

A MEMORIAL TO A MAN AND A CAUSE:

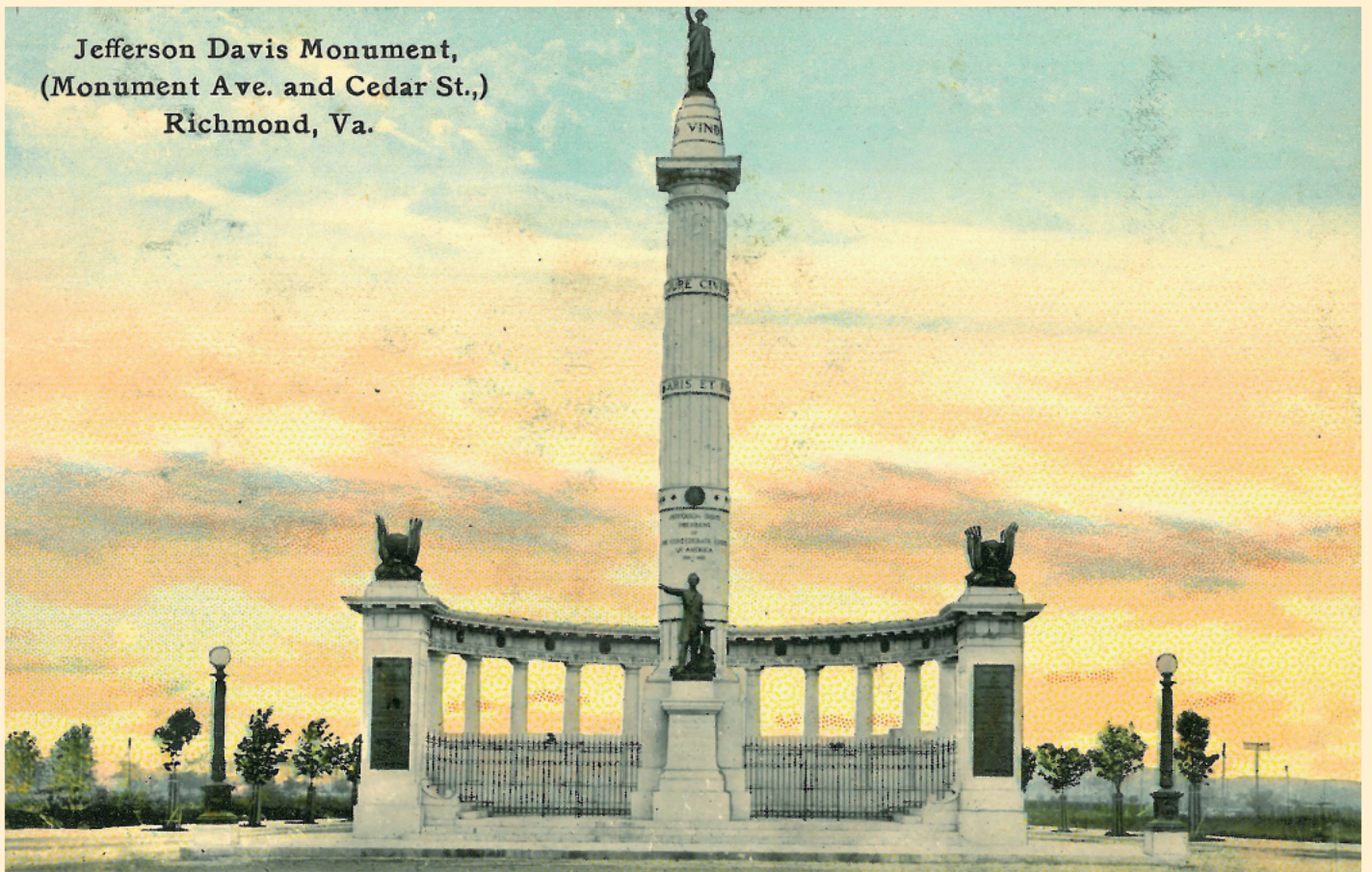
The Tortuous Tale of the Jefferson Davis Monument

BY JOHN M. COSKI

The Confederate statues on Richmond's Monument Avenue often have been the objects of public debate, especially since the June 2015 Charleston murders. In the fall of 2016, a Richmond mayoral candidate held a press conference in front of the Jefferson Davis statue and called for its removal. "The Jefferson Davis statue is a political statue that glorified a failed political organization and championed a cause – slavery – that all Americans now find abhorrent," Joseph Morrissey explained.

