# Comprehensive Architectural Survey of Robbinsville, North Carolina Lisa D. Buckley and Elizabeth C. King North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office December 2018/November 2020

#### Introduction

Euro-American settlers arrived in the region that now includes Graham County after the Cherokee Removal of 1838. Located in the far western portion of North Carolina bordering Tennessee, Graham County's remote location and challenging terrain caused it to be one of the last parts of North Carolina to see permanent white settlement. Natural resource industries drove growth in the early twentieth century. A robust lumber harvesting and milling industry and dam construction in nearby communities drew many to the region. Carpet manufacturing and furniture bolstered the local economy in the mid to late twentieth century.

The challenging terrain of far western North Carolina provided those who lived in Robbinsville and in the surrounding communities of Stecoah, Cheoah, Tulula, and Yellow Creek a level of isolation that often resulted in the preservation of older building techniques and other cultural practices. Once introduced, any given architectural style seems to have persisted longer in Graham County than in the nation at large.<sup>1</sup>

The earliest wagon roads to Robbinsville were those built for Cherokee Removal. A road to Topton replaced a wagon road to Andrews in 1902, and access to Maryville, Tennessee, Robbinsville's nearest metropolitan neighbor to the north, was not established until 1930. Because transporting lumber by cart over mountain roads was onerous, the lumber companies built railroads, and thereby expanded access to the area, spurring further development and population growth.<sup>2</sup>

According to 2010 U.S. Census data, nearly 85 percent of Robbinsville residents identify as white. Native Americans comprise more than 3 percent of the population. Graham County is home to the Snowbird Cherokee, a community of around 500 members of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

The goal of the Comprehensive Architectural Survey of Robbinsville was to survey approximately 100 to 120 buildings and structures. Principal investigator Lisa Buckley, employed as Architectural Survey Specialist in the Western Office of the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office (HPO), recorded 98 properties. At the conclusion of the survey,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Michael Ann Williams, who conducted the 1997 Reconnaissance Survey, noted that, "Architectural change came much more slowly for the majority of rural people in southwestern North Carolina. A prolonged period of slow change, dating from the 1880s to the 1930s, characterized the building practices of the rural majority." *Homeplace: The Social Use and Meaning of the Folk Dwelling in Southwestern North Carolina* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 30.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Graham County Centennial, 1872-1972 (Robbinsville, N.C.: Graham County Centennial, 1972).

four individual properties and two historic districts were approved for the National Register Study List at the February 14, 2019 meeting of the National Register Advisory Committee: Snider's Department Store and Bemis Lumber Company Office (GH0139), Phillips Motel (GH0157), "The Hut" (GH0204), the First Baptist Church of Robbinsville (GH0203), the Robbinsville Downtown Historic District (GH0230), and the Snidertown Historic District (GH0133).

Two historic properties previously assigned survey site numbers were demolished prior to the beginning of Buckley's 2018 survey. The Robbinsville Depot (GH0051) was surveyed in 1975 but was demolished prior to 1993, based on available aerial imagery. Robbinsville High School (GH0052) was vacated in 1992 and demolished between 1993 and 1998 to allow for an expansion of Robbinsville Elementary School. Other local landmarks along Robbinsville's main thoroughfare were lost before a survey record could be created. Among these properties are Robbinsville's Main Street movie theater, the Slaughter Hotel, and the Joyce Kilmer Inn and Cottages, the latter of which was replaced by a large community health clinic in the early 2000s.

The completion of the Rodney Orr Bypass (U.S. Highway 129) encouraged automobile-oriented development away from Robbinsville's historic Main Street. Many businesses, including the post office, moved from Main Street to the bypass, where there was ample space for strip malls, buildings with larger footprints, and parking lots. As a result, community gathering spaces shifted from the Main Street drug store and department store to newer venues like the Ingles Market and restaurants along the bypass. As businesses vacated Main Street, some former commercial buildings became residences.

Because there are no land use codes in Robbinsville, existing land use patterns represent organic growth; however, land uses are mostly grouped. Commercial activity is concentrated along Main Street and the Rodney Orr Bypass. Residential development rims the perimeter of Robbinsville.

