



**Presidential
Series 3¢
Jefferson:
a link to FDR's
third term
decision, and
more...**

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Presidential Series 3¢ Jefferson: a link to FDR's third term decision, and more...

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The 3¢ Jefferson stamp was the postal workhorse of the 1938 Presidential Series paying the first-class postage rate for some sixteen years from its release date of June 16, 1938 until it was replaced by the 3¢ Statue of Liberty stamp on June 24, 1954. The stamp is certainly no rarity, as more than 86 billion were printed in sheets using 356 printing plates. If coil and booklet stamps are added the total reaches nearly 122 billion.¹

It should be pointed out that postal history items with even the most common stamps can be fascinating if the contents are historically important or unusual. I especially enjoy this aspect of collecting, and will show you two of my favorite examples of this bearing the 3¢ Jefferson stamp, with a link to FDR's crucial decision to run for a third term as president in the midst of crisis, and a heartwarming glance at a note from James A. Farley to his college student daughter.

The design of the 3¢ Jefferson stamp can be traced back to a suggestion made by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in early 1934 that a new series of stamps depicting previous presidents be considered, although initially these were to be commemoratives.² Later, it was decided to use these to replace the 1922 series, and in 1937 a design competition was initiated. Perhaps surprisingly, the contest was won by Elaine Rawlinson, a young New York City art student with no previous experience in designing stamps. Her elegant design for the 1¢ stamp based on the Houdon bust of George Washington was so compelling that it was decided to pattern the entire series on her entry.

The 3¢ Jefferson stamp was the fifth stamp to be issued in the 1938 Presidential Series. It was designed by William K. Schrage using a photograph of the bust of Thomas Jefferson by Houdon in the Library of Congress. The portrait for the die was engraved by Carl T. Arlt and the lettering was by James T. Vail, with the first plates going to press on May 17, 1938.¹



THE POSTMASTER GENERAL
WASHINGTON

June 16, 1938.

Mrs. A. J. Ryan,
21 East 21st Street,
Brooklyn, New York.

Dear Mary:

I am pleased to send you this letter bearing the 3-cent stamp of the new regular series.

The subject of the stamp is a likeness of Thomas Jefferson, from a bust by Jean Antoine Houdon.

This letter is being mailed at Washington, D. C., which post office has the first-day sale of the stamp on this date.

Very truly yours,

James H. Taylor

THE POSTMASTER GENERAL
WASHINGTON
OFFICIAL BUSINESS



Mrs. A. J. Ryan,
21 East 21st Street,
Brooklyn, New York.

Figure 1. Postmaster General favor FDC with letter for the 3¢ Jefferson stamp.

A June 16, 1938 favor first day cover (FDC) for this stamp with letter signed by Postmaster General (PMG) James A. Farley in green ink is shown in Figure 1. Note the embossed Post Office Department seal and heading at the top. The letter is addressed "Dear Mary," and in fact Farley knew the recipient quite well since Mary Cahill had been one of his secretaries, and was now the married Mrs. Ryan living in Brooklyn, NY. This letter, like all my other examples for the 1938 Presidential Series provides only a brief description of the 3¢ stamp as having "a likeness of Thomas Jefferson, from a bust by Jean Antione Houdon." The first-day city was Washington, DC.

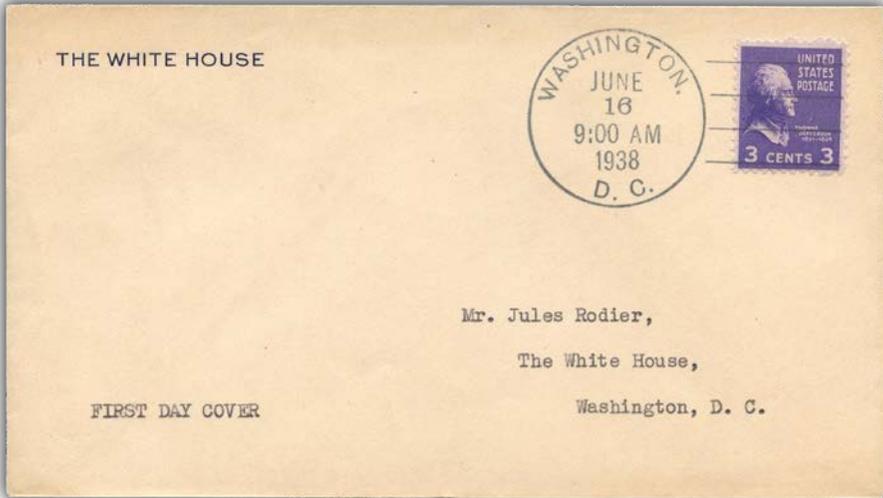


Figure 2. FDC on official White House stationery for the 3¢ Jefferson stamp sent to Jules Rodier.

