

Saint Michael's Lutheran Church, Strasburg.

BY WILLIAM FREDERIC WORNER.

Strange visions of the storied past
From years long gone arise,
And bid me tell the quaint old tales
They form before mine eyes.
Tales of the men of former days
Of those who built her walls,
The men upon whose peaceful graves
St. Michael's shadow falls.

The earliest reference extant to the Lutherans of Strasburg township is that found in the old register of the German Lutheran congregation in New Holland, on the first page of which, under date of May 1, 1730, the Rev. John Casper Stoever recorded: "The List of baptized children in the congregations at Mill Creek, Pequea, and Beber Creek." This is the first mention of the Strasburg Lutheran Church, for the Beber (Beaver) Creek congregation has always been identified as the one which worshipped, at that time, or subsequently, at the "Old Dutch Burying Ground."

The Rev. John Frederick Handschuh,¹ in the account of his journey thru Pennsylvania, relates: "On the 26th of May, 1748, at the close of the afternoon service held in Trinity Church, Lancaster, at 3 P. M., at which service Mr. Schaum preached, several persons came to speak with me² from Earltown, from Beaver Creek and Strasburg township, asking whether I could also serve them with the Word of God and when, whom I informed as well as I could at present."

Again on June 30th he records:³ "Between the morning and the afternoon service people who were sent by a small Lutheran congregation from Strasburg township, came and most earnestly entreated that I should indeed also care for their souls, to whom, however, I could not as yet give a certain answer, but many a necessary admonition."

The Lutherans of Strasburg township became so persistent that they absolutely refused to be put off any longer. A final appeal was made a week later. Under date of July 7th the Rev. Mr. Handschuh states:⁴ "I had much to do with several people from Strasburg township who would by no means

¹ Hallische Nachrichten, page 201.

² Pastor Handschuh was on his first visit to Lancaster.

³ Hallische Nachrichten, page 209.

⁴ Hallische Nachrichten, page 210.

take a refusal. Upon their many entreaties, I had at last to promise that after eight days I would visit them and preach for them."

That a delegation from the Lutheran congregation of Strasburg township, a few weeks later, waited on the Rev. Mr. Handschuh and accompanied him to their place of worship, is evident from his own account:⁵ "Early on the 24th of July, 1748, I was taken to Strasburg township, fourteen miles from here (Lancaster) to preach and to take charge of the congregation of that place. I entreated the people very impressively, publicly and particularly to spare me if they were not very earnestly concerned for their edification unto salvation, as I had more to do in the two other congregations than I could well attend to, and the road to them was too far and entirely too fatiguing, as it was necessary to ride over a tolerably large stream (Conestoga) two pretty large rivulets (Mill and Pequea creeks) and several stony and marshy tracts of country."

Thus far it has not been ascertained whether the Rev. Mr. Stoever, who, prior to 1740, resided in New Holland, organized the Strasburg congregation or not. Even after his removal to his new home on the Quitpahila, in Lebanon county, in 1740, he continued as pastor of the New Holland Church until 1746, serving five or six congregations and doubtless organizing others.⁶

The first record still in possession of the Strasburg congregation is that commenced by the Rev. Johann Gottlieb Engelland,⁷ a wandering Wurttemberg theological student, who had been the pastor of a congregation in Hamburg, Germany. He and the Rev. Tobias Wagner, who had also been a pastor in Wurttemberg, and the Rev. Henry Burcher Gabriel Wartmann served Trinity Church, Lancaster, from 1751 until March, 1753, when the Rev. John Siegfried Gerock entered upon the pastorate.⁸ It is probable that the Rev. Mr. Wagner also labored in Strasburg.

The title page of the old record of the Strasburg Lutheran Church reads as follows:

"Church record of the congregation in Strasburg, commencing January 5, 1754, on which may be found as far as possible the names both of those baptized from this time forth, in addition to the names of those who have died as well as those who have been confirmed."

It is evident from the Rev. Mr. Engelland's entries, that the register, altho commenced in 1754, contains earlier records. At this time, 1753-1754, the congregation were building or had already built a church edifice. On the second page of the record, in a very poor hand, he tells us that in the year 1753, the congregation received a contribution of boards, already fitted, tongued and grooved, for a sounding board for the pulpit.

