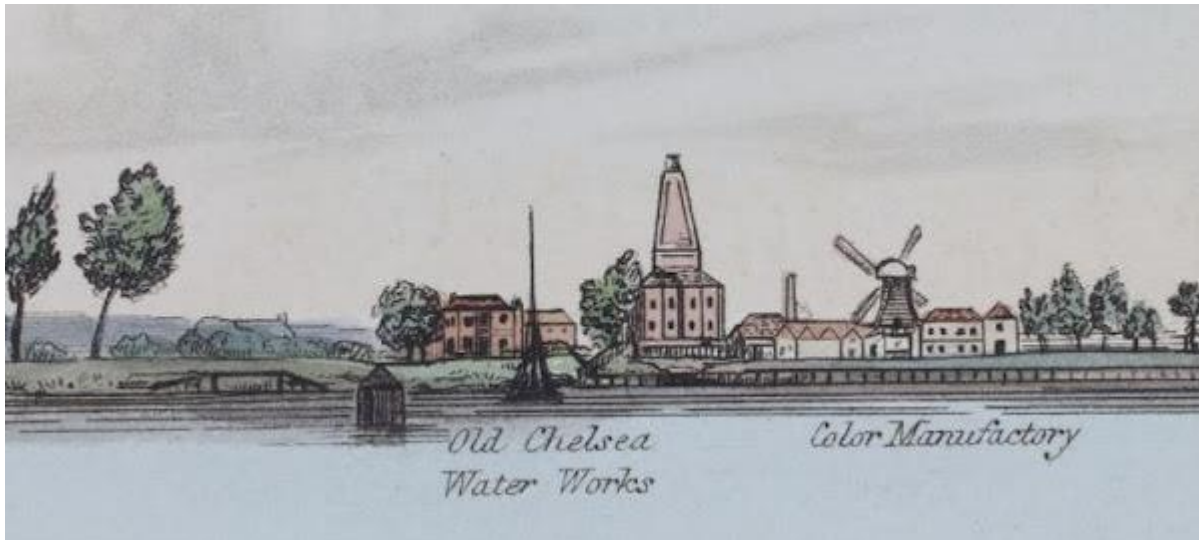


## **The 1820 Settler Party which should not have left for the Cape Colony and the man who was mistakenly allowed to lead the Party**

Most accounts agree that the putative pyramid builder Thomas Willson was born circa 1780. For most of his life he seemed slightly unsure of his age, giving numbers that, worked backwards, give possible dates of birth sometime between 1779 and 1785. His place of birth is likewise uncertain, on the 1861 census he says is from Fulham, but in 1819 he told the colonial office it was Chelsea. We don't know the name of his parents or their station in life or indeed anything else about his family background or his childhood. The first documented fact we have about him is that he won the Royal Academy Gold Medal for Architecture in 1801 for a projected National Museum for Painting and Sculpture. It seems reasonable to assume from this that he attended the Royal Academy as a student and he certainly continued to exhibit there; in 1804 it was a 'Design for an entrance front to the Bank of Ireland from Foster Place, Dublin'. We know he married Mary Ann Ince on 13 August 1808 at St Botolph Aldgate; according to the register he was a resident of the parish. The couple went on to have four children; Percy, who was born in 1809, Mary Ann in 1811, Douglas in 1813 and Thomas in 1815. By his own account the young husband and father worked as an architect and land surveyor in the Horse Guards office of the commander in chief of the British Army, the Duke of York and Albany, Prince Frederick (the second son of George III) but by 1819 he may have been out of work as Britain stepped down from being on a more or less permanent war footing with the French.

