



# Spindle City Historic Society

Volume 15 Issue 2

Summer 2012

## HISTORIAN'S NOTEBOOK

## DID YOU KNOW

### O'Dea's Famous Picture of Andersonville Prison

Perhaps nothing affected the psyche of the post Civil War generation more than the image of the Confederate Prison at Andersonville, Georgia. The very word Andersonville became synonymous with the atrocities which the country had inflicted on its sons, both Northern and Southern. In the 1890 Census of Civil War Veterans and Widows, the single word "Andersonville" was acceptable in the "Disability Incurred" category. Life at Andersonville was depicted in movies, novels, paintings and in the written memoirs of those who survived. However, no depiction was better known by that generation than the pencil drawing done by a Cohoes bricklayer and former "guest" at Andersonville, Thomas O'Dea.

Thomas O'Dea was born in Ireland about 1847 and migrated with his family to Boston. In 1861, when the Civil War broke out, 14 year old Tom wished to follow his older brother George into the Union Navy but was turned away and told, "Go home and grow up first." A determined lad, in July 1863, he ran away to Maine and enrolled as a drummer in the 16<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the Maine Infantry Volunteers.

O'Dea was captured during the Wilderness Campaign in May, 1864. Moved from one Confederate prison to another, he ended up at Camp Sumter in Andersonville, Ga. Constructed in January, 1864, the Camp was designed to house 10,000 prisoners. By the time of O'Dea's arrival in the summer of 1864, there were 35,000 starving, sick and/or wounded men. During the 15 months the Camp operated, 13,000 prisoners died and many of the survivors suffered for the rest of their lives with illnesses they contracted there. Over forty percent of all Union prisoners of war who died during captivity perished at Andersonville.

The terrible death rate was the result of insufficient food supplies, polluted water, lack of medical care, and, depending on your point of view, either the incompetence or the wickedness of the Confederate officers in charge. The only source of water was a stagnant, befouled stream that was also used as a sewer and bathing area. No barracks were provided to protect against the rain, heat or cold. Many men were nearly naked. Food, when it was available, consisted of rancid grain and a few tablespoons of mealy beans or peas. Dysentery, gangrene, diarrhea and scurvy were rampant. To make matters worse, roving gangs of prisoners, known as raiders, attacked and robbed the "fresh fish" i.e. new prisoners. Sick or infirmed inmates were routinely relieved of their few possessions or rations. Captain Henry Wirz, the commander of the Andersonville Prison, was the only Confederate soldier convicted and executed for war crimes at the conclusion of the War.

*(continued on p.2)*

....that on March 15, 1897, as a result of the efforts of Msg. Dugas, a painting by Signor Cremonini of Rome, of the Modern Italian School of Painting, was installed in St. Joseph's Church? The painting was valued at 10,000 francs at the time.

.... that on August 9, 1899, the assessed value of the city of Cohoes was \$11,585,359.50?

.... that on June 27, 1899, St. Bernard's class of 1899 held graduation exercises in the new Cohoes Opera House? There were ten graduates.

....that Larry Burns of Cohoes and Spider Lewis of Boston fought in the lightweight division on June 12, 1894 in the Gaiety Theater for \$300 each?

....that on October 1, 1894, the first service was held in the main auditorium of the new St. Agnes Church, and Father Lowry celebrated the sixteenth anniversary of his first Mass in Cohoes?

.... that on July 1, 1898, the annual reunion of the 22<sup>nd</sup> regiment, NY Volunteers of the Civil War was held in Caldwell, and regiment members attending from Cohoes were: A.T.Calkins, Malachi Weidman, Wm. Weidman, John B. Swartz, Wm. H. Flannagan, J.C. Vanderwerken, Van Olinda Gordon, Ira M Wilson, and R.J.House?

.... that on May 22, 1897, the Robinson and Franklin combined circuses came to town with a great street parade?

....that on August 31, 1894, Jack King, the boxing champ from Brooklyn, sparred with Larry Burns of Cohoes at the Labor Day Picnic held by the Amulet Association of Jack Spinners?

.... that on August 21, 1897, President McKinley visited Cohoes? He arrived at 10:30 p.m., when an engine and special car drew into the city and sidetracked near the depot, where McKinley remained for two hours, away from the excitement in Troy.

