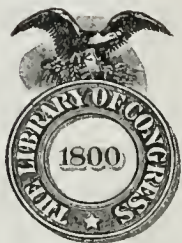


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SAILS AND SAILMAKERS

By JAMES FRANKLIN BRIGGS

PAPER READ AT MEETING OF THE
OLD DARTMOUTH HISTORICAL SOCIETY

APRIL 27th, 1937

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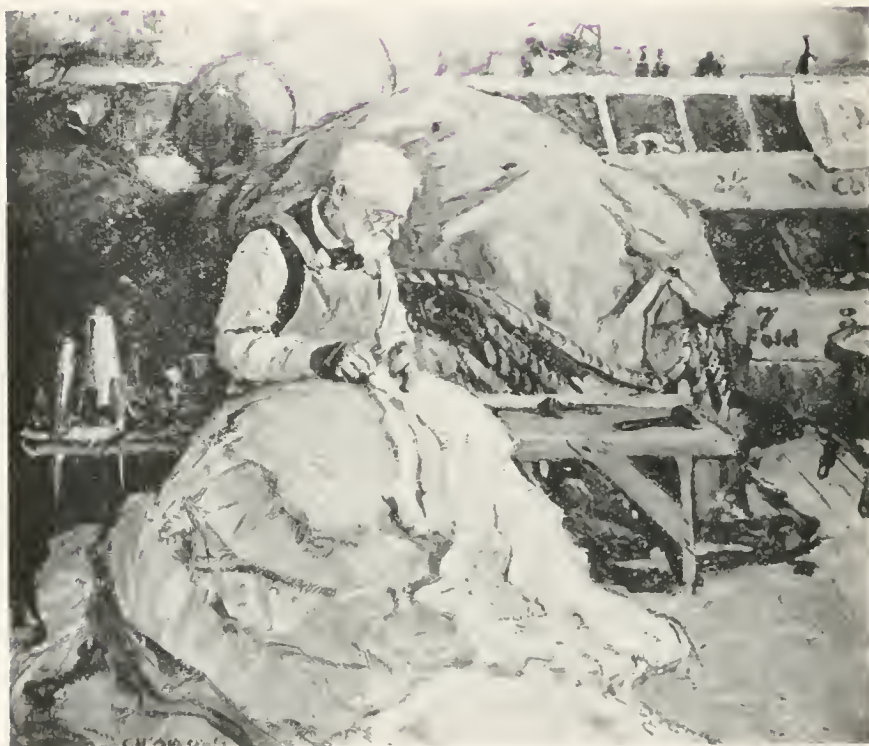
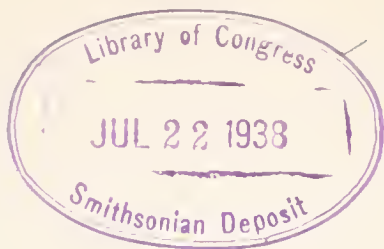
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OLD DARTMOUTH
HISTORICAL SKETCHES

No. 65

In the Series of Sketches
of New Bedford's Early History



THE SAILMAKER

—From the painting by Clifford W. Ashley

SAILS AND SAILMAKERS

LITTLE has been recorded about the days and the ways of Sailmakers. Yet sails brought Columbus to discover the New World and the Pilgrims to found our commonwealth. When there were few highways, sails furnished the means of transportation and communication between the colonies. Again sails enabled our fathers to drag from the ocean the wealth that built our city. It is not unfitting, therefore, that our Society should have a passing interest in sails and sailmakers.

It is suggested that the first physical force used by man beyond his own bodily powers was the force of the wind upon a crude sail. Whether this be so or not, we know that the origin of sails lies beyond the remotest horizon of history. We may imagine that some early savage, astride a floating log, found his loose garment of skin caught the wind and quickened the slow movement of the log. Perhaps he ceased poling along the bottom of a shallow lake, and raising the skin garment on the end of his pole, allowed the wind to take the place of muscular effort. (1) This may have been the first sail.

Now leaving the field of prehistoric years that only the imagination can picture, let us explore a few early records. The Hebrew account of the building of the Ark gives the exact dimensions and the material of the Ark, but makes no allusion to sails. (2) Possibly sails were not known in those days, or more likely were not needed by Noah, since he had no place to sail to.

