

## The History of Osbornville by Bryan Thompson

If you have never heard of Osbornville you are not alone. Three out of four people I have mentioned the community to have never heard of it. Yet at one time this De Kalb community had its own post office, cheese factory, school, church group, several sawmills, a cooper shop, many farms and its own weekly column in an Ogdensburg newspaper.

Osbornville is located in the Northwest corner of the town of De Kalb. The community takes its name from Osborn Lake. The lake takes its name from Alexander Osborn an early sawyer in the town of De Kalb who first worked at Cooper's sawmill.

In June 1808, William Cooper seized Alexander Osborn's property, for failure to meet obligations on a contract. In early 1809 Osborn threatened suit against anyone who would try to operate Cooper's sawmill. About this time Mr. Osborn surreptitiously set up a sawmill on West Beaver Creek. In the summer of 1814 when Potter Goff and Silas Spencer surveyed the entire township of De Kalb they found Mr. Osborn's sawmill on the falls on West Beaver Creek (sometimes known as Osborn Creek) below Osborn Lake and assigned his name to the lake. Mr. Osborn must have left some time before this date because Russell Goff, in December 1810, wrote to the proprietor, Richard Cooper, that he had borrowed the saw blade from the dysfunctional mill on Beaver Creek to keep his mill in operation.

So Osborn Lake and Osbornville take their name from a pioneer settler who stayed in the area less than half a dozen years and may have never set foot in

what is today known as Osbornville as his mill was south east of Osborn Lake on what would later become Streeter Rd.



From Blankman's 1896 Wall Map of St Lawrence County



(left)

*Sketch of Osborn's Mill by E. P. Townsley 1850.*

The history of Osbornville is directly related to its geographic isolation. It is surrounded on three sides by the large swamps of Beaver Creek and Osborn Lake.

Cut off from the rest of the town of De Kalb and nearby De Peyster, dry land access was only available from the town of Gouverneur.

The land directly adjacent to Osbornville, in the town of Gouverneur, was part of the Ford tract. David Ford purchased the 9000-acre tract from Samuel Ogden in May 1800.

The Ford Tract began at the Southeast corner of the Town of Gouverneur and ran along the East line of Gouverneur, Macomb and Morristown to the St Lawrence River,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile wide.

In the early years, Mr. Ford actively handled his property, selling lots and leasing them out. He soon decided to only lease his lands and most of the lands sat unoccupied and undeveloped. After his death, his estate sold the remaining 5000 acres of land at a public auction on January 20, 1869. All the lands adjacent to Osbornville were included in the auction. For  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile to the west of Osbornville, in the town of Gouverneur, the lands were mostly vacant and undeveloped prior to 1869.

The Town of De Peyster was formed in 1825 from that part of the Town of De Kalb north of Beaver Creek and that part of the Town of Oswegatchie south of

Black Lake. Since there are two branches of Beaver Creek there appears to have been some confusion as to whether Osbornville was part of the new town of De Peyster or the old town of De Kalb. In 1836 the citizens of De Peyster had a map drawn of their new town. The map has the southern boundary of De Peyster running along West Beaver through the middle of Osborn Lake. All of Osbornville is included in the Town of De Peyster on this 1836 map.

Except for two woodlots on Beaver Creek owned by De Peyster farmers, the land south of East Beaver Creek remained unoccupied and held by absentee proprietors until 1838. In that year, Philo Hurlbut purchased Lot 176, 100 acres, for \$100, from Anne and George Pomeroy (the daughter and son-in-law of Judge William Cooper).

Philo Hurlbut had first settled in the part of De Kalb that later became De Peyster in 1805 at what is today the intersection of County Rt. 11 and the Mayhew Rd. He began doing road surveys for the town of De Peyster in 1832 and for De Kalb in 1836. After he purchased Lot 176 in De Kalb he must have built some kind of crude bridge and crossing through the long expanse of swamp to his property. On December 11, 1839 the Commissioners of Highways of the Towns of De Kalb and De Peyster met at "Hurlbut's Railroad across Beaver Creek...at the request of the Highway Commissioners of the town of De Kalb for the purpose of making a determination .....relative to the laying out of a (public) road. " The road was to extend into both towns. The road was to commence near Samuel Westerns in De Kalb to cross Beaver Creek and the town line at the Hurlbut railroad and intersect an existing road in De Peyster by Mr. Hurlbut's house.