### Purpose

Buckley's 2018 survey of Robbinsville was the first comprehensive study of the town's built environment. The 1978-1979 Far West Regional Survey and the 1997 Graham and Swain Counties Reconnaissance Survey did not include a detailed study of Robbinsville.<sup>3</sup> The Far West Regional Survey recorded the Robbinsville Jail (GH0034), but the two-county reconnaissance survey did not include historic properties in Robbinsville. Other limited surveys, including environmental review studies triggered by Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, documented seven resources within town limits. The Graham County

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Sponsored by the initiative Western North Carolina Tomorrow, the 1978-1979 Far West Regional Survey was a reconnaissance-level survey of 10 counties in western North Carolina. Folklorist Michael Ann Williams conducted the 1997 architectural survey of Graham and Swain counties, which primarily focused on vernacular dwellings outside of Robbinsville.

Courthouse (GH0039) was individually listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2007. Junaluska's Grave (GH0060) was added to the National Register Study List in 1990.

The 2018 survey arose from property-owner interest in the potential National Register eligibility of Snider's Department Store and Bemis Lumber Company Office (GH0139). Consultation with the HPO's regional survey and restoration specialists in December 2017 revealed that little historic context was available to understand the built environment within Robbinsville.

The purpose of the 2018 comprehensive survey was to provide a complete picture of the historic architectural resources in Robbinsville. The survey allowed local stakeholders to understand historic themes as expressed in the built environment and provided historic context for building development in the little-researched far western region of North Carolina. The findings of this study can be utilized for economic development initiatives and to facilitate implementation of prior planning efforts, such as the 2012 report issued by the University of North Carolina Institute for the Environment's Center for Sustainable Community Design entitled, "Reimagining Robbinsville." The 2018 survey can also provide baseline information for adaptive reuse and marketing, such as the reuse of the currently vacant Snider's Department Store.

# Methodology

The planning phase for the survey began in late 2017 when HPO staff met with local stakeholders. A "windshield survey" in June 2018 identified the areas of greatest architectural interest in Robbinsville, noting that the north-south oriented business district along Main Street retained many historic buildings, that neighborhoods of modest single-family residences surrounded the commercial corridor, and that a newer commercial district dominated by national chains had developed along the Rodney Orr Bypass/U.S. Highway 129.

Prior to beginning fieldwork, Buckley populated a project-specific Microsoft Access database with information found in older paper records. Buckley also examined newspapers, deeds, and property record cards, interviewed stakeholders and Robbinsville residents, and consulted secondary resources.

In order to maximize the survey's value as a planning tool, Buckley surveyed properties that were less than fifty years old at the time of survey. Priority was given to historic resources that retained integrity of materials.<sup>4</sup> The survey scope covered a variety of time periods and building

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Integrity of Materials is an important consideration in assessing a historic property's eligibility for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. In the National Register Bulletin, "How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation," the National Park Service offers the following guidance on assessing materials. "Materials are the physical elements that were combined or deposited during a particular period of time and in a particular pattern or configuration to form a historic property. The choice and combination of materials reveal the preferences of those who created the property and indicate the availability of particular types of materials and technologies. Indigenous materials are often the focus of regional buildings traditions and thereby help define an area's sense of time and place."

uses (e.g., residential, commercial, religious, etc.). The survey was limited to those resources that lie within the municipal limits of Robbinsville.

Local stakeholders, including members of the Graham County Historical Association, local civic organizations, and local economic development groups, participated in the survey committee. Over the course of the project, members attended several meetings in order to share insights and address specific questions that arose during the survey. Committee members facilitated contact with Robbinsville residents who could provide access to specific properties. The committee also provided comments on a draft of the final report. The relationship proved mutually beneficial, as it provided HPO staff opportunities to offer advice and technical assistance to local property owners.

Over the course of eight non-consecutive days in July and August 2018, Buckley surveyed 98 resources constructed between the late nineteenth century and 1969. She photographed historic buildings visible from the public right-of-way with a DSLR camera. Several property owners granted interior access to their homes or businesses for survey purposes. Buckley took interior photographs at two churches, seven commercial buildings, the Robbinsville Jail, and Robbinsville Elementary School.