Although Morrissey later tempered his position, he was not alone in singling out the Davis statue for criticism "Lee, Stuart and Jackson...were Virginians," observed a March 2016 editorial in a Richmond weekly. "Say what you will about the Civil War, they served their home state. But because Davis was not a Virginian, the main reason to honor him in Richmond is that he served as the president of the Confederacy. More than anything else, doesn't the Davis monument celebrate the Confederate States of America itself?"

Jefferson Davis Monument,
(Monument Ave. and Cedar St.,)
Richmond, Va.



A dramatic tinted postcard of the Jefferson Davis monument as it was finally built. Like most of the monuments on Monument Avenue, the

Davis statue was not originally supposed to be there, and the avenue did not even exist when planning for the Davis monument began.

It is a fair question that begs other questions. Why did Richmond erect a statue of Jefferson Davis – in addition to the one placed on his gravesite at Hollywood Cemetery in 1899 – in 1907? Who made the decision to erect it there, to build it as it is and where it is?

The answers to these and other questions lie in the Museum’s manuscript collections, specifically in the minute books and other record books of the Jefferson Davis Monument Association. As the recent Museum symposium underscored, every monument has a “back-story.” The back-story of the Jefferson Davis monument is more complex than most.

Conceived originally as one city’s tribute to the Confederacy’s only president, it grew to be the project of the entire former Confederacy; it took 17 years to complete, changed location and design three times, and involved a surprising amount of debate, even among the like-minded group of white Southerners dedicated to honoring Jefferson Davis.

The tortuous tale of the Jefferson Davis monument reminds us that what we see on our modern cultural landscape didn’t just happen, but was the product of conscious decision making. Then and now, erecting a statue typically is a messy and complex process.

“This monument will rise, and soon”

Jefferson Davis died in New Orleans on December 6, 1889. Richmond women organized the Confederate Memorial Literary Society (CMLS) to rescue his former executive mansion from destruction and open in it the Confederate Museum (subsequently The Museum of the Confederacy).

And, on December 21, 1889, a mass meeting of citizens resolved “to organize an association for the purpose of building a monument to the Hon. Jefferson Davis.” Comprised of Confederate veteran and Richmond Mayor James Taylor Ellyson and other prominent male citizens, the Jefferson Davis Monument Association (JDMA) acted quickly to secure a charter from the Commonwealth of Virginia.



This composite image from the 1896 United Confederate Veterans reunion program shows some of the prominent Richmond men who led the Jefferson Davis Monument Association from 1890-1899. Although they turned over control of the Association to the United Daughters of the Confederacy in 1899, the men remained active as an Advisory Board and Building Committee.

The JDMA also acted quickly to persuade Davis’s widow, Varina Howell Davis, to move her husband’s body from New Orleans to Richmond. The Association sent a committee, chaired by Joseph R. Anderson, the owner of Tredegar Iron Works and a former Confederate general, to New York to meet with her. The stratagem worked.

Meanwhile, other cities – notably Atlanta – planned monuments to Davis and also campaigned to be the final resting place of the former president’s remains. Richmond’s JDMA sent delegates to a new committee of the United Confederate Veterans (UCV). The UCV met in September 1892 and found itself presented with a *fait accompli*. Even the Atlanta delegation, which had raised more money than any other city, conceded defeat.

