1820. In addition, Hon and Abraham Kern began preaching single immersion rather

⁹ "Church Record," Church of Christ, Blue River, IN, March 1836; Evans, 31.

¹⁰ Evans, 31.

¹¹ Ed Stowell Mace, *Through a Hundred Years: A History of the First Christian Church of Salem, Indiana, Published on the Occasion of Its Centennial Anniversary* (Salem, IN: The Leader Pub. Co., 1942), 5.

¹² Evans, 32.

¹³ Henry K. Shaw, *Hoosier Disciples: A Comprehensive History of the Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) in Indiana* (Bethany, VA: Bethany Press, 1966), 19.

¹⁴ Mathes, "Tour to the South," 84.

¹⁵ W. D. Bartle, *The Story of Park Christian Church, New Albany, Indiana* (New Albany, IN: Jacob Hessing, W. D. Bartle, Chas. M. Porter Pub. Comm., 1930), 6-9.

¹⁶ Mathes, "Tour to the South," 84.

than the triune immersion of the Brethren.¹⁷ Shaw noted that the *Christian Baptist* had a particular influence on Joseph Hostetler.¹⁸

In 1827 John Wright suggested a merger between his group and the Hostetlers' Dunkards.¹⁹ He and his brother, Peter, along with other representatives, attended the "Annual Conference of the Tunkers" to suggest a union on the Bible alone. At the same meeting, he proposed a union with the New Lights, which led to the Edinburgh Conference.²⁰

Several Restoration preachers had backgrounds in the New Lights in Indiana: Elijah Goodwin, Beverly Vawter, Michael Combs, J. M. Mathes, and John O'Kane.²¹ This branch of the New Lights migrated from Kentucky and was closely associated with the "old" Christian movement. In southern Indiana, they had primarily settled in Clark and Jefferson Counties.²² The New Lights of Indiana were ripe for change in the 1820s. Michael Combs had been reared to believe that "the Bible and the Bible alone [was] . . . an all sufficient rule of faith and practice." Upon hearing David Purviance at a revival meeting in 1822, he was baptized.²³ J. M. Mathes was reared a Baptist but identified himself with the New Lights after his personal studies of the Bible and reading of the *Christian Baptist*.²⁴ Eventually, Combs, Mathes, Vawter, Goodwin, and O'Kane joined the "current reformation."²⁵

In August of 1827, Jesse Hughes, president of the Brethren of the Christian Church in the Eastern District of Indiana (with Beverly Vawter as the clerk) announced in the *Christian Messenger* a unity meeting that would take place in the next year near Edinburgh, Indiana.²⁶ On July 25, 1828, the New Lights and the Wrights gathered at the house of F. Steinberger in Bartholomew County. The minutes do not reflect much content of their discussions, but their bipartisan cooperation is apparent.²⁷ Joseph Hatchitt wrote, "The Bros. Wrights . . . have been formerly denominated 'Depending Baptists'; but lately have laid that name aside, and now call themselves 'the Church of Christ.' . . .

¹⁷ Eller, 39–42.

¹⁸ Shaw, 50.

¹⁹ Eller, 43.

²⁰ Evans, 33.

²¹ Shaw, 60–69.

²² Ibid., 61.

²³ Kerr, 10.

²⁴ Shaw, 64 n. 28.

²⁵ Ibid., 65, 69.

²⁶ Jesse Hughes, "Communicated," *Christian Messenger* 1 (Aug. 25, 1827): 240.

²⁷ Jesse Hughes, "For the Christian Messenger," *Christian Messenger* 2 (Sept. 1828): 259. Cauble wrote that Joseph Hostetler was also in attendance to represent the Dunkards, but his name was not included in the minutes. Neither does Evans mention J. Hostetler's attendance at the meeting; in fact, the statements that Cauble quoted from Evans were reflections of union that occurred "a few subsequent years" after the Edinburgh meeting (Cauble, 34; Evans, 33, 66–67).

