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# Jay Kislak

## The \$150 Million Man

BY ELLEN FIRSCHING BROWN

PHOTOGRAPHS OF JAY KISLAK BY TASHA TOLLIVER

**A**fter ninety-one years, the Waldburg-Wolfegg family of Germany finally relented. In 1992, Prince Johannes Waldburg-Wolfegg agreed to sell two of the most important maps pertaining to American history. One, from 1507, was the first to name a place called America. The second, printed in 1516, is the first nautical map of the world and clearly delineates the Gulf of Mexico, the Florida peninsula, and the Eastern Seaboard. The Library of Congress had pursued the maps since their discovery in the Waldburg-Wolfegg castle library in 1901. Once the prince decided to sell, it took the better part of a decade to negotiate the German government's approval and the price, \$14 million. The four-foot-by-eight-foot maps printed on twelve sheets of paper each are the only surviving copies of two enormously influential works by the German cartographer Martin Waldseemüller.

The prince gave the Library of Congress until November 15, 2000, to come up with the money. The deadline came and went. Two and a half years

Jay Kislak stands in the elegant room at the Library of Congress where his collection will go on display.



later, the prince sold just the 1507 map, which is sometimes called America's birth certificate, for \$10 million, with Congress appropriating half and private donors contributing the rest.

The matter of the *Carta Marina*, as the 1516 Waldseemüller map is known, remained. The library still wanted it, but raising another \$4 million seemed nearly impossible.

Enter Jay I. Kislak, a self-described "mortgage peddler from Hoboken." His wealth and his passion for early American history had landed him a seat on the Madison Council, the group of heavy hitters who lead the private fundraising efforts of the Library of Congress. In 2003, Kislak and his wife, Jean, with the encouragement of James Billington, the Librarian of Congress, flew to Europe on their private jet to buy the *Carta Marina* for themselves. They landed on a private airstrip near the Swiss border and were driven to the Waldburg-Wolfegg estate, which at the time was hosting an annual music festival for the nearby village. Kislak later described the castle as a "one of those baronial places, with a dining hall that can seat a thousand people."

Kislak negotiated the purchase of the *Carta Marina* amidst the buzz of a cocktail reception, a performance of Mozart's music, and a reading of the composer's love letters by a prominent German actress. As the night drew to a close, Kislak and the prince reached an agreement, which Kislak agreed to keep confidential.

The Librarian of Congress would not ordinarily encourage a private citizen to acquire a monumental artifact like the unique *Carta Marina*, which the library had been chasing by then for more than a hundred years, but he knew that Kislak intended to donate his Americana collection to the library. Indeed, Kislak did not own the cartographic treasure for long. In April 2004, he donated a major part of his book and artifact collection, including the 1516 Waldseemüller map, to the Library of Congress as a gift to the American people. While not formally appraised, the collection may be worth as much as \$150 million, and such an unprecedented gift deserved an unprecedented response. In December 2007, the Library of Congress will open a permanent and prominent exhibition space dedicated to Kislak's collection.

One morning in late September, I met Kislak at the Library of Congress to hear about his life as a collector and to find out what led him to make such a staggering gift to the American people. When he arrived, he shook my hand pleasantly but was obviously distracted. There was some mix-up about his cell phone, and it was clear we were not going to accomplish anything until it was fixed. As I waited, I began taking notes. He looked the part of a real-estate mogul: sharp features, business-like demeanor, dressed for the occasion in a suit and dark tie. I admit to feeling a bit worried. I knew from his assistant that he was short on time, and the problem with his phone did not bode well for a productive interview. Suddenly an unexpected ray of hope emerged. By squinting my eyes, I could just make out that Kislak was wearing a Babar the Elephant necktie. This, I suspected, was a good omen.

Moments later, with the phone problem solved, Kislak turned to me with a smile. He rolled his eyes in mock exasperation at the glitch and said, with what appeared to be genuine pleasure, "So, you're here to talk about my books? Where do you want to start?" Within minutes, we were knee-deep in the Jay Kislak story. Kislak was more than willing to share his experiences, and our conversation that day continued, off and on, by phone during the fall.