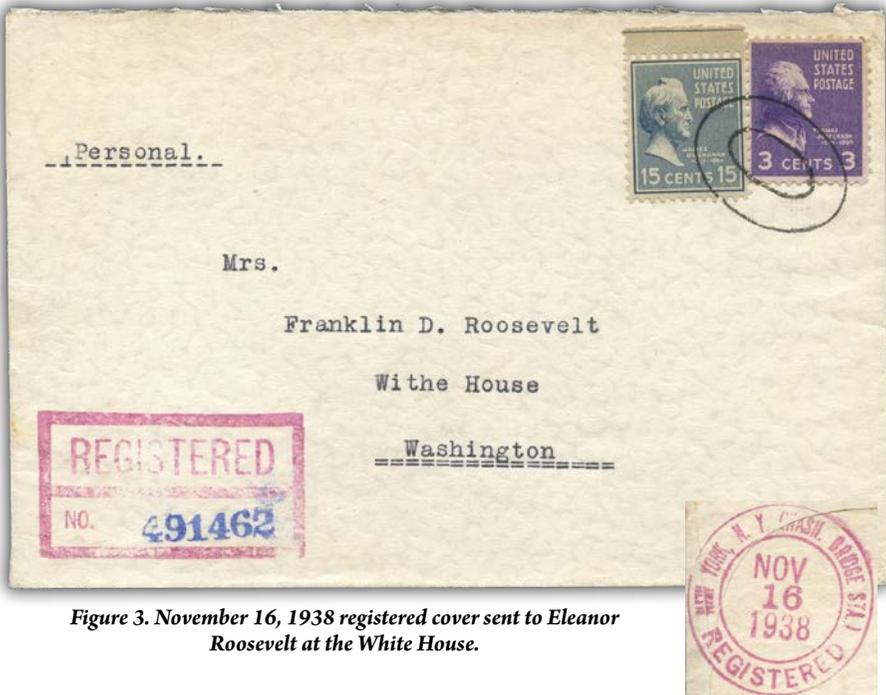


Figure 3. November 16, 1938 registered cover sent to Eleanor Roosevelt at the White House.

FDCs were also created for stamps of the 1938 Presidential Series using official White House stationery such as the one sent to Jules Rodier shown in Figure 2. As is the case for many other FDCs sent to Rodier, who was a long-time White House telegraph operator, this was postmarked Washington, DC.

To appeal to me, examples of commercial usage for 1938 Presidential Series stamps need to show some interesting connection. For example, shown in Figure 3 is a November 16, 1938 registered mail cover sent from New York City to Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt at the “Withe House” using a 3¢ Jefferson stamp coupled with a 15¢ Buchanan stamp to pay the registration fee. The cover is marked “Personal” and the backstamp shows that it was mailed from New York City’s Washington Bridge Station. This represents relative early usage for the 15¢ Buchanan stamp, which was issued on October 13th, about a month earlier.

While I have more than six hundred covers sent to FDR from around the world in my collection, I actually have no examples franked with the 3¢ Jefferson stamp. I surmise that very few, if any of these would have been saved, although FDR surely received lots of mail franked with them.

However, I do have examples showing usage of the 3¢ Jefferson stamp by both Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt on White House stationery in my collection. In Figure 4, I show my favorite one of these. This shows single usage of the 3¢ Jefferson stamp on an April 19, 1940 full-size White House envelope and it is addressed to a George Cook Sweet in Waterloo, NY.