*The Graham Star* published an article about the survey in the July 12, 2018 edition. HPO staff attended the August meeting of the Graham County Historical Association to share details about the survey while it was underway.

Buckley summarized her findings in narrative descriptions added to the project-specific MS Access database. She labeled digital photographs according to standard HPO naming conventions. She created paper survey files containing fieldnotes, photographic proof sheets, and copies of primary and secondary research sources. HPOWEB, the HPO's GIS web server, displays the geospatial results of the survey. This report summarizes the project and presents recommendations for the six resources added to the National Register Study List in February 2019.

# Historic Context

# Cherokee Removal and Early Settlement (1838-1915)

In 1838, North Carolina troops established Fort Montgomery to the east of present-day Robbinsville to serve as a holding facility during the Cherokee Removal ordered by President Andrew Jackson. The establishment of Fort Montgomery marked the beginning of white settlement in the area. Due to the challenges of farming rugged mountain terrain, white settlement of modern Graham County lagged behind other parts of western North Carolina. Early settlers practiced subsistence farming in isolated conditions.

In the 1840s, a trading post that later served as the post office was constructed on the site now occupied by Robbinsville Elementary School. In 1872, Graham County was established from northeastern Cherokee County. The first county courthouse was constructed at Robbinsville in

1874, through the community remained unincorporated until 1893. Between 1890 and 1910, Robbinsville's population grew from 60 to 150 residents.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 1. Circa 1895 photograph of Robbinsville. Courtesy of Mike Ingram.

The lumber industry drove most of Robbinsville's early growth. Early lumber interests included the Belding Lumber Company, the Heiser Lumber Company, and the Kanawha Hardwood Company. The first short-line narrow gauge railroads arrived in 1909 to serve the lumber industry, replacing river drives and draft animals in transporting lumber to market. In 1915, six sawmills operated in Robbinsville in addition to four others in Graham County.<sup>6</sup>

Log buildings comprised the majority of the earliest dwellings in Graham County; however, after the establishment of sawmills, dimensional lumber became available for new construction, resulting in a transition to boxed- and wood-framed buildings. The 1997 Graham and Swain Counties Reconnaissance Survey discovered several boxed-frame houses near Robbinsville, but the 2018 survey did not record any buildings of this construction method in town.

Six properties in Robbinsville appear to be more than one hundred years old: three houses, a commercial building, the Robbinsville Jail (GH0034), and the Robbinsville Public School and Masonic Lodge (GH0162). The circa 1879 house at 85 North Main Street (GH0205) appears to be the oldest extant building in town. It served as a Methodist church before becoming a residence.<sup>7</sup> The house is a one-story, side-gabled frame house with an altered or replaced shedroof porch. Owner Jimmy Millsaps states that locust log posts make up the building's frame.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Graham County Centennial; Levi Branson, Branson's North Carolina Business Directory, 1890 (Raleigh, N.C.: Levi Branson, 1890), 309; Levi Branson, Branson's North Carolina Business Directory, 1896 (Raleigh, N.C.: Levi Branson, 1896), 293; The North Carolina Yearbook and Business Directory, 1915 (Raleigh, N.C.: News and Observer, 1915), 227.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Graham County Centennial; N.C. Yearbook, 1915, 227.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Personal correspondence, Buckley and Michael Ingram, August 2018.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Personal correspondence, Buckley and Jimmy Millsaps, August 2018.

The circa 1917 house at 174 South Main Street (GH0160), though nearly forty years younger than GH0205, bears striking similarities to the older house. Both houses are small one- or one-and-a-half story, side-gabled frame houses with weatherboard siding, covered front porches, small rear wings, and a conspicuous lack of features referring to any nationally popular architectural styles. A comparison of the two houses demonstrates the conservatism of historic house forms and styles in rural western North Carolina, where architectural trends persisted across several generations.

