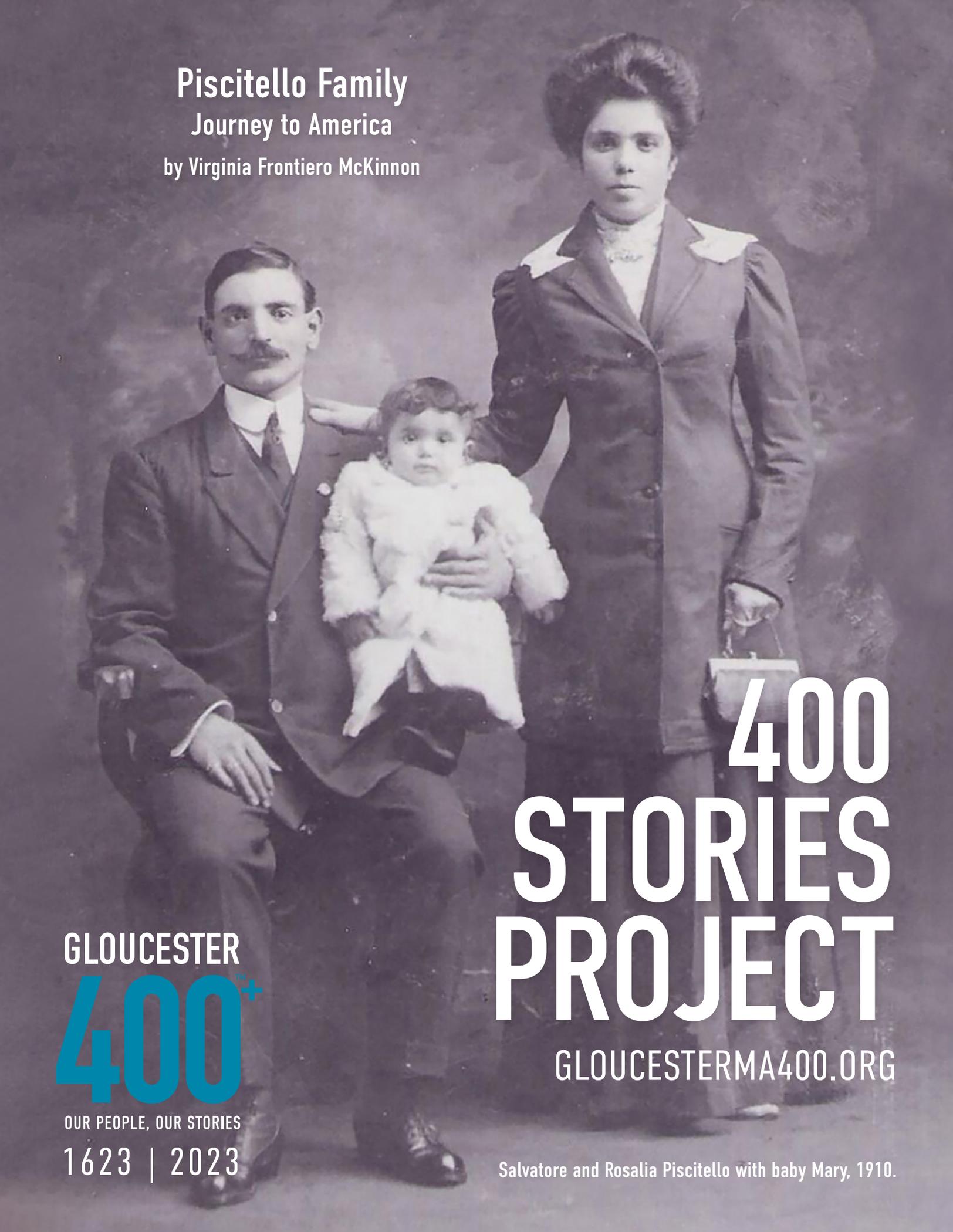


**Piscitello Family**  
Journey to America

by Virginia Frontiero McKinnon



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Salvatore and Rosalia Piscitello with baby Mary, 1910.