Kislak was born in 1922 and grew up in New Jersey. His mother had Rumanian roots and his father had immigrated to the United States from the Ukraine as a small child. Kislak earned a business degree at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania in 1943 and then served as a navy pilot in the Second World War. While he likes to play up his humble son-of-immigrant origins, the reality is that his father founded a successful real estate brokerage firm that is still in operation. In the early 1950s, Kislak moved to Florida to pursue his own real estate interests, while retaining close ties with his father's business. Today, the Kislak family sits atop a very large, privately held real estate and financial services empire.

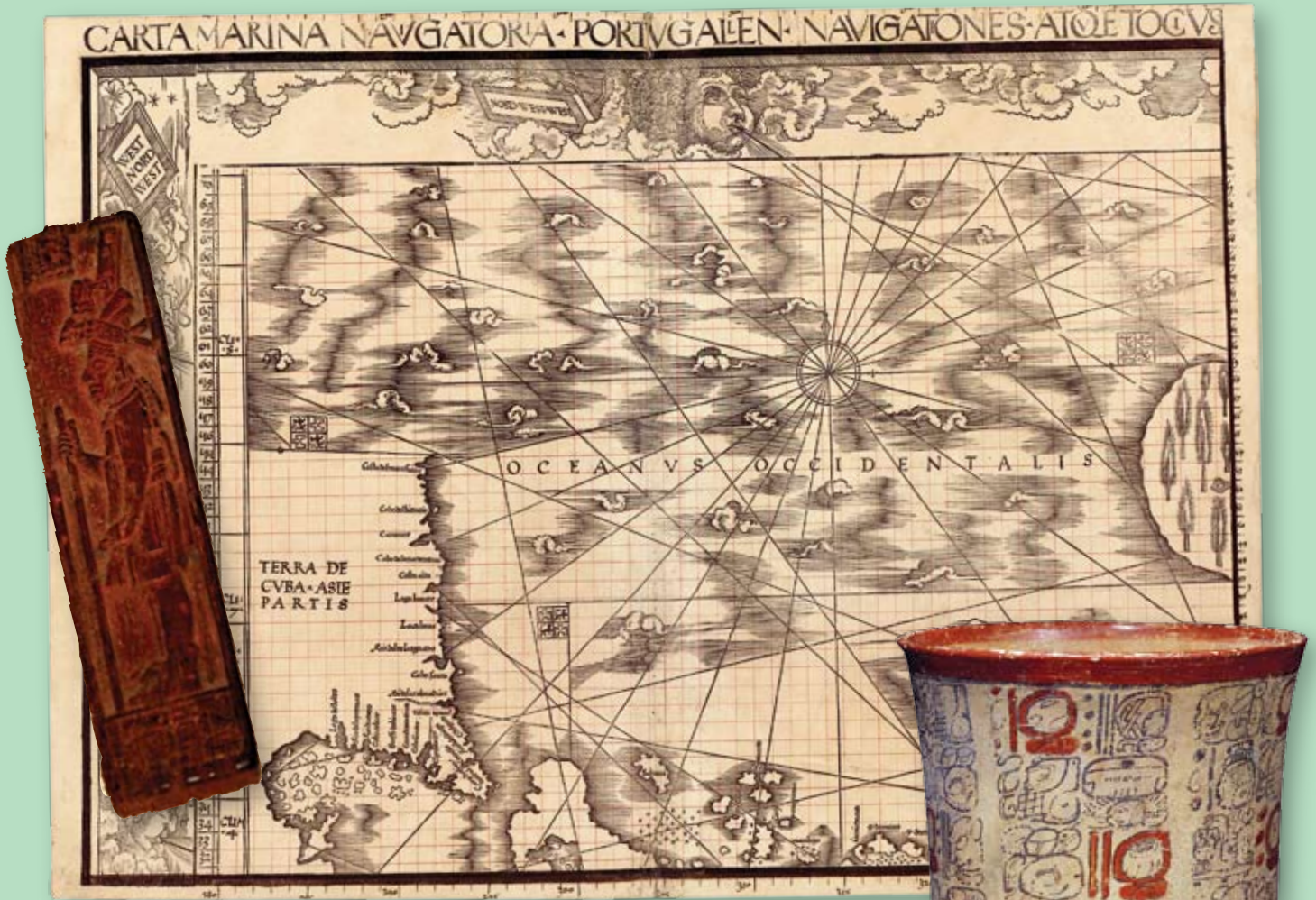
But there was more than work in his life. "I've always hung around books and libraries," Kislak told me. "When I first moved to Florida, I had a shelf filled with the regular fodder young people collect—fine bindings, Dickens, that sort of thing." As his bookcases filled, Kislak converted a sunroom and then a garage into library space. "After the car was kicked outside," he said with a mischievous grin, "I needed to specialize." On a trip to Boston in the early 1960s, he walked into Goodspeed's Book Shop and found himself on the top floor, in the Americana division run by Mike Walsh. "He's the one who suggested that I start with Florida, because that's where I lived. That day he sold me my first book for which I paid over \$100," an eighteenth-century history of the region.