This was the first attempt at a public road into Osbornville. The chosen route was problematic as after it crossed from De Peyster into the Town of De Kalb onto

high ground in Osbornville it headed due south across a half-mile wide swamp then over some steep and stony ridges to connect with Maple Ridge Rd where Samuel Western lived. This route proved impossible to develop as a highway.

On October 6, 1842 Philo Hurlbut was employed to resurvey the road in the town of De Peyster. He resurveyed the De Kalb portion eighteen days later on October 24, 1842. This new route followed very closely that of the present day highway ending at the Gouverneur town line on Lot 232.

At this time there was no highway connection into the town of Gouverneur. Prior to the 1840's there was no bridge across the Oswegatchie River at Rock Island. Instead the Rock Island Rd followed the present county road from Gouverneur to near the river then continued along the current Welsh Rd to Richville.

The citizens of De Peyster were anxious to have a direct route from their community to Gouverneur. In this era town residents worked off their highway tax obligations with labor on the roads in their particular neighborhood. A road district for Osbornville, number 38 for De Kalb, was formed in 1842, the same year Rock Island Road was resurveyed. There was some local resistance to the expense and labor of opening a new road through the Town of Gouverneur. In a very unusual maneuver the New York State legislature was asked to intervene to open the new town road.

On April 16, 1846 the legislature passed Chapter 67 of the laws of 1846, "An Act to provide for the appointing of commissioners to open and improve the "Rock Island and De Peyster Road" in the county of St. Lawrence. " The act ordered the St Lawrence County Court Of Common Pleas to appoint three commissioners with the expressed task of laying out the Rock Island and De Peyster Road. The

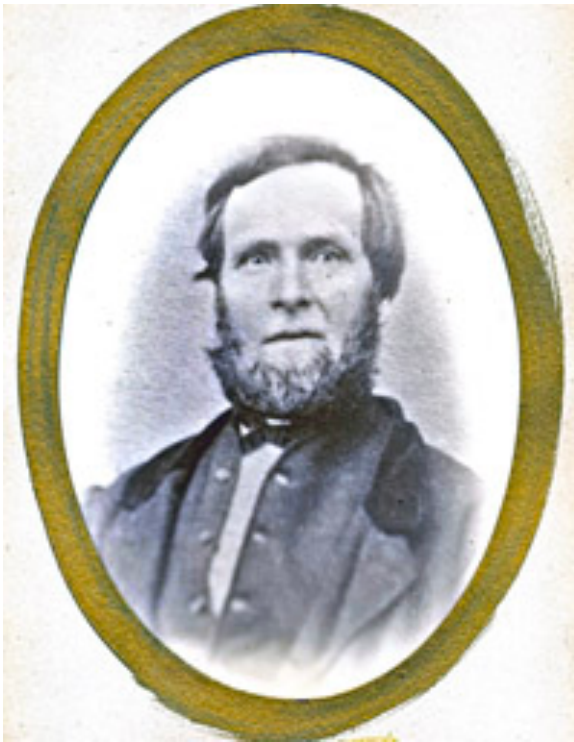
road was to "commence at a point where it intersected the main road from Gouverneur to Richville...extending northeasterly to the point where the road intersected the State Road in the town of De Peyster near the Kellogg place."  
(Chapter 67 Laws of NYS for 1846)

The act also provided for a special tax levy over two years on all lands within one mile on each side of the new road of eight cents per acre (This was a cash not labor levy.). Those within a half-mile of each end of the road were exempted. The commissioners were to lie out the route of the road, complete a roll of all occupied and vacant lands, and present it to the County Board of Supervisors who would collect the tax and distribute it to the individual towns. The commissioners appointed under the act were: Asa L. Hazelton, Hiram Fuller and Philo Hurlbut. Their salary was \$1.50 per day. The new road was completed by the fall of 1848 providing ready access to Osbornville from east and west for the first time.

People often forget that in the pre-mechanized era of agriculture it was not possible to do the work of clearing the forest and building shelter and tilling the land alone. Every farmer depended on a work circle to get things done. Consequently people tended to move in groups with family and neighbors they could rely on for help. Having only escaped feudal Europe a few generations before, owning land was the ultimate security. In order to ensure the economic security of their children, prosperous parents, would provide them with land to develop into farms. Affordable undeveloped land was becoming scarce and hard to access in the St Lawrence River valley by the 1840's and 50's. The newly opened lands in Osbornville provided a good opportunity. Settlers began to move in immediately.