After the defeat of Napoleon and the demobilisation of thousands of military personnel, unemployment and political unrest became a serious problem in Britain. One of the proposed solutions was to encourage emigration to the colonies and in 1819 Parliament allocated £50,000 pounds to the establishment of a colony on the Eastern Section of the Cape of Good Hope. A plan was circulated offering potential settlers one hundred acres of free land in South Africa plus free passage and food whilst on the ship though a £10 deposit was also required "to provide security for any advances which the Cape Government might be compelled to make for protecting the settlers against starvation". The Government encouraged the formation of settler parties, the deposit to be collected by the party leader but paid over to the colonial authorities. A presumably unemployed and desperate Thomas Willson was one of the people attracted by the idea of leading a settler party to South Africa. On the 19th July 1819 from the family home of Bridge Cottage, Chelsea Water Works, he wrote to his old superior Henry, Lord Bathurst, the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, soliciting employment in Cape Colony; "As your Lordship on a former occasion did me the honor to express a desire to serve me, having devoted the early years of my Life under Government, and possessing Testimonials highly honourable to my Character and professional fame and presuming upon the means of taking out 100 families to the Cape of Good Hope, may I in such a case be distinguished with an appointment as Colonial Secretary, Surveyor or any other respectable office in your Lordships gift or recommendation?" No offer of employment was forthcoming however and in fact later on the Colonial Office sheepishly admitted that Willson's application to lead a party had been accepted in error and that they had actually meant to endorse a rival application from the similarly named Edward Webb Wilson who had

applied to emigrate with the influential backing of Sir John Kynaston Powell of Ellesmere, the member of Parliament for Shropshire.