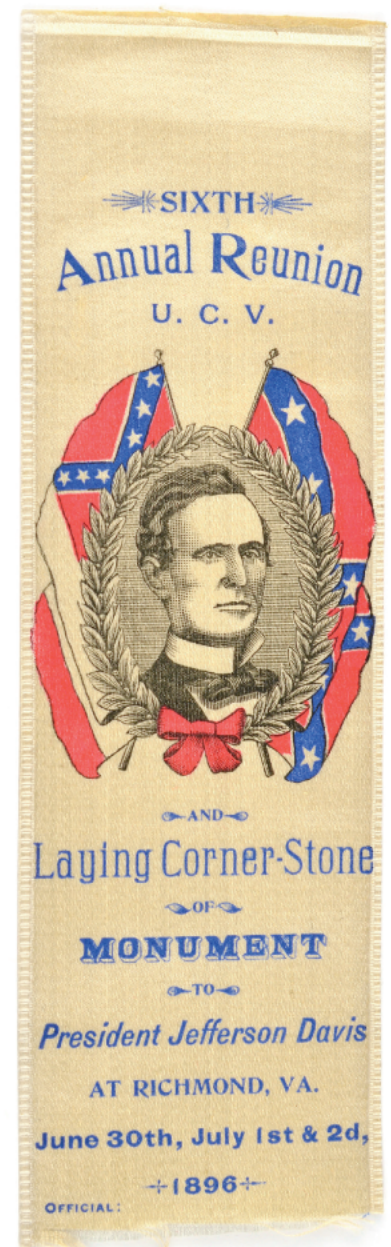
Accordingly, the UCV resolved “that as Richmond was the capital of the Confederacy and has been selected by Mrs. Jefferson Davis as the burial place of her husband, and inasmuch as she has suggested that it is also the most appropriate place for the erection of a monument to his

memory, the United Confederate Veterans will cooperate with the Davis Monument Association of Richmond and the Southern Press Association in the effort to erect the same.”

In delegating to Richmond the right and the responsibility to build the South’s primary monument to Jefferson Davis, the UCV insisted on specific commitments. Accordingly, in September 1892 the JDMA and the UCV announced resolutions declaring that the monument would be built in Monroe Park, an old city park on what had been the city’s western edge during the war, and “that the amount of \$250,000 be raised for the purpose of erecting the Monument.”

“This money will be raised speedily,” assured a formal address “To the Southern People.” It further promised that “[t]his monument will rise, and soon, to be an everlasting memorial, not only of the patriot and statesman who purely and bravely led souls, but of the ineffable valor and devotion of the most heroic soldiery which the world ever saw, whom he typified while he commanded.”

Having won the prize, the Richmond committee – consisting of the city’s busiest political, business, and civic leaders – soon discovered that they had overcommitted themselves. They devoted most of their time to the details



With great ceremony, the cornerstone for New York architect Percy Griffin’s grand temple to Jefferson Davis was laid in Richmond’s Monroe Park in 1896 – but never built.



A published photograph pasted into a United Daughters of the Confederacy scrapbook shows the women who guided the Jefferson Davis Monument Association from 1899 to 1908.

of re-interring Jefferson Davis's body in Richmond, which was accomplished in June 1893. By that time, the United States was sliding into the worst economic crisis it had yet experienced. The Association had delegated the all-important fundraising effort to the Southern Press Association, which proved ineffective, and had to be fired and replaced.

Having pledged to show progress in the effort by the UCV's annual reunion in late May 1896, the Richmond leaders found themselves with their backs against the wall. Only in November 1895 did the Association appoint a committee "to recommend a plan of procedure for selecting the design for the Davis Monument." Only in March 1896 did the Association announce a design competition for the monument.

Delayed until a month after the UCV reunion, the cornerstone laying occurred on July 2, 1896 – four days after the design committee decided *what* would be built on that cornerstone: a grand Classical-style temple that resembled Grant's Tomb, which was then nearing completion in New York City.

Then the project stalled again. Meeting only occasionally over three years, the men in 1899 admitted what had become obvious: they would not be able to raise \$250,000 (the equivalent of at least \$6 million modern dollars) or complete the monument on their own. "[W]e fear that we shall never achieve success until we enlist the aid of the noble women of the South in our endeavor." J. Taylor Ellyson formally requested that the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) assume control of the JDMA; the UDC, at its November 1899 convention in Richmond, accepted the charge.

The women symbolically adjourned a meeting from Ellyson's office to reconvene at the Confederate Museum.

They appointed new directors (representing each UDC state division) and a central committee headed by Janet Weaver (Mrs. Norman V.) Randolph, a formidable Richmond woman who was also a leader in the CMLS. Dismissed from the board, the men remained active as members of the JDMA Advisory Board and Building Committee.

