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# The Bicycle Boom and Women's Rights

## **Abstract**

The increasing popularity and widespread use of the bicycle in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries directly contributed to the movement for women's rights in the following decades. The sense of independence cycling afforded to women, as well as the opportunities for unification in defense of a cause that arose in light of controversies over the pursuit, were important in forming the foundation for later events.

## **Keywords**

Women's Rights, Bicycle, Transportation, Industry, Invention

## The Bicycle Boom and Women's Rights

By: Jenna Fleming

For approximately two decades during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, citizens of the United States remained captivated by a revolutionary and wildly popular innovation: the bicycle. Cycling offered opportunities for transportation, exercise, and social interactions, connecting Americans by providing them with a shared experience. The bicycle was particularly influential upon women, and as a result of its rapid rise in popularity, a nationwide conversation about gender roles and relations was ignited. Female riders, also known as “wheelwomen,” took initiative to refute criticisms of bicycle use within both the public and private spheres.<sup>1</sup> The organization and collaboration these women employed, along with the sense of unity they achieved, became a factor in the advancement of the movement for women's rights during the twentieth century.

Though early incarnations of the bicycle were first made available in North America during the 1860s, these primitive models failed to gain widespread use. Following a variety of improvements that increased the bicycle's safety and availability, growing enthusiasm for the sport emerged in the late 1880s.<sup>2</sup> While the bicycle was used extensively by Americans from approximately 1885 to 1905, it was during the 1890s that the machine enjoyed the height of its popularity. The terms “bicycle boom” and “cycling craze” are therefore most often used to refer to this decade, though a definition of the trend cannot be restricted to any such sharply defined period of time.<sup>3</sup> It is also important to note that different regions of the United States experienced peaks in the popularity of bicycling at different times; large urban centers like Boston and Philadelphia saw early appearances of the trend, while more time was necessary for its diffusion to rural areas.

The new form of transportation presented by the bicycle was accessible and attractive to both men and women of middle- to upper-class backgrounds. The extent to which the invention permeated American society can be seen through the frequency with which it was addressed in publications and popular culture of the time. Stories about cyclists could be found in many

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen Gruber Garvey, “Reframing the Bicycle: Advertising-Supported Magazines and Scorching Women,” *American Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (1995): 67.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Harmond, “Progress and Flight: An Interpretation of the American Cycle Craze of the 1890s,” *Journal of Social History* 5, no. 2 (Winter 1971-1972): 236.

<sup>3</sup> David V. Herlihy, *Bicycle: The History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 282.

widely-read publications, such as *Godey's Magazine* and *The Saturday Evening Post*, and songs that referenced the subject, like "Daisy Bell," became well-known. Depictions of the machine appeared in illustrations and advertisements, and some of the first celebrity athletes gained fame as a result of the sport.<sup>4</sup>

Statistics regarding nationwide bicycle use during the years of the boom are not widely available, but smaller-scale observations can be used to make inferences about general trends. In 1895, officials in Minneapolis, Minnesota, kept records of traffic patterns, which provide some insight into the prevalence of the bicycle in urban centers. Conducting a survey of traffic at the busy central intersection of Nicollet Avenue and Fifth Street, city engineers noted that "the average bicycle count on Nicollet Avenue in 1895 might have been around 4,000 per day – close to half of all traffic."<sup>5</sup> Though exact figures are not available, estimates of sales by the largest bicycle manufacturers suggest that by 1896, about four million Americans were participating in the pastime.<sup>6</sup> Clearly, cycling was a leisure activity enjoyed by many citizens, and it held a unique status as a one in which both men and women could partake. This possibility brought many criticisms of as well as diverse opportunities for female cyclists.

With the rapid increase in the popularity of cycling for women came objections from several sources concerned with preserving traditional gender roles. Victorian social ideals were widely accepted at the genesis of the bicycle boom in the late nineteenth century. Within this system, the sexes were relegated to distinct social spheres, with men occupying the public world of business and women confined to the private life within the home. Female independence was discouraged as popular culture portrayed women as sensitive, vulnerable, and submissive to authority. Conversely, bicycling involved young women spending a substantial amount of time outside of their homes, unsupervised by family members or other acceptable chaperones. Access to the vehicle allowed them the freedom to travel where, when, and with whom they chose.<sup>7</sup> It was feared that this increased sense of liberation would provide young women with the opportunity to be led into dangerous situations or make irresponsible choices, compromising their morals and jeopardizing their reputations.

