

Have You Seen Me?: Missing Works of Nineteenth-Century American Literature



. . . at first it seems incredible . . . that such-and-such a thing can be discovered, but after it has been discovered, it again seems incredible that it could elude men for so long.

– Francis Bacon, The New Organon (1620)

To students new to the study of nineteenth-century American literature, it may

seem that the field has been so thoroughly studied and catalogued that there can be very little left to discover about it. This could hardly be further from the truth. The bodies of work of the most well-studied of American authors from the period—much less writers who are only just beginning to receive their critical due—are almost all incomplete. Indeed, it is probably a rare thing to study a writer who does *not* have works, either known or suspected, missing from their corpuses. This seems to be especially true of authors of the nineteenth century, for a few reasons.

First, the amount of material printed in that era was for the first time very large. The nineteenth century was an era of ballooning publishing numbers, awash in novels, poetry volumes, newspapers, literary magazines, pamphlets, chapbooks, religious tracts, monthly serials, penny dreadfuls, yellowbacks, paperbacks, and even a phenomenon eventually called the “bestseller”—giving scholars today a great deal of material to search through. Second, this material is more likely than earlier printed works to be digitized, since publications from the eighteenth century and before are fewer, rarer, and often in fragile condition, keeping much of this early material limited to physical archival storage. Third, more recent professional authors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, have generally adopted personal archiving and self-bibliography practices that make textual losses less likely, at least accidental losses. Thus, nineteenth-century American literature is particularly ripe for ongoing recovery efforts—especially concerted, collective efforts between and among scholars of the archives.



Figure 1: George Comegys, *The Ghost Book* (Philadelphia: Butler & Long, 1839-1844). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

Knowing what is missing is an important first step. Indeed, sometimes simply bringing a problem to light can speed its solution. One of the more recent examples of this is the rediscovery of Kate Chopin's late, lost short story, "Her First Party," in 2013. The story was known to have existed, but for decades scholars despaired of knowing *where* to look. Success finally came when researchers Bonnie James Shaker and Angela Pettitt combed through an online periodicals database "outside the logical, searchable framework of Chopin's lifespan" (386). It is my hope that the list below—of known and suspected missing texts by nineteenth-century Americans—will encourage similar collaboration and unorthodoxy. This list is naturally incomplete, a beginning; a fuller accounting would fill whole volumes. What follows was inspired by the pioneering collaborative work of scholars like those highlighted below, as well as by Johanna Ortner, whose essay "[Lost No More: Recovering Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's Forest Leaves](#)" appeared in *Commonplace* in 2015 and had an

early impact on this writer.

* * *

Hawthorne's 1819 poem(s) in print: Among known missing works by Nathaniel Hawthorne, those topping any "most wanted" list will be his earliest publications by far: his juvenile poems. In a letter addressed to his older sister, Louisa, and dated September 28, 1819, Hawthorne, then sixteen years old, included several stanzas that he had recently composed. "I am full of scraps of poetry," he writes, "can't keep it out of my brain . . . I could vomit up a dozen pages more if I was a mind to so turn over." He adds, with obvious pride: "Tell Ebe [his younger sister] she's not the only one of the family whose works have appeared in the papers." Julian Hawthorne later reported that Hawthorne sent verses (presumably these) "to a Boston newspaper" at age sixteen. "These have not yet been identified," notes Joel Myerson, editor of Hawthorne's *Selected Letters* (27).



Figure 2: Charles Bird King, *Grandfather's Hobby* (United States, s.n., 1830-1851). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

Whitman's early newspaper pieces and lost novels: Decades before he would become a poetic iconoclast, a young Walt Whitman, age twelve, found a job as an editor's apprentice at the *Long-Island Patriot*, his father's Democratic newspaper of choice. During the year or so he worked for the paper (1831-32), he published in the *Patriot* what he would later call "a few sentimental bits," none of which have been identified so far.

