IN 1895 BOSTON WAS BEGINNING to feel the first major swell of the bicycle craze that swept the country during the middle of the Gay Nineties. The public parks were a favorite haven for drivers of the "wheeled steed," and a popular park guide reported that swarms of bicyclers, "representing all sorts of conditions," filled the park roads on the weekends, presenting "one of the great sights of Boston." The author continued: "Men and women eminent in the social life of the city may be pointed out on their wheels as they once were on horseback or in their carriages." The parkways provided good surfaces for riding at any speed, but the "scorchers" (bicycle jargon for a speedster) wanted more. To this end, the City Council delivered an order that the Parks Department should develop a special bicycle roadway in Franklin Park or the Back Bay Fens.

Here was a case of the "machine in the garden"; technology encroaching on nature. The Olmsted firm, consultants to the parks commissioners, quickly pointed out that parks existed to provide pleasant scenery and vistas in striking contrast to those found on the city streets. The parks were no place for the bicycler's "scorching track." Building such a track would mean putting park ground "to a use quite inconsistent with its purpose." There was an irony in this antagonism, for bicycles, like parks, existed as an antidote to the normal routine of city life. As a recent article persuasively argues, "the bicycle was both a mechanism of progress and a vehicle of flight." And although the Olmsteds won this round against the "scorchers," they and the parks commissioners learned to live with the bicycle and accommodate its interests.

The bicycle's history in Boston offers many insights into the way
the city reacted to its own growth and change. One may profitably
investigate the very basic question that contemporary observers
asked: Why the boom? Beyond this, one might ask, what did the
bicycle offer? To which groups did its attractions appear most
compelling? What problems, if any, did it address or resolve?
Ultimately, the bicycle was the basis for a new form of receptive
community building—the consumption community—in which men
and women joined in a shared attachment to a product designed
and promoted to serve their interests. Clubs were the inner core,
but one did not need them to belong. Membership required only
the ownership of a bicycle. This meant that the consumption com-
community was at once more widespread, more democratic, and more
tenuous.4

IN FACT, there was more than one passing bicycle rage. At
least four different forms of two-wheeled cycles caught the fancy
of Bostonians during the nineteenth century.5 It was the fourth
and last of the breed, the “safety” bicycle, that furnished the boom
in the nineties. The paterfamilias of the line, the “draisine” (also
called the “hobby horse” or “pedestrian curricle”), first appeared
in Boston in 1819. Designed by Carl von Drais, baron of Sauer-
bronn, and exhibited at Paris in 1818, the machine was improved
in England by Dennis Johnson. The draisine was an aid to walking,
for there were no pedals. The rider perched himself on a saddle,
suspended by heavy springs between two equal-sized wooden
wheels, and pushed along with the balls of his feet. A wheelwright
named Salisbury began making them in Boston, where the con-
traption “attracted the gaze of the crowd from the rapidity of its
motion and the singularity of its shape.”6 Charles E. Pratt, a Boston
lawyer who promoted the popularity of the bicycle in the 1880s
and nineties, claimed that “with them many a study-worn Harvard
student took his moonlight stroll across the long bridge over the
Charles into Boston.”7 But the draisine held no wide popularity
and quickly passed into oblivion. Roads were simply not smooth
enough for speed and the financial panic of 1819 precluded capital
investments in its manufacture. The machine was uncomfortable;
its riders prone to ridicule.8
Fifty years passed before the next form of cycle entered Boston’s
sporting annals. This was the velocipede, and with it came the first
real bicycle craze. A young Parisian mechanic named Pierre Lalle-
ment had experimented with an old draisine by adding foot-pedals to the front axle. His employer, Michaux et Cie, took out a patent and displayed a number of the devices at the 1865 Paris Exhibition. In 1866, Lallement emigrated to Ansonia, Connecticut, and brought his idea with him. There, he and an enterprising local man named Carroll received an American patent and began producing "velocipedes." This wooden-framed cycle weighed between fifty and one hundred pounds, and had wheels approximately forty inches in diameter (the front slightly larger than the rear), stout wooden spokes, and iron tires. 9