Some early evidences of sails are found in Egypt even on pre-dynastic boats. Later sculptures depicting Egyptian boats at Punt on the Red Sea, in the reign of Queen Hatshepu about 1450 B. C., show that each boat carried many oars and one low mast with a wide rectangular sail spread between an upper and a lower yard. (3)

In the fourth book of the *Odyssey* Menelaus says, "So soon as early Dawn shone forth, the rosy-fingered, first of all we drew down our ships to the fair salt sea, and placed the masts and the sails in the gallant ships, and the crew too climbed on board, and sat upon the benches, and smote the grey sea water with their oars." From this crystal-clear picture we get several facts about boats of the twelfth century before

Christ. The ships of these Greeks were drawn up on land. Such craft could have no depth of keel, and hence could not sail against the wind. The masts and sails were attached together and were taken down and put up as occasion demanded. Oars were used in the same boats with sails, doubtless when the wind gave out, or blew from an adverse direction.

In the twenty-seventh chapter of Ezekiel, verse seven describes the sail of a Phoenician galley of the sixth century B. C. in these words: "Fine linen with brodered work from Egypt was that which thou spreadest forth to be thy sail." This was written in disapproval of the luxury of the wealthy citizens of Tyre.

The materials of which sails were made in the old world were mainly hemp or flax, with coarse rattan matting used in the Far East, and tapa, a cloth made of bark, in the South Seas. In our country cotton duck is used almost exclusively. Lately light sails have been made of silk. In the 1936 Boat Show in New York I saw a small boat rigged with a sail made of celophane. The advantage of such a transparent sail is that when racing with another boat to leeward, you do not have to look under your boom to see what your opponent is doing, because you can keep watch of him right through your sail. Apparently celophane was not successful as sail cloth for no such sail appeared in the 1937 Boat Show.

We turn now from sails to sailmakers. The evidence of sails proves the existence of sailmakers as early as 3500 years before Christ, but we have no record of who they were or how they worked.

The Book of Acts tells us that the Apostle Paul was a tent maker. (4) If the Jews had been a maritime people, Paul would doubtless have been a sailmaker. Indeed it is altogether probable that on his four Mediterranean voyages the skilled needle of Paul helped to mend rents in the ship's sails caused by the tempestuous Euroclydon.

Let us pass over seventeen centuries and come from the distant Mediterranean to our own Buzzards Bay. Leonard Ellis in his "History of New Bedford" says that when Joseph Rotch came from Nantucket to our shores in 1765 "He found upon his arrival a little hamlet comprising among its inhabitants Joseph Russell, John Loudon, ship-builders; Benjamin Taber, block maker and boat builder; Gideon Mosher, mechanic; Elnathan Sampson, blacksmith." (5) If there was any sailmaker in the village at that time, he was not sufficiently important to be named.

Under the vigorous leadership of Joseph Rotch, however, whaling and its allied crafts grew rapidly. "From Dartmouth there were annually fitted (in the years) 1770-1775," says Leonard Ellis, "eighty vessels of 6,500 tonnage. ————— Vessels were built on the Acushnet and Apponegansett Rivers, and sail lofts, rope walks, cooper shops and wharves came into existence." (6)

If we bear in mind that all ships in those days moved only by means of sails, we will readily grant that as the shipping of New Bedford increased, the industry of sailmaking here must have grown proportionately in size and importance. In 1805 there were belonging to this port 112 vessels. By 1853 there were more than three times as many. Five years later to outfit the whalers required 205,000 yards of canvas. (7) This indicates busy times for the sailmakers.

We have said that when Joseph Rotch came from Nantucket he found here a certain shipwright named John Loudon. This John Loudon in 1760 purchased from that princely landowner Joseph Russell an acre of land on the water front south of Union Street. He constructed a wharf in line of the present Commercial Street. In 1787 Loudon sold what land he then had left to Isaac Howland, (8) who built a candle works and distillery at the head of the wharf. The wharf was subsequently called I. & G. Howland's, and later Commercial Wharf. (9)

On this wharf in 1836 we find the following business houses:

At number one, Charles R. Tucker, Ship Chandler and Grocer.