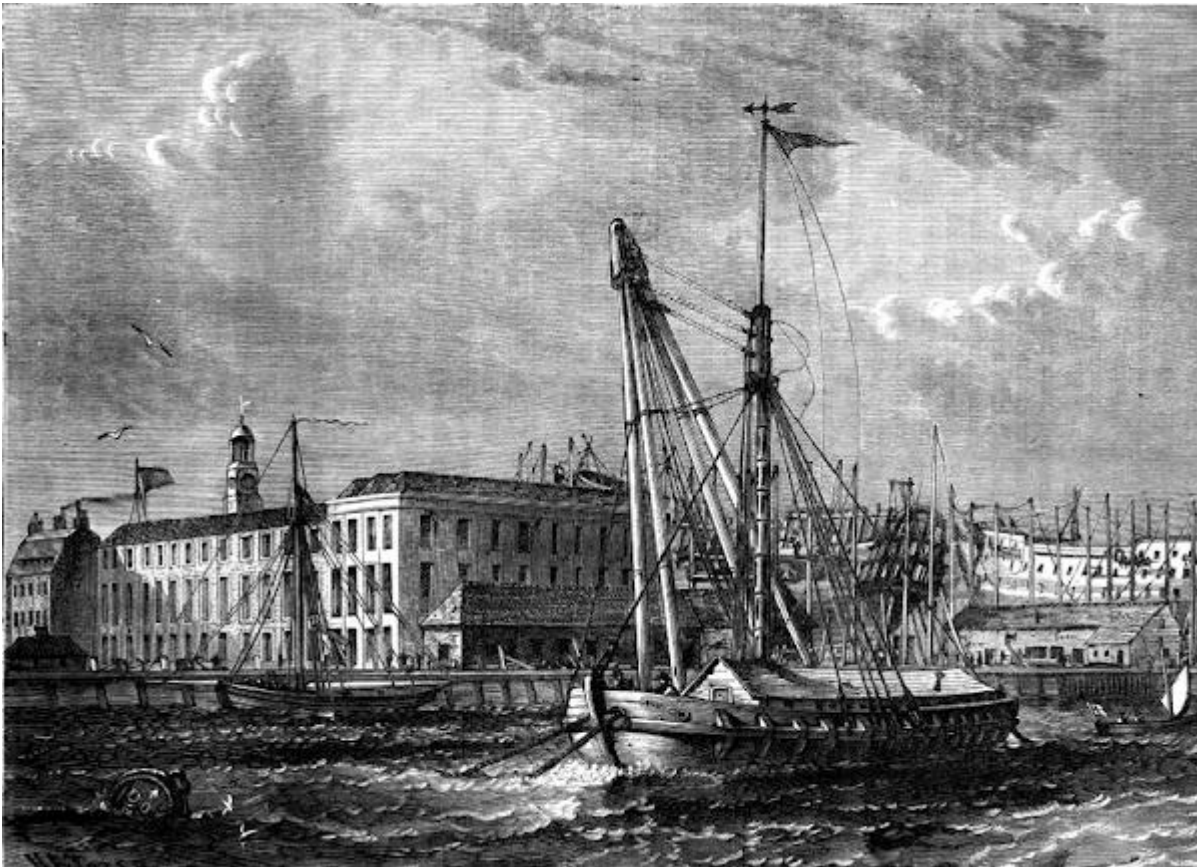


Old Chelsea Water Works from the Thames, 1829

Willson's party consisted of 307 persons, 102 able bodied men and their dependants. Jumping the gun somewhat Willson collected an initial £5 deposit from them before the Colonial Office confirmed the success of his application. He went to collect a further £10 from each of his settlers to pay the Government deposit, the initial £5 would be used, he said, to buy 'necessary stores'. He also decided to levy a 5% surcharge on the total amount paid by his charges as a personal fee for his efforts on their behalf. From the outset some of the potential colonists recruited by Willson were suspicious of his methods and his motives. A James Phillips of 3 Tann Street, Aldersgate, wrote to the Government wishing to confirm Willson's bona fides as "being desirous of avoiding the possibility of becoming a dupe to an artifice, I respectfully request to be informed if what he states is the fact, as the terms proposed by him are that £5 be paid the first week of the current month into his hands without any security for its proper appropriation, £5 in Oct & £5 the last week in the same month, which last sum is for the purchase of stores of him on landing at the colony."

From Chelsea Willson fired off a salvo of correspondence during July and August to Lord Bathurst trying to clarify various details relating to return of the settler's deposits once they were in South Africa. By October he issued a scheme for the governance of his party once they were settled in the Cape, his suggestion being that the ten individuals in the party with some pretensions to being gentlemen should form a 'Society', each contributing an equal amount of capital and five labourers, and constitute themselves a Committee of Management to oversee the building of houses and the cultivation of their land. In addition, he proposed that every ten settlers should select a director to represent them, who would assist Willson himself in 'the dispensation of benefits'. In the distribution of land to the members of his party he would be as generous as was consistent with 'the public good' and the preservation of his 'own individual rights as Lord of the Manor'. He was willing to give a written guarantee of his intention to grant land to any settler who was entitled to a share,

and who would 'pay a stipulated sum towards a Fund of Indemnity' intended to go into his own pocket. This grandiose and rather confusing scheme aroused the resentment of his party and as a result never got off the ground.



Setting sail from Deptford, 1820

For some reason Willson left his 8-year-old daughter Mary Ann in England with relatives whilst the rest of the family, including his two youngest sons who were just 6 and 4, joined the rest of the emigrating party in Deptford in early January 1820. There they all boarded the Belle Alliance for the voyage to the Cape only to find themselves miserably stuck in the ice bound Thames for over a month waiting for the unusually fierce winter frost to thaw. The ship finally struggled to the Kent Coast and set sail from the Downs on 12 February taking just under 3 months to reach Table Bay on 2 May. Willson immediately wrote to Lord Bathurst to let him of the party's safe arrival:

We have made the passage (without accident) in eleven weeks from the Downs, and except in the cases of measles and small pox which was brought on board by some of the settlers' children, we have had excellent health, and it is my duty to say that in general the Settlers have not only stated themselves to be well satisfied but have expressed their gratitude for the excellent accommodation and provisions which were furnished for them by your Lordship's, direction, and I believe in so large and varied a party it would be difficult to select an instance wherein greater order has more generally prevailed, with the exception of two juvenile thieves who, for example sake, I have found it necessary to have

punished, but careful to avoid the character of severity on the passage, notwithstanding their repeated depredations, for the sake of example.