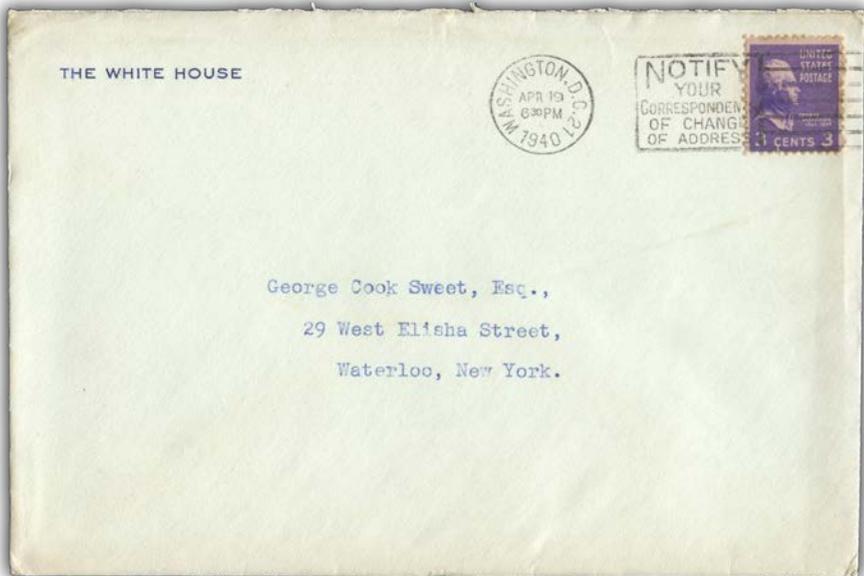


Figure 4. April 19, 1940 cover from FDR to George Sweet.

What’s so special about this? This is where collecting postal history that contains the original correspondence is so fascinating. The enclosed letter from FDR on light green White House letterhead stationery begins with the salutation “Dear George,” as shown in Figure 5. Especially notable is the letter’s closing “As ever yours” and the fact that it is not signed, having instead a typed “F.D.R.” and a notation at the bottom “(Dictated but not signed).” So, who was George Cook Sweet and why was this letter not signed?

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

April 19, 1940.

Dear George:

It is good to hear from you and I am glad you have had, on the whole, a good winter. I, myself, came through all right until the middle of March when I caught the "flu" -- last one in the office to do so. Now I am all right again and off to Warm Springs for a week, I hope, but may have to come back on the run if another independent nation starts to disappear in Europe.

You are all right on your theory about present policies but don't get too cocky about that draft theory next July. I could write you pages to prove you are wrong. I hope to see you this spring.

As ever yours,

F.D.R.

George Cook Sweet, Esq.,
29 West Elisha Street,
Waterloo, New York.

(Dictated but not signed)

Figure 5. April 19, 1940 letter from FDR to George Sweet.

Sweet was a retired naval officer, a long-time friend and confidant of FDR. He was also a strong and early advocate of naval aviation, who in 1909 became the first naval officer to go up in an airplane. A photograph of Sweet in his Navy uniform (circa 1915) is shown in Figure 6. George Sweet and FDR had known each other since FDR was the Assistant Secretary of the Navy from 1913-1921, during which time Sweet received the Navy Cross for developing and installing a high power trans-Atlantic radio communications station in France during World War I. Both loved the Navy and all things nautical, and this helped lead to a strong bond between them. The earliest correspondence that I

have seen (not in my collection) is a handwritten 1927 letter from FDR inviting George Sweet to visit him in Warm Springs, GA at his newly built cottage. Files at the FDR Library contain much material related to the correspondence between FDR and Sweet, the last being a brief memo from FDR to his White House physician Admiral Ross McIntire shortly before his death, saying "Will you acknowledge and say I was delighted to get his letter?" referring to Sweet's letter of March 15, 1945.³

The breezy informality of FDR's correspondence with George Sweet, often by dictation and left unsigned, displays an intimacy between old friends that was put to paper due to the physical distance between them. What's especially wonderful about it is that it exists at all. Others with whom FDR had close friendships, such as Louie Howe and later Harry Hopkins, were just that - friends who were physically in such close proximity to FDR that there is little correspondence between them, and their conversations were not recorded or documented. In fact, both Howe and Hopkins actually lived in the White House for years at a time, quartered in the Lincoln bedroom.