As mentioned earlier the first known settler was Philo Hurlbut. He located on lot 176 by Osborn Lake. Legend has it that he chose the lot because of the waterpower readily available to run a sawmill. The mill was probably one of the first things erected on the lot. Good waterpower sites are few and far between in the nearby portion of De Peyster. A close, ready supply of timber made the manufacture of lumber a profitable enterprise.



Thomas Hurlbut

As indicated by town records (refund of nonresident tax), by 1842 Philo Hurlbut was a full time resident of his new enterprise where he erected a log cabin. Within twenty year Philo's children and grandchildren occupied almost the entire eastern portion of Osbornville. In 1843, Philo's oldest son Thomas Hurlbut, married Jane Giffin and that same year took out a land contract to purchase Lot 175 next door to his father. In 1847 Philo purchased an additional 100 acres to the east on Lot 177.

Over the next ten years Philo Hurlbut's sons and son in law, Horace Hurlbut, Amos Hurlbut, Andrew Hurlbut and Daniel Austin purchased all the land in Osbornville to the East of Philo Hurlbut's farm. Andrew Hurlbut moved from De Peyster to De Kalb in 1855.

Philo signed over his land to Andrew at that time and Andrew purchased additional acreage the same year. In September 1857, Philo's granddaughter Francis Austin married George Morris and by December they moved onto the land her father, Daniel Austin, had purchased for them (Lot 160, 159, 151).

Many of the first settlers were not as permanent settlers as the Hurlbut family. They made their living by cutting wood on wild lots, selling potash, fire wood and lumber to meet the rents due the proprietors. When poor weather, ill health or financial panic hit they pulled up stakes and moved to a new situation.

One of the first settlers in Osbornville was Leonard Smith who took out a land contract with E. Fry on Lot 232 (on the Gouverneur town line) in 1844. Leonard and his wife Lucinda raised a large family in Osbornville. Leonard died in 1859. During the fifteen years he lived in Osbornville he occupied at least four different lots without ever paying for any of them. In 1863, after his death, Lucinda managed to buy twelve acres on the southern end of Lot 173.

Elijah and Wilhelmina Spink came into De Kalb about 1845 from Jefferson County and took a land contract on 50 acres of Lot 236. The Spink's almost immediately built the first frame house in Osbornville. The record of his payments to William Averill for the lot are illustrative of the difficulties some settlers had in meeting payments in a limited cash economy. He initially was to pay \$200 for the lot, plus annual interest, all due in ten years. By 1867 he had paid \$853 on the principle, interest and penalties and still owed Averill \$397.60. This while clearing the land, building a house and paying the real estate taxes on the property for over twenty years.



Elijah Spink's son Alfred (M. A.) was a talented inventor. He patented a continually cleaning plow coulter and a feather renewer, He ran a prosperous Blacksmith's Shop in Rensselaer Falls. He had married Lucinda Smith's daughter Nancy.

In 1867 a three way land swap was arranged whereby Lucinda Smith took over the contract on Elijah Spink's farm, Elijah Spink got clear title to a house in Rensselaer Falls formerly owned by the pump peddler Eleazer Robertson, and the Robertson family got Lucinda Smith's twelve acre lot in Osbornville.



*Elijah Spink House, First frame house in Osbornville, erected circa 1845.*

Ten years later, in 1877, Lucinda Smith's son, Charles finally paid off the contract on the Spink place. Things did not go well for the Smith family there. Within a year Charles had to sell the property to his brother due to consumption (Tuberculosis). His brother took title, but he too was ill with the disease. He sold the property back to Charles' wife Sarah McIntyre Smith probably in a bid to protect the farm from creditors. Harrison Smith died of TB in 1881, a sister Francis Smith Wall in 1880 and Charles Smith in 1883. Sarah Smith sold the farm soon after and left Osbornville for

Kendrew.