The circa 1897 Robbinsville Public School and Masonic Lodge (GH0162) replaced a smaller schoolhouse at the same location. Because no public funds were available to construct the needed larger school, the schoolboard and local Masonic Lodge agreed to jointly fund and construct a building that would accommodate students on the first floor and Masons on the second. The building served as Robbinsville's school from 1897 to 1909.<sup>9</sup>

The building at 40 Dula Street (GH0032) served as the Robbinsville Jail before its conversion to residential use. Constructed in 1910, the jail was expanded in 1935 and replaced in 1941, when a new courthouse that included jail cells was completed. The former jail is a two-story, wood-frame building having a common-bond brick veneer and corbelled cornice. It is remarkably similar to historic jails in Avery, Clay, and Watauga counties. The jail is one of a small number of brick-veneered buildings in Robbinsville. Other examples are found among the commercial buildings on North Main Street.

# Industrialization and the Emergence of a Workforce (1916-1934)

Several lumber companies operated within Graham County, but the Bemis Lumber Company dominated the industry and made the most lasting impact on Robbinsville. In 1924, H.C. Bemis purchased the Whiting Manufacturing Company, a lumber interest, and along with it, the right to develop the railroad line. Bemis' Graham County Railroad opened in 1925. Eventually, Bemis Lumber Company became one of the largest employers in Robbinsville. Employees built many of the houses in and around Robbinsville. The company constructed a mill, company store, a picnic ground and recreation center (GH0124), and mill housing (GH0016) outside the municipal limits. The Bemis Lumber Company also constructed a movie theater on North Main Street that is no longer extant.

The construction of several hydroelectric dams in Graham County brought more jobs to the region. Alcoa's 1916 Cheoah Dam was the first, followed by Tallahassee Power Company's Santeetlah Dam in the mid-1920s and the Tennessee Valley Authority's Fontana Dam in the 1940s. Between 1920 and 1930, the population of Robbinsville increased nearly 190 percent, and new housing was constructed to accommodate this growth.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Graham County Centennial.

Many of the commercial buildings on North Main Street were constructed during this period. Most of these buildings are attached to one another in commercial blocks and have no setback from the sidewalks, forming a contiguous commercial corridor that radiates from the courthouse square. Two notable Main Street commercial buildings are the former Ingram's Drug Store



Figure 2. Ingram's Drug Store, photograph ca. 1935. Courtesy of grahamcounty.net.



Figure 3. Snider's Department Store, undated photograph. Courtesy of Graham County Public Library.

(GH0179) (Figure 2) and the former Snider's Department Store (GH0139) (Figure 3). Ingram's Drug Store is a circa 1925 two-story, brick-veneered commercial building with a chamfered corner. The building originally housed a bank that failed in the 1929 Stock Market Crash. Ingram's occupied the building from 1929 until around 1970. The drug store included a lunch counter that created an important social space in Robbinsville.

Snider's Department Store is a circa 1927 one-story commercial building clad in uncut stone with a grapevine mortar. Snider's Department Store operated for more than 80 years before it closed in 2008. It was the largest store in town for many years, as well as the main retailer in Robbinsville and Graham County, selling a wide variety of merchandise from groceries to shoes to live poultry. Following the closure of Snider's, residents are now required to leave Graham County for routine shopping trips.

Other commercial buildings on North Main Street are one-story buildings on small parcels, most of which were constructed between 1900 and 1950. The

building at 25 North Main Street (GH0176), constructed in 1900, is the oldest commercial building in Robbinsville and one of the few two-story buildings. The buildings at 42, 66, and 78 North Main Street (GH0143, 0140, and 0145) are more typical: modest, one-story commercial buildings for which function took precedence over decorative detail. They are single-use, purpose-built buildings having simple forms.

Most residential construction during this period took place west of Main Street along Atoah and Circle streets. The steep grade east of Main Street and the tendency of Tallulah Creek to flood likely influenced this growth pattern. Atoah Street (Figure 4) developed in the mid-1920s in

tandem with Robbinsville's population growth and is the earliest cohesive neighborhood in town. It is the most intact collection of dwellings of consistent form and style, featuring several blocks of Craftsman-style bungalows that retain triangular knee braces, exposed rafter tails, and narrow-light windows. Though covered in replacement siding, the houses at 96, 108, and 118 Atoah Street (GH0185, 0187, and 0188) retain their original scale and massing.