Although Sweet's friendship with FDR was not at this level of intimacy, FDR's correspondence with Sweet does reveal an insider's view of the humor and charm of FDR, something not often seen under the spotlight of his presidency. This is one of the reasons that I find collecting correspondence of the FDR era so entrancing. Before looking in detail at the letter of April 19, 1940, I'll first set the mood by briefly quoting from FDR's January 24, 1939 letter to Sweet. Sweet had just written to him from Florida, telling him of the fate of the *Larocco*, FDR's old houseboat that had recently burned, and commenting on some medical treatment that he had undergone. FDR replies "Many thanks for the information about my ex-boat. After she came up standing in the middle of a pine forest, I sold her to somebody who was going to use her as a bungalow, dance hall, saloon or some such purpose, and I am sorry to hear that she has gone up in smoke. ...I am glad your medico has made interesting discoveries about your anatomy and that your cough has been cured by the application of corn plasters to your toe -- or some such treatment!"³

The April 19, 1940 letter from FDR to Sweet in my collection has a distinctly more serious tone. The Sitzkrieg lull in the war in Europe had just been broken by the rapid German conquest of Denmark and Norway in early April, and FDR was now struggling with the momentous decision of whether or not he should run for a third term as president. The text of the letter in Figure 5 is reproduced below, with the italics being mine.

It is good to hear from you and I am glad you have had, on the whole, a good winter. I, myself, came through all right until the middle of March when I caught the "flu" - last one in the office to do so. Now I am all right again and off to Warm Springs for a week, I hope, but may have to come back on the run if another independent nation starts to disappear in Europe.

You are *all right on your theory about present policies but don't get too cocky about the draft theory next July*. I could write you pages to prove you are wrong. I hope to see you this spring.

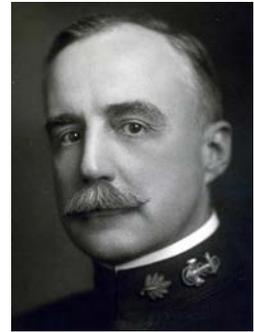


Figure 6. George Cook Sweet (circa 1915).

The contents of the April 16 letter from Sweet that FDR refers to in the above note is of great interest, since Sweet lays out in some detail the strategy that FDR later followed regarding a third term. While there is not room to discuss this fully here, a brief summary excerpting and quoting Sweet's exact wording from the letter includes, "I'm sure that I know what you are going to do when the time comes. It's no guess with me, the Navy always does it. If I might be so cocky as to suggest something it is this. Say nothing until the convention...beware the draft," and that "I know that you know that DUTY is the really great satisfaction in this life."³

I find it interesting that Roosevelt demurs in his response on April 19th, telling Sweet "...don't get too cocky about the draft theory next July. I could write you pages to prove you are wrong." This suggests that FDR doesn't want to "tip his hand," even to an old friend. In other words, FDR was being deliberately coy, but nonetheless taking it all in, and this evasiveness clearly extended to others. For example, according to Robert Sherwood, Harry Hopkins told him on April 23 that "he expressed grave doubts about" FDR running for a third term.⁴

What is apparent is that the course Franklin D. Roosevelt ultimately took bears a remarkable resemblance to that advocated by his friend George Sweet. The key elements of this were for FDR to remain quiet about any third term plans until the convention, then do his duty and accept a draft for the nomination. Sweet further takes the opportunity to goad FDR in a June 10 letter by suggesting that the Republicans may decide to draft him at their convention before the Democrats have a chance.³

To put things in context, the interval between April 1940 and the Democratic National Convention of July 15-18, was a turbulent time. Following the rapid German conquest of Denmark and Norway in early April came a blitzkrieg assault on May 10 that crushed Belgium and the Netherlands, and led to the sudden collapse of France. Paris fell to the Germans on June 14, and on June 22 the French signed a humiliating armistice at Compiègne, resulting in a pro-Axis government in Vichy headed by Marshal Pétain. This left Great Britain alone in the war against Hitler just two days before the 1940 Republican convention on June 24-28. With the looming crisis in Europe, the isolationist views of the leading Republican candidates had suddenly become obsolete and the convention delegates nominated a surprise dark-horse candidate, Wendell Wilkie.

