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Prologue

The Book Ahead

I did not realize it when I began to write this book, but it has turned out to be the closing chapter of my multivolume biography of eighteenth-century Louisbourg. It may sound odd to speak of a constantly evolving settlement of thousands of people over the span of four decades in terms of a biography. Nonetheless, that is how I now see this account of the events of the second and final French occupation of Louisbourg.

The story of what happened at Louisbourg between 1749 and 1758 is one of the great dramas in the history of Canada, indeed, of North America. It is a tale with many twists and turns, which brings in the end roughly forty thousand men, women, and children on shore and afloat at Louisbourg in June and July 1758. The resulting clash was monumental by anyone's standards. One of the largest British military forces ever to campaign in North America—roughly twenty-seven thousand soldiers and sailors—went up against approximately eighty-five hundred French soldiers and sailors. The exact number of French civilians within the walls of Louisbourg is unknown, but the total was likely around four thousand. By itself the overall forty thousand figure reveals not only the massive scale of the undertaking but also the importance the two imperial powers placed on Louisbourg, the one to defend it and the other to capture it.

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The participants fully recognized the magnitude of the struggle in which they were involved as they were living through it. So did the people residing in the nearby French and British colonies because they too had a stake in the outcome. And, obviously, so did their superiors in the mother countries, as they were the ones who authorized the massive land and sea forces that crossed the ocean to collide at Louisbourg. What unfolded at the French stronghold on Cape Breton Island in the summer of 1758 was to have a far-reaching influence on the outcome of the long Anglo-French contest for supremacy in North America. It was nothing less than the first major British victory in the most recent war, following a string of setbacks and disappointments. Had Louisbourg *not* fallen in 1758, as it had avoided doing in 1757, when a large fleet of French warships within Louisbourg harbor and a storm at sea thwarted a massive British expedition, then who knows how differently the Seven Years' War might have ended? Would yet another reverse—following those of Braddock's defeat in 1755, the loss of Oswego in 1756, the surrender of Fort William Henry in 1757, and the French victory at Fort Carillon/Ticonderoga in 1758—have been enough to undo the administration in London led by William Pitt? We will never know because the British did achieve victory at Louisbourg. And with it, the tide in the Seven Years' War turned dramatically in their favor. The campaign at Louisbourg was celebrated long and loud in Britain and its colonies, suggesting that there was as much relief as joy when people learned the news.

Fame, of course, is fleeting. So it was with the capture of Louisbourg in 1758. That siege and the decade that preceded it in Atlantic Canada are not well remembered, except by a relatively small number of historians.[1] By the twenty-first century the simultaneous French tragedy and British glory represented by "Louisbourg 1758" had receded into the dim background of the continent's collective consciousness. Historians with an interest in the Seven Years' War tended to focus instead on the siege of Quebec in 1759, with its drama of a decisive few moments on the Plains of Abraham, with the unrivaled symmetry of the deaths of both commanders, Wolfe and Montcalm. Those who think of the Louisbourg campaign of the preceding year, if they think of it at all, regard it as a prelude to the main event. Historians have long followed a tradition in which the campaign at Louisbourg was boiled down to a few paragraphs or at best a few pages.[2]

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Through such a lens the ending of the colony of Île Royale (as Cape Breton Island was known to the French between 1713 and 1758) and the removal of its population become small details in the advance of one empire and the decline of another. Also, most narratives look at the Louisbourg sidebar from an exclusive military history perspective, one in which the British victors tend to receive far more ink than the losing French side. That approach misses the fascination and poignancy of the final decade of Louisbourg's existence, for what happened at Louisbourg in 1758 is as much a tale of dashed French hopes and plans as it is of a British victory.