From there, Kislak began eagerly acquiring Florida books. Through his collecting, he came to understand that the U.S. history he had learned as a child, which began with the founding of Jamestown, in 1607, and the *Mayflower's* arrival at Plymouth Rock, in 1620, did not tell the entire story of the early American experience. The European origins of the United States are decades older than the first British settlements, stretching back to 1565 with the founding of Saint Augustine, Florida. And indigenous cultures thrived for thousands of years before that. As Kislak's knowledge of this history grew, so did the scope of his collection. "You have a lot of license collecting Floridiana," he remarked. "The Spanish explorers considered Florida to be everything north of the Gulf of Mexico." Since so many of the early explorers had ties to the Caribbean and Mexico, expanding his focus to those regions made sense as well.

By the 1970s, Kislak decided to look beyond printed materials. "I'm like one of those guys who keep string; I just kept adding to the pile," he explained. He wanted to know more about the native civilizations that predated the Europeans explorers. "To hear their version of events," Kislak said, "I had to go into artifacts." Other than having visited the Mayan ruins of Tulum while on vacation with his children, Kislak had little experience with pre-Columbian cultures. He visited Sotheby's in 1980 to look at some contemporary art and noticed an artifact sale going on across the hall. "I ended up buying two or three Peruvian pieces, not even knowing what they were."

When he told the contemporary art people at Sotheby's what he had done, they were surprised. Collectors did not often wander around the building buying objects. To set him on the right track, a specialist in pre-Columbian artifacts guided Kislak through buying four or five more pieces that afternoon. "Now that I was pregnant with artifacts, I figured I'd better learn more about them," Kislak said. From there, his collection grew to include

# Treasures of the Jay Kislak Collection



Above: The section of the *Carta Marina* that shows the New World. What is now the United States is labeled "Cuba." Inset: The Tortuguero Box, a seventh-century Mayan artifact which tells the story of Aj K'ax B'ahlam using glyphs.

A codex-style vase with sixty hieroglyphs.



Seventeenth-century Techialoyan land records, with text in Nahuatl.



A hand-colored engraving of St. Augustine, Florida, from 1589, almost twenty years before the English settled Jamestown.

pre-Columbian art, pottery, and personal items. He also added an important series of large, seventeenth-century oils depicting the conquest of Mexico. Kislak's wife, an avid collector with a background in art history, aided his acquisitions of art and artifacts.

In his more than fifty years of collecting, Kislak has assembled one of the world's most significant private holdings of materials relating to the early Americas—more than four thousand items created over three millennia. Soon after his donation to the Library of Congress was official, the rare-books division put fifty treasures on display for a short time. Each one seemed more amazing than the next. A 1528 letter from Bartolomé de las Casas, a priest and early advocate of Indian rights, rested near a sixteenth-century manuscript handbook for priests written in Latin, Spanish, and two indigenous languages, Kekchi and Quiché. The *Carta Marina* was accompanied by an exceptional Aztec map drawn on tree bark paper. The Tortuguero Box, a small, seventh-century Mayan offering box covered with hieroglyphics, accompanied a thousand-year-old vase decorated in the style of a Mayan manuscript. Kislak also donated George Washington's diary for the year 1762 and important letters by Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe, and John Quincy Adams. Rounding out the eclectic mix are works by the naturalists John James Audubon and Mark Catesby as well as artist Diego Rivera's drawings for an illustrated edition of the Popul Vuh, the most important surviving collection of Mayan myths.