....that on February 2, 1897, Cohoes boxer Larry Burns went to fight in England but lost on May 4 to Larry Greenfield?

....that on October 18, 1897, the first anniversary of the organization of the Cohoes Council Knights of Columbus was celebrated with over 800 knights in attendance?

.... that on May 6, 1899, Governor Roosevelt signed a bill for a lift lock in Cohoes? On May 18 he signed a bill appropriating \$5,000 to construct a new bridge over the Champlain Canal where the canal crossed Ontario Street.

### WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

The Spindle City Historic Society welcomes new members *Eunice Antonucci, Theresa Bourgeois, James Cuva, Jackie & John Reavy, and Donna Vaughn.*

*Historian's Notebook (continued from p.1):*

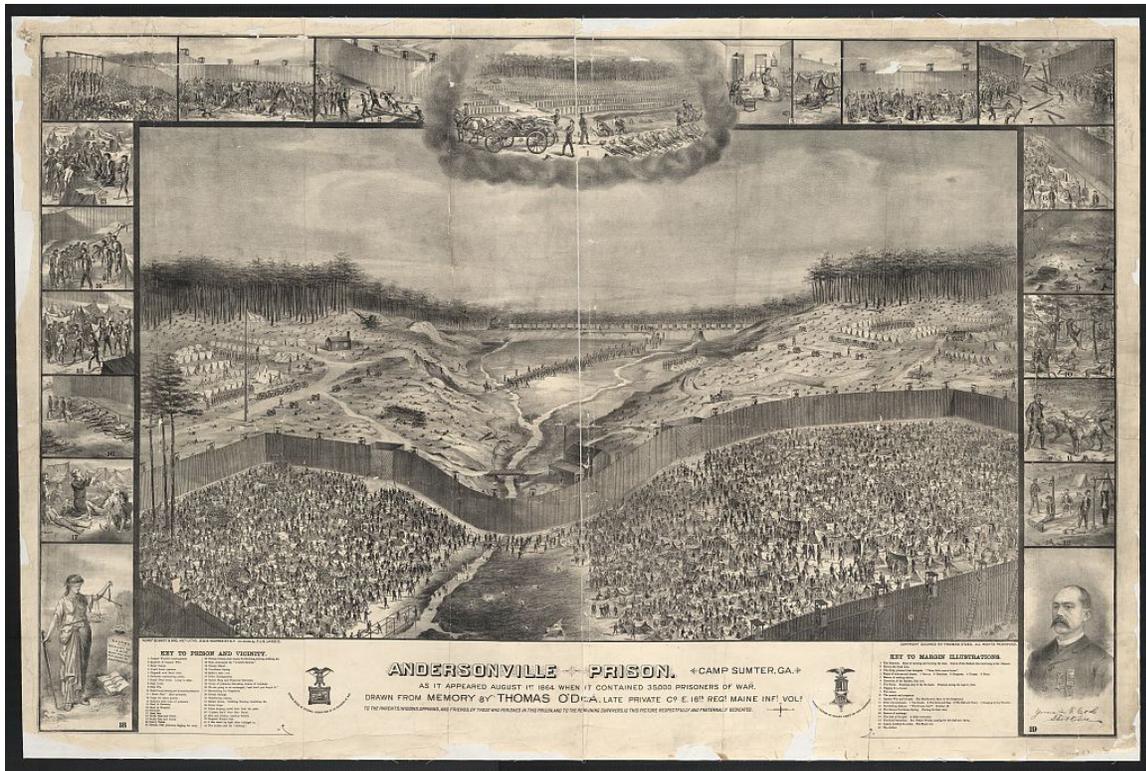
Thomas O'Dea was released from Andersonville on February 24, 1865. He was ill and emaciated, with ragged trousers and broken shoes his only possession. When he arrived home in Boston in July, bad news awaited him. His family had disappeared without a trace. For the rest of his life Thomas would search in vain for news of his sister and parents. He would locate his brother George only after a 25 year search.

Earning a living as an itinerant mason, O'Dea ended up in Cohoes by the early 1870's. His years on the road must have acquainted him with many fellow masons because he was elected general secretary of the Bricklayers and Stone Masons Union of America, a position he held for many years.