Circle Street boasts a variety of houses dating from the early 1920s to the 1960s. The house at 156 Circle Street (GH0214) is a notable two-and-a-half-story, hipped-roof, Colonial Revivalstyle house that includes a fullwidth porch supported by classical columns. GH0214 is the largest house in Robbinsville. The neighboring house at 188 Circle Street (GH0216) is a side-gabled, brick-veneered, Craftsman-style bungalow with a full-width porch. Both houses were

*Figure 4. Atoah Street, photograph ca. 1930. Courtesy of grahamcounty.net.* porch. Both houses were constructed in 1926, when Robbinsville was rapidly growing as a result of job creation in the lumber and hydroelectric industries.

# WPA and CCC (1935-1943)

The Stock Market Crash of 1929 and subsequent Great Depression affected western North Carolina greatly. By 1935, over 17 percent of households in Graham County were on relief.<sup>10</sup> The formation of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in 1933 provided a two-fold solution to problems the community faced: it employed able-bodied young men at a time when work was scarce, and it began to address conservation issues brought on by the timber industry. The CCC came to Robbinsville in 1935 to begin restoration work within Nantahala National Forest. Road construction was one of the many undertakings of the CCC, and the road between Robbinsville and Andrews is one example of their work.

Robbinsville benefited from nearby CCC Camp #NCF-24, which drew recruits from across North Carolina. While the local CCC camp limited its focus to forestry-related projects, the Works Progress (later Work Projects) Administration (WPA) undertook a wide variety of projects. The WPA participated in road improvements, privy construction, fish pond

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Harley E. Jolley, *That Magnificent Army of Youth and Peace: The Civilian Conservation Corps in North Carolina, 1933-1942* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

construction, and a variety of employment programs that provided school cafeteria and janitorial staff. The WPA constructed at least four extant buildings in Robbinsville.

In 1938, the WPA relied on local labor to construct the former Robbinsville High School. While the main classroom building was demolished in 1992 when Robbinsville Elementary School was expanded, the Robbinsville High School Gymnasium (GH0202) and the Robbinsville High School Band Building (GH0199) remain on campus. The gymnasium is an uncut, uncoursed native stone building with grapevine mortar. Wormy chestnut lines the interior walls. The basement once held a classroom and showers. The band building is a front-gabled building clad in uncut, uncoursed native stone with grapevine mortar.

"The Hut" (GH0204), also constructed in 1938, is a community building initially operated by the Lions Club and Graham County Women's Club.<sup>11</sup> This side-gable, Rustic Revival-style pole building has rubble chinking and grapevine mortar joints. In 1941, the WPA completed the Graham County Courthouse (GH0039), a large native stone building that replaced a circa 1895 frame building at the same site. Reportedly, town leaders made the decision to replace the 1895 courthouse in part because it was last wood-frame county courthouse in North Carolina. The 1941 courthouse was individually listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2007.<sup>12</sup>

### Postwar Era (1944-1971)



*Figure 5. North Main Street, photograph ca. 1955. Courtesy of grahamcounty.net.* 

New construction in Robbinsville peaked in the 1950s and 1960s, decades in which the timber industry continued to flourish. The prominence of Bemis Lumber Company as the town's major employer greatly influenced the development of Robbinsville, giving it some of the characteristics of a company town. In addition to the circa 1930 movie theater, the lumber company provided Robbinsville with its first library, the Bemis Memorial Library, in 1938. Donations from the Bemis and Veach families replaced the original building in 1952 with a one-story, front-gabled frame

building (GH0209) that stands on its original site on South Main Street. The former library building retains a round window in its gable and a projecting multi-pane picture window supported by wood brackets. More recently, the former library building has served as commercial space.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Personal correspondence, Buckley and Doyle Brock, August 2018.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Graham County Centennial, 25-28; Clay Griffith, "Graham County Courthouse" National Register Nomination Form, 2007.