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<sup>4</sup> Herlihy, *Bicycle*, 255.

<sup>5</sup> Ross D. Petty, "Bicycling in Minneapolis in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century," *Minnesota History* 62, no. 3 (2010): 88.

<sup>6</sup> Harmond, "Progress and Flight," 240.

<sup>7</sup> Garvey, "Reframing the Bicycle," 67.

The family was seen as the central unit of society during the Victorian era. Middle- and upper-class parents felt that it was important to find advantageous matches for their daughters in order to secure their stable and respectable futures. Because marriage and motherhood were the primary goals for young women, the distraction cycling posed from this prescribed path was often met with disapproval. As participation in the sport grew, a prevalent view arose that girls would become preoccupied with riding and the pursuit of adventure rather than focusing on the all-important work of finding a husband, building a home, and bearing and caring for children.<sup>8</sup>

Questions about the social propriety of bicycling and its impact upon traditional femininity were accompanied by medical concerns. Riding a bicycle requires a substantial physical effort, and towards the beginning of the boom this aspect of the hobby drew negative comments from medical professionals and untrained citizens alike. Many assumed that the female body was too delicate to endure intense labor, and it was believed that any use of the bicycle should be closely supervised to ensure that women did not exceed their own limits. Some doctors conceded that moderate usage could be beneficial to a patient in good health, “provided she does not over-exert herself while riding too long a time, or too fast, or up too steep hills,” as Dr. J. West Roosevelt wrote in an 1895 *Scribner’s Magazine* article.<sup>9</sup> Other physicians fully opposed their female patients’ use of the machine, warning that the shape of the seat could prove harmful to the female anatomy and even threaten women’s fertility.<sup>10</sup>

Medical warnings surrounding the bicycle were essentially an extension of social concerns about women. The necessity for close supervision of women’s cycling habits, frequently repeated by medical professionals of both sexes, came in response to the threat female freedom posed to conventional authority.<sup>11</sup> The prevailing social views of the time contributed to the expectation that women could not make decisions and judgments about their own health. Furthermore, the level of interest expressed in cycling’s impact on female reproductive abilities reflects perceptions of women’s roles. Because bicycling had the potential to prevent women from fulfilling their primary roles as wives and mothers, it was criticized as inappropriate and hazardous.

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<sup>8</sup> Garvey, “Reframing the Bicycle,” 74.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Sarah Hallenbeck, “Riding Out of Bounds: Women Bicyclists’ Embodied Medical Authority,” *Rhetoric Review* 29, no. 4 (2010): 327.

<sup>10</sup> Hallenbeck, “Riding Out of Bounds,” 331.

<sup>11</sup> Hallenbeck, “Riding Out of Bounds,” 335.

In addition to protestations from the general public and medical community, female cyclists combated opposition from church leaders. Protestant pastors of the late nineteenth century expressed fears that increased mobility offered by the bicycle would present women with opportunities to stray from the moral pattern they were expected to follow. Increased access to alcohol, greater privacy within courtships, and decreased church attendance were possible consequences of women's partaking in bicycling as a leisure activity.<sup>12</sup> However, these concerns were not always restricted to female riders, and church leaders questioned the decency of men's participation in the sport as well. The machine posed a threat to traditional gender roles by distracting both men and women from their designated duties in the professional and private sectors. For the Protestant church, the amusement also offered all citizens a dangerous alternative to spending time at the church or in contemplation of the Bible.<sup>13</sup> Religion therefore represented another form of opposition that female advocates for the bicycle would have to overcome in order to justify their pastime.

No one was more qualified to speak out against these challenges than wheelwomen themselves, and the frequency with which they did so is a testament to their affinity for and dedication to the sport. The advertising-supported popular magazine was a journalistic medium that experienced a surge in popularity in the period contemporary to the bicycle boom.<sup>14</sup> These magazines had a wide circulation and were issued frequently, and because the content often addressed relevant social issues, they presented a perfect platform for debating perceptions of the bicycle. Periodicals such as *Godey's Magazine* and *Harper's Bazaar* published articles by established female journalists as well as testimonials from riders who felt compelled to share their stories with other women.<sup>15</sup> Bicycling was a popular topic for articles in newspapers of major cities and small towns alike, and women expressed their views through composing their own pieces or writing letters to the editor.

Women of a more prominent social standing naturally had a greater ability to communicate their views on cycling. Many of the most well-known female activists of the time took advantage of their distinction to voice support for use of the bicycle. Women including

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Taylor, "Rapid Transit to Salvation: American Protestants and the Bicycle in the Era of the Cycling Craze," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 9, no. 3 (2010): 349.