Altho the first baptisms correspond in date with the erection of the church, others recorded later were performed before this time, one in 1748 and another as early as 1745.

Among those baptized occur these names: Hans George Wuerfel (now

⁵ Hallische Nachrichten, page 211.

⁶ Schmauk's "History of the Lutheran Church in Pennsylvania," page 267.

⁷ At Bergstrasse Church, near Ephrata, the name Engelland is given as John Theophilus, presumably one and the same person.

⁸ Schmauk's "History of the Lutheran Church in Pennsylvania," page 322.

Warfel), Wendel Seits, Casper Rapp, George Lentz, Wendel Traut, John Jacob Brua, Dewald Brua, J. Nichol, Ignatig Lesdner, Philip Huber, Barthaser V. Kennan, Martin Kuhn, Conrad Vieman, Mary Elizabeth Burkhard, J. Nicol Hoffman, Lusanna Wuerfel, Paul Traut, Peter Berger, Matthias and Elizabeth Berger, Henry Raks, Johannes Buchles, John Roessel (now Russel), John Yost, Marie Keett, Alexander Gusert, Conrad Walz, J. Adam Stiner, Peter Shaeffer, Leonhard Bickel, Heinrich Valtz, J. Schmidt, John George Saal, Peter Berger, Paul Wild, Frederick Weise, Felix Bachman, Frederick Danninger, Philip Jacob Gruendler, Balthaser Boll, Jonas Raab, George Hauber and Sophia Ruth.

While it is obvious that the Lutherans of Strasburg township had formed a congregation prior to the erection of the "Old Dutch Church," the date on which the record was commenced January 5, 1754, is considered the time when a permanent organization was effected, which has existed ever since.

The first church was a log building about twenty feet square. It was weather-boarded about thirty years after it was built. The entrance was at the eastern end of the church, with windows on the north and south sides of the building. This church was not located in the borough of Strasburg, but about one and one half miles to the southeast, at a point where the road to the Nickel Mines crosses the road from Soudersburg to the California store.⁹

Thus far the writer has not been able to learn why this particular site was chosen. Rupp tells us that the first house¹⁰ was built in the village of Strasburg in 1733, and that the little hamlet was of rapid growth, owing to its location on the "old Conestoga road." Over this road the Indian traders travelled to their posts in the wilderness, and were followed later by the pioneers in Conestoga wagons seeking new homes in the fertile valleys west of the Susquehanna. Strasburg was one of the chief stopping places, containing at one time as many as three public houses. In 1753, the date of the erection of the church, Strasburg must have been a village of considerable size and importance. Yet we find the Lutherans organizing a congregation and erecting a church, not in the village where its convenience to the greater number of inhabitants was obvious, but one and one half miles to the southeast, off from the main highway and in the then backwoods. We ask, why was this site chosen?

The ridge of the Mine Hill was settled principally by Lutherans and German Reformed, who used the building in common for many years. These early German settlers had little means, were inclined to be clannish and adhered firmly to their native tongue. Strasburg was settled by peoples of different nationalities, artisans of various trades, who were inclined to barter. There was little social intercourse. The Palatines were mostly followers of Meno Simon, and having some means, settled on the better lands north of the Mine Hill. The tenets of the Mennonite faith were much more rigid than those of the Lutherans and forbade religious affiliation with other sects. This to a great extent precluded social intercourse and accounts for so much intermarrying among the early Mennonites. The feeling for race and creed

⁹ Ellis & Evans, page 1065.

¹⁰ Built by a Bowman on the site of the property owned at present by Mrs. Charles Keneagy.

was stronger in those days and kept the different peoples apart, as for instance the Quakers and Scotch-Irish Presbyterians of the southern end to a late date.

The little log structure¹¹ so well known for many years as the "Old Dutch Church" was erected on the farm now owned by John Banzhof. A diligent search among the deeds in the Recorder's office has failed to reveal the identity of the patentee of the land on which the church was built. Whether the trustees in erecting the building just squatted on the land, or obtained permission, or secured title thereto, has not been definitely ascertained up to this date.

The original tract of land granted to the Lutherans for church and burial purposes contained about one acre. The farm passed into the possession of John Eshleman, whose heirs sold it to Hervey Brackbill in 1851. From a recitation in the deed¹² we learn that it included "one acre at the northeast corner whereon is a burying ground which in title to the said John Eshelman (Deceased) the same was included but a reserve made for burying and other purposes."