When we met in conference together, we could find nothing to separate us asunder."²⁸

Evans spoke of another meeting at the "Annual Meeting of the Southern District" that was a few years after the Edinburgh meeting. He did not give a date, but representatives from the Baptists, Tunkers, and New Lights were all listed as having attended. Evans mentioned specifically John Wright, Peter Wright, Abram Kern, Mordecai Cole, and the Littells. The result of the meeting was "permanent union" with a merging of about three thousand people.²⁹

Over the course of the next few years, these districts of Baptists, New Lights, and Dunkards would join the ranks of other congregations in the Stone-Campbell movement. John Wright wrote, "formerly we had 'Regular Baptists, separate Baptists, German or Dunkard Baptists, free will Baptists, christain [*sic*] connexion, or as they were called, new lights.' . . . Much of the partyism that had existed, was removed, and most of these party names were done away, by a union in Christ upon the bible alone."³⁰ One should note that this merger, influenced by both the *Christian Messenger* and the *Christian Baptist*, began before the Stone-Campbell merger in 1832. This is an example of an ideological merger of the Christians and the Disciples before it had taken place officially.³¹

The Wright Brothers

Although the Wright brothers, John, Peter, Levi, Joshua, and Amos, Jr. made a significant impact serving as catalysts for the Restoration movement's development in Indiana, their greatest contribution to ministry was in the local congregations. They were true missionaries who devoted their lives to church plantings and nurturing.

Peter Wright

Few have recorded the Wrights' local works during the formative years of their movement. However, some have left traces of their history in later writings. For example, in 1875, Josiah T. Johnson wrote the obituary of his father (Jordan Johnson). He included in this letter that Jordan Johnson was married to Lavina Wright, daughter of John Wright and that Peter had baptized Jordan and his niece, Lavina, in Mill Creek on October 4, 1829.³² We do not know much about Peter Wright, but we do know that he married Rachel Wood in 1812, who bore him eight children.³³ After Rachel died, Peter

²⁸ Joseph Hatchitt, "A Letter," *Christian Messenger* 2 (Sept. 1828): 260-61.

²⁹ Evans, 34.

³⁰ John Wright, "Incidents," 119.

³¹ See Shaw, 82-89.

³² Josiah T. Johnson, "Obituary," *CR* 5th Series, 1 (April 1874): 189.

³³ Arkin, 49. One of Peter and Rachel's sons, Tilman Wright, was the great-grandfather of Georgia Pruett Hobby (1916-). Alvin and Georgia Hobby served as Church of Christ missionaries in Zambia for more than 40 years. Their son, Dr. George

married a second time to Magaret Moore. Peter remained actively involved in evangelism through the duration of his life.³⁴

Levi Wright

Levi Wright and his family moved to Putnam County, east of Indianapolis. He had a strong ministry near Greencastle with a church of about 125 members in Long Branch,³⁵ where he served as an elder. He also served as a preacher along with his nephew Nathan Wright (Amos, Jr.'s son).³⁶ In 1850 Claiborne Wright (probably a son of Amos Wright and brother of Nathan) reported that Levi was moving to Iowa.³⁷ Levi Wright stayed in Iowa until his death in December 1869. He was a preacher about forty years.³⁸

Joshua Wright

Joshua Wright lived and preached in Hamilton County, north of Indianapolis. We do not know much about his life. We do know that John Wright visited Joshua while touring the central part of the state and that John wrote the obituary for Amos A. Wright, Joshua's son, who died at the age of 24 with typhoid fever in 1849.³⁹ In 1854 Joshua Wright reported from Winchester, Missouri (Clark County), to the *Christian Record* about a new church plant.⁴⁰ He died in Clark County, Missouri, in 1863.⁴¹

Amos Wright Jr.

Amos Wright Jr., the youngest son of Amos, Sr. and Elizabeth, also lived a life dedicated to ministry. He was just a boy when his father and older brothers began the Free Will Baptist church, and he grew up committed to their cause. In 1822, he married Jane Goss, and they resided in Washington County.⁴² J. W. Wolfe, who wrote Jane Wright's obituary, said the following about their home:

her husband [has been] also a pioneer preacher, who has devoted almost his entire time to the work of preaching the Gospel, in the Church of Christ. Therefore her

Hobby (1943–2004), provided many of the genealogical records that sparked my interest in this research project.

³⁴ See John B. Hayward, "News from the Churches," *Millennial Harbinger* NS, 3 (Nov. 1839): 551; and John Wright, "Life and Pilgrimage," 34.

³⁵ Claiborne Wright, "News from the Churches," *CR* 4 (May 1847): 349–50.

³⁶ Elijah Goodwin, "Church Statistics," *CR* 6 (March 1849): 282; Arkin, 21. John in his journal mentioned meetings he held with Levi in Putnam County (John Wright, "Life and Pilgrimage," 14, 27, 33).

³⁷ Claiborne Wright, "News from the Churches," *CR* 2nd Series, 1 (Dec. 1850): 185.

³⁸ Henry Wright, 190.

³⁹ John Wright, "Life and Pilgrimage," 11–12, 27–28; John Wright Sr., "Obituary," *CR* 7 (Jan. 1850): 224.