<sup>13</sup> Harmond, "Progress and Flight," 245.

<sup>14</sup> Garvey, "Reframing the Bicycle," 82.

<sup>15</sup> Hallenbeck, "Riding Out of Bounds," 329.

Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Frances E. Willard published books and essays or delivered speeches on the subject. In addition to making use of these public forums, they addressed the topic in private writings such as letters. Through various forms of writing, women of differing social positions took responsibility for publicizing the merits of the bicycle and sharing their own experiences.

One of the primary goals of female bicycling advocates was to dispel misconceptions surrounding the exercise and its relationship to women's health. Myths about cycling were most often propagated by male doctors, and in many cases the women who wrote in opposition of the activity had never actually tried it for themselves.<sup>16</sup> Thus fears about loss of sexual purity and fertility through bicycle use and ideas about inherent female weaknesses were supported without any real evidence to the fact.

In response, wheelwomen with firsthand experience of cycling's beneficial aspects were eager to share their observations with others, taking to widely-circulated public magazines in order to do so. In 1896, a rider named Mary Bisland penned the article "A Woman's Cycle," published in *Munsey's Magazine*. Bisland vividly described the sensations experienced through physical activity, recalling that

At every turn of the rubber tires... fresh oxygen whips up the blood, and from crown to toe the sinews spring back and forth in obedience to new motions.... speed means accelerated circulation and a sense of mental buoyancy that purifies the brain.<sup>17</sup>

Many women followed this theme, depicting exercise as invigorating and maintaining that cycling actually increased their energy levels rather than sapping them, as doctors had so often warned. Mary Sargent Hopkins, a reporter for *Frank Leslie's Weekly* magazine, wrote in an 1899 article that thanks to the bicycle, "the languid and delicate woman, whose sensitive nerves were always on edge, has gone entirely out of fashion."<sup>18</sup> Using her own testimonial as well as endorsements from other women as evidence, Hopkins used her position as a journalist to challenge popular misconceptions. Engaging her readers and urging them to keep an open mind to the possibilities for better health presented by cycling, she asserted that "a change has

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<sup>16</sup> Hallenbeck, "Riding Out of Bounds," 327.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Hallenbeck, "Riding Out of Bounds," 335.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Hallenbeck, "Riding Out of Bounds," 337.

come to our women, and who shall say, as they gaze on their glowing faces and finely-developed figures, that it is not for the better?”<sup>19</sup>

Women whose audiences were of a smaller scale nevertheless took it upon themselves to advocate for cycling as well. The case of Jessie McQueen serves as an example of this grassroots movement, and her circumstances illustrate the scope of the bicycle’s influence. McQueen was a young, unmarried teacher from eastern Canada who had moved to the western province of British Columbia in pursuit of a job at a newly established school.<sup>20</sup> Though she was under the supervision of school board members, McQueen’s independence offered her numerous opportunities, and some of her activities, including cycling, incited concern from her parents. In an 1899 letter she addressed their fears, writing, “Don’t be afraid about me & my wheel, mother. I’ll never be a reckless rider – have only had it out once as yet, but I see dozens of them about town now – the streets are improved so much.”<sup>21</sup> In citing the popularity and approval of the machine in the more liberal Canadian frontier, McQueen attempted to change her mother’s view of the bicycle.

Following the pattern set by other female writers, she used her own experiences to combat unfounded medical concerns: “After dinner I thought I’d try my wheel for exercise to warm me up. By the time I had dragged it up two hills I was some warmer, but I didn’t ride very long.... But it did me good – set my blood a-moving.”<sup>22</sup> Simply by acknowledging her own limits in regards to exercise, Jessie McQueen disproved the claims of many physicians that women were unable or unfit to participate in this physical activity.

While female writers were outspoken on many aspects of bicycle culture, perhaps the most prominent of these was their fondness for the freedom of transportation riding offered. A certain level of caution was required in expressing these views due to the prevailing social environment, which supported traditional Christian values and prescribed gender roles. Still, women were enthusiastic in communicating the kind of liberation provided by the bicycle, which they were quick to qualify was still appropriate and beneficial. In her autobiographical work *How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle*, Frances Willard insisted:

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Hallenbeck, “Riding Out of Bounds,” 337.