FDR himself remained publicly silent regarding a possible third term, even as the Democratic National Convention in Chicago on July 15-18 began. Behind the scenes, however, things had been quietly falling into place. Harry Hopkins had been dispatched to Chicago to set up "headquarters" in the Blackstone Hotel, delegations friendly to Roosevelt had been previously chosen, and FDR's long silence on the matter of a third term had left his political rivals for the nomination nonplussed. The result, of course, was that after some convention maneuvering FDR was re-nominated on the first ballot.

In hindsight, Roosevelt's decision and strategy leading to his re-election to an unprecedented third term was of great historical importance. Specifically, it helped ensure that Great Britain was able to remain in the war until the United States itself was drawn in at the end of 1941, and perhaps more importantly, it provided FDR as a strong and capable war leader. Here, Franklin Roosevelt's global overview, strategic insights and decisions (which were often at odds with his generals) turned out to be crucial in guiding the allied effort in World War II.

So why is FDR's friendship with George Sweet virtually unknown today? For one, Sweet had no official government position, played no formal role during a very turbulent time, and it is understandable that others have been the focus of attention. Also, Sweet was reliably discrete and wrote no memoir.

As a collector with a strong interest in the history of the FDR era, I got very lucky. George Sweet's family kept all of his correspondence with FDR and related items intact, then these ended up in the hands of a major autograph dealer a few years ago. The signed letters (which I couldn't afford) went up for sale separately as important FDR autographed letters by the dealer, but ten or so lesser items including my April 19, 1940 letter ended up on Ebay where I just stumbled across them at the right time. The only published reference to any of the FDR/George Sweet correspondence I have been able to find is in a 1951 book that quotes from a November 21, 1932 FDR letter to Sweet after the election in which FDR humorously refers to James A Farley and Louis Howe. "Well, we brought the old ship into port and we were right in trusting to the navigation of the boys in the grocery store."³ I'm fortunate in having acquired the original of this letter in one of these Ebay lots. By the way, Donald Day, the editor of the book could only have come across this letter as a carbon copy in the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library where most of the FDR-Sweet correspondence still resides, hidden away among millions of other pages of documents.



Figure 7. May 27, 1947 cover from James A. Farley to his daughter Ann.

Ironically, my other favorite postal history item for the 3¢ Jefferson stamp is one sent by James A. Farley, FDR's rival for the 1940 Democratic nomination for president. In fact, it was rivalry over the 1940 nomination that led to Farley resigning as FDR's Postmaster General and becoming Chairman of the Board of the Coca-Cola Export Sales Company. This is among hundreds of Farley items in my collection, which even include favor

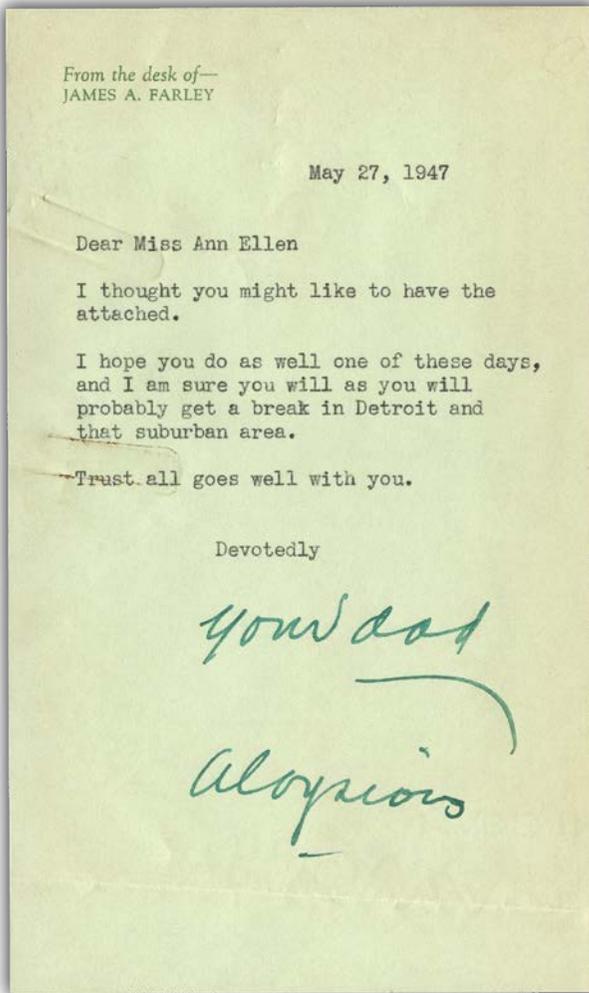


Figure 8. Signed May 27, 1947 note from James A. Farley to his daughter Ann.