## While not formally appraised, Kislak's gift to the Library of Congress may be worth as much as \$150 million.

How does one person go about amassing a collection of this magnitude? Certainly, Kislak has extensive financial resources and the means to hire a curator to catalog and manage the collection. Yet money alone does not account for a collection of this breadth and quality.

Like most success stories, a bit of serendipity came into play. When Kislak moved to Florida and began collecting items of regional interest, it was a relatively open market. In a recent telephone interview, the noted Americana dealer Bill Reese explained to me that it was not until 1992, the quincentenary of Columbus's expedition, that collecting in the field really heated up. Kislak, by starting in the early 1960s, was decades ahead of other collectors.

More important than having good timing though, Kislak is smart. "Jay is one of the most knowledgeable collectors that I've ever dealt with," Reese said. Even the map and print dealer Graham Arader, who is not known for tossing out compliments lightly, echoed the sentiment: "Jay's the smartest guy in that area of collecting living today."

It helps that Kislak is no shrinking violet. When he learned a young man on his building's cleaning staff had been helping himself to books, Kislak hired a private detective and implemented a sting operation. He can be equally tough when it comes to making acquisitions. "Jay is an extremely savvy businessman," Reese said. "He knows what he's doing and drives a hard bargain." In Arader's words, Kislak can be a "nightmare" to deal with. "Everything has to be 110 percent victory for Jay and a loss for me. If we had 100 marbles, Jay would insist on getting 110 and me losing 10."

I asked Kislak how he managed the crossover from hobby collecting to the highest echelons of the field. He said it was simply a matter of introducing himself to the top dealers. "The first time I went to John Fleming's I guess I was thirty years old. I didn't know a thing," he said, referring to a legendary New York dealer. "I saw his ad in the classifieds and had no idea of how important he was. I showed up at the building on 57th Street looking for a storefront. It turned out to be a twelfth-floor apartment—lavish, tall ceilings and bookcases everywhere. Intimidating." Kislak told Fleming about his interest in Florida and asked how much it would cost to put a collection together. "I had no idea then how stupid a question that was," Kislak said. He ended up buying just a single item that day, although he went on to establish fruitful relationships with Fleming and many other big-name dealers.

While Kislak was glad to have good relationships with the top booksellers in the field, he knew that better prices could be found at auctions. "When I started collecting, the auction houses were the playground of the dealers," he told me with a good-natured smirk. But that didn't keep him from wanting to join the fun. "I'm willing to try anything at least once," he said of his decision to start attending the auctions on his own. He recalls a daunting experience the first time he went to a Sotheby's auction in London. "I went into this little, dank, dark room off Bond Street. Around a green felt horseshoe-shaped table there were maybe twelve seats

for dealers and a few extra seats in the back." To his frustration, he was quickly outbid on everything he wanted. (British dealers had a reputation for bidding up impetuous collectors who dared to attend auctions on their own). "I had to get something; I was not going away empty handed," he said. So he set his sights on a sixteenth-century guide to shipping ports, a relatively common work that he thought might not generate much interest. He won the book, but had to pay almost twice the estimate for the privilege. After the auction was over, one of the dealers came over, curious why Kislak had paid so much for that particular book. "Do you know something we don't?" the dealer asked. With some degree of embarrassment Kislak had to admit, "No, I just liked it."

One also gets the sense that Kislak is successful because he maintains a balance between his passions and pragmatism. In 1991, he acquired what can best be described as nirvana to collectors of early Americana: the earliest obtainable printing of the letter Christopher Columbus wrote describing his first discoveries in America. It was printed in Rome in 1493, within two months of the explorer's return to Europe. That Kislak already owned a 1494 version of the same letter did not diminish his desire for the far rarer 1493 edition. His thrill over the \$400,000 purchase, however, did not last long. Several months later, he received a call from Reese, the dealer who had bought the letter at Sotheby's on Kislak's behalf. There was a problem. Interpol had contacted the auction house, claiming that the letter had been stolen from a library in a small Italian city. The library wanted it back. To many collectors such a call might prompt outrage or indignation.