<sup>20</sup> Jean Barman, Jessie McQueen, and Annie McQueen, *Sojourning Sisters: The Lives and Letters of Jessie and Annie McQueen* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004; EBSCOhost eBook Academic Subscription Collection): 35.

<sup>21</sup> Barman, *Sojourning Sisters*, 197.

<sup>22</sup> Barman, *Sojourning Sisters*, 197.

I always felt a strong attraction toward the bicycle, because it is the vehicle of so much harmless pleasure, and because the skill required in handling it obliges those who mount to keep clear heads and steady hands. Nor could I see a reason in the world why a woman should not ride the silent steed so swift and blithesome.<sup>23</sup>

Willard's status as president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union gave her authority to speak on this subject. An endorsement of bicycling from one so closely involved with the promotion of prohibition of alcohol, religious ideals, and public health initiatives would be respected by many. Additionally, Frances Willard was one of the first wheelwomen to draw connections between the pastime and the contemporary, burgeoning movement for increased women's rights. In her eyes, the two social developments could and should be adopted jointly: "She who succeeds in gaining the mastery of the bicycle will gain the mastery of life, and by exactly the same methods and characteristics."<sup>24</sup>

Other prominent women's rights activists of the time adopted a similar approach, and the bicycle itself, as well as the habits and practices of the women who rode it, came to represent liberal views of gender roles and relations. In an 1889 speech addressing the members of a women's social organization, noted political advocate and bicycle proponent Elizabeth Cady Stanton referenced the invention's positive and powerful impact on those who used it, saying, "Our women who ride on the bicycle have thrown the petticoat aside and appear in tights."<sup>25</sup> Citing this new equality of dress, she claimed that it would not be impossible for women to achieve an improved social situation comparable to that of men. She continued, "I believe that men and women are created equally.... It is necessary that the influence of both men and women should be felt in the government.... I do not mean that men and women are just alike, the fact that they are not alike makes it all the more important that each should be represented."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Frances E. Willard, *How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle: Reflections of an Influential 19<sup>th</sup> Century Woman*, ed. Carol O'Hare, introduction Edith Mayo (Sunnyvale, CA:Fair Oaks Publishing, 1991), 18 - 19.

<sup>24</sup> Frances E. Willard, *Let Something Good Be Said: Speeches and Writings of Frances E. Willard*, eds. Carolyn De Swarte Gifford and Amy R. Slaggell (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 208.

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, *The Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, Volume 5: Their Place Inside the Body-Politic 1887 to 1895*, ed. Ann D. Gordon (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009; ProQuest ebrary): 206 - 207.

<sup>26</sup> Stanton, *The Selected Papers Volume 5*, 207.

Many female authors were keen to depict the bicycle as a moralizing agent. Wheelwomen justified their devotion to the hobby by communicating views of the machine as a method of learning discipline. In sharing their stories, bicycling advocates including Frances Willard were unafraid to acknowledge the difficulties they faced in learning the mechanics of riding. In *How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle*, Willard described the process itself, which she undertook at the age of fifty-three. She recalled that upon starting out, she required the assistance of three young men simply to stay upright on her “wheel.”<sup>27</sup> However, with proper instruction and perseverance, “I finally concluded that all failure was from a wobbling will rather than a wobbling wheel.”<sup>28</sup> Female proponents of cycling made an effort to dispel previously held ideas about the bicycle through connecting its use to conventional values like determination and teamwork.

Partaking in the cycling craze afforded women a sense of community they would have been unable to find nearly anywhere else. Women of different ages were able to ride together and even had the opportunity to join cycling clubs, no doubt fostering friendships over a shared interest in the sport.<sup>29</sup> Willard spoke of connections she was able to make with other women as a result of her interest in bicycling, remembering “when I grew somewhat discouraged and said that I had made no progress for a day or two, my teacher told me that it was just so when she learned.”<sup>30</sup>

The largely cooperative effort through which greater approval of bicycling was achieved served as a basis for further movements towards women’s rights during the twentieth century. The first of these was the effort for dress reform, which was directly inspired by the bicycle boom. An 1895 article published in the *Illinois State Journal* describes “How the Unique Club Disciplined Two Members Who Appeared in Skirts.”<sup>31</sup> The association of female riders, based in Chicago, was made up of about fifty women dedicated to the pursuit of riding and insistent upon the need for a practical style of dress for female bicyclists. Following the refusal of two club members to follow this second stipulation, “The president and the captain held a consultation, and then, taking several strong armed members with them, fell on the skirt wearers

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<sup>27</sup> Willard, *How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle*, 28.