Over the years, O'Dea read many accounts of life at Andersonville and he found them wanting. In 1879, he saw a photograph of the prison which appeared to imply that it was a well organized camp with the appearance of cleanliness and order. He vowed to provide a true description of the prison as he had known it. Feeling that he lacked the talent to write about his experience, he decided on a pencil sketch, even though he had never drawn before. Working at night, after a long day of laying brick, he took six years to complete the drawing. Relying exclusively on his memory ("In executing the work, I had no picture, map, plan or scale to guide or instruct me."), O'Dea produced a four and a half by nine foot bird's eye panoramic view of the Prison as it existed in August, 1864 when it contained over 35,000 men. Surrounding the main scene are nineteen sketches depicting specific aspects of life in the prison.

In a pamphlet called *History of O'Dea's Famous Picture of Andersonville Prison*, which he wrote in 1887, O'Dea said of his work.

"The scene of indescribable confusion among the prisoners presents them in every imaginable position, standing, walking, running, arguing, gambling, going to or coming from the Branch with cups, dippers, canteens, or rude pails with water, lying down, dying, praying, giving water or food to the sick, crawling on hands and knees, or hunkers, making fires and cooking rations, splitting pieces of wood almost as fine as matches, the sick being assisted by friends, others "skirmishing for graybacks," washing clothes and bodies in the branch, trading in dead bodies, fighting, snoring, shouting ..."



*O'Dea's famous picture of Andersonville. Image from the Library of Congress on-line catalog.*

In both the main scene and the marginal sketches, O'Dea's pencil captured the essence of Andersonville --- filth, disease, hunger and death. Near-naked men laying in excrement, dead bodies thrown on a wagon like

cordwood, prisoners being shot for getting too close to the “deadline,” gangs of raiders attacking the “fresh fish” as they entered the stockade and dead bodies being stripped of their clothing are all shown. However, amidst all the horror, O’Dea also included two positive images: Providence Spring and Father Peter Whelan. The Spring was an underground stream that provided fresh water, suddenly exposed one night by a bolt of lightning, and Father Whelan was known as “The Angel of Andersonville” for ministering to all creeds, colors and nationalities.

In the lower right hand corner, O’Dea drew a self portrait, and in the *History* he took the opportunity to vent some pent up anger -- not at his former Confederate wardens but at those in the North who he felt had not shouldered their fair burden.

“But the soldier has not forgotten. The soldier gave up his home, his blood, his life, for his country. The bondholder gave his dollar from which he reaped his Shylockian interest of a hundred fold. In order to pay the bondholder the soldier must again be sacrificed.”

The drawing apparently became an immediate hit. In 1887, O’Dea set up a business and ordered 10,000 lithograph copies. He sold them for \$5 and offered a reduced rate to G.A.R. Posts. A copy found its way to a Post in Aurora, Illinois, and led to a reunion with his brother George. He moved from Summit St. in the mill section of Cohoes to the more fashionable Walnut St., and changed his listing in the City Directory from “mason” to “author and proprietor of O’Dea famous pictures of Andersonville Prison.” Prosperity may not have been lasting, as his listing in 1888 went back simply to “mason” But the work inspired fellow Cohoesier Patrick Carey to pen “Andersonville: Lines Suggested At Seeing O’Dea’s Great Picture” and describe the artist as “Himself an actor in each fearful scene, From memory drawn, thro sleepless years between.”

In May, 1914, on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his capture, Thomas O’Dea spent a week at Andersonville, then operated by the War Department. He found a button from a Northern uniform and discovered that Providence Spring was still running. One thing he did not find was a copy of his picture, which had been removed due to Southern objections.



*Portrait of Thomas O’Dea, from a publication of the NYS Civil War Centennial Commission*



Thomas O’Dea died on March 18, 1926 and is buried in St. Agnes Cemetery next to his wife Catharine McGuinness O’Dea. On his grave he is identified as a member of “Co. E, 16<sup>th</sup>. ME. Inf. Vols.” Thomas and Catharine had five children, four of whom are buried with their parents. Two daughters, Emma and Estella, taught at School 4 and lived together on Broadway. A lifelong friend and fellow teacher at School 4 was my favorite aunt, Irene Greeley McCune, who in the early 1950’s took me to visit her good friends and to view their prize possession. Though I was very young and knew little about the Civil War or Andersonville, I can still remember the large, dark picture in their front hallway. Somehow I knew it was important.

