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Caps, Canes, Pushball and Smokers: Student Life and Customs at the University of Michigan in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Introduction

This exhibit explores traditions and customs that became part of the student life experience at the University of Michigan during the 1800s and early 1900s.

Within the smaller student body at the University of Michigan then, certain customs and elements of dress distinguished students as members of their particular class or school. As shown in the following sections, headwear, canes and smoker meetings are just some examples of how these events and items became iconic displays of class pride as well as sources of rivalry between classes.



Sophomore Class of 1877 in front of University Hall, 1875.
From UM Photographs Vertical File.

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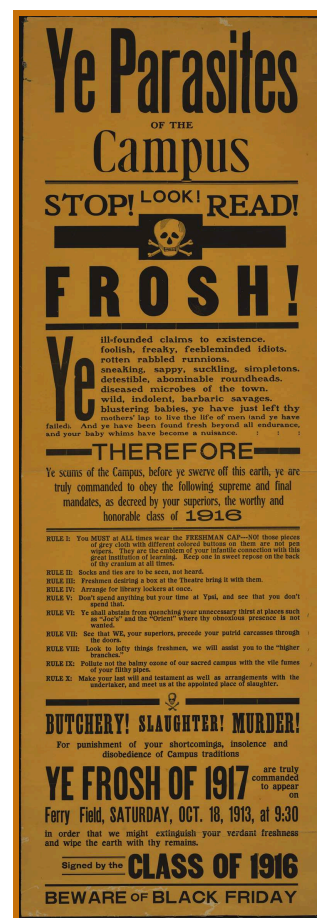
Caps, Canes, Pushball and Smokers: Student Life and Customs at the University of Michigan

Class Rivalries

Class rivalries have been a part of UM history since the late 19th century. Medics, Laws and Lits would provoke and challenge each other throughout their university years. This behavior and practices would become an expected part of the freshman and sophomore experience as well. In the process of initiating the incoming students, classes would face each other multiple times a year in class challenges, games, and hazing. Living through the first two years at the University of Michigan was enduring frequent class hostilities, kidnapping of class officers, house-raiding, face-painting, and hair-cutting, all with the idea of fostering class spirit.¹

These clashes go back to the fall of 1867 when the tradition started as a result of fights between two classes. Initially freshmen and sophomores would challenge each other to football matches; a game that was played very differently then. Rules allowed for an unlimited number of men, and wrestling and boxing were part of the game.²

These matches were eventually banned because of the resulting violence and injuries. Between 1904 and 1908, as these practices became more humiliating and violent, official class games were established by the Student Council as a way to channel the existing rivalries between classes.



Black Friday 1913.
From Freshman Sophomore Rush Posters

1: Shaw, Wilfred B. The Shaw, Wilfred B. The : An Encyclopedic Survey. Ann Arbor, MI. University of Michigan Press, 1942. p. 1771-1775.

2: Shaw, Wilfred B. The Shaw, Wilfred B. The : An Encyclopedic Survey. Ann Arbor, MI. University of Michigan Press, 1942. p.1773

Ye Parasites

OF THE

Campus

STOP! LOOK! READ!



FROSH!

Ye ill-founded claims to existence.
 foolish, freaky, feebleminded idiots.
 rotten rabbled runnions.
 sneaking, sappy, suckling, simpletons.
 detestible, abominable roundheads.
 diseased microbes of the town.
 wild, indolent, barbaric savages.
 blustering babies, ye have just left thy
 mothers' lap to live the life of men (and ye have
 failed). And ye have been found fresh beyond all endurance,
 and your baby whims have become a nuisance. : : :

—THEREFORE—

Ye scums of the Campus, before ye swerve off this earth, ye are
 truly commanded to obey the following supreme and final
 mandates as decreed by your superiors, the worthy and

mandates, as decreed by your superiors, the worthy and
 honorable class of **1916**

- RULE I:** You **MUST** at ALL times wear the **FRESHMAN CAP**---NO! those pieces of grey cloth with different colored buttons on them are not pen wipers. They are the emblem of your infantile connection with this great institution of learning. Keep one in sweet repose on the back of thy cranium at all times.
- RULE II:** Socks and ties are to be seen, not heard.
- RULE III:** Freshmen desiring a box at the Theatre bring it with them.
- RULE IV:** Arrange for library lockers at once.
- RULE V:** Don't spend anything but your time at Ypsi, and see that you don't spend that.
- RULE VI:** Ye shall abstain from quenching your unnecessary thirst at places such as "Joe's" and the "Orient" where thy obnoxious presence is not wanted.
- RULE VII:** See that **WE**, your superiors, precede your putrid carcasses through the doors.
- RULE VIII:** Look to lofty things freshmen, we will assist you to the "higher branches."
- RULE IX:** Pollute not the balmy ozone of our sacred campus with the vile fumes of your filthy pipes.
- RULE X:** Make your last will and testament as well as arrangements with the undertaker, and meet us at the appointed place of slaughter.