While the long shadow cast by the 1759 siege of Quebec was one factor that kept Louisbourg's own siege from being better known, another influence was at work. For many years the historical profession underestimated the significance of Louisbourg as a seaport and settlement. Despite the in-depth book published in 1918 by J. S. McLennan, which demonstrated the scale and scope of the French colony, Île Royale long occupied a marginal position in the dominant narratives on New France.[3] That began to change in the 1970s and 1980s, when a new round of studies on Louisbourg's society and economy began to appear.[4] For those who read such works, the French colonization of Cape Breton Island ceased to be the simple story of a fort "guarding" the entrance to the part of New France that existed along the shores of the Saint Lawrence River. Rather, Louisbourg and Île Royale came to be seen as an important and sizable colonizing initiative in its own right, with its own distinct economy.[5] Stronghold, yes, argued the authors of those studies, but not merely an advance post for Quebec and Montreal. That, after all, was a role Louisbourg could perform only when a fleet of French warships was based there, which did not happen very often. And without a squadron riding at anchor, Louisbourg's guns and garrison could do nothing to prevent an attack on the Saint Lawrence settlements.

In France few historians were interested at all in the long-lost colony of Île Royale in any context. One of the few was François Caron, who put forward an interpretation in 1983 that Louisbourg was for the French in North America what Gibraltar was for the British on the Mediterranean. "To protect Louisbourg," writes Caron, "is to defend the whole colony." To be sure, the military historian's perspective reflects the importance that the Cape Breton stronghold had for officials at Versailles

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in the years leading up to 1758, yet that was a fairly recent development. In the beginning, which for Louisbourg occurred in 1713, the settlement was established not to be a "guardian" of the Gulf of Saint Lawrence but as an economic engine or base. Year after year throughout the 1720s–1750s, France's Ministry of the Marine, which was responsible for the navy and overseas colonies, allocated an important portion of its budget to develop and defend Louisbourg because Île Royale was valued in and of itself, for its maritime economy of fishery and commerce.[6]

The numbers speak louder than words. That Louisbourg represented much more than a well-fortified frontier post is clearly reflected in the following figures summarizing the community that would be wiped out in 1758. In the span of four decades of life and growth, the parish at Louisbourg witnessed over 2,200 baptisms, 565 marriages, and nearly 1,200 recorded burials.[7] There would be no more such events in the town after the British victory, at least not involving French settlers. As soon as the British could after their conquest, they sent to France virtually every soldier, sailor, and civilian—perhaps as many as twelve thousand people in the latter half of 1758. The term "deportation" is not usually applied to that forced removal, but the relocation took place at the same time as the much better known Acadian deportations of 1755–62.

As the subject of a biography, Louisbourg offers three main sides to its personality: fortress, seaport, and community. All three are examined in this book in varying degrees. Looked at collectively, the French colony had a short lifespan. The bookend dates are 1713 and 1758, and it should be noted that from the midpoint in 1745 until the midpoint in 1749 Louisburg was in British hands and spelled without a second *o*. Forty-five years is not long by any standard. Most people in today's North America and Europe live far longer, and so did many of their predecessors in the eighteenth century. Brief or not, the era in which Louisbourg was a French base on Île Royale was one of the turning points in the history of North America. Innumerable colonial actions and reactions brought countless changes to people on both sides of the Atlantic. Wars, territory-changing treaties, and massive population declines and movements are the most obvious. The short- and long-term impacts of eighteenth-century colonialism on the peoples of the Americas, Europe, and Africa are incalculable and still with us in the twenty-first century.

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Louisbourg is only one case among many, yet from my vantage point it is among the more riveting. During its four and a half decades, Louisbourg evolved from an unsettled harbor into a bustling fishing and trading port and a populous walled town. It became the virtual capital for the French in Atlantic Canada, enduring two protracted sieges. Each time, in 1745 and 1758, the sieges ended in defeat and removal for the French defenders and colonists. After the second loss, which is the focus of this study, British sappers systematically destroyed the once-vaunted fortifications. Louisbourg became something of a modern Carthage.

Put briefly, Louisbourg and the colony of Île Royale packed a lot into a brief lifespan. And no part of that history is more intriguing than the ten-year period that began in 1749. *Endgame 1758* focuses squarely on those final ten years. It was a decade dominated by war or, more accurately, by thoughts of, worries about, and preparations for war. For the first nine years people dealt with the aftermath of the preceding conflict, the War of the Austrian Succession (King George's War), and with the work judged necessary in anticipation of the next attack. The preparations involved measures on shore and afloat, for British blockades of the French colony became a part of life beginning in the mid-1750s. The tenth year, 1758, turned out to be Louisbourg's last, at least as a French bastion. The promise Louisbourg had once held for the French evaporated when British arms found glory.