The velocipede attracted little popularity until the Hanlon brothers, a famous acrobatic troupe, introduced a modified version in their act at Selwyn's Theatre, Boston, during August of 1868. It proved such a popular part of the act that the acrobats decided to give public demonstrations of their prowess on the Common. The curious crowd was so large that the Hanlons had a difficult
time giving one exhibition. These superb athletes naturally made the vehicle look easy to ride; people were enchanted by the grace with which the Hanlon brothers sped along the Common’s pathways. Others were delighted in the business opportunity they saw.

Early in 1869, W. P. Sargent & Co., a carriage firm, opened a velocipede riding school in the basement of a building on Tremont Street. The craze began in earnest. Within a few weeks the school had 150 pupils, and the demand continued. By February, the city had a sizable number of indoor riding schools and several outdoor “arenas.” Manufacturers met the demand at seventy-five to a hundred dollars per bicycle.

The indoor rink at 155 Tremont Street had a long, smooth floor with wooden pillars down its length. The pillars were wrapped with carpeting—designed to protect the bicycles, not the bones of the hapless neophyte! Approximately fifteen laps to the half-mile, traffic proceeded one way, “to the left, cavalry fashion.” Usually two to four dozen riders packed the floor at once; nearly all, claimed the Advertiser, “from the wealthier classes of our society.” Initiates could take lessons at a dollar an hour in a private room, where they crashed and fell “with about as much grace as a flock of ducks whose wings and legs have been broken.”

The velocipede enjoyed this craze during 1869 as a source of amusement and entertainment for the curious. But ultimately it proved to be a short-lived fad. Its nickname as the “bone-shaker” was truly descriptive. Heavy, clumsy, unable to absorb shocks, it was impractical for all surfaces but the hardwood floors of the riding schools and arenas. Even before its quick demise after 1869, the Boston Advertiser had predicted the brevity of its popularity:

The right machine for our roads is not the present two wheeler; whether it has yet been made at all, I cannot say. But I advise all enthusiastic and hopeful velocipedists, who dream of long excursions into the country, of pleasant toddlings on time, of trips to their office, etc., in so many minutes and seconds, to reserve their money and enthusiasm for the rinks and wait for the machine which will stand alone, as a faithful velocipede should, and which can be made to run up a hill and over frozen ruts with a little less exertion than what is necessary to a man running at full speed on his own legs.

Bostonians and urbanites elsewhere waited for a more practical and efficient means of self-propelled transportation, one that
would convey them easily through the streets of the city and, better yet, to the suburbs beyond. Within a decade, many had found the answer.\textsuperscript{13}

By the mid-1870s, English mechanics had designed a new form of bicycle called the “penny-farthing” or “ordinary.” This machine was centered on an enlarged front wheel, usually forty to sixty inches in diameter, depending on the length of the driver’s legs. The larger wheel yielded greater speed than was possible with a velocipede, despite the fact that the pedals remained on the front axle. The rear wheel was reduced in size to minimize weight. The
frame was made of wrought iron, and total weight varied from twenty to sixty pounds, depending on whether the bicycle was designed as a “racer” or a “roadster.” Wooden wheels gave way to steel, iron tires to “cushion” India rubber. A much-improved vehicle, the ordinary first caught American attention at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{14}

One of the interested viewers was a native Bostonian named Albert A. Pope, a Civil War veteran who retained his colonel’s rank in formal address. Early the following year Pope had an ordinary made under the supervision of an Englishman who was staying at his Newton home. Although Frank Weston had organized Boston’s first bicycle importing firm—Cunningham, Heath & Company—in 1877, Pope also saw the machine’s potential and began importing English cycles through his new Pope Manufacturing Company in Hartford, Connecticut. A visit to England, however, convinced him that the import trade was too limited a venture, greater profit lay in manufacture. In 1878 he began making Columbia bicycles. The first fifty were made at the Weed Sewing-Machine Company in Hartford; by 1895 his group of factories in the Connecticut Valley employed twenty-five hundred, and his three thousand sales agencies covered the entire country.