Other early settlers were the Everett and Nancy Barkley family, who also arrived in 1844 from Canada with five grown sons. They at various times lived on Lots 232, 233, 173 and 234. Although they lived in the area for almost 20 years,

neither they nor their children, ever owned any land in the community (With the exception of his son Adam Barkley who for seven months in 1864 owned his father-in law, Henry Gaddis's farm before selling it back and moving to Charlevoix, Michigan).

Norman Tyler first appears in Osbornville as the Overseer of Highways for the area in 1845. In 1846 he took out a land contract on the westerly half of Lot 174. His family would remain in the area for almost 50 years, and eventually own much more land.

The eastern portion of Lot 174 went through a series of land contracts in the 1840's. James Alexander held it in 1846, Alfred Clark in 1847. Rufus T. Giffin held it from 1850 to 1855 (This lot adjoined his sister Jane Giffin Hurlbut's land.). Finally Jesse Streeter purchased the land in 1855. He sold the land to Norman Tyler in 1860.



Osbornville School painting by Ida Bracy

In 1844, with the increase in children in the community, Osbornville got its own school district. District number 16 was organized from part of De Kalb district #11 and a former joint district with De Peyster. The district originally included all

of Rock Island Road, and Maple Ridge Rd. from the intersection with Gore Rd west.

It was later reduced in area to only include Rock Island Rd and the lands North West of it on the Chandlerville Rd. The first schoolhouse, a log structure was built on the corner of Norman Tyler's land. The current schoolhouse was built in 1876. The district was first known as the Tyler school and later as the Osbornville School. The school served as a community center. The end of year exercises at the McIntyre Grove in 1896 drew over 300 people according to newspaper accounts.

Garrett and Ruth Vanderhoof also settled in Osbornville in the 1840's. Their names appear on no contracts but they lived on Lot 171 for a time. Their son William ran a coopers shop located across from the schoolhouse.

The widower Henry Gaddis emigrated from Ireland in 1838 with three children. He settled on Lot 172 in the early 1840's. By 1848 he had paid for his lot. His daughter Margaret married Adam Barkley and they improved the farm together until the Barkley's left for Michigan in 1864. His son James worked as a cooper. In 1864, at 65 years of age, Henry married the Irish born widow Margaret Bryce. He had twin sons by this second marriage and continued to farm in Osbornville until 1875.

As a result of the Anti-rent movement of the 1840's New York State enacted a real property tax levy on non-resident property owners. Prior to this time non-resident landlords were largely exempted from paying local taxes. The initial law lacked means for enforcement. This was rectified when the NYS legislature passed Chapter 298 of the 1850 Laws of New York, "An act in relation to the

collection of taxes on lands of non-residents and to provide for the sale of such lands for unpaid taxes".

This law had real teeth. Lands could be confiscated from absentee landlords for non-payment of taxes if left due for three years. Delinquent taxes were assessed interest at the rate of 37-½ %. This law had far reaching effect on rural land ownership. One unlucky absentee landlord in Osbornville saw 50 acres of lands sold for \$3.51.

Rather than risk losing their assets the absentee proprietors who held more than half the land in St Lawrence County before the act of 1850 quickly began selling off their property. Most of the buyers were local lawyers and bankers who in turn resold the properties. Richville attorney, Harlow Godard, bought and sold over one hundred properties just in the town of De Kalb between 1850 and 1860.

In 1846, the Osbornville road district had 33.3% of its land listed as subject to non-resident tax. The reshuffling of ownership brought many new settlers to Osbornville, often on small parcels where they made use of the forest resources rather than developing farms. William and Sally Potter had been tenants in nearby North Gouverneur. In 1860, when William was 74 years old and Sally 64 they purchased 15 acres of Lot 235. Next door in 1862 Agnes & Joseph Jourdan bought 6 acres of land. Each of these owners extracted what they could from the parcels and resold the property within five years, usually to become part of adjoining larger farms.

In 1860 John Overacker purchased 100 acres of Lot 234 for his son Lester and his bride Jane Babcock. Lester and Jane Overacker added an additional 100 acres to their holdings and farmed in the neighborhood for over forty years.

Shortly after 1860 the second largest family group to settle in Osbornville arrived. They were: Rachel Gould Conklin, Laurentine Gould Mott, Lucina Gould Cummings and Maria Gould Woods and their families. The four sisters had been residents of Brownville in Jefferson County before coming to Osbornville. The first of the four sisters to arrive was Laurentine Gould Mott and her husband Fred Mott. They were living on Lot 171 by the time of the 1860 census. By 1865 they had moved to Lot 232 on the Gouverneur town line.