Apparently the drawing stayed in that hallway until 1961. As the country commemorated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Civil War, the O’Dea sisters offered the work for public view. It was put on display at the Fenimore House, headquarters of the New York State Historical Association in Cooperstown and the family was awarded a bronze medallion by the Civil War Centennial Commission. The presentation was made by renowned historian Dr. John Hope Franklin. Three copies of the print are housed at the NYS Military Museum in Saratoga, but I have been unable to discover what happened to the original. Hopefully it occupies an honored spot in the home of an O’Dea descendant, and as we prepare to commemorate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Thomas O’Dea’s sacrifice, they will once again share it with us.

*Paul Perreault  
Town of Malta Historian*



## Off the Top...

Now that the wet Memorial Day parade is behind us, we look towards the nation celebrating the Fourth of July. In 1865, with Lee's

surrender ending the Civil War in April, *"the restoration of peace added unusual interest and significance to the celebration this year of the 4th of July, and in Cohoes the demonstration was unusually large. The following is a summary of the account of the exercises given in the [newspaper] Cataract:*

*" The weather was all that could be desired, clear and pleasant. As no pains had been spared by the Hon. C. H. Adams, president of the day, and the committee of arrangements, the details of the celebration were perfect, and nothing occurred to mar the harmony of the occasion. The day was ushered in by the national salute and ringing of bells. At half past ten, the procession, under direction of the marshal, ... and his assistants, ...commenced moving in the following order :*

1. *Co. I, 11th Heavy Artillery, N. Y. V. This veteran company under command of Capt. Jas. O Hare, made a fine appearance and commanded the plaudits of the citizens along the entire line of march.*
2. *The Car of Liberty. This contained the Goddess of Liberty, surrounded by her guardians, art, science, agriculture, etc., and thirty-six young ladies representing the states.*
3. *Fire Department.*
4. *Committee of Arrangements, Orator, Header and Village Officials.*
5. *St. Bernard's Sunday School.*
6. *The Trades.*

*The exercises on the island were opened with prayer by Rev. A. J. Bingham. The Declaration was then read by P. D. Niver, and an oration delivered by Rev. A. T. Pierson, of Waterford."*

Abstracted from: *The History of Cohoes, New York, Earliest Settlement to the Present Time*, Arthur H. Masten, 1877.

Where ever the July 4th holiday leads you this year, remember to celebrate the history of our nation and the history of Cohoes.

Have a safe and enjoyable summer.

Paul D. Dunleavy  
President

## Canal Clean Sweep/Cohoes Beautification Day



On April 21, a group of Spindle City Historic Society members teamed with a contingent of residents of the Harmony Mills Lofts for a cleanup along Devlin Street, Craner Park and Lock 17 as participants in Cohoes Beautification Day the statewide Canal Clean Sweep. As is often the case, the cleanup produced some unusual finds. Among the discards collected were a TV, a cell phone, a Play Station 2, a swimming pool filter tank, pieces of a bowling ball, a golf ball, gloves, a fleece jacket, a shoe, a lawn chair, three pairs of skis (two pairs of downhill skis, one pair cross-country) and a ski bag (but no poles or boots), two plastic swords, and a large roll of barbed wire.

Many thanks to all of this year's participants: Daniele Cherniak, June Cherniak, Walter Cherniak, Linda Christopher, Lundy LaBuda, Chris Madden, and Pam Marino. We encourage everyone to join us at next year's Clean Sweep for the satisfaction of cleaning up a section of the city, and the excitement of new and unusual discoveries!

## Memorial Day Parade

On May 24, members of the Spindle City Historic Society participated in the annual Memorial Day Parade in Cohoes. Although there was an untimely downpour during the parade, the group's spirits were not dampened.