The emphasis in *Endgame 1758* is on two parallel stories. One is the French side of the imperial equation, with the focus on events at Louisbourg. The other story is the British side, where events involving Halifax, Louisbourg's counterbalance, are of primary interest. Though these are the twin foci of the book, all incidents and episodes of the 1749–58 period are not treated equally. Some are included because they provide insights into the nature and character of life at Louisbourg and on Île Royale. Put differently, they flesh out the biography. Others contribute directly to the military saga that culminated in the siege of 1758. The first half of the book essentially sets the stage for an in-depth depiction of what happened in the two final years, 1757 and 1758.

By the end of the book the reader should see that the imperial power that prevailed at Louisbourg was the one that brought and effectively used more resources: warships, artillery, and ground troops. The latter

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part of the formulation, about effective use, must be added. One thing military history makes clear is that battles and campaigns are not determined by numbers alone. If that was all there was to it, the British would have won easily at Fort Carillon/Ticonderoga in 1758, when in fact they were soundly defeated by a much smaller force of French defenders. At Louisbourg the events of 1757 demonstrated that the British could not just show up off the coast with a large fleet and expect the French to lower their flag. To force the French leadership at Louisbourg to surrender, an enemy had to accomplish three main goals: implement an effective naval blockade, get large numbers of troops ashore, and advance against the fortified town sufficiently to make capitulation inevitable. That undertaking is a lot easier stated in the twenty-first century, from the comfortable position of knowing how things turned out, than it was achieved in the eighteenth century by the people who actually had to make it happen.

Anyone who has read the short summaries on Louisbourg that have appeared in countless books over the years knows already that the 1758 siege lasted about seven weeks and the British prevailed. However, there is much more that could and should be said about the fateful campaign against Louisbourg. The details of how and why the French colony ended the way it did, not just in June and July 1758 but over the decade that preceded the siege, are a little-known and compelling story. It is also high human drama. No one on either side knew how things were going to end—none of us ever does. In the pages that follow I present Louisbourg's final years with the sense of uncertainty that must have colored people's lives at the time.

The Game of Empire

Viewed through the time lapse of centuries, far from the tragedy of actual lives lost, the territorial competition waged by Great Britain and France in the eastern half of North America might be characterized as a long, drawn-out chess match. At the highest levels of the two European-based empires, gains and losses were sometimes treated as a game, albeit a deadly one. Ashore and afloat, the French and the British took turns being the aggressor. For a century and a half an advance by one side was frequently met by a countermove from the other. Alliances and broad stra-

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tegic interests meant that conquests were sometimes exchanged. A classic example is the way in which France and England (and after 1707, Great Britain) handed Acadia back and forth repeatedly up until the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. Another is the British return of Cape Breton Island to the French by the terms of a 1748 European treaty, to the annoyance of the New Englanders who had captured the stronghold at Louisbourg three years earlier.

At times the moves of European monarchs, or more accurately the administrations that acted in their name, puzzled or enraged people in North America. Kings and their advisers found it relatively easy to think of territories on a map as far-flung "holdings" to be kept or handed away, but the people actually living in those areas could not form such a detached perspective.[8] The burned buildings, devastated landscapes, captured vessels, and lost lives were all too real to the indigenous peoples and European colonists.

On an existential level, therefore, a chess analogy is an artificial and unsatisfactory construct. It does not capture the pain and suffering inflicted by the various wars. Moreover, it does an injustice to the complexity of the conflicts in North America before 1763. There were many more than two players struggling for sovereignty or simple existence. The mix included dozens of Aboriginal tribes, whose warriors often greatly outnumbered the European combatants. In seventeenth-century New France, for example, the Canadiens battled the Five Nations far more often than they did their English or New England rivals. A similar situation existed in the Anglo-American colonies, where seventeenth-century wars were predominantly with Native warriors, not French soldiers.