Lucina Gould Cummings' husband, James Cummings, enlisted in the Civil War in 1861. He disappeared in action. The young widow Cummings came to Osbornville, and purchased 30 acres of Lot 235 in 1864. She developed this farm with her nephew Henry Conklin and his family.

Rachel Gould Conklin and her husband Jacob were living in Osbornville by 1867 when she held a land contract on 50 acres of land on Lot 171. They later moved to Lot 232 when Fred Mott moved onto a farm in North Gouverneur. Her son Grafton would eventually fulfill the contract and purchase Lot 232 in 1904. By this time Rachel Conklin's son Grafton and grandson Dealton Seavey, who purchased the Overacker farm, were the largest landowners in Osbornville. The Gould sister's descendants, eventually controlled most of the land at the western end of Osbornville.

The Civil war had a profound effect on all of American society. There was so much loss and devastation, a nationwide religious revival followed. In Osbornville, Norman and Louisa Tyler lost two sons William and David and Lucina Cummings lost her husband. It was in this era that religious meetings first began to be held at the Tyler Schoolhouse. It became a station on the De Peyster Methodist church circuit with Thomas Hurlbut as Sunday school leader.

In 1879 the group joined with groups from the Babcock school in North Gouverneur and the Seavey School on the Maple Ridge Rd to build the North Gouverneur Methodist Church. Other religious denominations also met at the Tyler schoolhouse.



Andrew Hurlbut

When Philo Hurlbut died in 1857 he left instruction that he was to be buried on top of the hill on his farm. His was the first burial, in what was to become the Osbornville Cemetery. Within a few years many other graves were added to the plot. In 1884 Andrew Hurlbut deeded the cemetery to his descendants and the descendants of Thomas Hurlbut, Norman Tyler and Martin V. McIntyre. Soon after a cemetery association was formed. Martin McIntyre was the first president. The last known burial was that of Norman Tyler in 1910.

Between 1850 and 1870 the farms in Osbornville developed rapidly from frontier homesteads to established farms.

In 1850 only Norman Tyler kept sheep by 1870 half the farms had sheep. In 1850 Philo Hurlbut had 8 cows his neighbors only kept one or two. By 1870 Lester Overacker had 34 cows and most of his neighbors had 10 to 20. In 1870 Lester

Overacker was the only person in the neighborhood who produced cheese with 6654 pounds produced.

His neighbors chose to make butter. The top producer was Andrew Hurlbut who produced 3600 pounds of butter in 1870.

In 1850 Andrew's father Philo was the top producer of butter with a mere 400 pounds and no cheese was produced in the neighborhood.

In 1850 over 200 bushels of wheat were grown in the community but by 1870 production had dropped to 12 bushels. Meanwhile oat production had risen from 120 bushels in 1850 to over 1100 bushels in 1870. Irish potato production had risen from 93 bushels in 1850 to 1052 bushels in 1870. Every single farmer in Osbornville produced Maple sugar. The top producer in 1850 was Philo Hurlbut with 400 pounds. No figures exist for 1870 but by 1880 Andrew Hurlbut produced 1000 lbs, Thomas Hurlbut 700 lbs, Norman Tyler 600 lbs and Lester Overacker 500 lbs. The remaining neighbors produced about 200 lbs per household. By the 1870's every farm showed some fruit trees but Andrew Hurlbut had the largest orchard with 90 bearing trees.

By 1870 most of the land along Rock Island Road had been sold and was being developed. The only undeveloped lands were the lots along Beaver Creek North of the farm lots on Rock Island Road. These Lots were all land locked. One of the first settlers was Franklin Tyler. Franklin took up lot 164, north of his father Norman Tyler's farm. Within a few years William Wall, and two of the Smith family son's, Harrison and William took up land in the area. In May 1875 these four petitioned the Town of De Kalb to open a new road from Rock Island Road to Franklin Tyler's Farmhouse.