Until 1795 or 1796, the property was either owned jointly by the Lutheran and German Reformed congregations, or else it was used in common. Having disagreed about some matter they separated, the Lutherans retaining possession, while the Reformed congregation built a church of their own at New Providence¹³ in 1796.

The "Old Dutch Church" was still standing about fifty years ago.¹⁴ During the early part of the 19th century it was converted into a schoolhouse. Jacob Pfautz taught school in it from 1812 to 1815. All vestiges of the old log building have long since disappeared, even the greater part of the old graveyard has been plowed over. The few tombstones lying scattered in a wilderness of weeds are all that is left to remind the historian that at this place stood the first Lutheran Church in Strasburg township, and in its old neglected graveyard lie the mortal remains of Stoutzenbergers, Schmidts and Warfels, peace to their ashes.

The site of the old church did not seem to be the permanent home for the congregation, for by deed¹⁵ dated February 7, 1760, Edward Dougherty, of Cecil county, Maryland, in consideration of five shillings paid by Frederick Klyng and Jacob Pfautz gave the parcel of land containing one acre "in trust to and for the only proper Use, Benefit and Behoof of the Lutheran Congregation in the said village and township of Strasburg to be forever hereafter made use of by them for a churchyard and Burial Place."

Thus it will be seen that the Lutherans used this new burial ground in

¹¹ Also called Stoutzenberger's Church, owing perhaps, to the number of persons bearing that name in the adjacent graveyard.

¹² Book Y, vol. 7, page 26.

¹³ Was there not a Lutheran church or at least an organized congregation of Lutherans located in or near New Providence prior to 1796, since the Rev. Mr. Handschuh and others repeatedly make the distance from Lancaster to the "Old Dutch Church 14" miles? It is only 10 miles.

¹⁴ Senator John G. Homsher says it was still standing when he was a boy.

¹⁵ Book V, vol. 3, page 364.

the village of Strasburg, tho they continued to worship in the "Old Dutch Church" for nearly fifty years longer. It is evident that they looked forward to the removal of their house of worship to the village of Strasburg at an early date.

In 1821, the Rev. Dr. Endress noted on the first page of one of Trinity's records¹⁶ that at the time he made the entry, the Strasburg congregation was connected with that of old Trinity, Lancaster, or at least considered a part of its organization. The Rev. J. W. Early tells us that this statement must be somewhat qualified, as the Strasburg congregation was served by pastors living at New Holland as early as 1790, if not prior to that time. The Strasburg congregation was evidently served by the Rev. John Siegfried Gerock during the time of his ministry in Trinity Church, Lancaster, from March, 1753, until March, 1767. Whether it was also served by the clergy who officiated in Trinity during the vacancy from 1767 to 1769 cannot be ascertained. The Rev. Henry Melchoir Muhlenberg superintended the supply of Trinity and it is probable that he and the Rev. Christian Emanuel Schultze, who also preached during that time, ministered to the Strasburg congregation.

As no baptisms are recorded between 1756 and 1775, and as there is no record of communicants before 1780, we cannot state positively that the Rev. J. H. C. Helmuth served the Strasburg congregation during his entire ministry at Trinity or not. But it is certain that he served it during the first part of his pastorate. As the register was resumed in 1775, this would indicate a change of pastors about this time. The Rev. William Kurtz served the congregation with occasional services from 1763 to 1775, and regularly from 1775 to 1779. He moved to Lebanon¹⁷ in 1780.

In one of the old records of Trinity Church, the Rev. Gotthilf Henry Ernest Muhlenberg states that he himself occasionally ministered to and superintended the supply of the Strasburg congregation from 1780 to 1785.

The Strasburg congregation asked Synod in 1783 for permission to employ the clergyman then serving at New Holland. Since all the baptisms, as well as the lists of communicants from the close of 1786 until 1789 are evidently recorded by the same hand, it is altogether probable that the Rev. Frederick Valentine Melsheimer, who took charge of the New Holland congregation in May, 1786, served at Strasburg during this time. The Rev. Mr. Melsheimer was undoubtedly the most scholarly ministrant the Strasburg church ever employed. He established the first public school on New Holland, and was made Professor of Languages in Franklin College in 1787. He came to this country during the Revolution as the chaplain of a German regiment.¹⁸ He was the earliest local investigating entomologist.