Another problem with the chess metaphor is that the "board" on which the imperial wars were waged was not well defined. In the early 1600s the French, the English, the Scottish, the Dutch, and the Swedish all made tentative settlements at several spots along the Atlantic seaboard; the rest of the continent remained in the control of the indigenous peoples. Slowly but steadily the Europeans spread inland as the decades went by, aided by the germs as well as the arms they had brought from overseas. By the period treated in this book, the imperial arena in North America stretched across perhaps a third of the continent. The North American "board," of course, was only one zone where European imperial

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ambitions were clashing. A good part of the planet was by then in play, with Spain, Portugal, and Holland major players along with Britain and France. There were flashpoints in India and Africa as well as the Americas. The more territory the empires covered, or aspired to cover, the more important became control over sea lanes. In that area the British eventually emerged with the upper hand, though their ascendancy was not always apparent nor was it ever a foregone conclusion.[9]

In eastern North America, where competing Anglo-French imperial dreams clashed head on for a century and a half, the indigenous peoples were drawn into and affected by the struggle. The Aboriginal tribes were no monolith. There were enormous differences—including, on occasion, longstanding enmity—among the different groups. A common strategy was for a given tribe to ally itself with one European power in the hope that it could stem the advance of another. Samuel Johnson perceptively observed from London that the British and the French had "parted the northern continent of America between them, and [were then] disputing about their boundaries." Each sought "the destruction of the other by the help of the Indians, whose interest it [was] that both should be destroyed."[10]

Despite its weaknesses as a concept for the broader war, the chess metaphor is nonetheless a useful shorthand for the particular history of Louisbourg. It captures the essence of that late-starting French colonial initiative. The place began from scratch in 1713 as a deliberate stroke of imperial design by Louis XIV and the comte de Pontchartrain, the minister of the marine, who held the responsibility for the navy and overseas colonies. Louisbourg's subsequent growth—demographically, economically, and militarily—under Louis XV resulted in large part from policies pursued by subsequent ministers of the marine, especially the comte de Maurepas. And its defeats—not once but twice—occurred because France's great imperial rival, Britain, in concert with its Anglo-American colonies, was determined to remove the Cape Breton stronghold from the geopolitical map. Admittedly, Native warriors were involved on both sides in the two conflicts at Louisbourg, yet not in large numbers, and they did not play determining roles. This was because the campaigns waged at Louisbourg in 1745 and 1758 were fundamentally European-style sieges, though some irregular forces and light infantry were needed.

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Aboriginal combatants were valued and present, yet they formed part of the supporting, not the leading, cast. In contrast to many other conflicts in eighteenth-century North America, where chiefs and warriors sometimes played a key military role, the two struggles at Louisbourg were primarily matches between the two longtime European rivals.[11]

The chess analogy also suits Louisbourg because it conveys the generally detached perspective of the kings, ministers, and advisers in London and Versailles who ultimately determined the fate of the place. That does not mean that those officials did not have strong feelings about the value of Louisbourg and the colony of Île Royale, because they did. Yet the importance assigned in Versailles or London to the fortified town and port on Cape Breton Island—either to retain it or to eliminate it—was determined by the utility envisioned for it in the larger context of the French or the British Empire. There was little or no attachment to the colony as an entity unto itself. In that utilitarian outlook the European colonists and indigenous peoples who actually lived in the territories were regarded as pieces in a global match, not players who should be encouraged to make their own moves.