The 1820 settlers landing in Algoa Bay by Thomas Baines

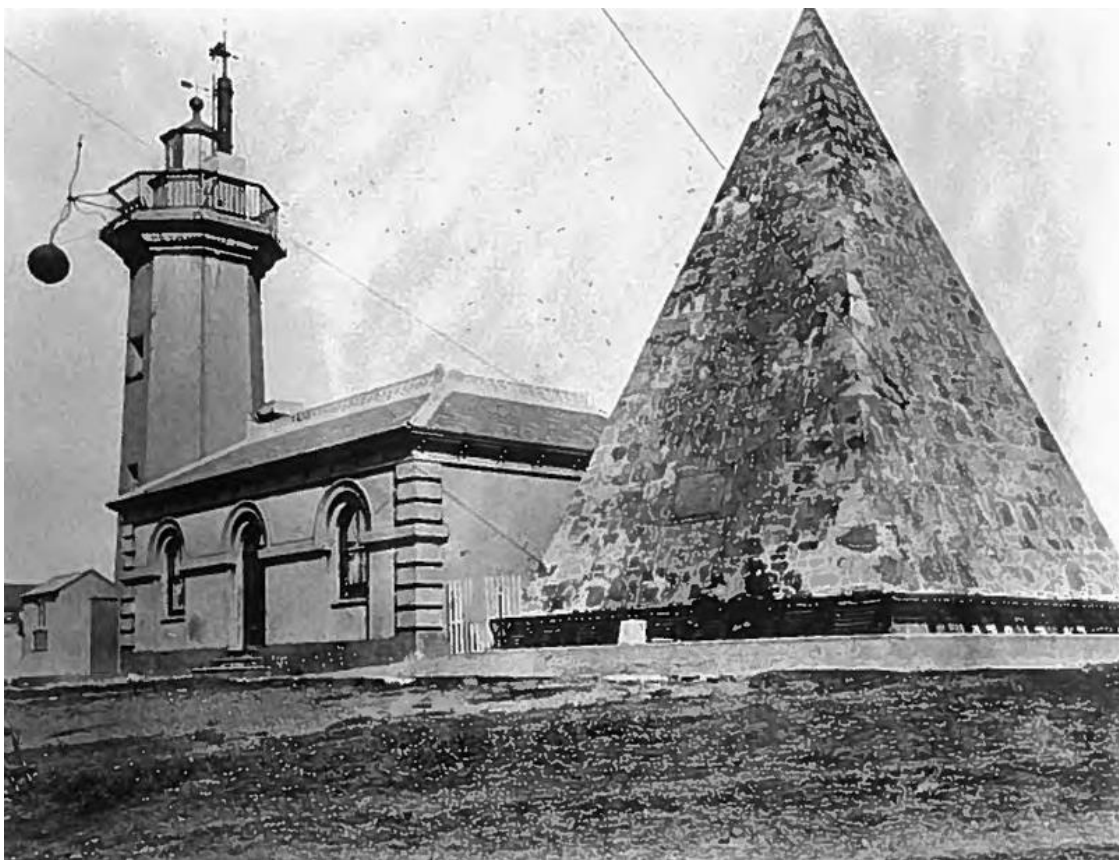
Very few migrants on government transports in the 19th century felt that they were excellently accommodated and provisioned. Willson's party may not have been as contented as he portrayed them to Lord Bathurst. Thomas Cock for one might have had something to say about the 'excellent health' apparently enjoyed by virtually everyone on board apart from his wife and three children, who all died during the passage. One of the settlers with pretensions to being a gentleman, a Mr Wilmot, may also have taken issue with the statement having lost one of his servants. Two of the excellently accommodated and provisioned settlers demanded to be put ashore at Simon's Town with their families and leave the party. On the final leg of the voyage to Algoa Bay Willson issued a circular to his party members demanding 'indemnification' for his efforts and expense on their behalf, claiming the sole right as 'Lord of the Manor' to hunt, fish and cut timber on the party's lands and to call on its members for labour. Almost the first thing the settlers did on disembarking at Algoa bay was to present a petition to Sir Rufane Donkin the acting governor of the colony asking him to intervene on their behalf with their leader. The governor called a meeting with Willson and his party and 'after explaining and exhorting, and deciding rather against Mr W', he believed that 'union was restored' and he despatched the squabbling settlers to their final destination on the Bush River.

Willson had ambitious plans for the new settlement. On the voyage out he had written to Lord Bathurst to explain his vision:

Taking all things into consideration it has occurred to me from the great influx of population in the district I am to inhabit, foreseeing that a number of Artificers and persons of mechanical genius who have entered themselves as farmers, will naturally fall

into their former occupations, and that additional towns and villages will most probably grow out of such a state of things, I have suggested a plan for a Town which can be systematically and progressively acted upon: to express its origin I have given it the name of Angloville, which name I have also inserted in my printed forms for sub-grants; it will in the beginning simply take the form of a square, which with your Lordship's permission, in token of my respect and from a grateful sense of duty, I must beg leave to call Bathurst Square, in the centre of which it is proposed when our funds will admit of the expense, to erect a Colossal Monument of our beloved Sovereign King George the fourth, and as other squares and streets occur in the design, His majesty's ministers will not be omitted in marking our gratitude for the present epoch of our lives, with the natural feeling and spirit we must ever have for our native and beloved Country.