Later, for much of his twenties, Whitman worked as a correspondent for a number of Brooklyn and Manhattan newspapers. During the period spanning 1841 to 1848, he is also known to have published miscellaneous prose tales, novellas, and

sketches. Whitman was not particularly proud of his work from this period, which tended to be rapidly written and sensationalistic. He later wrote that “[m]y serious wish were to have all those crude and boyish pieces quietly dropp’d in oblivion—but to avoid the annoyance of their surreptitious issue” he published about two dozen of them in 1892, in *Collect and Other Prose*. However, the Library of America’s *Story of the Week* webseries notes that “[s]ince many were published anonymously or pseudonymously, there might be others that have not yet been identified.” These pieces might be found in any number of New York periodicals, including the *Aurora*, the *Evening Tattler*, the *Statesman*, the *Daily Plebian*, the *Mirror*, the *Democrat*, the *Sun*, the *Subterranean*, the *Daily Tribune*, the *Sunday Times & Noah’s Weekly Messenger*, the *Rover*, the *Washingtonian and Organ*, the *American Review*, and Brooklyn’s *Daily Eagle* and *Evening Star*.



Figure 3: Walt Whitman, age 35, frontispiece to *Leaves of Grass*. Samuel Hollyer (1826-1919) of a daguerreotype by Gabriel Harrison (1818-1902) (original lost).

Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Whitman is also believed to have written, and perhaps published, at least one and perhaps two novels around the time of his first publishing *Leaves of Grass* (1855). Letters and manuscripts from the period detail the general plot outlines of these two potboilers, titled *The Sleepwalker* (ca. 1851) and *Proud Antoinette* (ca. 1858-60), at least one of which, the former, Whitman claimed to have completed. Whatever their publications histories, if any, the whereabouts of their manuscripts today are unknown.

The origins of the phrase “the Great American Novel”: An essay written by novelist John William de Forest and published in *The Nation* in 1868, is generally regarded as the beginning of the ongoing popular discussion of “the great American novel.” However, de Forest’s essay is not the origin of the phrase itself, as Lawrence Buell notes in his 2014 book on the subject. P. T. Barnum toyed with the phrase in 1866, and it is clear that the term was already in general circulation by then. I have performed a number of searches for the phrase—always using the article “the,” since the phrase “a great American novel” does not necessarily convey the same sense—and have found a number of earlier uses of the term. As for early candidates for the title, de Forest himself said that “[t]he nearest approach to the desired phenomenon is ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’.” I now believe he may be right. The earliest usage I can locate refers to Stowe’s bestseller. In an 1852 English edition of the work, published in six unbound parts by Vickers and T. C. Johns (both of London), the book is referred to as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin. The Great American Novel, To Be Completed in Six Weekly Numbers, Price One Penny Each*. I imagine that with effort, even earlier uses of the phrase may be found.



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"FRIENDS, FAREWELL!"

Entered at N. Y. P. O. as Second-class Mail Matter.

THE NORTH POLE LEAVES THE RANKS OF THE UNDISCOVERED.

Figure 4: "The Undiscovered Club [includes 'The Great American Novel']," from *Puck Magazine*, 13 Oct 1909. Nankivell, Frank A. (Frank Arthur), 1869-1959, artist. Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Early African American fiction: Given the merciless oppressions of American slavery, the eventual collapse of Reconstruction after emancipation, and the ongoing terrorism of whites toward African Americans during the Jim Crow Era, it is perhaps unsurprising that so few short stories and novels are known to have been written by African Americans prior to 1900. What is surprising, though, is that after decades of pioneering efforts by scholars like Henry Louis Gates Jr., Brigitte Fielder, Jean Lutes, Denise Burgher, Caroline Gebhard, Katherine Adams, Sandra A. Zagarell, and many others, the full extent of early and pioneering African American engagement with fiction is still only just coming to light. Prominent recovered African American fictions—be they published or preserved in manuscript—include Harriet E. Wilson's 1859 *Our Nig* (rediscovered by Gates in 1981), Hannah Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (written ca. 1853-61, rediscovered by Gates in 2001), and Alice Dunbar-Nelson's

planned volume of short stories *Annals of 'Steenth Street* (written largely in the 1890s, reconstructed by Fielder, Lutes, and Burgher), as well as short stories published in periodicals like *The Anglo-African Magazine*, the *Colored American*, and *The Christian Recorder*. These discoveries join the ranks of early fictions by the likes of Victor Séjour, William Wells Brown, Frank J. Webb, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Martin Delany, and Frederick Douglass; they also suggest that much more early African American fiction is likely buried in periodicals and archived manuscripts around the US.