"the aid of the noble women of the South"

Over the next seven years, the new female leadership of the JDMA confronted and overcame a succession of external and internal challenges. As the men had hoped, the women proved more successful in fundraising and built the treasury from the \$20,000 they inherited toward a new, more modest, goal of \$75,000. Still, they had to postpone their promised completion date from June 3 (Jefferson Davis's birthday), 1903 to 1906, and, finally, 1907. The main reasons for delay were continuing disagreements over the design of the monument and its location.

At their very first meeting, the new female directors voted to hold a design competition. They also decided by committee and by a roll call vote that the new monument design would be an arch built at 12th and Broad St., a prominent Richmond intersection two blocks south of the Confederate Museum – the former Confederate executive mansion.

Meeting again during the UDC's November 1901 convention in Wilmington, North Carolina, the directors voted to solicit artists' models that would be displayed in the Virginia State Capitol for inspection. They also balked at the monument's projected cost of \$75,000, voting to build it for no *less* than \$50,000.

When the directors met in Richmond in June 1902 to vote on the design, Jefferson Davis's widow, Varina, dropped

Jefferson Davis's widow, Varina (shown here in mourning dress), had a troubled relationship with the Confederate organizations that worked to honor her late husband. Those organizations resented her decision to move to New York City. She disapproved of monument designs that seemed calculated to honor the Confederacy more than Jefferson Davis. Her disapproval threw a wrench into the Monument Association's plans in 1902-1903. Varina Davis died in October 1906 and did not live to see the monument finished.



a bombshell on their proceedings. JDMA president Nellie Hotchkiss McCullough read two letters just received from Mrs. Davis stating in no uncertain terms that she opposed both the proposed design and its location. Mrs. Davis reportedly preferred an equestrian statue for her husband – which editorial writers commenting on this showdown rejected as inappropriate for a statesman.

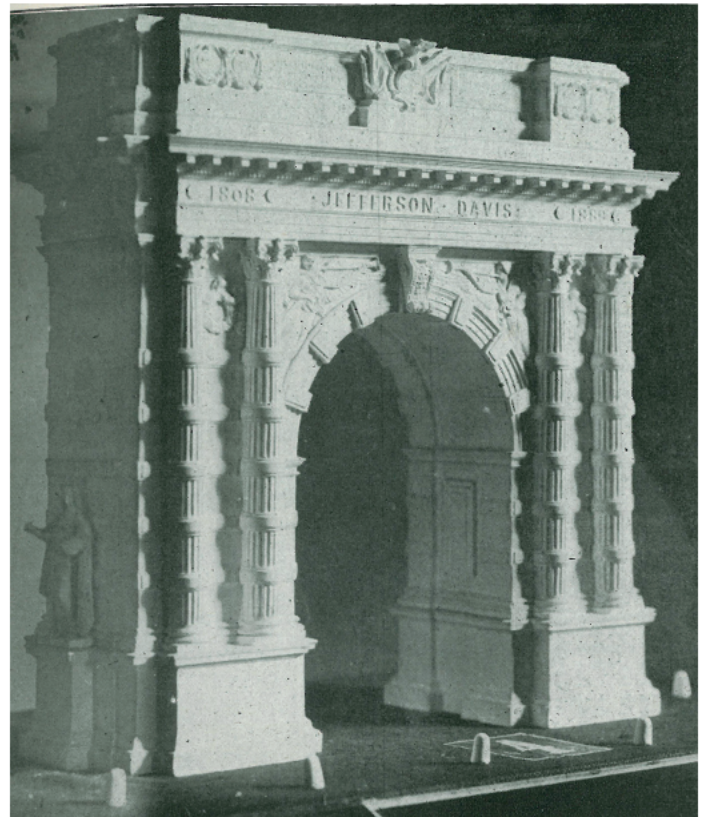
Louisa McCord Smythe, director from South Carolina, “said she did not think Mrs. Davis understood the spirit of the people in this matter” and, according to the minutes, “made a beautiful and comprehensive speech on the Memorial Arch, which, if spoken of as a triumph, was a triumph of principle, and that appropriate inscriptions could be placed on this Arch, which would serve as instructions to future generations.”

Declaring that “it was impossible for us to reject that Arch,” the Association dispatched Smythe and another director to New York City to make a personal appeal to Varina Davis. Then they – and the competing artists who were in Richmond for the verdict on their work – waited as the two women took a train north. The next evening they sent a telegram with the news that Mrs. Davis had withdrawn her opposition.