BUTCHERY! SLAUGHTER! MURDER!

For punishment of your shortcomings, insolence and
 disobedience of Campus traditions

YE FROSH OF 1917 are truly
 commanded
 to appear
 on

Ferry Field, SATURDAY, OCT. 18, 1913, at 9:30

in order that we might extinguish your verdant freshness
 and wipe the earth with thy remains.

Signed by the

CLASS OF 1916

BEWARE OF BLACK FRIDAY

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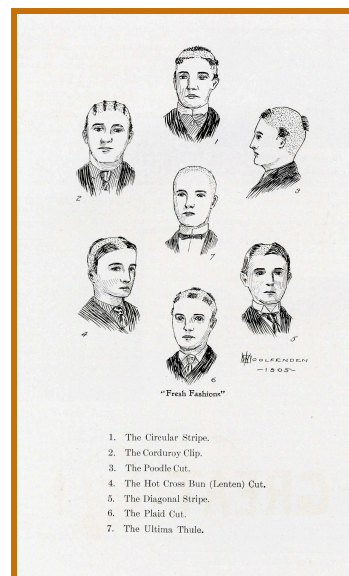
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Caps, Canes, Pushball and Smokers: Student Life and Customs at the University of Michigan

Hair-cutting and Banquets

Hair-cutting, a humiliating practice with roots in the medieval ages, was also part of these class rites. Each Spring, the freshman class would hold an annual banquet. This event became another chance for the sophomore class to initiate first-year students. Sophomores would make it their goal to kidnap the freshman class officers, particularly the toastmaster, and to shave their heads with the purpose of preventing their attendance to the grand event. February would be described as the "start of the hair-cutting craze between the two classes as the sophs" would "make certain that freshman will appear at the function with hair shorn like the ... fashion of a small boy."¹

A number of events led to the abolition of this hazing practice. Sometime around 1906, students went on "medieval hair-cutting forays carried on within the precincts of the library." Another notable episode took place in March of 1905 when two sophomores were stabbed by a frightened freshman trying to defend himself from hazing.² These events resulted in the faculty stepping in and eventually ended the hair-cutting war.



Yearbook portrayal of freshmen haircuts. From *Michiganensian* 1905.

Michigan's Haircutting Episode.

An unfortunate episode occurred as a result of the recent hair-cutting war at Michigan. Two Sophomores whose names were not learned were badly, though not seriously, stabbed by a frightened Freshman, who heard steps behind him, and turned around to defend himself from what he supposed was a hazing crowd. Without waiting to find out who the men were he pulled out a knife and slashed the students who had come up behind him.

The two injured students were taken to the university hospital, where Dr. C. G. Darling pronounced the wounds not serious.