Figure 5: Alice Dunbar Nelson, circa 1900, Schuges of Washington, DC. Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

In some instances, information at least exists to provide researchers a place to begin. For example, until recently the earliest known literary publication by Charles W. Chesnutt—the late-nineteenth-century author of tales and novels addressing race relations in the post-Reconstruction South—was thought to be “A

Father's Dream." This short story was published in the *Cleveland Voice* in the spring of 1885, when Chesnutt was twenty-six years old. However, in 1999 a much earlier tale was rediscovered: "Frisk's First Rat," a brief short story that appeared on the second page of the Fayetteville, North Carolina, *Educator* on March 20, 1875, signed "Chas. W. Chesnutt." From that date until the appearance of "A Father's Dream," no Chesnutt-authored publications are known.

However, even during his lifetime there was the suggestion that unspecified Chesnutt juvenilia was extant somewhere. In an 1899 promotional sketch of Chesnutt's life, for example, provided by Houghton, Mifflin & Co. (publisher of his then-new collection of tales, *The Conjure Woman*), it is asserted that "Mr. Chesnutt's first story was written at fourteen, and was published in a newspaper issued by a colored man in North Carolina. Its motive was the baleful effects on the youthful mind of reading dime novels. Since 1884," it adds, "he has contributed stories to various periodicals." (See "The Rambler" column in the *Book Buyer* for June 1899, page 361.) No publications of Chesnutt's have surfaced from these time periods—neither for the year he was fourteen years old (1872-73) nor for 1884 (one year prior to "A Father's Dream"). One may doubt the veracity of the *Book Buyer* sketch—not least because it contains a miscalculation of Chesnutt's age—but the details of his ostensible first tale, which evidently lampooned "the baleful effects on the youthful mind of reading dime novels," are specific enough to suggest that Chesnutt himself provided them to his publisher. Yet they do not match any known work of his.

Beyond known or suspected missing fictions by African Americans, there must be many more *unknowns* that lie unsought, unconnected to any scholarly bibliography. Their recovery and redistribution will be the work of generations of scholars to come.