# Piscitello Family - Journey to America

by Virginia Frontiero McKinnon

In 1910 a beautiful young woman--my grandmother, Rosalia (Cianciolo) Piscitello left her native Sicily for America with her four-month-old baby daughter Mary (my mother). My grandfather, Salvatore Piscitello, also from Sicily, was an adventurer who had visited America several times. He took his first trip to America when he was only 17 years old! Although Salvatore was an adventurer, he became engaged to my grandmother and returned to Sicily to marry her. Salvatore promised Rosalia's family that he would not return to America, but as soon as he found out Rosalia was pregnant, he headed back to America to find them both a place to live.

During their courtship and early days of their marriage, Salvatore sent my grandmother Rosalia beautiful love letters, but my grandmother had never learned to read or write. Her sister-in-law would secretly read the letters to her, and my grandmother would dictate a reply.

My grandmother Rosalia's family did not want her to go to America. They were a close-knit family with strong roots in Sicily; my grandparents and mother were all born in Casel di' Tusa, Province Messina, Sicily, Italia. Rosalia was denied taking her beautiful handmade trousseau with her, as her family wanted her to return to them very soon.

The month-long journey to America was very long and challenging for my grandmother. She had to make the voyage alone because my grandfather Salvatore was already in America, looking for work, and preparing for her arrival. Her passage was on the lowest deck with very crowded conditions. I marvel at my grandmother's courage to travel to another country with her infant child, not knowing the language or having family support in America.

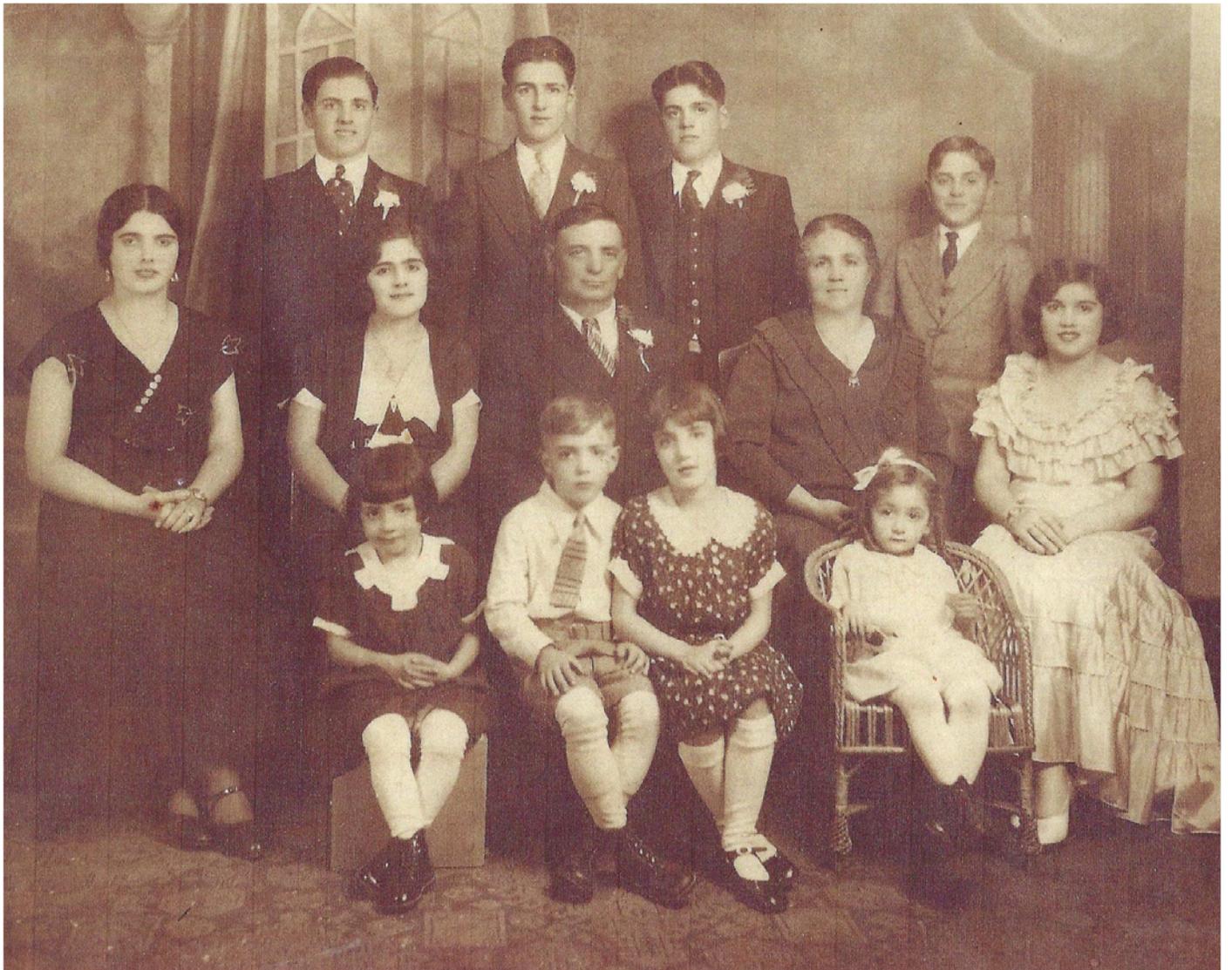
My grandfather met my grandmother at Ellis Island and took her to a little apartment in Canton, MA. My grandfather found employment in a factory, and soon he was made foreman. My