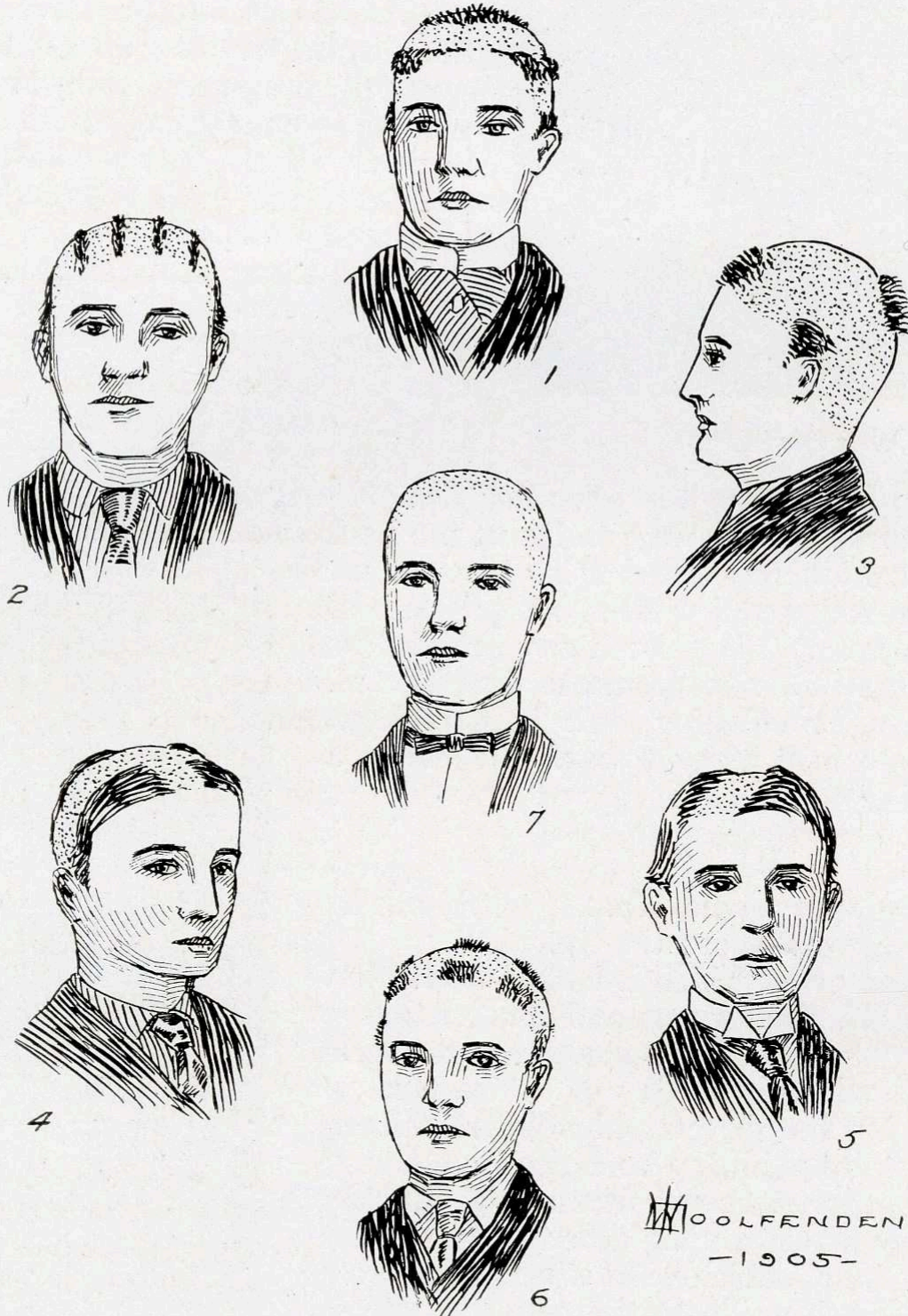
The two Sophomores declared they had no scissors and were not after the Freshman. The unfortunate occurrence will probably end the hair-cutting war, which began so good-naturedly earlier in the afternoon.

Michigan Haircutting Episode
From *The Cornell Daily Sun*, March 10, 1905.

1: *Washtenaw Times*, April 9, 19[].
Vertical File. Bentley Historical
Library, University of Michigan.

2: "1905 Michigan Haircutting Episode" *The Cornell Daily Sun* . Volume XXV,
Number 109, March 10, 1905.

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“Fresh Fashions”

1. The Circular Stripe.
2. The Corduroy Clip.

3. The Poodle Cut.
4. The Hot Cross Bun (Lenten) Cut.
5. The Diagonal Stripe.
6. The Plaid Cut.
7. The Ultima Thule.

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Smokers

Michigan students came together in athletic events, dances, class banquets, and other social gatherings such as smokers. Smokers were social events that became popular in American universities at the beginning of the 20th Century, specifically among male students. One of the first smokers recorded at the University of Michigan was organized by the Senior Class of 1901. Soon other students from other classes and from the various schools and colleges at the university would hold their own Smokers. Throughout the year a number of these events would take place; the Sophomore Smoker, the Senior Football Smoker, the Architectural Smoker, the Senior Pharmic Class Smoker, and the Michigan Union Smoker, among others.

"Our smokers were jolly affairs in which conviviality and good-fellowship were the key-notes, and no one could take exception to them."¹



The Smoker's Club 1876. The crowd that smoked the freshman out and set the world on fire. From UM Photographs Vertical File.



Engineers' Smoker 1913. Photographs. From Vulcans records, Box 2.

The Medical School Smoker was praised as producing income which would go to the general fund. One of the most popular and highly attended was the one held by the Michigan Union also known as the Annual Smoker.