On the 13th of June 1790, the Rev. Henry Moeller, who had been the chaplain of a German regiment under Washington during the Revolutionary

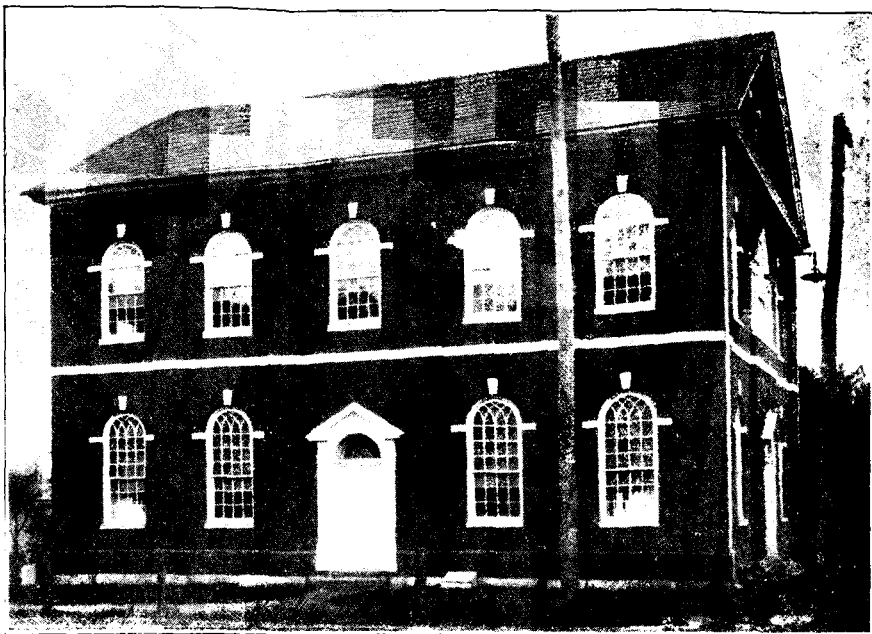
¹⁶ Memorial Volume of the Evangelical Church of the Holy Trinity, page 86.

¹⁷ Schmauk, page 282.

¹⁸ Schmauk, page 391.

war, became the pastor of the Strasburg Church, and served the congregation until about the close of 1794. He resided at New Holland.¹⁹

His successor was a candidate named Peter Bentz,²⁰ who assumed the pastorate in the autumn of 1795, and ended his ministry in the fall of 1801. He remained on the list of licentiates during the entire time he served in Strasburg. A part of the time he resided in Mount Joy and during the remainder in Cocalico. He died in 1802.



ST. MICHAEL'S EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH,
STRASBURG, PA.

In September, 1798, the Rev. John Plitt, of Chambersburg, was called to the pastorate of the New Holland Church, and during the latter part of 1803, he added Strasburg to his charge. His pastorate in the latter congregation terminated in March, 1812, being the longest since that of the Rev. J. S. Gerock.

The old log structure becoming dilapidated, the congregation with the aid of the people in the community built the present brick church in the

¹⁹ Rev. Moeller confirmed a class of 23 catechumens in 1791, and 15 more in the spring of 1794, yet the permanent increase of the congregation seems not to have been very great. The communicants numbered 30 in 1791 and 45 when he left.

²⁰ Frequently spelled "Penns" by some of Synod's secretaries.

village of Strasburg. The cornerstone was laid on August 25, 1806. The ministers present were: Rev. G. H. E. Muhlenberg, D.D., noted botanist and pastor of Trinity, Lancaster; Rev. Dr. Clarkson, rector of St. James' Episcopal, Lancaster, and the Rev. John Plitt. The building was not completed until ten years later. At the dedication of the church on August 15, 1816, the following clergy were present: Rev. Dr. Endress, pastor of Trinity; Rev. J. H. Hoffmeier, pastor of the German Reformed Church in Lancaster; Rev. Dr. Sample, pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Strasburg, and the Rev. John Jacob Strein, pastor of St. Michael's.

Whether it was the burden of church building or not that stood in the way cannot now be determined, but the fact remains that the congregation seems not to have increased during this period. The pastoral relations of the Rev. John Plitt were severed in March, 1813.