Louisbourg and Atlantic Canada

This book focuses not on the global imperial contest but on the corner of North America known today as Atlantic Canada. Readers who think of the area as either a summer vacation destination or an economically disadvantaged region may be surprised to learn that the zone once figured prominently in the military, economic, and strategic thinking of France and Great Britain. Imperial interest peaked in the decade 1749–58. Those years witnessed the end of a long Anglo-French struggle for dominance along the Atlantic seaboard, with tragic ramifications for the French, the Acadians, and the Mi'kmaq. The British and the Anglo-Americans, on the other hand, benefited from the misfortunes of the others.[12] When the period is extended a few more years to include the fall of Quebec in 1759 and of Montreal in 1760, the era of the Seven Years' War (or if one prefers, the French and Indian War) was one of *the* pivotal periods in North American history.[13]

Two conditions put Louisbourg and other key parts of Atlantic Canada in the spotlight between 1749 and 1758. The first was an increased

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determination on the part of the leadership in Great Britain to win a *complete* victory over the French in North America. Previously, limited or regional gains had been enough. Beginning in 1749, however, the British showed a previously unseen determination concerning the North American colonies. That resolve waxed and waned over the decade like a stock market graph, yet the overall trend was unmistakable. An influential and growing number of officials in Britain wanted to see all French pieces swept off the colonial chess board. The most dramatic strokes were the founding of Halifax in 1749; an aggressive sea campaign that began a few years later; eight years of deportations of thousands of Acadians; and the sending of unprecedented numbers of soldiers and warships to the North American theater in the late 1750s.[14]

The second condition that put a spotlight on Atlantic Canada between 1749 and 1758 was the French response to the British initiatives. Put bluntly, they had to keep up or give up. In response to British militancy a succession of French administrations made concerted efforts to hang on to their nation's economic and strategic interests in the Atlantic region. The single most important stronghold in the zone, from the perspective of the different ministers of the marine, was Louisbourg. Beginning in 1749 and accelerating in 1755, the marine ministry committed more soldiers and ships to Louisbourg than it had ever done before. That strengthening of the capital of Île Royale by the French in turn hardened British resolve to capture the place. The various imperial moves of the early 1750s represented a sort of arms race, though of course the term had not yet been coined.

Looking at the larger North American context, the French altered and refined their vision of what they wanted to achieve in *Amérique septentrionale* as the decades passed. By the mid-eighteenth century the imbalance in the colonial populations made it clear that there was no hope of completely eliminating the British from North America. In round numbers there were more than ten times as many Anglo-American colonists as there were French ones: over a million to fewer than one hundred thousand. Indeed, Massachusetts alone had roughly three times the population of New France.[15] Consequently, the best hope for the French lay in consolidating their strengths in three main ways. One was to reinforce garrisons at primary fortresses such as Louisbourg and Quebec. That was done, and I shall have more to say on that topic later. A second

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approach was to send additional warships to the theater. Everyone acknowledged that the Royal Navy had a dominant edge by the mid-eighteenth century, but no one assumed the French were going to lose every naval encounter, nor did they. On the contrary, as events would demonstrate in the 1750s, the French were able to send formidable squadrons to nullify or at least reduce the British advantage. On this subject, too, there will be much more later.

The third way in which the France of Louis XV sought to enhance its North American empire was to establish a line of posts and a network of Native alliances on the interior of the continent to arrest the growth of the Anglo-American territories. Those efforts lie mostly beyond the scope of this book and have been dealt with by many historians. It is nonetheless worth noting that the many French forts probably looked impressive on maps reviewed at Versailles; they certainly do today when identified on maps in modern texts.[16] Yet tiny garrisons in scattered outposts across a frontier that stretched several thousand miles were unable to exercise effective control much beyond the range of the soldiers' muskets. The key to the French having influence in the territories along and close to the Mississippi, Ohio, and other rivers lay in having support from and alliances with the dozens of Aboriginal nations for whom the areas were homelands. For the most part the French were adept at using traditional Aboriginal diplomatic forms to develop relationships with the indigenous peoples, allowing those who acted on behalf of Louis XV to have more influence than they would have otherwise. Such alliances served French military interests well for a long time, including in Atlantic Canada, where the Mi'kmaq generally shared a common fear or distrust of the British and/or the Anglo-Americans.[17] Lest some think the French were universally loved by Aboriginal nations, let me make clear that they were not. The Iroquois, the Chickasaws, and the Fox, among others, fought long and bloody campaigns against the men of Louis XIV and Louis XV. In Atlantic Canada, however, there were no such French conflicts with the Native peoples, though there were times of tension and resentment, particularly when some bands began to sign treaties with the British (which happened in 1725–26 and 1752). The breadth of the French sphere of influence across a good part of the map of North America was impressive yet not solidly planted except in a few areas. Historian Ian Steele expresses the vulnerability poetically when he writes that the "reach of