Upon their return, Smythe reported that Mrs. Davis supported an arch that was “entirely memorial” (as opposed to triumphal), *but* that “she seriously objected to the location, with the cars running through it, as she thought the idea of a memorial would be entirely destroyed.”

The competing artists received this news from the former Confederate First Lady – but still voted unanimously in favor of the original site at 12th and Broad.

Trying to find a way out of this dilemma – on which newspapers throughout the country were reporting in detail – Central Committee Chairman Janet Randolph



Varina Davis turned thumbs down on a monument design in the form of a triumphal arch through which traffic on Richmond’s busy Broad St. would pass. Louis Gudebrod’s winning design for a strictly memorial (not triumphal) arch ran into its own traffic problems.

reiterated that the Association had “carefully weighed” all potential sites “from every standpoint” and chosen the best, “but of course the Board would have to defer to the wishes of Mrs. Davis in this matter...” The women then reconsidered several potential sites and voted to send a telegram to ask Mrs. Davis her preference between 12th and Broad and Monroe Park and “abide by the decision of Mrs. Davis.”

Janet Randolph, who had locked horns with Varina Davis over a UDC protocol issue years earlier (Davis had confided to a friend that she found Mrs. Randolph “too high and mighty and too irritable and rough for me.”), then tendered her resignation. The board declined Randolph’s resignation.

As expected, Mrs. Davis chose Monroe Park for the new memorial arch. The Association chose the design of a young Connecticut-born sculptor, Louis Albert Gudebrod.

When the JDMA met again in New Orleans in November 1902, both of those fundamental decisions underwent reconsideration. The men of the Building Committee declared Monroe Park – ironically where in 1896 the men had laid cornerstone for their grand temple – “unsuitable” for the monument. Louis Gudebrod’s detailed estimate suggested that



The Richmond, southern, and national press gave blow-by-blow accounts of JDMA meetings, especially when Varina Davis’s disagreement with the association over how – and how not to – honor her late husband became public knowledge.

he would not be able to build the monument for the contracted cost. Further negotiation failed to bridge the gap, so the Association dismissed the artist.

Now without site or design, the women accepted assistance from the same Richmond men whom they had supplanted four years earlier. Anticipating this eventuality, the Building Committee had been working with Richmond's most famous sculptor, Edward V. Valentine, and an architect, William C. Noland. They presented a new concept that the board liked. Obviously sensitive to how long the Jefferson Davis Monument drama had been dragging on, the board voted not to hold a new competition, but to engage Valentine and Noland to erect a new monument that would be unveiled June 3, 1906. It was to be located on Cedar St. – later renamed Davis Avenue – at its intersection with Monument Avenue.

The JDMA directors were also happy to accept financial assistance from their close colleagues in the CMLS. As it had done in 1893, the CMLS held a Memorial Bazaar in April-May 1903, this one to raise funds for both the Confederate Museum and the Davis monument. The bazaar succeeded "far beyond what we even dared hope for," exclaimed the JDMA officers. The CMLS gave the JDMA two-thirds of the proceeds – \$15,000 – which was more than enough money to complete the monument.

Although the location, overall design, and sculptor and architect were set, many details remained. The Association appointed a three-member Inscription Committee to discuss and write the message to go on the monument. The JDMA's

work on those details was either an admirably democratic and deliberative process or a cautionary tale against designing a monument by committee.

In contrast to Richmond's equestrian statue of Robert E. Lee with its three-letter inscription ("LEE"), the Davis monument was to bear many words – ultimately more than 300. Verbose as the Davis monument is, Edward Valentine's original proposal was more so, even including background on Colonial and Revolutionary War history. One director observed that "any one carelessly reading the inscriptions would think it was erected by Daughters of the Revolution, and would wonder what Mr. Davis was doing there[.]" She and most of her fellow directors voted for inscriptions solely about Confederate history.

Valentine and Noland's concept featured a broad semi-circular colonnade and central Doric column bearing symbols and inscriptions and topped by an allegorical female figure named "Vindicatrix." Vindicating the Confederacy, not Jefferson Davis, was clearly the monument's central focus.