The Rev. Peter Filbert became pastor of the New Holland Church in 1814, but whether he also assumed charge of St. Michael's cannot be ascertained at this time. His pastorate was brief, if he served St. Michael's at all, for he remained but a short while at New Holland.

St. Michael's Church, Strasburg, in common with the other organizations of its day resorted to the means then in vogue of raising money—a public lottery. An advertisement of the Church at Strasburg announcing a lottery to defray the expenses incurred by the trustees first appeared in the Lancaster Journal on April 24, 1807. Prizes ranging from 20 up to 2000 dollars were offered. The advertisement appeared weekly for nearly two years without any apparent results. This induced the managers of the lottery to alter their scheme so as to require less money for the purchase of tickets. The new plan was submitted to the governor and his approval was obtained on December 7, 1808. The advertisement setting forth the new scheme appeared in the Journal on June 27, 1809, and was inserted regularly for some time. On March 10, 1810, the managers notified the public that the drawing of the lottery had commenced. If it actually had, as stated, it took a long time, for the lucky numbers were not published until June 3, 1816.

Unfortunately no record exists of the expenses incurred in the erection of the Church. It is also impossible to state how much money was raised by this lottery, there being but one entry on the old register acknowledging the receipt of 82 dollars from the venture. It does not seem to have been very successful. But thru it the congregation became involved in a lawsuit and were required to pay one Peter Fagent a claim of 500 dollars and the costs.

The Rev. Dr. Endress in 1815 wrote in the Trinity Church²¹ record: "The congregation at Strasburg which formerly communed with that at Lancaster has for some time been engaged in building a church, and it is now finished. They make application to the Lancaster pastor for his services, but he cannot well undertake it, and he therefore directs them to apply to Candidate Strein."

In 1816, the congregation petitioned Synod to permit the Rev. John Jacob Strein, then a candidate living at Elizabethtown, to serve them. He at once assumed charge of St. Michael's, remaining in residence at Elizabethtown

until 1820. He then moved to Columbia where he resided until 1840, when he moved to Lancaster. He continued to preach German exclusively until he ended his pastoral relations in 1865. His was the longest pastorate in the history of the church, tho there was no great increase in the congregation.

Until 1897, St. Michael's had always been served by ministers who lived at a distance, either at Lancaster, New Holland, Elizabethtown or Millersville. The German language was used exclusively from the time of its humble beginnings until 1860, when English was introduced. The two languages were then used alternately until 1896, when the German was discontinued.

The Methodists and Presbyterians were given permission to use the building on condition that their meetings would not interfere with the Lutheran services. The noise made by the Methodists²² at the time of their revivals was so annoying that the Lutheran council adopted a resolution, which it seems to have cancelled immediately, prohibiting the other denominations from using the building. Eventually the Methodists secured other quarters and the Presbyterians erected a meeting house of their own.

Until 1819, St. Michael's had been served by pastors of the New Holland Church for about thirty years, but it was still looked upon as a branch or mission church having a quasi relation to Trinity, Lancaster.

An application for a charter was made on December 30, 1816, and the following names appear on the instrument:

" Minister of the Gospel.

" John Jacob Strein

" Trustees.

" Peter Zegenheim

" Jacob Shindel, Sr.

" John Holl

" Jacob Miller

" Michael Rine

" Members of the Congregation.

" Michael Withers

" Leonard Kesselr

" Jacob Rockey

" Andrew Zimmerman

" John Holl, Jun.

" Peter Holl, Jun.

" Samuel Holl

" Peter Holl, Senr.

" Peter Pintler

" Heinrich Aument

" Daniel Boeshor

" George Kessler "

The charter,²³ written on a large heavy piece of parchment, was secured on March 27, 1817, and is signed by Amos Ellmaker, Attorney General of Pennsylvania. Simon Snyder, then governor, issued an order with his autograph and the seal of the state attached for enrollment on the 6th day of June, 1817.

Altho St. Michael's had evidently owned a house of worship since 1753, it did not adopt a constitution of its own until December 8, 1822.

Dr. Schmauk, in referring to the laying of the cornerstone of St. Michael's Lutheran Church, Strasburg, states that heretofore the Lutherans at this place

²² Ellis & Evans, page 659.