The 1915 *Michiganensian* included this description of the Union Smoker. "Each year, immediately after the close of the football season, members of

the Union hold a mammoth smoker in the combined gymnasiums, in honor of the football team. This function has become a well-grounded institution in University life, and its popularity is made evident from the number that must be refused admission every year, because of the limit placed by the Board of Regents on the number allowed in Waterman Gymnasium. The annual smoker held last fall was attended by a full capacity of fifteen hundred men. It was undoubtedly the "peppiest" smoker of all."²

Even the women at the university started holding smokeless smokers as described in 1908:

"The girls meantime were not sitting idly, but under Vice-President Miss Swinton's leadership, set a precedent for future fair ones by organizing smokeless smokers. Rumor has it that lemonade, tea, Krupes punch and other mild and harmless beverages flowed free and fun was in great abundance."³

¹: Class of 1903. *Michiganensian* 1903. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. p. 8.

2: Annual Smoker 1915. Michiganensian 1903. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. p.307

3: 1908 Literary Class History. Michiganensian 1908. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. p.xxxiii

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The Smokers of '76.



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Cane Day

The use of canes was a privilege reserved by the graduating class, another way for students to remind the student body of class hierarchies. Senior classes at the University of Michigan, going back to 1869 had taken the custom of carrying class canes. These were carved with the autographs of fellow classmates and were to be used only by seniors. In 1923 an official date in the spring was designated for the seniors to start using their canes from then until graduation day. Cane Day was first celebrated May 5th of that year and was observed until the late 1930s. The Bentley Historical Library holds a small number of carved class canes as part of their collections.¹