## New Sign in Power Canal Park

On May 18, as an opening event for Cohoes Heritage Days, the City of Cohoes and the Spindle City Historic Society unveiled a new sign in Power Canal Park. The park, officially opened in 2004, contains a group of interpretive signs, created by members of the SCHS, that recount the history of the Harmony Mills Historic District of Cohoes, the Erie Canal, the Harmony Mills, the Cohoes Falls and the Cohoes Mastodon. Many thanks to Mayor McDonald for officiating at the unveiling, and to DPW director Ken Radliff for installing the new sign.



*Tor Shekerjian and Paul Dunleavy unveil the sign.*

## Cohoes Heritage Days



*Bernie Ouimet describes French-Canadian culture and history in Cohoes.*

On Saturday, May 19, SCHS participated in Cohoes Heritage Days, a citywide celebration of the rich history of Cohoes. Numerous community organizations held events at venues around the city, and historical Cohoes personages could be encountered on the city's streets. The Spindle City Historic Society

hosted a series of speakers at the Visitor Center who gave presentations on some of the many ethnic groups who immigrated to Cohoes and gave the city its unique character. Among the speakers were Frank Colaruotolo, discussing Italian-Americans, Bernie Ouimet, on French Canadians, Miriam Biskin

on the Jewish community, and Father Terent Wasielewski speaking about Russian and other Slavic immigrants. SCHS also sponsored a tour of historic sites of the Troy and Schenectady Railroad, now the route of the Mohawk-Hudson bikeway through Cohoes.



*Tor Shekerjian as industrialist and philanthropist Horace B. Silliman.*



*Walter Lipka talks baseball, and shares the history of Hall of Famer George Stacey Davis.*



*Jack Madden leads a tour of historic sites of the Troy and Schenectady Railroad.*

## From the SCHS Collection – Letters and a Portrait



*WWI soldiers in front of City Hall, 1918, just after their induction into the Army 305<sup>th</sup> Infantry. Charles Rowan is in the front row, second from the right.*

In the Spindle City Historic Society's collection are a set of letters and a painting that tell the poignant story of WW I soldier Charles Rowan.

On June 5, 1918 Mrs. Elizabeth Rowan of 31 Amity St. in Cohoes received a note from Reverend Duncan H. Browne, Chaplain of the 305<sup>th</sup> Infantry EF, fighting in France. He extended his and the Infantry's sympathy for the loss of her son Charles on June 3 through the explosion of a shell. Reverend Browne wrote that as he laid him to rest, he thought of her and that in his prayers she might find comfort. He also wrote that her son was a "good boy, a good soldier" and he offered his services at any time she felt free to call upon him.

The next month, on July 29, 1918, Chaplain Duncan H. Browne responded to a

July 1<sup>st</sup> letter sent to him by Mrs. Rowan. He wrote back that he was touched by all that she had written and most of all by the "splendid courage and true spirit of heroism" she exhibited. He went on to write that she was an example of High American Motherhood that made him "more thankful than ever that he was an American and that the mothers of our boys had 'a purpose so high and so unselfish.'" He went on to describe the event that killed her son: "The unfortunate accident of which your son was a victim along with others occurred on one of the ranges where the men had gone for practice. Someone, who nobody will ever know, picked up an unexploded shell. This exploded, killing some outright and injuring others. Charles died almost immediately along with others among his comrades. Had he survived the accident he very likely would have been crippled for life. It all occurred so suddenly and unexpectedly that death was almost instantaneous. The cemetery where we laid him to rest is in a quiet spot outside Longuenesse on a peaceful hillside. A cross bearing his name marks the resting place, the grave Number is 6A. In due time you will receive the boy's belongings. I have written for confirmation as to just what these are. In this same cemetery there rest others, American, French, and English, who made the supreme sacrifice to their country and the cause of Freedom. A cause that at not a distant date will soon be won. I hope in God's Providence I shall some day have the honor and privilege of meeting the Mother of such a son personally. Again let me assure you that I stand ready to serve you at any time and in any way. God bless you and keep you strong."



Charles Rowan was among the first Cohoesiers to lose his life in WWI. As one of the early casualties of the war from Cohoes, his portrait was painted by a local artist and given to his family. The painting has been donated to the Spindle City Historic Society, and with the letters, is a reminder of the great losses of war.