Willson's dream of Angloville with its colossal monument to George IV in Bathurst Square never materialised. Within a few days of arriving at the place that would eventually come to be known as Beaufort Vale, a terrified Willson had abandoned his settlers and returned to Cape Town because the 'wretched minded classes' amongst them had threatened to put a bullet in his head. The cause of the discord, the non-return of the deposit money, was exacerbated by Willson's high handed manner and by misinformation spread by colony officials. The settlers had been told, incorrectly, that the deposit money had already been returned to Willson and assuming that he was trying to cheat them, furious party members threatened him and his family. In 1823, two years after his return to England, Willson wrote to Lord Bathurst outlining the events that led to him abandoning his charges:



The Donkin Memorial with the 1861 lighthouse in the background

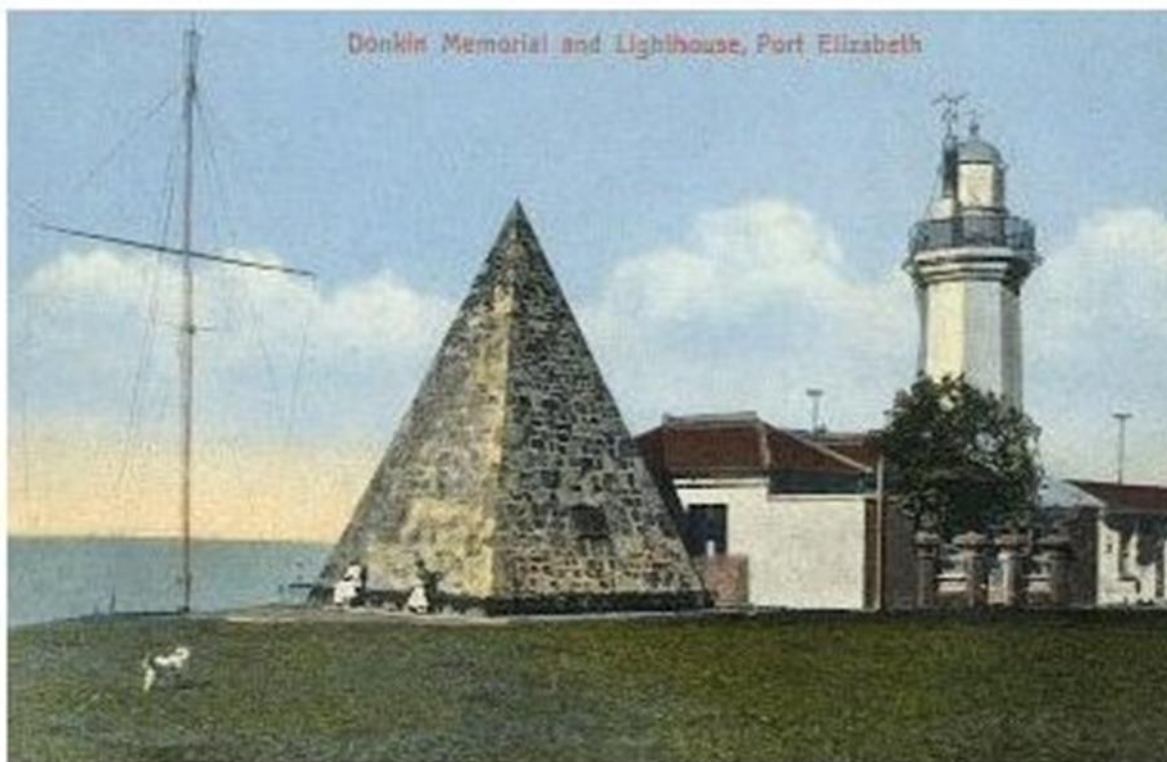
*I was to be reimbursed in Money on my arrival at the Cape! It was the money only that could afford me the means of protecting myself from the petty debts of numerous Individuals, whose chief aim was to incur debt, and to rob me: and the money was the only means of reimbursing myself for monies advanced, in anticipation of such repayment! This is a serious loss to me, my Lord, and a serious grievance entailed upon me by His Majesty's Government. And, from the blunders of the Irish Commandant at Algoa Bay, who insisted upon it, and assured the Settlers that I had received the whole of my Deposit money, my family were assailed with midnight violence, and I was threatened with Assassination! Nothing but clamour and discord followed, and I had afterwards to contend against no fewer than Twenty-five Actions at Law! which I have been informed since my return, that these several actions were secretly advised and supported at the expense of General Donkin! and proof has been tendered to me to establish it as a truth! My Lord, I can scarcely credit the possibility that the Honourable General could be guilty of such duplicity! which would be no less cruel and wicked than it proved altogether futile, unnecessary, and derogatory to the Abettors. What, my Lord, can compensate me for such unheard-of persecution? I was previously threatened by the rude Hibernian with ruin, nothing but my ruin could satisfy his lust of authority, he pursued me with still greater barbarity, at the very hour that my poor wife (whose education and family connexion ought to have been her protection, she is the only sister of Mrs. George Cowell of Fitzroy Square, a Lady who I believe is not unknown to your Lordship), when she, unhappily, was in a perilous state of life, and death, for 24 hours, at that critical time did this unfeeling Officer threaten, in braggart terms, to toss both me, and my baggage, into the waggons which he had planted before my door, and threatened to send us into the Interior under a Military Escort.*