A large, strong, physically vigorous man, with prominent brows and a “deep, modulated and vibrant” voice, Pope was a shrewd businessman and an ideal bicycle promoter. He purchased all of the available American patent rights to the bicycle, an expensive proposition that later give him great advantage in the industry. He helped organize the Boston Bicycle Club in 1878, and later founded the Massachusetts Bicycle Club. He was a guiding force behind the League of American Wheelmen, ever pressing for the cyclist’s legal rights and for improved roads. He promoted and subsidized bicycling newspapers, pamphlets, and journals. Indeed, in many ways, his Pope Manufacturing Co. and its Columbia bicycle were to the industry and sport what Henry Ford and the Model T were to the automobile. Not the first or the only, both were the most responsible for transforming a novelty into a popular vehicle.\textsuperscript{15}

As proved by its enduring, although limited, popularity, the ordinary was a vast improvement over the velocipede. It gave America its first cycling sportsmen; proud of their devotion to the wheel, happy and quick to promote its benefits and usefulness.
Although there were only five hundred cyclists in 1879, by 1882 the *Wheelman* estimated that twenty thousand plied the roads, mostly in the Eastern cities.\(^6\) When Boston hosted the sixth annual meet of the League of American Wheelmen, two hundred cyclists took part in the major "run about town." More than a thousand cyclists from all over the country merrily wheeled about in their club uniforms, with shades of gray, blue, and brown predominating. The *Boston Journal* noted, "The absence of any flashy uniforms shows how cycling has come to be a part of the rider's everyday life and not a means of display." The early clubs chose drab colors, grays and khakis especially, for practical reasons as well—to hide the dirt that soiled the rider thrown from his wheel.\(^7\)

Cycling on the ordinary revolved mainly around membership in a bicycle club. As *Bicycling World*, a Boston-based journal, maintained, the chief fascination for racer and roadster alike was the "jolly fellowship . . . the sympathy of tastes among those who love the open air, the sense of fine health, and the recreative exercise of mind and muscle." This sense of common interest gave rise to "a freemasonry among bicyclers."\(^8\) The Boston Bicycle Club, the first in the country, had begun operation in 1878 with 14 members; by 1882 its rolls had increased to 140. The Massachusetts Bicycle Club opened its doors in 1879, and by 1883 had 70 active members.\(^9\)

Other clubs quickly followed suit. By 1886 Boston had so many small clubs that the League of American Wheelmen's *Bulletin* referred to them as "numberless, some of which are occasionally heard from, and others never." Denied membership in other clubs, a group of blacks from the West End—boot-polishers, elevator operators, waiters, and singers with money enough to purchase the machines—formed their own, the "Hubclinians."

To a greater or lesser degree, all clubs followed the model of their first forerunner, which had formally stated its twofold purpose: to enhance the "mutual enjoyment of its members in the pursuit of bicycling as a pastime," by means of clubmeets, tours, excursions, and races; and to promote "the use of the bicycle as a practicable and enjoyable aid to locomotion, by the general public."\(^\) Of course the earliest clubs provided their members the emotional support so necessary for these "deviant" activities. As Pope's corporate lawyer recalled, the general public had little use and much scorn for the ordinary. "If they did not take them for toys and
playthings,” he wrote, they were just as apt to “look contemptuously upon the men who put on again the short breeches of boyhood and disposed themselves upon these acrobatic contrivances.”