<sup>28</sup> Willard, *How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle*, 31 – 32.

<sup>29</sup> Taylor, “Rapid Transit to Salvation,” 352.

<sup>30</sup> Willard, *How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle*, 37.

<sup>31</sup> “Bloomers and Bloomer Etiquette,” *Illinois State Journal*, July 15, 1895, quoted in *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society (1908 – 1984)* 34, no. 3 (Sep. 1941): 378.

and stripped them down to their bloomers.”<sup>32</sup> Certainly this type of reaction was not a typical occurrence during the cycling craze era, but the example serves to illustrate the fierceness with which some supporters of dress reform were willing to defend their beliefs.

With the advent of the bicycle’s popularity in the late 1880s came the first calls for a more appropriate method of outfitting female riders. Most women found it difficult or impossible to ride in their everyday clothing, which typically included restrictive corsets and cumbersome full skirts.<sup>33</sup> It was difficult enough for many women unexperienced in physical activity to learn how to ride a bicycle, and their obstructive clothing was just another complication of the already challenging process. Due in large part to the agency and independence that cycling afforded women, riders took it upon themselves to invent alternative costumes to wear while participating in their sport.<sup>34</sup> The proposed garments most often included a less constricting bodice paired with a shorter skirt and some version of trousers. This last component was the most radical, as American women had at no time in the past suggested the regular, intentional adoption of a garment reserved entirely for men.<sup>35</sup> Although the forms of pants worn by female cyclists were usually heavily modified from those worn by men, the move nevertheless incited an outcry from conservatives unable to conceive of the concept.

Despite the objections they faced, wheelwomen continued to take a practical approach to the issue. When confronted with accusations that their riding costumes would make them unfeminine or encourage sexual deviance, they responded by citing the necessity for dress reform to ensure their own safety. Willard addressed the issue sensibly, noting towards the end of *How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle*:

It is needless to say that a bicycling costume was a prerequisite. This consisted of a skirt and blouse of tweed, with belt, rolling collar, and loose cravat, the skirt three inches from the ground; a round straw hat, and walking shoes with gaiters. It was a simple, modest suit, to which no person of common sense could take exception.<sup>36</sup>

Willard’s practical view of her riding outfit, as well as the evident efficiency of the garment itself, would serve to assuage readers’ fears about dress reform. Though bloomers,

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<sup>32</sup> “Bloomers and Bloomer Etiquette,” 378.

<sup>33</sup> Gayle V. Fischer, “‘Pantalets’ and ‘Turkish Trowsers’: Designing Freedom in the Mid Nineteenth-Century United States,” *Feminist Studies* 23, no. 1 (1997): 111.

<sup>34</sup> *Monro* 617.

<sup>35</sup> Fischer, “‘Pantalets’ and ‘Turkish Trowsers,’” 114.

<sup>36</sup> Willard, *How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle*, 75.

pantaloon, and other variations on female trousers were supposedly masculinizing and inappropriate, testimonials like the one included in *How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle* demonstrated their necessity.

It must be recognized that all female riders did not blindly support any and all efforts at dress reform. Some women took it upon themselves to police the movement even as they remained involved in it, discouraging their fellow activists from straying too far from social conventions in order to retain popular approval. An 1895 article published in the *Illinois State Journal* provided a list of “Don’ts for Women Riders,” which outlined rules for cycling etiquette and costuming practices.<sup>37</sup> Some of these pieces of advice were sensible and could be beneficial, such as “Don’t wear clothes that don’t fit,” and “Don’t overdo things. Let cycling be a recreation, not a labor.”<sup>38</sup> However, the majority focused on the need for moderation in unconventional behaviors related to cycling, warning “Don’t wear a man’s cap,” “Don’t go to church in your bicycle costume,” “Don’t discuss bloomers with every man you know,” and “Don’t use bicycle slang. Leave that to the boys.”<sup>39</sup> Clearly, not all women felt that an immediate change could be effected when it came to dress reform; the call for gradualism in shifting from conventions was not only present but also vocal.