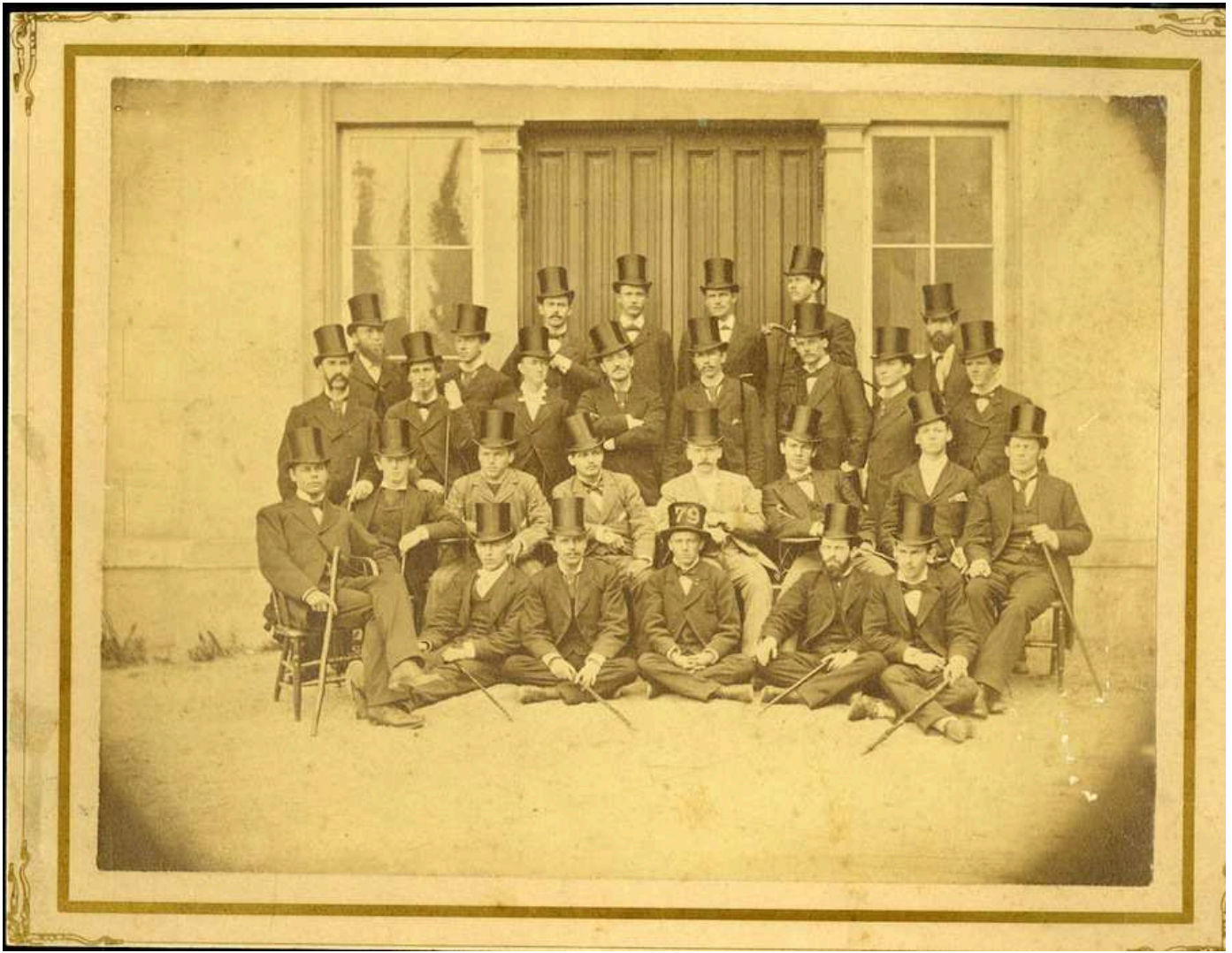


Class of 1879 in front of Angell Hall.
From UM Photographs Vertical File.

- [Michigan Today article: Hand-carved History](#)

1: Shaw, Wilfred B. The : An Encyclopedic Survey. Ann Arbor, MI. University of Michigan Press, 1942. p. 1767.; Frosh Bible, 1924-1925. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. p. 34.

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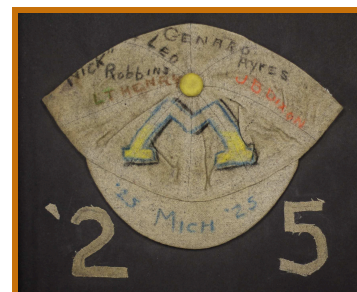
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BE PROUD TO WEAR YOUR POT¹

Freshman Caps

In the early 1900s, freshmen at the University of Michigan could be spotted around campus by their distinctive gray caps, which they wore every day as mandated by the Frosh Bible.² From the late 1860s freshmen, sophomore, junior and senior classes have used different hat styles to distinguish themselves by college, department or class year from the rest of the student body. Oxford hats, fez caps, mortarboards, derbies, plugs, and eventually pots were worn with pride, and sometimes shame, by students. By 1905, it was part of Michigan tradition for the freshmen to wear their gray caps, also called pots, all year long. This was strictly enforced by upperclassmen. The caps would show their class year and a different colored button indicating school or department. While some argued that the use of class hats increased class spirit others perceived it as a symbol of serfdom.³



1925 Freshman Cap.
From Milton P. Starr Scrapbook.

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At the end of the school year, having fulfilled their cap-wearing obligations, freshmen would burn their pots in a university-wide bonfire celebration called "Cap Night." This event took place the first Saturday in June and was the night when the freshmen were formally ushered into the dignity of sophomoredom.⁴ Students, grouped by class year, would march across campus to Sleepy Hollow, where the rite of passage would take place. Students celebrated with speeches, a snake dance, singing, and finally by tossing their caps into the fire. The Cap Night festivities would continue in town as Ann Arbor theaters treated students to a free movie showing in celebration of the event.

The practice of burning the caps came to a halt temporarily from 1917 to 1919 as a result of World War I in Europe. Class caps were collected to send to refugees, particularly in Belgium. The wearing of caps was eventually abolished in 1934 although occasionally students would try to encourage once again the use of caps, this time in maize and blue,⁵ to promote school spirit.



Cap Night 1916
From Frederick Rolshoven Bolton photograph collection.

The Bentley Historical Library holds a number of student scrapbooks where pieces of these caps can be found, along with photographs and descriptions of Cap Night. Before burning their caps, some freshmen would cut a piece as a memory of their student years at Michigan. The Michigan Daily and other university-wide publications found in the Bentley collections also provide detailed descriptions of the Cap Night event and other student life traditions.

[Exhibits on the use of caps at other universities.](#)

1: Frosh Bible, 1924-1925. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. p. 31.

2: Frosh Bible, 1924-1925. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

3: "Freshmen Destroy Signs of Serfdom." *The Michigan Daily* May 20, 1911. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

4: "One Thousand Fresh Caps Cast Into Blaze." *The Michigan Daily* June 3, 1906. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

5: "Freshmen Get Sore--And Pots Ain't No More." *The Michigan Daily* October 6, 1942. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

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