Undaunted by criticism, members of the Boston Bicycle Club rendezvoused regularly in front of the Museum of Fine Arts, “where the wide and smooth avenues offer excellent facilities for assembly and procession, and for access in several directions to the country.” These excursions would often lead to the Chestnut Hill reservoir or to the outlying suburbs. Wheelmens especially loved the reservoir, the *Herald* reported, “where the smooth roadway, with its broad sweep and gentle declivities affords superb facilities for fast and enjoyable riding.” Clubs sponsored road races of up to a hundred miles through Boston’s neighboring cities. Unfortunately, the courses were sometimes so difficult to follow that many of the racers became hopelessly lost. By 1889, the clubs were strong enough to gain the support of the City Council in petitioning the parks commissioners to allow July Fourth races on the Playstead Road in Franklin Park. After some debate, the commissioners were forced “to accede to the wishes of the City Council,” although they deliberately added, “We think it proper to say that we fear that such uses of the park are not wise.” The races were a success; despite foul weather, several thousand spectators turned out to marvel at the “scorchers.” The July Fourth bicycle races became a regular feature of the city’s annual patriotic celebration, and other races soon followed along other parkways.

Bicycle clubs successfully nurtured the love of wheeling among a small but growing segment of the city’s sportsmen. They were not successful, however, in promoting the use of the ordinary as a widespread, popular means of transportation. Purchase prices of one hundred dollars up were extremely high for a machine that was still quite difficult to master and manage. Although its cushion tires were infinitely superior to the iron plate of the velocipede, a rock or a sharp bump on the road would quickly jar its rider out of any sense of comfort and ease.

In 1881, *The Bicycling World* extolled the availability of good roads in the Boston area; but it had to lament that “there are only about one thousand bicyclers in Boston and its suburbs! Can anybody tell why there are not ten thousand?” Indeed, there was really little wonder. The ordinary was not only uncomfortable, it
was also very dangerous. Sitting almost directly above the front axle, the rider had great difficulty stopping and, worse yet, was prone to take a "header." The common surprise was that more cyclists were not killed! Bicycle advocates themselves knew that fear kept most people off the ordinary, but there was no way to convince the "shuffler" otherwise. A safer machine was needed.28

Despite its shortcomings, the ordinary performed invaluable service in laying the groundwork for the real bicycle boom of the 1890s. It proved that engineering technology could create a self-propelled machine that would satisfy the desires of city dwellers longing for outdoor exercise, speed, and long-distance travel. The ordinary's devotees carefully argued all of the benefits of cycling that analysts of the later boom treated as something new. Indeed, in this regard the marketing of the bicycle proceeds from 1877 on an unbroken course. Finally, although its high price and awkwardness limited its appeal to upper- and middle-class sportsmen, the ordinary set in motion several components of promotion that were critical in nurturing the immediate acceptance and universal popularity of the safety bicycle.

To begin, riders of the ordinary organized the first bicycle clubs. As Charles Pratt maintained, there were few charms in solitude; "Unity was strength, and concert of action was necessary to conquest."29 When antagonism to the ordinary surfaced in 1878 and policemen began warning riders off the street, clubmen successfully lobbied in City Hall to ensure that bicycles received the same legal standing and treatment as other vehicles common to the roads. Pope himself invested thousands of dollars in legal fees at the city, county, and state levels, in Massachusetts and other states.30 The national lobby was the League of American Wheelmen, formed on May 31, 1880 at Newport, Rhode Island. None other than Charles E. Pratt of the Boston Bicycle Club found himself elected president. The league performed local club services at a national level, protecting the rights of wheelmen, encouraging and facilitating bicycle tours, promoting the improvement of roads, and regulating the sport of bicycle racing. Within a year, the league had sixteen hundred members, and Massachusetts provided more than a third of them. Without question the local clubs and the national league had made the roads smoother, the laws fairer, and the sport more organized and enjoyable by the time hundreds of thousands took to the wheel in the 1890s.31
Bicycle Crazes