*Many thanks to John Rowan for his donation of the portrait of Charles Rowan.*

**NYS Historic Preservation Office Honors Cohoes Preservation Efforts**



*Award recipients Lauren Payne, Robert Clancy, and Daniele Cherniak with Mayor John McDonald and Deputy Commissioner Ruth Pierpont.*

On May 15, the NYS Historic Preservation Office presented certificates of appreciation for preservation efforts in Cohoes. Receiving awards were Robert Clancy and Lauren Payne of Spiral Design Studio, for their work in rehabilitating the former YWCA building at 135 Mohawk St. in the city’s Downtown Historic District for use as offices for their design business. Also receiving an award was SCHS first vice president Daniele Cherniak, in recognition of her longtime education efforts and advocacy for historic preservation in the city of Cohoes.

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***Spindle City Historic Society Membership Application***

[www.spindlecity.net](http://www.spindlecity.net)

President - Paul Dunleavy

First Vice President - Daniele Cherniak    Second Vice President - Tor Shekerjian  
 Secretary - Linda C. Christopher    Treasurer - June Cherniak

- |  |         |   |         |
|--|---------|---|---------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Individual Membership     | \$10.00 | <input type="checkbox"/> Institutional Membership | \$25.00 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Senior Citizen Membership | \$ 5.00 | <input type="checkbox"/> Contributing Membership  | \$35.00 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student Membership        | \$ 5.00 | <input type="checkbox"/> Sustaining Membership    | \$50.00 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family Membership         | \$15.00 |   |         |

*We have great things planned in our home in the Cohoes Visitor's Center! Please help if you can with an additional donation to support our upcoming programs: \_\_\_\_\_ \$5.00    \_\_\_\_\_ \$10.00    \_\_\_\_\_ other \_\_\_\_\_ gift membership*

NAME \_\_\_\_\_ ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_  
 CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP CODE \_\_\_\_\_  
 TELEPHONE \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Mail completed form with membership fee, payable to Spindle City Historic Society, to:  
 June Cherniak, Treasurer, 415 Vliet Boulevard, Cohoes, NY 12047

### ***Electronic Option for Delivery of the SCHS Newsletter***

The Spindle City Historic Society now offers its members electronic delivery of the newsletter. This assures faster receipt of your newsletter. To sign up for electronic delivery, please send your e-mail request to: [cherniak@nycap.rr.com](mailto:cherniak@nycap.rr.com) and provide the e-mail address for receipt of your newsletter. Otherwise, you will continue to receive the newsletter through regular mail.

### ***e-mail Notifications of SCHS News and Events***

If you would like to receive timely e-mail notices of upcoming Spindle City Historic Society events and other news, please e-mail us at [cherniak@nycap.rr.com](mailto:cherniak@nycap.rr.com).

### ***Wanted: Your Stories for the SCHS Newsletter***

If you have a story about people, places, or events in Cohoes history, the Spindle City Historic Society wants to hear from you. The Society is seeking articles for upcoming issues of its quarterly newsletter. The newsletter staff welcomes written articles, recollections of the past, and information that can be used in newsletter articles or in the newsletter's "Did You Know" section. Contributors will be acknowledged. Please contact us by calling 518-237-5618 or by e-mailing us at [cherniak@nycap.rr.com](mailto:cherniak@nycap.rr.com).

### ***UPCOMING EVENTS***

***Wednesday, June 27*** – Spindle City Historic Society meeting. 7 p.m., Cohoes Visitor's Center.

***Wednesday, July 25*** – Spindle City Historic Society meeting. 7 p.m., Cohoes Visitor's Center.

***Wednesday, August 29*** – Spindle City Historic Society meeting. 7 p.m., Cohoes Visitor's Center.

***Saturday, September 22*** – The Underground Railroad in the Region – A presentation by Cliff Mealy. 1 p.m., Watervliet Historical Society Museum, corner of 1st Avenue and 15th Street, Watervliet. Event co-sponsored by the Watervliet Historical Society.

Photo credits this issue – Walter Cherniak, David Koschnick, Paul Perreault

☞ SCHS Newsletter Staff ☛

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Spindle City Historic Society

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