At number three, the counting room of that famous shipping house, Isaac Howland, Jr. & Co., whose members were then listed as Gideon Howland, Thomas Mandell, Edward Mott Robinson and others.

At the corner of Orange Street (now called Front Street) were Chapman & Bonney, Sailmakers.

At number ten, Whitney & Lindsay, Grocers and Commission Merchants.

And at an unnumbered location on I. & G. Howlands wharf was Simpson Hart, Sailmaker.

Who was this sailmaker Simpson Hart and where did he come from? His paternal ancestors in the early 1640's had come from London to Taunton, then to Portsmouth, R. I. and North Dartmouth. His father, Simpson Hart Senior, was born in 1763 in the house of his

father, William Hart, a large landowner of North Dartmouth. This house, built in 1717, (10) is still standing on the west side of Faunce Corner Road north of the railroad track. (11)

Simpson Hart, Junior, was born in New Bedford in 1804. At the age when boys used to choose between college and going to sea, he chose to go to sea. His older sister, Sophia, had married Thomas Mandell, a partner in the firm of Isaac Howland, Jr. and Company. They owned not only whaleships, but also merchant vessels, and carried on a lucrative trade with China. In one of these China merchantmen Simpson Hart sailed. At his own request he was permitted to land at Tahiti, and to spend a year in exploring the South Sea Islands. Later he became a master mariner in command of ships sailing to China and to Liverpool, but he gave up the sea for a very good reason.

He fell in love with Ruth Swift Briggs, daughter of a successful Boston merchant in the China trade. Ruth's family consented to the marriage only upon condition of his establishing himself in business on shore.

If he could not go to sea, he would make sails for ships. So in 1834 he obtained a location on I. & G. Howland's Wharf and erected the sign "Simpson Hart, Sailmaker." In the same year he married the lady of his heart. (12)

From the beginning the business prospered. New Bedford, although it remained a town for thirteen years more, and did not achieve the dignity of a city until 1847, was growing by leaps and bounds.

In 1836 its population was 11,113, an increase of 47% in six years, and its citizens owned 167 whaling vessels. The directory of that year lists five sailmaking firms (14) and twenty-six individual sail-makers.

In 1843 "Uncle Gid" Howland, in one of his sober moments, decided to build a three story granite block on the north side of Commercial Street. This was owned by Gideon Howland and his two daughters, Sylvia Ann Howland and Abby Slocum Robinson, mother of Hetty Green. They rented the top story, or loft, of the new building to Simpson Hart, Sailmaker.

You may ask, why did sailmakers always stow themselves away in the most inaccessible recesses of a building? It was necessary for a sailmaker to have a large floor unobstructed by posts or supports, because on this floor he must draw out the plan of each sail and lay down the cloths to be cut. Such floors could not be found except on the top story.

Lacking such a floor, an old-time sailmaker at Nantucket used to cut his large sails in the field. He drove a stake in the ground to mark each corner of the sail, and then starting from the tack, he would walk along a circuitous course and mark his way with a sharp stick. When he arrived at the stake marking the clew, he would look back at his marks and says, "Man's hand can't better that." The sweep in the foot of the mainsail would be from six to nine feet. But it did not matter so much in those days because the foot of the mainsail was made fast to the boom only at the corners. (15)

It was the custom among business men to endorse notes for each other. Simpson Hart endorsed for his friends. There came a collapse of credit and Simpson Hart was called upon to pay the notes bearing his endorsement. This forced him to the wall. He immediately started business again, however, and insisted on paying up not only his own proper obligations but also all of the notes that he had endorsed.

When he died at the age of seventy-two, it was stated that he occupied the leading position in the sailmaking business, and that he enjoyed the entire confidence of all who transacted business with him. (16)

Such was the master sailmaker. Of what stamp were the apprentices and the journeymen?

In the nineteenth century it was the custom of master sailmakers to take one or more boys for a three years apprenticeship. During that time the apprentice frequently lived in the family of the master, where he received his board and keep, but little or no wages.

James Hamilton, whom I remember in his old age as a giant of a man, came to New Bedford about 1830. At that time he was a raw-boned Irish boy. He lived with a Mr. Haffords, from whom he was learning the sailmaker's trade. James was not allowed at the table with the family. When the family left the table Mrs. Haffords carefully removed any remaining piece of pie or cake, and left only the codfish and potatoes for James.