Other Main Street buildings constructed during this period include the former post office (GH0220), portions of the Robbinsville Elementary School campus (GH0200 and GH0201), and the Robbinsville Administrative Offices (GH0182). The former Wachovia Bank (GH0132), built in 1960, is now home to the Graham County Soil and Water Conservation District Office and the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Office. In the late 1970s, this building housed the Graham County Sheriff.

The 1957 James Lees Carpet Company Facility sits at the south end of Robbinsville just outside the municipal limits. The company employed 400 people before it closed in 1971. When the facility opened, the Snider family constructed a neighborhood of worker houses (GH0133) on an adjacent parcel. "Snidertown" is a collection of twenty-six one-story houses of similar form and scale completed circa 1960. The houses are clad in asbestos shingles and have concrete block foundations and asphalt shingle roofs. Many retain three-over-one double-hung sash windows. The houses share uniform setbacks, and there are no sidewalks or driveways. Most houses have front-gable roofs, though some have side-gable roofs or two front-facing cross-gables. Today, most of the houses remain rental units. Phillips & Jordan, a land-clearing business that focuses on government contracts, is another postwar business that influenced Robbinsville's built environment. The 1950 bowstring truss building at 74 Laura Street (GH0148) was a Phillips & Jordan facility.

The importance of tourism to Robbinsville's economy is clear considering the survival of four mid-century motor courts and motels, including three still in operation. These are the 1945 Phillips Motel (GH0157), the 1958 San Ran Motel (GH0218), the 1969 Mountain Manor Motel (GH0165), and the now shuttered 1957 Five Point Motel (GH0217). The Phillips Motel on North Main Street is constructed of native stone and clad in uncoursed, uncut rubble. The office building was originally a residence; later, twelve guest rooms were added, forming a courtyard arrangement. In the early 2000s, Robbinsville's best-known lodging property, the Joyce Kilmer Inn and Cottages, was demolished to make way for a new county health facility.

While many residential properties in Robbinsville date from the 1950s and 1960s, most of them were constructed on empty lots in established neighborhoods. Jordan Street, located to the east of Rodney Orr Bypass, is the exception, a mid-century neighborhood of eight brick-veneered Ranch-style houses constructed between 1965 and 1968 (GH0163). These one-story, low slung houses have attached carports and are uniformly set back from Jordan Street.

### Modern Era (1972-present)

Far western North Carolina has experienced a gradual decline in population correlated to the closure of manufacturing plants and the lack of new jobs to replace those lost. Robbinsville's population peaked at over 800 residents in the 1980s and has gradually declined to an estimated population of fewer than 650 in 2019. In 1990, Bemis Lumber Company closed. Thereafter,

Stanley Furniture Company, which had purchased the Lees Carpet Company facility in 1984, was the town's largest employer until it outsourced its manufacturing jobs to China in 2014.<sup>13</sup>

Robbinsville is fortunate to have a Main Street historic district that is scenic, convenient to natural attractions, and highly walkable. The popularity of the region as a tourist destination provides an excellent opportunity to make its historic downtown a destination.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Dale Neal, "When the Last Factory Leaves a Mountain Town," Asheville Citizen-Times, August 30, 2014.

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Local business owner Bryan Farley kindly shared his knowledge and photographs with us. Randy Jordan and Jeff Hancock of Graham County Land Company provided access to the historic Robbinsville Jail. Reverend Ben Thacker provided access to the First Baptist Church and the "Hut" and also invited church members Doyle Brock and Scott Millsaps to share their memories. Superintendent of Schools Angie Knight was kind enough to show us around Robbinsville Elementary School. Reverend Max Turpin graciously provided a tour of Hosanna Baptist Church. Main Street property owner John Colwell provided access to his properties, as did Carol and Annette Ensley. Motel owner Bill Young provided access to the Phillips Motel. Town of Robbinsville Alderman Brian "Taco" Johnson shared his knowledge and acted as a liaison to the Robbinsville government. Thank you to *The Graham Star* and editor Gary Corsair for providing media coverage of the survey. Thank you to the Robbinsville United Methodist Church for providing a meeting space.

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