But Kislak is a practical man, accustomed to handling high-stakes problems. Reese recalled being surprised by Kislak's reaction. "Jay said, 'Well, we have to get it back to them.' It was as simple as that." Kislak asked Reese to retrieve the letter from his New York apartment. "I found it shelved with a bunch of paperbacks," Reese said. Kislak received a full refund from the auction house, plus interest. Kislak must have earned good karma for his forbearance. Eighteen months later, he was able to acquire another 1493 printing of the letter at Christie's for \$100,000 less than the stolen one.

Beyond his business sense and persistence, there clearly is something intangible about Kislak that separates him from the average wealthy collector. When I asked him what that something might be, he rejected the premise of the question. "First thing, I'm not wealthy. I'm a poor little suffering mortgage peddler from New Jersey," he said with all seriousness. "It's not like I'm some hedge fund guy." Second, he suggested he doesn't even think of himself as a true collector. "I'm just interested in studying an area of history that happens to have been neglected, and the books are the things to tell the story." He paused a moment and then went back to the matter of his financial status. "I really never think of myself as wealthy. All I know is I am still working at over eighty years old. I am at it every day."

Even in its evasiveness, Kislak's answer spoke the truth. After interviewing many people who have worked closely with him over the years, the consensus is that Kislak stands out because of his commitment to collecting as a means of acquiring knowledge. Reese put it this way: "We live in an impatient world in which the lifespan of collectors can be very brief. People come in and get very interested in book collecting all of a sudden, but then lose interest and move on to something else just as quickly. Jay, on the other hand, is very much of the old school, people who were collecting because of long-term interest and passion."

Arthur Dunkelman, the curator of the Kislak collection for more than a decade, suggested that Kislak's interest has lasted because "he was driven by a higher purpose than simply acquiring expensive and interesting things." Somewhere along the way, his collecting turned into a mission to offer the world a new understanding of pre-Columbian cultures and European interaction with these cultures. "Jay looked outward, beyond his own enjoyment of these materials," explained Dunkelman.

By the late 1990s, Kislak's collection had grown to an unwieldy size, overflowing his home and then the building that houses his charitable foundation. With his eightieth birthday on the horizon, it was time to make permanent arrangements.

Kislak wanted his collection to remain intact and be made available to the public in perpetuity, ideally in Florida. Several local universities expressed an interest, as did the University of Pennsylvania, Kislak's alma mater. Ultimately, none of the interested parties were the right place. "A gift of this magnitude is not really a gift in some ways," explained Dunkelman. "Housing a collection of this nature requires enormous resources for storage, cataloging, and interpretation." Ultimately, Kislak turned to what, in retrospect, seems like an obvious choice: the Library of Congress, the world's largest library.

In 1999, a group of division chiefs from the library traveled to Florida to see Kislak's collection. I recently sat down with Mark Dimunation, chief of the library's rare-book and special-collections division, to hear the story of that first visit. A man of

imposing stature befitting his position, Dimunation remembered that trip as "an exciting, almost overwhelming experience. They trotted out one fabulous piece after another." He says there was no question the library was interested in receiving the donation. Admittedly, there were logistical issues to work through. "How would it be housed? Where would we put it? How do we give it a sense of importance?" However, there were no problems big enough to diminish the library's interest. While there was some duplication between Kislak's collection and the library's existing holdings, Dimunation said they constituted only a small subset of the gift. "The vast majority of items were new to us and would unquestionably enhance the depth of our coverage and, in some cases, fill in a missing wedge of our holdings."

Kislak's desire for public access to the collection did not deter the library either. When asked about the reasonableness of Kislak's demands, Mark Dimunation laughed out loud. "The Library of Congress is all about public access," he said. To prove the point, he grabbed the clear plastic badge hanging from his neck and flipped it around for me to see a little card placed behind his identification. He read to me from that card: "The library's mission is to make its resources available and useful to the Congress and the American people and to sustain and preserve a universal collection of knowledge and creativity for future generations." Dimunation carries the card everyday to remind himself of the library's commitment to the people. "So, no, we didn't have any problem agreeing that Jay's collection be made available to the public," he said.