²³ Book K, vol. 9, page 637.

were members of the Lancaster (Trinity) Church.²⁴ This is incorrect. The facts are these: Prior to 1780, no record of communicants appears on the register of St. Michael's congregation. It is assumed that the church lacked the proper vessels for a reverent celebration of the sacrament. Descendants of the early settlers relate that their ancestors drove to Lancaster for the quarterly communion, tho they were members of St. Michael's. About this time (1780) the church purchased the beautiful pewter communion and baptismal services, in excellent condition today and still used by the congregation.

In 1819, Michael Withers, Sr., presented the church with a pipe organ. The instrument was made in his farmhouse in Lime Valley. It was used continuously for nearly a century, and has only recently been sold. A pair of "jingle socks," presumably a century old, were until a late date used to collect the offering. In 1897, Trinity Church, Lancaster, presented St. Michael's with two old walnut chairs for use in the chancel and an oil painting by Leon von Osko entitled: "The Incarnation." These have recently been disposed of.²⁵



OLD ST. MICHAEL'S COMMUNION SERVICE.

St. Michael's Church building is a type of architecture known as Romanesque. The name of the builder is buried in obscurity. Tradition says that the Rev. G. H. E. Muhlenberg was the architect. If this be so, he possibly intended it to be a reproduction of Trinity Church on a somewhat smaller scale. A close examination shows that it followed the same general lines of the Lancaster Church both as to exterior and interior before Trinity was renovated. A large brick steeple had been erected at the east end of the

²⁴ Schmauk, page 350.

²⁵ The painting was purchased by the DuPonts.

church, but when it had reached a few feet above the roof of the nave, the funds became exhausted and it was never completed. This tower was rather imposing in appearance, and contained arched windows, which, architecturally, corresponded with those of the main building. About the year 1835, the church council, in default of financial resources, determined to tear down the tower, sell the bricks and liquidate the claim. This was done subsequently, and an ell was built to the house in which Dr. Tinney now lives. This building was used for many years and known as the Strasburg Academy. When the school closed its doors years later, the ell was torn down and the bricks were used to erect the dwelling in which Mrs. Hess now lives.

Some have expressed the opinion that the cornerstone was built into the old steeple, but they have not been able to confirm this. A search for it in the present building has proven unsuccessful. Thus far no person has been found who remembers having seen the cornerstone. The private journal of the Rev. G. H. E. Muhlenberg contains the declaration that was deposited in it. Were we able to locate this journal it might throw some light on the subject, but it, too, has disappeared.

The following is a list of pastors who have served St. Michael's congregation from its inception to the present day:

- Before 1748. Rev. John Casper Stoever.
- 1748-1751. Rev. John F. Handschuh.
- 1751-1754. Rev. Johann Gottlieb Engelland.
Rev. Tobias Wagner.
- 1754-1767. Rev. John Siegfried Gerock.
- 1767-1769. Rev. Henry Melchoir Muhlenberg.
Rev. Christian Emanuel Schultze.
- 1769-1775. Rev. J. H. C. Helmuth.
- 1775-1779. Rev. William Kurtz.
- 1780-1785. Rev. Gotthielf Henry Ernest Muhlenberg.
- 1786-1789. Rev. Frederic Valentine Melsheimer.
- 1790-1794. Rev. Henry Moeller.
- 1795-1801. Rev. Peter Bentz.
- 1803-1812. Rev. John Plitt.
- 1812-1816. Rev. Peter Filbert (possibly vacant part of time).
- 1816-1865. Rev. John Jacob Strein.
- 1860-1865. Rev. J. W. Early (English only).
- 1865-1866. " " " " (both languages).
- 1866-1872. Rev. H. H. Bruning, D.D.
- 1872-1874. Vacant.
- 1875-1879. Rev. S. R. Boyer.
- 1879-1880. Rev. E. L. Reed.
- 1880-1885. Rev. A. B. Markley, Ph.D.
- 1885-1886. Rev. E. H. Schmoll.
- 1887-1888. Rev. J. W. Early.
- 1889-1896. Rev. W. C. Lauer.
- 1897-1912. Rev. G. W. McClanahan.
- 1912-1916. Rev. Samuel A. Ziegenfuss.
- 1916-..... Rev. W. R. Knerr.

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