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New France was swift and light, but fragile, like the birch-bark canoes they adopted from the Algonquin and Huron."[18]

As the 1750s unfolded many showdowns occurred throughout northeastern North America. Louisbourg loomed large in the thinking of the imperial powers, close to the top of both the French and the British list. To the one empire Louisbourg was a vitally important place to defend; to the other it was a primary target to remove. In chess parlance the final phase of the match is the endgame. Louisbourg's own endgame came before that of the continent-wide war, yet the 1758 result on Île Royale helped shape the larger outcome.

This narrative reflects, as far as the available sources allow, the perspectives of all participants. Those sources are long and deep for the main protagonists, the French and the British, yet sparse when it comes to the Mi'kmaq and other Native allies of the French. Although those warriors had only a small role in and impact on the events of 1758, it would have been desirable to know what their leadership thought of the conflict.

In keeping with the opening observation that this book is essentially a biography, the central character is Louisbourg itself. At the risk of repeating myself, the major fortified town and seaport on Île Royale was perceived as the key to Atlantic Canada. For French colonists, Acadian settlers, and Aboriginal allies such as the Mi'kmaq, the Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet), and the Abenaki, Louisbourg was a formidable bastion that people hoped would keep the British and the Anglo-Americans at bay. For the several thousand civilians who actually lived in or near the walled town on a year-round basis, Louisbourg was the community that sustained them. On the other side of the board, for the British and the Anglo-American colonists the fortress on Cape Breton Island was an economic and military threat, an obstacle to be overcome. This book strives to explain what happened to and at these three different Louisbourgs—stronghold, community, and threat—during the decade that ultimately settled the place's destiny.

A Recapitulation: Louisbourg 1713–1748

Within a few years of the French landing on the shores of Louisbourg harbor in 1713, it became evident that the fledgling seaport would play a crucial role in the contest for North America. Its predecessors in the At-

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lantic realm—Port-Royal (Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia) and Plaisance (Placentia, Newfoundland)—had fallen to the British during the war just ended (War of the Spanish Succession, 1701–13). Once the French made the decision to concentrate their interests in the Atlantic region on the two major islands over which they still claimed sovereignty, Île Royale and Île Saint-Jean (Prince Edward Island), it was inevitable that the new stronghold at Louisbourg would be tested. The only questions were when and how. When would an assault take place, and how would the place hold up?

For three decades those questions went unanswered. Louisbourg grew much larger and far stronger than the settlements that had preceded it along the Atlantic shores. Past defeats, therefore, did not seal the fate of the current fortified town. It would take a massive army and navy, superior to any force the British and their Anglo-American colonists had yet mustered in the region, to accomplish that. No one could foresee in the 1720s and 1730s when such an initiative might be forthcoming.

Luckily for the people who came to Louisbourg in 1713 and afterward, there was no immediate war. For three decades the settlements on Île Royale, especially Louisbourg, enjoyed peace and relative prosperity. Of course, there were hard times and occasional severe shortages. Yet overall the first thirty years of Louisbourg's history were characterized by remarkable growth. The cod fishery employed hundreds and brought wealth to many individual proprietors. Using dried cod as the primary export, merchants in Louisbourg and elsewhere developed trading links throughout France's Atlantic realm. The capital of Île Royale emerged as a "junction" or transshipment center. Vessels sailing to and from France, the West Indies, Canada, and even potentially "enemy" destinations in New England and Nova Scotia (the former Acadie) dropped anchor at Louisbourg to off- or on-load various commodities. The establishment of the port as an active seaport gave "new structure" to France's Atlantic empire.[19]

The quest for commercial wealth was the primary force behind colonial development and territorial rivalry in the eighteenth century, as indeed it was in earlier and later periods. The individual most responsible for France's colonial policies at the time was Jean-Frédéric Phélypeaux,

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