The provenance of foreign antiquities pops up regularly in discussions of artifact collections like Kislak's. In recent years, several American cultural institutions have experienced controversies over their possession of similar material. Most recently, Yale University returned a cache of Machu Picchu relics to Peru. In our discussions, Kislak freely acknowledged that this had been a worry for some potential recipients of his collection. Here again though, Dimunation showed little anxiety. "The Library of Congress proudly manages a vast collection of international resources," he said. "We are fully comfortable addressing those types of concerns." The library is particularly at ease given Kislak's reputation as "a careful and skilled collector who bought items through well-known public sales and maintained records of the appropriate documentation."

On April 16, 2004, the Library of Congress issued a press release announcing that the Kislak collection had been donated to the library. In describing the gift, James Billington, the Librarian of Congress, called it "a unique collection that would be impossible to assemble today." He proudly accepted the gift "on behalf of the nation."

Ironically, other than a story in the *Washington Post*, Kislak's donation has received virtually no press coverage. In fact, outside his network of dealers, Kislak's name is almost unknown in the book world. Even among his friends, the size of his donation to the Library of Congress is barely understood. "Jay's not playing humble," Dunkelman said. "It's just that he's the type of guy who would much rather spend time talking to interesting scholars than standing on a stage or reading about himself in a newspaper." Kislak's low profile is likely to change, however. For the last three years, the Library of Congress staff has been working at a furious pace to catalog the collection and remodel a permanent exhibition space to show it off. In order to make the transition as smooth as



Kislak confers with Arthur Dunkelman (right), the curator of the Kislak Collection at the Library of Congress.

## “I’m just interested in studying an area of history that happens to have been neglected, and the books are the things to tell the story.”

possible, Dunkelman moved from Florida to Washington, D.C., to continue his role as curator.

The Kislak Collection exhibition, which is scheduled to open to the public in December, fills 6,000 square feet of elegance and grandeur. On a recent tour of the space, Kislak and Dunkelman pointed out striking views of the Capitol building from one window and the Supreme Court from another. “We couldn’t have asked for a better spot,” Dunkelman said. “For a real estate guy like Jay, it’s location, location, location.” Given its high-profile setting, officials estimate that the Kislak collection will receive as many as three million visitors each year.

As our interview at the Library of Congress wrapped up, Kislak and I sat in the room named for Lessing J. Rosenwald, another major donor to the library. Rosenwald’s collection of early illustrated books surrounded us, and I asked if Kislak had any regrets about the donation. He chuckled at the question and acknowledged that he feels the absence of the materials that have been part of his life for many years. Yet he seems relieved to have the collection situated in Washington. “When everything was in Florida, so much was in storage I didn’t have any way to go through it,” he told me. He looks forward to spending more time

with his treasures in the coming years. “The library promised me a desk to use any time I want to come,” he said. “It will be pure selfish delight going through them. I bought every single item with the idea that I would have a chance to study it some day.”

**A**t a lecture in 2006, Billington referred to Kislak as “our princely donor.” Dunkelman used the same analogy with me when we toured the exhibition space. “We’re a young country, and we don’t have a royal family obliged to support our cultural institutions,” he said. “We have to rely on the generosity of philanthropists like Jay who have lived the American dream and have a sense of pride and largesse. Really, he’s an American prince.”

As I was finishing this story, I called Dunkelman to ask a few final questions. I mentioned that both he and the Librarian of Congress had referred to Kislak in princely terms. “I don’t think that Jay would like you using that,” he responded in a halting tone. I instantly regretted giving him the chance to weigh in on the matter. But then, before I could respond, Dunkelman changed his mind. “Ah, go ahead,” he said. “You ought to say it. It’s true.”

**Ellen Firsching Brown** owns Liberty Hall Books in Richmond, Virginia. She also writes the “How I Got Started” column in this magazine.

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