Me as a baby, with my parents, Mary (Piscitello) and Michael Frontiero.

grandmother recalled many people came to their home in search of work. Because my grandfather was able to do the hiring, he found jobs for most of them.

My grandfather moved his family often to find better employment. How I wish I had written down my mother's recitation of the cities. I recall Canton, Stoughton, Framingham, East Boston, and finally, Gloucester. Together my grandparents had eleven children with my mother Mary being the eldest.



**My grandparents Salvatore and Rosalia Piscitello (center),  
my mother Mary (far left), and her 10 siblings in 1934.**

In Sicily my grandfather's family members were fishermen so naturally my grandfather bought a little fishing boat in Gloucester. His five sons would take home a share to support the family. Large families were important at that time, as each son would contribute to the family fortune. Thus, my grandfather was able to buy a bigger fishing boat, the Angie and Florence-- and years later, a still larger boat, the American Eagle. My grandfather would say, "first the boat and then the house."



*The American Eagle, one of my grandfather Salvatore's fishing boats.*



**Gould Court in Gloucester, where I grew up with my family until I got married.**

My grandparents first lived in an apartment "down the fort" at 33 Commercial St. on the fourth floor. They purchased their first home in 1927 on 14 Gould Court. My grandparents were the first family of Italian heritage to buy a house on the street known as the "Irish Channel." My parents were married in 1928 and my mother became Mary (Piscitello) Frontiero. I was born at 14 Gould Court in 1929. My family lived on the second floor; my grandparents lived on the first floor; and my uncles slept in the

third-floor attic bedrooms. My Aunt Rose lived across the street, and my Aunt Frances, next door. Most of the Piscitello clan lived on Gould Court. We were all one family. I was welcome in their homes at any time.

I have very fond memories of my grandparents. My grandfather would play a game called "Che Volo?" or "What can fly?") with me and his other grandchildren. We would sit on the floor and put one finger on his knee. He would say "poluma," a dove, we would put our finger in the air. If he said "gatta" or cat, of course the cat cannot fly. We would have to pay a forfeit: purse our lips and blow up our cheeks. He would press against our cheeks with his fingers to make a noise. We would all laugh and beg him to play again. That's how we learned the names of many animals and birds.

My grandfather had a large book on the top shelf of the parlor closet. Very carefully he would take it down and read to us in Italian. "Beware of Russia," he would say. This was before WWII and I would answer, "Why?" He said it was written in his book. I wonder what happened to this book he treasured.

At times my grandfather would tell stories of his childhood. He was nicknamed "Bajano" as a child, which means "show off." He wore a little red cap, a beret. My grandmother told me that his family was very wealthy. Their money, in gold coins, was kept in a large chest of drawers. He was known to be very generous by giving away some coins that his family never missed to the poor people of the village.

I loved to sit on the steps and listen to my grandparents sing operatic songs. I remember my grandfather's deep baritone voice, and my grandmother would answer in a soft soprano voice. They were so in love and loved children. My grandfather was a true patriarch of an enormous family. I will always admire his wisdom. His legacy was a wonderful family, providing well for his children and grandchildren. I remember his challenge of keeping the family name sacred and precious. He kept many of the old Sicilian customs on holidays. "Always keep faithful to God and the family" was his motto.