While the connection between the cycling craze and the movement for dress reform seems natural, some scholars argue that the campaign for improvements to women’s clothing would have taken place regardless of the sport’s popularity. An article published in *The Ladies’ Home Journal* of the 1880s quotes Amelia Bloomer, perhaps the most well-known name connected to the effort for dress reform. She traces the origin of adult women adapting the traditional child’s garment of pantaloons for their own use to the year 1851, attributing responsibility for the idea to a friend.<sup>40</sup> Regardless of the association between the two movements, it cannot be denied that the rise of the bicycle during the final decade of the nineteenth century helped to further the subsequent popularity of the dress reform movement. Whether they rode bicycles or not, women like Elizabeth Smith Miller recognized the need for an improved outfit adapted to their changing needs. In 1892 she listed the benefits as well as the

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<sup>37</sup> “Don’ts For Women Riders,” *Illinois State Journal*, July 15, 1895, quoted in *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society (1908 – 1984)* 34, no. 3 (Sep. 1941): 378.

<sup>38</sup> “Don’ts For Women Riders,” 378 – 379.

<sup>39</sup> “Don’ts For Women Riders,” 378 – 379.

<sup>40</sup> D. H. Monro, “Godwin, Oakeshott, and Mrs. Bloomer,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 35, no. 4 (Oct. - Dec. 1974): 618.

disadvantages of her newly adopted garment of a mid-calf length skirt and full trousers reaching to the ankle:

its lightness and cleanliness on the street, the ease and safety with which it allowed me to carry my babies up and down stairs, and its beautiful harmony with sanitary laws.... The dress looked tolerably well in standing and walking but in sitting, it produced an awkward, uncouth effect.<sup>41</sup>

A great deal of experimentation would be needed before women found a new form of clothing appropriate for cycling, and in large part, it amounted to the rider's personal preference. However, the basis of agency provided by the activity itself encouraged women to find their own solutions to problems posed by clothing, and to defend those solutions against unjust challenges.

The attempt to gain approval for the bicycle proved to American women that anyone, no matter her social status or the size of her sphere of influence, could contribute to the success of women in general. Activists like Willard, Anthony, and Stanton enjoyed the most visibility and could communicate to an expansive audience through published works or lectures. Average women could become involved in furthering their own social agenda through writing pieces for local newspapers, communicating their views to other women, and initiating discussions within their families. Having seen the way in which a collective campaign could accomplish a shared goal, middle- and upper-class women would later mobilize their resources to lead other social crusades.

Anthony expressed related ideas in a letter to Harriet Taylor Upton dated October 22, 1891. Referencing the past success achieved when women of different situations worked together to challenge social inequality, she wrote that "our strength lies in all being united in one great society for political action – no matter what our personal likes & dislikes may be."<sup>42</sup> This new consciousness would be an important contributing factor in the eventually successful push for women's suffrage during the early twentieth century. Though it may seem an arbitrary component in the lengthy history of this campaign, the bicycle played an important part through providing women with a cause to support as they learned how to unify to advocate for much-needed reform.

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<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Monro, "Godwin, Oakeshott, and Mrs. Bloomer," 619.

<sup>42</sup> Stanton, *The Selected Papers Volume 5*, 403.

Regardless of differences in age, location, and social situation, female bicyclists of the late nineteenth century shared a common quality: a fondness for the sport that led them to speak out in support of it. Those who wrote about the experience of cycling almost always noted feelings of freedom, self-sufficiency, and enjoyment unmatched by any other leisure activity. In 1896 Mary Bishand described “the astonishing sense of exhilaration and gratitude that a woman experiences when she first becomes mistress of her wheel.”<sup>43</sup> That same year, a woman named Maria Ward published a pamphlet entitled *Bicycling for Ladies*, in which she attested, “Riding the wheel, our own powers are revealed to us.... You have conquered a new world, and exultingly you take possession of it.”<sup>44</sup> The near-universal sense of joy and accomplishment with which women regarded their bicycling experiences explains the need they felt to defend and promote the activity against a host of critics. They hoped to allow other women the opportunity to benefit from the activity, just as they did. The closing lines of Willard’s account of her involvement with cycling express a similar wish, as she recalled with pride, “I had made myself master of the most remarkable, ingenious, and inspiring motor ever yet devised upon this planet. Moral: Go thou and do likewise!”<sup>45</sup>

The influence of the bicycle upon the social environment of the United States at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries should not be minimized. Through offering opportunities for transportation, organization, and communication, it provided women with prospects for more active roles in society, to which they eagerly responded. The community that arose around the defense of women’s ability and right to ride had a part in laying the foundation for later movements that called for recognition of more universal rights. The bicycle was therefore important in instilling a deep-seated sense of independence and progress in American women during the 1890s.

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<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Hallenbeck, “Riding Out of Bounds,” 335.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Garvey, “Reframing the Bicycle,” 72.

<sup>45</sup> Willard, *How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle*, 76.

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