⁴⁰ Joshua Wright, "Church News," *CR* 2nd Series, 5 (Sept. 1854): 286. J. M. Mathes noted at the end of this letter that Joshua was an "agent," or collector, for the *CR*.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*; Arkin, 49.

⁴² Arkin, 51; J. W. Wolfe, "Obituary," *CR* 4th Series, 4 (July 1870): 333.

house has been the preacher's home and the home of the disciples of Christ for forty-seven and one-half years.⁴³

In the late 1840s and early 1850s, Amos, Jr. held meetings with John Wright, Jacob Wright (John's son), Thomas Green,⁴⁴ and J. M. Mathes.⁴⁵ In 1875, he published an essay titled "The Fall of Man."⁴⁶ Prior to this submission, however, he reflected on his expiring life on earth,

I was 70 years old last month . . . and think that my work is about done. But I know that while I am at home in the body, I am absent from the Lord. But I had rather be "absent from the body and present with the Lord." But we must "labor, that whether present or absent, we may be accepted of him."⁴⁷

To be sure, Amos Wright Jr. labored until he could labor no more. He died on February 7, 1880, in Edwardsport, Indiana.⁴⁸

"Elder" John Wright

"Elder" John Wright was the best known of the Wright brothers. As indicated above, he led the way in spreading NT Christianity in southern Indiana. From the launch of the *Christian Record* in 1843 until his death in 1851, he often sent reports of his whereabouts to the magazine, recording the churches that he visited and how many additions resulted. He cared greatly for these churches, showing impartiality towards men and women, rich and poor, white and black.⁴⁹ This pioneer in the Stone-Campbell movement was loved and respected.⁵⁰

As an "agent" for the *Christian Record*,⁵¹ he collected funds for subscriptions. In his letters to the *Christian Record*, he encouraged churches to trust the "preaching brethren" with their dues for the periodical.⁵² He personally was conscientious with his collections, taking careful notes of the funds.⁵³

⁴³ Wolfe, 333.

⁴⁴ For more on Thomas Green's role in the development of the Churches of Christ in Washington County, see Stevens, 578.

⁴⁵ Charles D. Green, "News from the Churches," *CR* 6 (Jan. 1849): 222; George H. Hon, "News from the Churches," *CR* 7 (Oct. 1849): 126; Amos Wright Jr., "News from the Churches," *CR* 2nd Series, 1 (Dec. 1850): 183; J. M. Mathes, "Report of a Short Tour to Southern Indiana," *CR* 2nd Series, 1 (May 1851): 347.

⁴⁶ Amos Wright Jr. "The Fall of Man," *CR* 5th Series, 2 (Sept. 1875): 519-21.

⁴⁷ Amos Wright Jr., "Church News," *CR* 5th Series, 2 (July 1875): 442.

⁴⁸ Arkin, 51.

⁴⁹ John Wright Sr., "Report," *CR* 1 (Dec. 1843): 137; John Wright, "Life and Pilgrimage," 34. Referring to a black congregation, John Wright described their efforts as follows: "we had a meeting such as is not common, but to their great comfort, with joy and rejoicing" (34).

⁵⁰ Mathes introduced John Wright's report with "written by that distinguished old servant of God, Eld. John Wright, in his own peculiar loving style" (John Wright, "Report," 136).

⁵¹ J. M. Mathes, "Agents for the *CR*," *CR* 4 (April 1847): 315.

⁵² John Wright Sr. "News from the Churches," *CR* 6 (Sept. 1848): 93.

⁵³ John Wright, "Life and Pilgrimage," 3.

He observed keenly the larger context of the Stone-Campbell movement in Indiana, where the churches were heading toward institutionalization.⁵⁴ One form of institution that developed was the Annual State Meeting. During the early days of the movement, associations were replaced with the Annual Meeting that had no legislative authority. The Blue River Association made this change around 1821, and the Silver Creek Association restructured in 1827 or 1828. J. M. Mathes described these meetings as having "no legislative business" but rather representation of churches by letters or "Messengers."⁵⁵

The meetings continued regionally until 1839, when the first statewide meeting was held. The announcement was given in the *Heretic Detector* and in the *Millennial Harbinger*.⁵⁶ John Wright normally did not attend the State Meeting; rather he adhered to the regional meetings of the "Southern District" and reported on these events in publications. For example, in 1843 he reported from the meeting at Mill Creek, Washington County, where twenty-nine churches and two thousand Christians participated. He assessed that the group met with a spirit of love and unity. He concluded his report by encouraging his readers to attend their meeting or other district meetings.⁵⁷