Although my grandfather had once promised to take my grandmother back to Sicily to visit her family, it was a promise unfulfilled. By the time he finally saved enough money for the trip, World War II had broken out. He died at age 64 of a heart attack shortly after the war ended. My grandmother did visit Sicily a few years later on a cruise ship, first class. By then, her parents were both deceased. Only her brother Augustine and her sister Teresa remained. Her return trip home was on an airplane.

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My grandmother was the heart of our family. She had so much love to give, always working, cooking, cleaning, sewing, helping others, and never thinking of herself. When she had a little time, she would crochet beautiful lace and afghans for our beds.

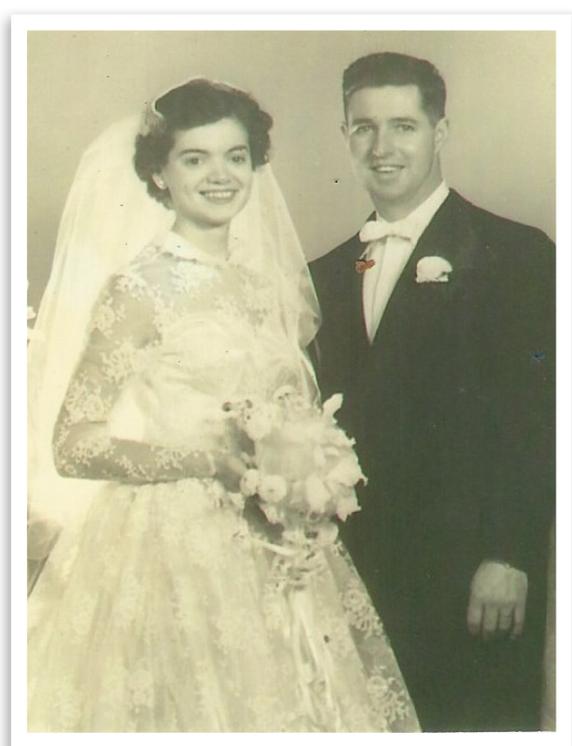
I remember every Thursday morning; she would make the most delicious Italian bread, using all of a 25-pound bag of King Arthur flour. I would hurry my breakfast to join her in the cellar

kitchen; it wasn't uncommon for houses built in the 1800s to have a kitchen in the basement! She baked the bread in the wood and coal stove. Grandmother would let me help her punch down the dough. As the dough was rising, I would wind up the Victrola and swing on the little rope swing tied to the rafters. We would sing songs together; she taught me many little Italian songs. Grandmother would save ten or a dozen portions of dough for each of the children. I would count them for her, and she would make individual loaves for us. We would eat them hot out of the oven with a bit of olive oil and a slice of good Italian cheese. My heart is full of wonderful happy memories of long ago, when families were close and caring for each other.

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In 1953 I married my Irish husband, Robert Hilary McKinnon, and I moved from 14 to 22 Gould Court for three years until we saved enough money to buy our own home. When I had my first child, my grandmother came knocking at my door on my first day home from the hospital. She asked if she could bathe my new baby boy. I was honored and delighted.

My husband grew up in a very different environment than mine. Before he was born, his father had married a widow and helped raise her three sons. Eventually, they had two more children, my husband's sister Margaret, and my husband, Robert. His mother had several strokes and was bedridden for five years.



My wedding to Robert Hilary McKinnon, 1953.

My husband had to get away from all this Italian tradition, family dramatics, and customs; I think it confused him! We purchased our first home in East Gloucester, about one and a half miles away from my family. My children could not visit their grandparents because they were too young to walk over a mile away. I have always regretted my children not having the opportunity to have the precious family childhood I enjoyed.

It was difficult for me to visit my family; I had seven children and would never take seven little children to see anyone! But thank goodness, my family visited me often in East Gloucester, be-

cause I was considered the “out of town” family member! We gathered at my home on Sunday afternoons in the traditional Sicilian way, enjoying coffee and cake. I remember it all fondly, my precious family memories.



My family reunion at Stage Fort Park, September 12, 2021.

## Acknowledgements

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## About the Author

Virginia Frontiero McKinnon, 92, wrote this story in 2021-2022. She is a beloved, active community member and writer in Gloucester, MA.

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