FDCs with signed letters sent to FDR himself. It's shown in Figure 7, and this manila envelope with a Coca-Cola Export Sales Company label from May 27, 1947 doesn't really look like much on the outside as a double-weight cover franked with a marginal pair of 3¢ Jefferson stamps, however...

It's addressed to Farley's daughter Ann at Wellesley College. As for the contents, it was packed with newspaper clippings announcing the engagement of her older sister Elizabeth and included the wonderful note shown in Figure 8.

What I most like about this item is that Farley signed the note "Your dad, Aloysious" in green ink. Aloysious clearly must have been an internal family "pet name" based on Farley's middle name that was used with his daughter from childhood. For a postal history and autograph collector like me, it just doesn't get any better than this.

Finally, Figure 9 shows an example of late usage of the 3¢ Jefferson stamp by the Assistant PMG Ormonde A. Kieb on a December 15, 1954 registered mail cover. This is shown together with its backstamps. Since the Jefferson stamp had been replaced by the 3¢ Statue of Liberty stamp on June 24, 1954 some might consider this use to be "out of period," but I'll point out that this was used by the Assistant PMG. However, use of the 30¢ Teddy Roosevelt stamp was certainly "in period" since the new 30¢ Robert E. Lee stamp of the Liberty Series would not be issued until September 21, 1955.

I'll also note that this was sent to "Mr. P. S. Brown" at the same address as the favor FDC for 4¢ Abraham Lincoln stamp of the Liberty Series shown last month.⁶ This helps illustrate how convoluted collecting favor covers and items on official stationery can become. In other words, there seems to be a relatively small number of favored individuals that inhabit this universe, and the same names just keep turning up over and over again.

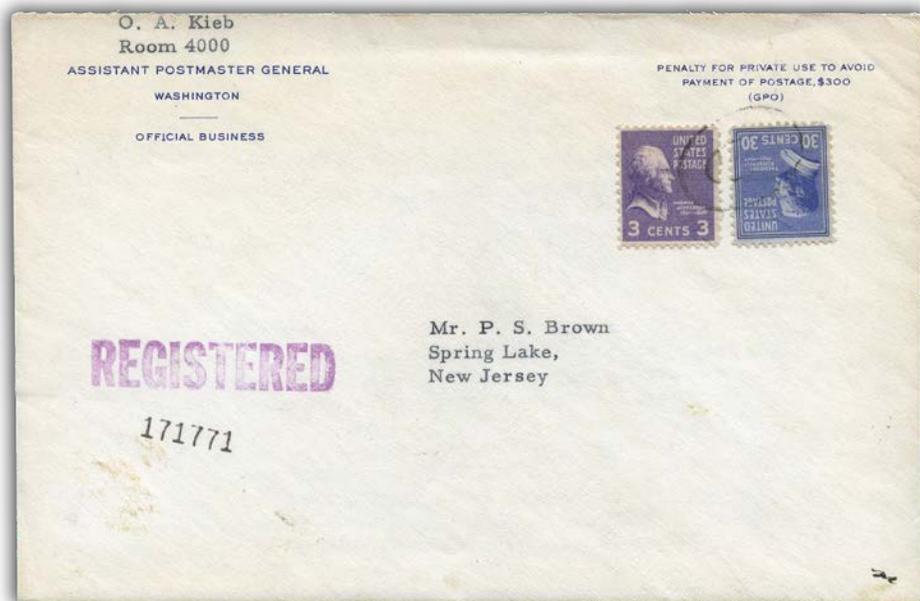


Figure 9. Registered December 15, 1954 cover from Assistant PMG Kieb.



The author would like to acknowledge Virginia Lewick, Archivist at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, Hyde Park, NY for help with records of the correspondence between George Sweet and FDR. Note that all covers and letters shown here are from the author's collection.

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