The JDMA discussed and agreed there should be a figure of Davis on the monument. Should he be seated or standing? Although some directors preferred a seated figure, "most voted for depicting Davis as "a standing statesman."

The Maryland Division, UDC, precipitated another embarrassing and widely reported public controversy when it complained that the monument design did not place Maryland on "equal footing" with all the states that gave aid to the Confederacy. JDMA President McCullough tried to mollify the Marylanders, but they did not back down until the Association announced publicly that all states would be represented by their coats of arms only, not by columns.



An estimated 80,000-200,000 people attended the unveiling of the Davis monument on June 3, 1907. Historian Gaines Foster described it as "a milestone in the evolution of the Confederate tradition. It climaxed the Confederate celebration by honoring the southern hero most directly identified with the righteousness of the Confederate cause." Shown here are a photo of the enormous crowd from the July 1907 *Confederate Veteran* magazine and a rare snapshot (donated to the Museum in 2010) of the monument shortly after its unveiling.

Kentucky's director, Henrietta Morgan Duke opened another can of worms when she proposed a new inscription noting that Jefferson Davis had been born in Kentucky. The Louisiana member then asked that it note that Davis died in her state. Learning of these alterations, the president of the Mississippi Division, UDC, requested the inscription that Davis was "a citizen of Miss. from earliest infancy." Heeding a warning that it could be "disastrous" to open such a debate so late in the process, the JDMA ultimately decided against including special references to any state.

"a triumph of principle"

On June 3, 1907, the 99th anniversary of Davis's birth, his only surviving child, Margaret Davis Hayes, unveiled the statue (still missing a few details) on Monument Avenue. JDMA officers Janet Randolph and Nellie McCullough delivered a welcome and a report, respectively, while the governor of Virginia, mayor of Richmond, and former Confederate general Clement A. Evans delivered the principal addresses.

The ceremony and the monument itself celebrated Jefferson Davis as the personification of the Confederate States of America and of a cause that, although lost, represented a "triumph of principle." Its sponsors – who were the influential elites of Richmond, Virginia, and the South – erected the monument explicitly to engrave those arguments in stone for future generations.

What did other Americans, who were not Confederates in background or sympathy, think of this grand monument to the president of a lost cause? Perhaps surprisingly to 21st-century Americans, the few surviving African-American newspapers of 1907 were silent; most northern papers covered the unveiling matter-of-factly, focusing on the fortuitous break in the rainy weather, the grandstanding presence of Democratic presidential hopeful William Jennings Bryan, and the ultimate success of the 18-year effort to build the monument.

The Marshalltown, Iowa, *Times-Republican* offered an insightful commentary on the monument and its significance. The editors noted that Davis most represented "the active principles of rebellion" and that "on him centered the hatred of secession and rebellion that pervaded the north." But, "if the



Typical of the era, organizations involved in building the Davis monument commissioned badges, medals, and pins to wear at the unveiling ceremony. Shown here are badges for the United Daughters of the Confederacy and United Confederate Veterans and the official badge of the Jefferson Davis Monument Association.

south is to be permitted to raise monuments and memorials to any of the men who fought for and guided the confederacy, it can scarcely fail to remember the president who ruled it. If any evidence of the absolute and perfect reunion of the sundered states were lacking the complacent and almost approving manner in which the north watches the south raise its memorial to a rebel president would supply it."

If white northerners in 1907 were willing to allow the defeated South to raise statues to its "rebel president," many Americans today, black and white, north and south, are speaking out against that complacent acceptance. Glaringly obvious and troubling to modern Americans is the complete absence of any reference to slavery anywhere among the monument's 300-word inscription. Beyond that, the words "slave" or "slavery" do not occur even once in the 144-page, single-spaced transcript of the Jefferson Davis Monument Association's minutes.

Modern commentators are correct in observing that the monument to Jefferson Davis is different from other Confederate monuments in Richmond; its sponsors intended it to be different – a monument as much to a cause as to a man. And they intended it to disassociate the man and the cause from their undeniable association with African-American slavery.

Between 1890 and 1907, the people whose opinions counted in Richmond supported the man and the cause. Today, the universe of people whose opinions count in Richmond and in America at large is much greater, and those opinions are, at best, divided over Jefferson Davis and the Lost Cause.

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