Sir Rufane Donkin and his wife Elizabeth

Willson never returned to the settlement and his place as leader was taken by the party's clergyman William Boardman. For the next two years Willson and his family were stuck at the new settlement at Algoa Bay, arguing, by long distance correspondence, with the Colonial Office, for a grant of freehold land that he felt was his due as leader of a group of colonists. During this time the ramshackle harbour settlement started to grow in much the same way as Willson had once probably imagined the growth of Anglerville. The most

important figure in the colony was Sir Rufane Donkin, the Quarter Master General of the British Army and acting Governor at the Cape, veteran of the Peninsular War, where he had served under the Duke of Wellington, and of the campaign against the Mahrattas in India under Hastings. It was in India that Donkin suffered a devastating personal tragedy, the death of his young wife Elizabeth. Feeling unable to continue with his responsibilities as a senior officer in the army Donkin requested and was granted extended sick leave at the Cape. Whilst there he recuperated sufficiently to be given the relatively light duties of supervising the nascent East Cape colony. Although she was buried in India Donkin decided Cape colony was the right place to commemorate his dead wife, firstly by naming the new coastal settlement Port Elizabeth in her honour and secondly by commissioning the building of a prominent memorial to her on the summit of the hill that overlooked the town. Captain Moresby of the Royal Navy welcomed the building of the Donkin cenotaph, a 10-metre high “pyramid, about to be erected as a private memorial, half-a-mile to the South-East of Fort Frederick” as an aid to navigation that “will stand conspicuous to ships approaching the land.” The pyramid, built of local stone and bearing an inscription to “one of the most perfect of human beings who has given her name to the town below”, was declared a national monument in 1938. In her 1994 book *Port Elizabeth: A social chronicle to the end of 1945* Margaret Harradine mentions that “settler draughtsman Thomas Willson made drawings for a pyramid similar to that of Caius Cestius in Rome, and William Reed supplied the stone. The builders were soldiers from the Fort”.



The Donkin Memorial is Willson’s first recorded involvement with the design and construction of a pyramid. In fact, it is his only known involvement with a finished building. Interestingly the design was based on the classical Cestius pyramid in Rome which was exactly the model chosen for the Metropolitan Sepulchre. As we shall see Willson’s sojourn

in Africa had repercussions which lasted the rest of his life and he continued to refer to his adventure at the Cape as the source of the financial troubles that dogged him until the day he died. The only topic which seemed to obsess him more than Africa was the Pyramids and the proposal for the Metropolitan Sepulchre. But in his writings on the subject and the constant self-publicity about it he never once mentioned the fact that he had been previously involved in the construction of a pyramid in South Africa. If he had played a significant role in the designing of the memorial surely, he would have brought the subject up in later life? By the time Willson was making the proposal for the colossal pyramid on Primrose Hill Sir Rufane Donkin was also back in England, someone who would have known the true circumstances concerning the memorial overlooking Port Elizabeth. Perhaps Willson was, as Margaret Harradine says, purely the draughtsman but if so the production of the drawings were the seed which generated a lifelong obsession with the idea of pyramidal interment.

Posted by David Bingham

<https://thelondondead.blogspot.com/2018/02/the-man-who-would-be-cheops-part-2.html>