The boy noticed that Mrs. Haffords sometimes made a dozen pies and set them on a beam in an unfinished back room. At night he would stealthily go down the back stairs, reach up to the beam in the darkness, seize the first plate that came to hand, and eat a whole pie. Then he would break up the plate and dispose of it, so as to leave no traces to betray him. (17)

Our good friend Roger W. Babson would say, "This series of events, gentlemen, illustrates the law of action and reaction."

An old time sailmaker, speaking of the 1850's said:

"Fifty years ago when the whalers from this port covered all the seas, it was hard work for a whaler to get a berth at any of these docks. Sailmakers were men of very different position in the old days. Each morning they came to the sail lofts with their high hats, canes, and sometimes gloves. None of them ever had to ask for a job. Instead they were at once recognized by the boss and begged to go to work. Often when there was a big lot of whaling vessels in port there were not enough men to satisfy all the master sailmakers. Then the custom of those who fell short was to wait at the foot of their rival's stairs toward sundown. As the journeymen came down from their day's work, they were asked to come to work at another loft until nine o'clock, which they often did, as there were no labor unions in those days to interfere with the men." (18)

The journeymen employed in Hart's sail loft were often men of small stature but of great virility and endurance. One of these, Theodore P. Crowell, began his apprenticeship before the Civil War. At the outbreak of hostilities he joined the Union Army. When the war was over he returned to New Bedford and finished his apprenticeship. He continued to be employed in our sail loft until he became blind, well past the age of eighty.

At one time when sailmakers were in great demand, every hour of overtime was counted as two hours. One man refused to go home. He worked until late into the night, caught a few winks of sleep on a pile of sails in the loft, and started in again at five in the morning, being paid for twenty-five hours in one day. Such was the old style "Sit down striker."

James Wittet, a little sailmaker of less than five feet in height, commuted from Marion. One Monday morning before seven o'clock my father, when about to unlock the stairway to the sail loft, found Wittet sitting on the door-step.

"You're here early, Jim."

"Yes, Mr. Briggs, I saw a good chance to come, so I came."

"Somebody gave you a lift?"

"No, sir, I got up before three this morning, and I walked."

He had tramped twelve miles of dusty road before beginning his week's work.

Hitch hikers please copy.

I remember a little old Santa Claus of a sailmaker named Church, who wore such an enormous white beard that I often wondered it didn't get caught in his stitches. On his sixty-second birthday he married his second wife and in less than a year their first child was born. Their last child was born when he was seventy-one years old; at least I find no later births recorded, although he lived to be eighty-one years old. (19)

A quiet man was George Brooks, who worked most of his life in Maine, but passed the last years of his sailmaking in our loft. Sitting on his bench, working on a boat sail, you see him here, painted from life by our fellow member, Clifford W. Ashley. On the day when this painting was first exhibited at the Swain School old Mr. Brooks died.*

These men were typical of the industry in the nineteenth century.

When about eight years of age I used to spend a part of each Saturday along the wharves, watching the sailors unbend sails from the yards of the square riggers, the donkey engines hoisting out casks of oil from the holds, and the sedate oil gaugers measuring the contents of oil barrels on the wharf, and drawing through the bung hole of each cask a test tube of the evil smelling stuff which they tasted for quality. Never did I see any of them make a wry face. One of these oil gaugers, Mr. George R. Phillips, used to attribute his robustness and long life to his partaking of this rich oily essence of the giants of the deep.

When the whaleship's sails had been loaded on one of Duddy's low gears, I and my companions were sometimes permitted to jump on the load and enjoy a ride up to the sail loft, bumping over railroad tracks and cobble-stoned streets to our intense enjoyment.

Upon arrival at the sail loft one of the sailors would sing out, "Ahoy, aloft!" The boss sailmaker would look out of the third story window and shout, "Ahoy, below!" The answer would come, "Sails from Bark Platina."

Then some of the sailmakers would leave their benches, and all of the sailors but two would scramble up the stairs to the loft to man the capstan. Long rope straps would be thrown out of the upper

* See frontispiece

doorway and spread on the sidewalk. The two sailors below would heave off the load one sail at a time, adjust the rope strap around the middle of the rolled up sail, and attach the bight of the strap to a large hook dangling on the end of a hoisting rope let down from above.