A water powered sawmill was built on Franklin Tyler's Lot and soon after a steam sawmill was built at the foot of Huckleberry mountain by James Todd. Another saw mill and lumber camp was built in the town of Gouverneur on the back of Huckleberry Mountain. Most of the land in this area continued to be held by absentee Landlords, while many tenants came and went. The landlords were first Thomas Tate and E. P Townsley later A. B. Spooner and Webster Chandler.

The number of woodcutters and laborers in the backwoods continued to expand into the 1880's. In about 1888 there were 42 children attending the Osbornville School. Over half of them came from families living in the back woods. The area became known as Chandlerville. Franklin Tyler never purchased his farm and it went through many tenants including the Washburn and Typher families. Sanford and Joanna Babcock Conklin did manage to buy Lot 168 in this region and developed a successful farm there.

Some of the wood cutting families included: the Mouks, Merithews, McQuades, Taylors and the Kellisons. Hank and Ellen Kellison were among the last of the woodcutters in the community. They cut wood on shares for local farmers up until Hank's death in 1925. They lived in a variety of dirt floor shanties, which they shared with their horse. Well into the 1930's, Eli George, from Akwesasne, would visit the area each spring to gather ash splints from the black ash trees of Beaver Creek swamp. When he had a truckload, he would pay a local farmer to deliver then to Akwesasne to be made into pack baskets.

The Osborn Lake Cheese factory was organized about 1887. The factory specialized in the manufacture of cheddar cheese. It was located on the line between Lots 235 and 236. The factory was in operation until the fall of 1930. It served as an important gathering point for members of the community. A

complete history of the Osborn Lake Cheese factory is available at [www.dekalbnyhistorian.org](http://www.dekalbnyhistorian.org) or in The Williamstown Gazette Vol. 5 no. 2.

In order to obtain more patrons for the cheese factory a new road was laid out from Maple Ridge Road near the Colton Rd to Rock Island Road in 1888. This road was known as the New Crossover Road. Osbornville now had three roads within its territory.

Prior to March 1891, residents of Osbornville would select a nearby Post office to have their mail sent to. In 1872 Thomas Hurlbut picked up his mail in De Peyster while next door his brother Andrew received his mail in Gouverneur. An Osbornville Post Office was established March 5, 1891 with Martin V. McIntyre as Postmaster. Mart McIntyre had been a traveling peddler but with the establishment of the post office he opened a store in his home.

The mail was picked up daily from the Gouverneur Post Office by a local carrier and brought to Osbornville, where it was sorted for pick up by the Postmaster. Each carrier had a one-year contract. Among the mail carriers were: Sanford Conklin, Grafton Conklin and George Goodale. The Osbornville Post Office was closed and replaced by Rural Free Delivery December 31, 1903. The store remained in operation until the 1920's.

By 1890 the St Lawrence Republican and the Ogdensburg Advance News carried a column of news from Osbornville. These columns reveal interesting stories about the residents and the neighborhood over time.

One example is the story of the Tyler family who had been residents for almost half a century. In March 1890, Chauncey Tyler rented out the Tyler farm and went to work on the docks in Ogdensburg, where his brother, Franklin Tyler, already

worked. In November 1890 Franklin was drowned in a fall from the docks into the icy river. Less than a week later, their mother, Louisa Tyler died. Chauncey left Ogdensburg soon after, but sold the family farm and moved to North Gouverneur to live near his father-in-law Fred Mott.

Another interesting tidbit covered was the major forest fire that swept over Huckleberry Mountain and through Chandlerville in May 1896. Racing through the accumulated slash, this fire decimated most of the remaining forestlands on the Ford tract.

By 1905 the timber was gone from the backcountry and the area population reduced correspondingly. The dairy farmers continued to work together and prosper. In 1914 the Richville Telephone Company extended service to Osbornville. In 1929 St Lawrence County took over Rock Island Road from the Town of De Kalb and the same year De Kalb abandoned the "Chandlerville Road". At about the same time the Osbornville news column was dropped from the Ogdensburg Newspapers. In 1937 electric lines reached Osbornville.

In 1948 the Osbornville School was closed and the students were bussed to North Gouverneur then later to the new central school in Gouverneur. In 1956 the New Crossover road was closed and Osbornville was again cut off from the rest of the Town of De Kalb. With a post office address of Gouverneur, a church in North Gouverneur and school attendance in Gouverneur little community identity was left for the once thriving Osbornville and its memory has faded from all but the oldest residents memories.

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