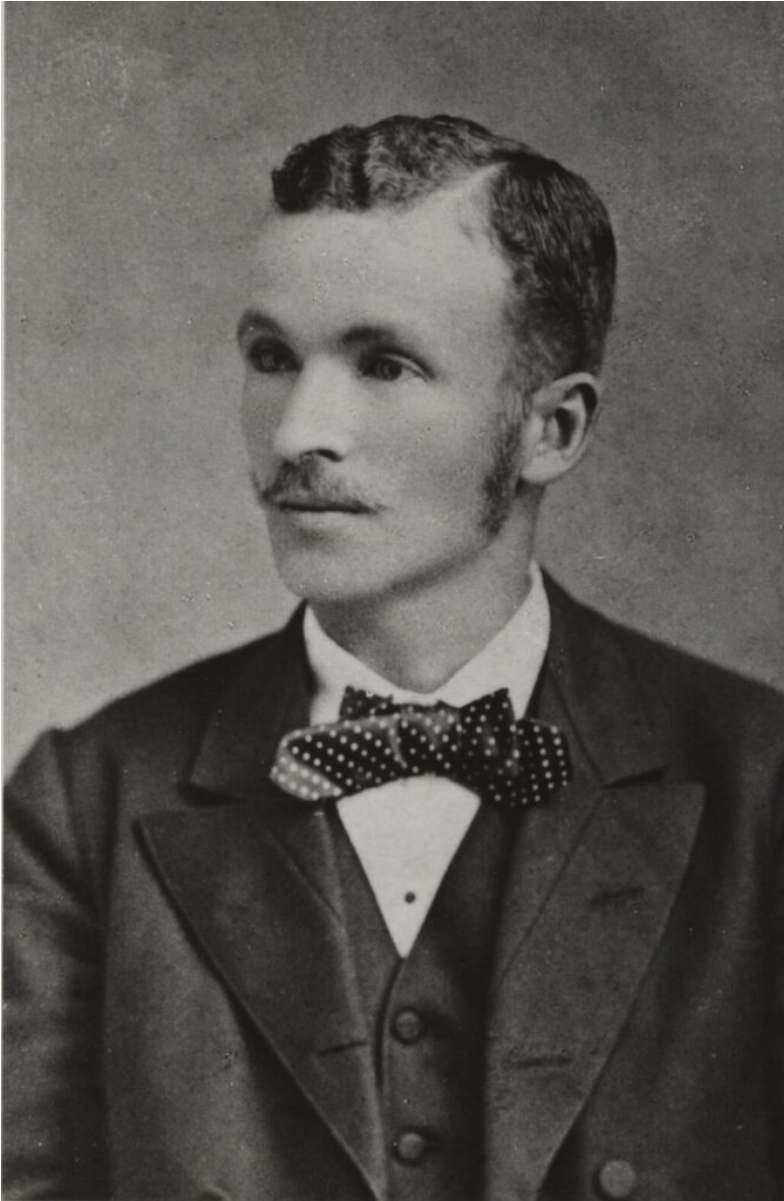


Figure 6: Charles Waddell Chesnutt, ca. 1883. Cleveland Public Library. Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Melville's book(s) of 1853: While not altogether free of conjecture, this topic is compelling enough to merit a place here. Herman Melville is known to have spent around four months, from December 1852 to April 1853, writing a sustained work, to which his sister Augusta and cousin Priscilla refer as "Isle of the Cross" in correspondence of the period. He then submitted a work, presumably this one, to the publisher Harper's that spring but did not see its publication. Scholars tend to agree that this work was some version of the "story of Agatha" to which Melville refers in a trio of letters to Hawthorne, but they disagree as to the ultimate result of this literary effort. Some have concluded that it was a novel-length effort, now lost; others believe it ultimately saw publication in 1854 in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, as a sketch in "The Encantadas" series. Melville writes in a letter to Harper and Brothers, dated November 24, 1853, that

[i]n addition to the work which I took to New York last Spring, but which I was prevented from printing at that time; I have now in hand, and pretty well on towards completion, another book—300 pages, say—partly of nautical adventure, and partly—or, rather, chiefly, of Tortoise Hunting Adventure. It will be ready for press some time in the coming January. (*Correspondence* 250)

This “Tortoise Hunting Adventure” likewise has never surfaced, even though Melville sent the Harpers an extract in December 1853 (for which he received a cash advance of \$300) and wrote to them asking their opinion of some portion of the “Tortoise Book” (which he refers to as “*Tortoise Hunters*”) in June 1854 (251, 267). It is unlikely that this work was anywhere near completion, however, since Melville specifies in the latter letter that “it would be difficult, if not impossible, for me to get the entire Tortoise Book ready for publication before Spring [1855],” though he acknowledges that he could “pick out & finish parts, here & there” (267).



H. Liverseege

O. Felton

The Politician

Figure 7: Henry Liverseege, *The Politician* (United States, s.n., 1840-1853). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

Louisa May Alcott's missing works of 1855-59: In her "Notes and Memoranda" ledger (now housed at Harvard's Houghton Library, and published as part of her *Journals*), Louisa May Alcott kept track of roughly thirty years' worth of personal earnings and major family events. For 1857, her listed earnings include:

Lovering	60
Sewing	20
'Agatha's Confession'	10
Our Sunbeam	10
Cross On The Tower	10
New Year's Gift	5
Pea Blossoms	10

Several of the items are self-evident, like "Sewing" and "New Year's Gift." Likewise, "Lovering" surely refers to the Loverings, for whom Alcott served as a governess between 1851 and 1859. However, three of the items on the list—"Agatha's Confession," "Our Sunbeam," and "Pea Blossoms"—have not been found. This is not unusual for this volume; in the two years previous, Alcott had listed "King Goldenrod" (1855) and "Painter's Dream" (1856), neither of which has yet to be identified. The following years' memoranda contain similar mysteries—e.g., an 1858 entry listed as "Hope's Treasures," which has not been located, and fully *five* unidentified entries for 1859: "Ottilia's Oath," "Steel Bracelet," "A Phantom Face," "Laird of Leigh," and "Faith's Tryst." Alcott biographer Harriet Reisen believes that these missing titles are likely short stories and that some may have been published, considering the earnings Alcott lists.