In 1846, John Wright attended his first State Meeting, where the ministers' demonstration of cooperation impressed him. He appreciated their lack of a "heady, high-minded, self-important spirit." He perceived that their meeting made no attempt at organized legislative power, deeming the group "a general assembly for the State of Indiana."⁵⁸

The movement in Indiana continued to institutionalize, as demonstrated by the establishment of the North Western Christian University (proposed in 1847) and the Indiana Christian Home Missionary Society (proposed in 1849). Curiously, John Wright gave no response to this trend. His silence, however, should not necessarily be interpreted as an objection. He maintained good relations with those who were involved (e.g., Elijah Goodwin, J. M. Mathes, and S. W. Leonard).⁵⁹ Rather, he was a man of the field. His primary interest was in traveling from church to church, preaching the gospel, and leaving behind a community blessed by his efforts.

During the final years of his life, John Wright witnessed the tragedy of losing some of his immediate family members. Three accounts were reported

⁵⁴ See Shaw, 112–54.

⁵⁵ Mathes, "Tour to the South," 84.

⁵⁶ B. K. Smith, "Great Meeting at Indianapolis," *Heretic Detector* 3 (April 1839): 88–89; J. M. Mathes, "News from the Churches," *Millennial Harbinger* 3 (June 1839): 284; Shaw, 90 n. 17.

⁵⁷ John Wright, "Report," 136–38. It was also decided at that meeting that the venue would move to Driftwood, Jackson County, in the following year (137).

⁵⁸ John Wright Sr., "State Meeting," *CR* 4 (Dec. 1846): 172.

⁵⁹ See Silas W. Leonard, "News from the Churches," *CR* 2nd Series, 1 (Sept. 1850): 90–93. Leonard was an "agent" of the university and the missionary society, but he participated jointly with John Wright and Jacob Wright at the annual meeting of Silver Creek (93).

in the *Christian Record* in the 1840s. First, John Wright Jr. died at the age of nineteen on November 19, 1843. The grieving father briefly wrote, "He died a christian, and is gone to the land of the blessed. . . . Farewell."⁶⁰ The passing of his wife Nancy occurred one year later, in 1844. She died while John Wright was holding meetings with J. M. Mathes on August 29.⁶¹ T. C. Johnson wrote her obituary, saying, "She lodged strangers, washed the saints' feet, brought up a family of children, all of whom now living, are members of the church of God, and one of them (Elder Jacob Wright) is an able minister of the New Testament."⁶² In public writings John Wright did not disclose his personal feelings about her death; however, in his journal he wrote, "Oh how lonesome I feel and surely I am, no tender companion to console me, between this and the grave and heaven."⁶³ The loss of Nancy was a devastating blow. The third family member's death reported was that of Amos Wright Sr., his father. Amos, Sr. died on October 14, 1846, at the age of 84. John said of his father, "He was one of the meek of the earth, and without an enemy in the world."⁶⁴ Amos, Sr. lived for fifty to sixty years as a Christian, and he was a "teacher of Christianity" for more than forty years.⁶⁵

In the spring of 1851, John Wright became ill and sought comfort at the home of his son, Ransom Wright. At that time, J. M. Mathes was on a nearby tour and visited his dear friend. He wrote,

Though his sufferings were great, he was patient and resigned; and spoke with ecstasy [*sic*] of his glorious home in heaven. This beloved old brother has been a public teacher of the christian Religion for near half a century. And though not a learned man, he has exerted a powerful influence upon the destinies of the reformation in Southern Indiana. He was emphatically a *good man*.⁶⁶

While dying, Wright talked of hope; and he wanted his family to witness it. Benedict wrote, "Had the skeptic been privileged to behold the triumphant exist of this man of God, his skepticism would have been blown away by the dying breath of this aged—this devoted servant of our divine Redeemer."⁶⁷ John Wright breathed his last on May 2, 1851.

Conclusion

The Stone-Campbell movement in Indiana is indebted to Amos Wright Sr. and his five preaching sons. They sought Christian unity and biblical truth in a frontier land ripe for change. Amos, Sr., John, Peter, Levi, Joshua, and Amos, Jr., were the Wright men at the right time in southern and central Indiana.

⁶⁰ John Wright Sr., "News from the Churches," *CR* 1 (Dec. 1843): 141.

⁶¹ Mathes, "Tour to the South," 85–86.

⁶² T. C. Johnson, "Obituary," *CR* 2 (Oct. 1844): 95. See Evans, 349–62.

⁶³ John Wright, "Life and Pilgrimage," 1.

⁶⁴ John Wright Sr., "Obituary," *CR* 4 (Dec. 1846): 191.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Mathes, "Short Tour," 347.

⁶⁷ Benedict, 352. Benedict was the attending physician.

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