Of equal importance, the ordinary spawned individual promoters and entrepreneurs who, for love and money, published articles, magazines, and books, organized meetings and political lobbies, established sales dealerships, and advertised, advertised, advertised the bicycle's merits. Frank W. Weston edited the *American Bicycling Journal*; Charles Pratt edited its successor, *The Bicycling World*, which a local stockbroker financed; Albert Pope invested sixty thousand dollars in *The Wheelman*; soon after its inception, the LAW published a regular *Bulletin*. All were aimed at convincing the middle and upper professional classes to take up and sustain a love of cycling. Reinforced by club and league organization, bolstered by expanded advertising in magazines and newspapers, cycling manufacturers continued to grow steadily. By 1890 there were twenty-seven in the United States, of which seven were in Massachusetts. The ordinary had set the wheels in motion for widespread interest. Unfortunately, it was not the cycle upon which a real boom could perch.32

During the 1880s, bicycle manufacturers on both sides of the Atlantic had revised the vehicle's design in order to improve both its practicality and popularity. In 1880, James K. Starley of Coventry, England, invented the "Rover Wheel," which closely resembled the structure of present-day bicycles. Interestingly, its dimensions made it more like a velocipede than a penny-farthing. Front and back wheels of equal size, attached to a diamond-shaped frame, the machine was propelled by pedaling the chainloop that connected the crank with the rear chainwheel. The driver sat above the middle of the frame, between the wheels. This design provided greater balance without sacrificing any of the leverage needed for speed. Hence its name, the "safety" bicycle.33

The safety failed to attract widespread interest, however, until it was featured at the 1885 Stanley show in England. Two years later, A. H. Overman of Chicopee, Massachusetts, patented the Victor safety bicycle. By August of 1888 the *Globe* declared that local dealers were not able to meet the demand for safety bicycles. Some, including Pope, stubbornly stuck with the ordinary. But the following year he relented, with his own safety version of the Columbia bicycle. The big boom had begun.34

Additional improvements accelerated the safety's popularity. The pneumatic or air-filled tire, ball bearings, and suspension wheels all improved the speed and comfort of riding the safety
How Boston Played

bicycle. Frame weights continued downward until, by 1893, many bicycles weighed less than thirty-five pounds. Popularity increased, and so did production. From 1890 to 1896, the number of bicycle manufacturers increased from 27 to 250; output of new machines from forty thousand to over one million. While approximations vary, the national population of bicyclists increased during these years from several hundred thousand to several million.\textsuperscript{35}

Analysts advised that the bicycle was here to stay:

It is quite the custom to speak of bicycling as a \textquotedblleft craze,\textquotedblright and there has been much speculation as to whether it would prove permanent or would pass away like other \textquotedblleft crazes\textquotedblright after a brief period of feverish popularity. It has been compared to the passion of a few years ago for rollerskating, and prophets have not been lacking who were confident that within five years it would run its course, leaving behind it the wrecks of innumerable bicycle factories and tons upon tons of unsalable machines. \textquoteleft Only wait,\textquoteright say these prophets, \textquoteleft and five years from now you can buy all the wheels you want, and of the best makes too, for five dollars; you may even get one with a pound of tea, or have it thrown in like a colored picture with a copy of a Sunday newspaper.\textquoteright The error in calculations of this kind lies in treating the matter as a \textquoteleft craze.\textquoteright It is something very different from that.\textsuperscript{36}

With the continued growth in sales and use, surely there were reasons to feel that \textquoteleft its stay will be permanent.\textquoteright In 1892, Boston's Irish-Catholic newspaper, the \textit{Pilot}, worried of the danger of too many wheelmen, adding that \textquoteleft verily, the bicycling has come to stay.\textquoteright\textsuperscript{37}

Spring thaws in Boston found cyclers impatiently waiting for the roads to dry up. By April, the weekends whirled with wheels. The bright, clear sun on one Sunday in 1895 shone down on twenty-five thousand cyclers from early morning until late afternoon as they traveled the streets to and from Franklin Park and the reservoir, their favorite haunts. An almost continual line passed by, on new and old safety models, broken only by the clank and clatter of a high-wheeled ordinary, by now scorned as another \textquoteleft bone-shaker.\textquoteright\textsuperscript{38}