Louisa May Alcott.



L. M. Alcott

*Flower Fables,
Hospital Sketches,
Little Women.*

Lucy Larcom.



Lucy Larcom

*Wild Roses of Cape Ann,
An Idyl of Work,
Breathings of the Better Life.*

Mary Ann Evans.
"GEORGE ELLIOTT"



George Eliot

*Adam Bede,
Romola,
Daniel Deronda.*

Felicia Hemans.



Felicia Hemans

*The Better Land,
A Parting Song,
The Rhine.*

Figure 8: *Queens of Literature* (New York: McLoughlin Bros., ca. 1885). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

Additional publications of Dickinson's prose or verse, in her lifetime: The most recent rediscoveries of Emily Dickinson verses published in the poet's lifetime were in 1982 and 1984, both by scholar Karen Dandurand. Her list of the publications of Dickinson's poems in her lifetime (to which has only been added her 1850 "Magnum bonum harum scarum" Valentine Eve letter) is the still-comprehensive standard. So far as is known, Dickinson never asked for her poetry to be published, which may explain why these publications are invariably unsigned and must be correlated to a known manuscript. Nearly all were printed between 1850 and 1870, with most appearing in the nine-year window of 1858-66.

That said, more could certainly exist in newsprint or between covers. Researchers hoping to take up the torch from Dandurand might consider systematically searching electronic newspaper databases for more unsigned verses, either using keyphrases from known Dickinson poems, or else combining words and phrases commonly recycled by the poet in her writings (such as *bobolink, circumference, immortality, in purple, I could not/cannot stop for that*, etc).



Figure 9: Daguerreotype of Emily Dickinson, ca. early 1847, housed by Amherst College Archives & Special Collections. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Twain's early newspaper writings: A full accounting of Mark Twain's published works is ongoing, particularly of those writings that appeared in small newspapers early in his career. As Merle Johnson, Twain's first serious bibliographer, explained in 1910, the author's "literary production covered a period of practically five decades. His range of activities included newspaper, magazine, book, and speech. He lived in a dozen places, from Honolulu to Vienna. Europe, Canada, and the United States vied for the first publication of his work. These things, together with the immense volume of publication, render it practically impossible to make these lists technically complete." Though the situation has improved significantly in the past century, Johnson's statement is still accurate. A number of Twain's early periodical writings, particularly those written in or before 1865, are either missing or available only as reprintings, a situation complicated by the young correspondent's near-constant use of pseudonyms—e.g., "Josh," "Thomas Jefferson Snodgrass," "W. Epaminondas

Adrastus Blab" (or "W.E.A.B."), "Sergeant Fathom," "A Dog-be-Deviled Citizen," "Rambler," "Grumbler," "John Snooks," and eventually, of course, "Mark Twain." Articles published in the *Virginia City Territorial Enterprise*, one of Twain's first newspaper assignments, are particularly rare. Independent scholar Barbara Schmidt keeps a well-updated list of these works on her website, twainquotes.com.