This rope, made of best manila one and a half inches thick, led over a sheave at the end of a beam projecting from the eaves of the building. The rope then passed to a wooden capstan that was two stories high. The upper story of the capstan in the attic acted as a drum around which the rope wound. The lower part of the capstan in the story below contained the square holes for the capstan bars. These bars were the size of fence rails seven feet long.

At the call "H'ist away," we boys delighted to tramp around the capstan, pushing on the bars with the sailmakers and sailors. When the sail was raised as high as the eaves, one man shifted to the opposite side of his capstan bar to hold the load. Then all the others took out their bars and went to the open doorway to pull in the sail.

At the words, "Slack away," the one man let his feet slide on the floor, and was pulled rapidly around the capstan, acting as a brake on the descending load. The floor was made of wide boards of native pine containing many huge knots. Fifty years of sliding around the capstan had worn down the soft pine but allowed to project the rounded and polished surfaces of the hard knots. We boys used to enjoy hanging on to a capstan bar when the sail was hauled in. There was a rapid forward motion, a centrifugal urge, and a sinuous up and down movement caused by your feet sliding over the projecting knots. It was not unlike riding on the "Rocky Road to Dublin" at Luna Park, or the thrill of skating rapidly over hubbly and wavy ice, which we used to call "ben-diddle-dums."

Sometimes all the sails did not come off the vessel's yards, but were taken from storage in the ship's lazarette. As they were hoisted up, West India cockroaches would drop on the side walk, big brown ones, three or four inches long. And how they would run! Seldom could we small boys run fast enough to catch one.

After the sails were hauled in, they were coiled up in the storage room of the sail loft in huge cylindrical piles about eight feet high. These many coils of sails made excellent places for us to play "tag" or "hide and seek". Climbing down inside one of these sail piles, as dark as a well, a boy inadvertently stepped into a nest of rats. The cries of the boy, the squeals of the rats, and the mad scramble of both for the upper air left us in doubt which was the more startled, the boy or the rats.

The whaleships away on a long voyage would call at some port, such as St. Helena, to land their catch and refit. The New Bedford agents would charter Schooner "Lottie Beard" to take out supplies and bring back oil. New sails would be included in the out bound cargo, packed in one or more large casks measuring 48 inches across the head by 52 inches high.

Al Wood the cooper with an assistant would appear at the sail loft riding on one of James Duddy's low gears with a new cask. From the sidewalk he would hail the boss sailmaker and announce that he'd come for the sails for Bark Sunbeam. While these were being broken out, he would roll the cask off the low gear and up end it on the sidewalk under the third story doorway. Then he would drive off the top hoops and take out the head.

By this time the first sail, rolled lengthwise and tied up every four feet, so that it roughly resembled a string of Gargantuan link sausages,—this sail would be ready to lower away from the open third story door. The cooper would climb into his cask, seize the lower end of the sail and place it on the bottom of the cask. As the roll of sail was slowly lowered he would coil it down, constantly walking around in the cask and stamping on the sail to compress it into the smallest possible volume. At first the cooper's head and shoulders only would appear above the rim of the cask, needing but a lantern to look like Diogenes of old, but gradually as more sails were stowed he would emerge from his seclusion, until standing on the last bolts of spare canvas at the top of the cask, he would look down with superiority on the circle of admiring small boys with an air that seemed to say:

"Here is an honest cask made of hand-split oak staves by honest labor. Here are honest sails stowed down in an honest way. I need no lantern,—behold the honest man!"

After the head was fitted in to the cask, the cooper would take a tool shaped like a huge two-tined kitchen fork, or tormenter, with turned down ends, and called a flagging iron. The turned down ends he would hook over two chimes of the cask. Then by putting the handle under his arm-pit and pressing sideways he would open up the crack between two staves, so that he would calk it with flags to make the cask water-tight.

After the upper hoops had been put on again the cooper and his helper, each holding a driver in the left hand and a hammer in the right, walked round and round the cask ringing smart blows of hammer on driver, driving down the hoops. When the contents had been

marked on the head of the cask, the cooper with his helper would roll the cask on to the low gear, by which it would be trundled down to the wharf alongside the "Lottie Beard." There with strap and tackle the cask would be swung aboard and lowered into the dark hold, where we will leave it in the care of Captain Marquand, master of the schooner.