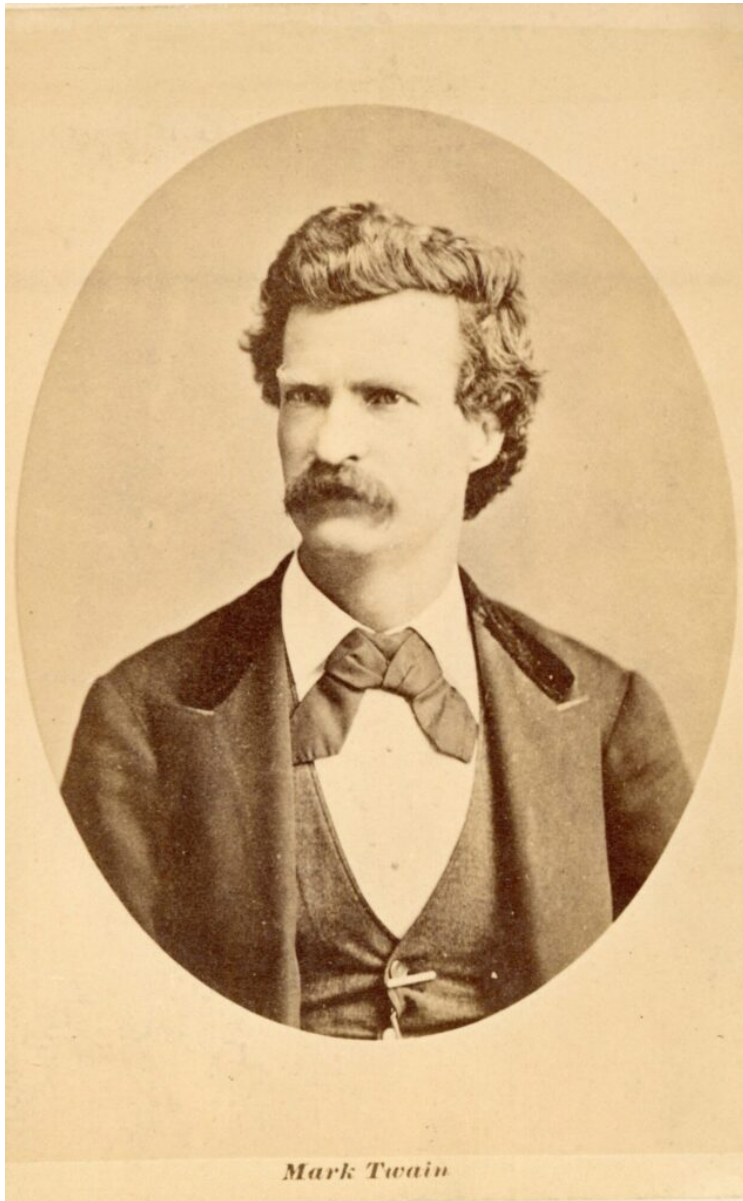


Figure 10: Mark Twain (United States, s.n., ca. 1867). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

Spofford's early stories: Harriet Prescott Spofford's tale "In a Cellar," which first appeared anonymously in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1859, was the beginning of her popularity as a writer of mysteries and Gothic romances. But it was not the beginning of her writing career; she'd spent much of the 1850s submitting stories to Boston newspapers, usually receiving tiny sums for them. While Spofford's novels are now well known, none of her early anonymous works have

yet been found.



Figure 11: Harriet P. Spofford. Bain News Service, publisher. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Missing lecture transcripts: Over the course of the 19th century, popular American authors often delivered speeches on the lecture circuits of their day—primarily in lyceums, library associations, local clubs, and subscription-based societies—as a way of engaging the public and securing supplemental income. Some lectures were reprinted or carefully transcribed (see Emerson’s, for example). Others were not. Nevertheless, missing lecture transcriptions may still exist in archived or digitized newspapers from the period. Twain, for example, lectured on Hawaii (then called the Sandwich Islands) after returning from an assignment there in 1866. In all, he delivered fifteen or sixteen such speeches, primarily in Grass Valley, California, and Nevada City, Nevada. Other than their general subject matter, these lectures are considered entirely lost.

In his book on the subject, Walter Francis Frear not only assumes that the lecture notes were destroyed by the author, but also considers attempts at their reconstruction to be futile, since “the more or less scanty newspaper accounts necessarily lack much in diction and manner of presentation by the lecturer” (177, 184). Nevertheless, it may be possible to locate more complete descriptions (if not transcripts) of these lectures in digitized newspaper archives. Other authors have similarly incomplete lecture corpuses, including Frederick Douglass, Herman Melville, Henry Ward Beecher, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Douglass’s and Beecher’s numerous lectures and sermons have been scrupulously catalogued, but they gave so many during their lifetimes that their lecture bibliographies are almost certainly incomplete. Gilman’s situation is practically the inverse: scholar Carol Farley Kessler notes that though Gilman “delivered so many lectures on ethics, economics, and sociology that she . . . lost count” (97), less than one hundred notices of her lectures have been found in print.

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