A generation ago we felt that sails had reached a stationary standardized condition. We thought that a jib was always triangular and a mainsail always four-sided. Now we have Marconi or triangular mainsails and quadrilateral jibs. We thought that sails were best when made of closely woven duck to prevent the wind from getting through. Now sailmakers cut large holes in certain sails to let the wind through. We thought that the slides on the boom always ran fore and aft. Now the slides on a Park Avenue boom run athwartship.

We believed that the pressure on the windward side of a sail was all that counted. Now Dr. Manfred Curry tells us that the movement of air currents on the leeward side of a sail is of more importance than the pressure on the windward side. Sail boats are not driven, but are sucked forward. (20)

We used to give sails such easily understood names as Foretop-gallantsail, Mainroyalstaysail, and Mizzenlowertopsail.

Today we are confronted with sails named for animals or people such as Jumbo, Annie Oakley, or even Mae West.

Perhaps the next radical change will be in making sails a decorative feature of a boat. Already we have small sails made of Wamsutta sail cloth in all colors of the rainbow, and larger sails inscribed with letters and numbers, and even with symbols such as birds, comets, and stars. It is but a step more to reach the embroidered sails of the old Phoenicians.

And so we see this ancient craft undergoing rapid changes in a changing world. May Saint Paul, or whoever is the patron saint of sailmakers, open the windows of our minds to welcome the dawn of new knowledge, but at the same time grant us grace to look upon the ways of our fathers with warm affection.

NOTES

- (1) "Ships of the Seven Seas," by Hawthorne Daniel, chapters I and II.
- (2) Genesis VI: 14.
- (3) "The Temple of Deir el Bahari," by Edward Naville, Plate LXII.
- (4) Acts XVIII: 3.
- (5) "History of New Bedford and its Vicinity," by Leonard Bolles Ellis, page 17.
- (6) Ibid, pp. 409-410.
- (7) Ibid, page 422.
- (8) "The Epic of New Bedford" by William M. Emery, in O. D. H. Sketches No. 64 pp. 33-37.
- (9) New Bedford Directories of 1836 and 1838, by H. H. Crapo.
- (10) Hart family records.
- (11) "Smith Mills," by Henry B. Worth, O. D. H. Sketches, No. 20, page 24.
- (12) Statement of Mr. Francis R. Hart, grandson of Simpson Hart.
- (13) New Bedford Directory of 1836.
- (14) Chapman & Bonney
Orange St. corner of I. & G. Howland's Wharf
Charles Haffords
Rotch's Wharf
Cook & Hindson
Rear of 9 Middle St.
Charles Hitch
5 Taber's Wharf
Simpson Hart
I. & G. Howland's Wharf
- (15) Letter of Dr. Oliver W. Cobb to the writer.
- (16) "The Evening Standard, Nov. 6, 1876, and "The Morning Mercury," Nov. 7, 1876.
- (17) Letter of Dr. Oliver W. Cobb to the writer.
- (18) "History of New Bedford," by Zephaniah W. Pease, Vol. II page 276.
- (19) Vital statistics of the City of New Bedford.
- (20) "Yacht Racing; The Aerodynamics of Sails," by Manfred Curry, page 32.

Other Sources of information

- "History of New Bedford," by Daniel Ricketson.
Encyclopedia Britannica.
Chambers Encyclopedia.
- "The Most Ancient East," by V. Gordon Childe.
- "The Ancient Explorers," by Cary & Warmington.
- "A History of Egypt," by James Henry Breasted.
- "The Howland Heirs," by William M. Emery.
- "The Witch of Wall Street," by Boyden Sparkes & Samuel Taylor Moore.

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- *37. The Medley, an Old Newspaper; New Bedford, 1793. 24 pp. 15c.
- *38. The Whaleman Statue; Presentation and Description. An artistic delineation of the romance in whaling. Illustrated. 50 pp. 25c.
39. Proceedings Meetings January and March, 1914; Location of First Settlement of Dartmouth. To be issued later. About 15 pp. 12c.
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