In mid-decade, the demand for bicycles was as great as manufacturers could bear, and perhaps more so. The \textit{Journal} estimated that one in twelve Bostonians desired \textquoteleft to supply themselves with a wheel.\textquoteright\textsuperscript{39} By 1896, the \textit{Herald} estimated the city's cycling popu-
lation at one hundred thousand. Several local developers publicized a plan to erect a giant indoor sports complex in the Back Bay. The domed structure, to be called the "Colossic," focused around a high indoor bicycle track, three hundred by two hundred yards, with seating for five thousand and accommodations for checking two thousand bicycles. The venture was based on projections of unlimited growth for the sport, growth which "the most skillful statisticians cannot foretell." As the Herald concluded, "people will have the bike, even though they may have to deny themselves of almost the necessities of life." 40

"Everyone under fifty learned to ride," Samuel Eliot Morison, Boston's preeminent historian, wrote in his autobiography, "either at Colonel Pope's bicycle rink on Columbus Avenue or on a quiet side street like ours [Brimmer]." Springtime brought hundreds of couples by the door, the young men often running beside the bicycles of their ladies fair. "From dusk to about ten p.m.," he concluded, "the street was filled with the young people learning to ride the bicycle, and resounded with tinklings, crashes, squeals and giggles." 41 But cycling was not limited to the young. Prominent members of the city's literati were seen wheeling about, including Kate Sanborn, Edward Bellamy, Sylvester Baxter, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Charles Francis Adams, and Harvard professor Albert Bushnell Hart. Although Charles Eliot Norton did not ride, his son did, prompting one local paper to refer to the famous academician as "Professor Norton, better known as the father of young Norton, the bicycle rider." Even a house on Beacon Street and a lot in Mount Auburn Cemetery were not enough for Brahmin rank, said local lore, unless at least one family female was an expert "wheelwoman." 42

Bicycle racing increased in popularity. In 1892 more than five thousand enthusiasts watched the July Fourth affair at Franklin Park. As the parks commissioners held out against a track in Boston, promoters looked to the suburbs. In 1893, W. D. Bradstreet of Waltham agreed to build a speed track in that city. Fifteen thousand people turned out for the opening, and when the original gravel surface gave way to "metalithic" cement, national champions like the legendary John Johnson ventured to Waltham to set record times at Bicycle Park. 43

Much of the recreational touring revolved around the bicycle clubs, which burst forth by the dozens. Clubmen organized the
early spring tours that signaled the start of the cycling season. Each club tried to outdo the distance records set by others, using as a benchmark the early tours of the Boston and Massachusetts clubs—over one hundred miles in a day, on the old ordinary! Local papers listed the rendezvous for each club, and its itinerary. Club runs and club news were standard features in the wheel-oriented newspapers. Here is a partial list of clubs that reported news in mid-decade: Berkeley, Bostonian, Mona Road, Mattapan, Bunker Hill, Roslindale, People's Institute Wheelmen, Alpha, Eagle, Mazzepe, Fellsmere Road, Tremont, Riverside, Woodbridge, Middlesex, Massachusetts, Lechmere, Mt. Pleasant, Orient, Roxbury, Noddle Island, Press, Commonwealth. As early as 1893, the various clubs had banded to form the Associated Cycling Clubs of Boston.44

Through their clubs and larger organizations, wheelmen continued the fight for better roads and equal treatment under the law. In 1887, cyclists in the greater Boston area created the Eastern Roads Association to promote Albert Pope's "Gospel of Good Roads." Their continued lobbying helped convince the General Court to create a permanent State Highway Commission six years later. Composed entirely of LAW members, the commission enjoyed an initial appropriation of three hundred thousand dollars.45 Boston's roads received the highest accolades of the country's wheelmen, as the Journal proudly noted:

No other city in the United States can boast of a greater incentive to cyclists in respect to delightful runs than can the city of Boston. Today the wheelman can start from the heart of the city, and, via Beacon Street, can, in a short time, reach the park system; there he can take a run of 28 miles over the most perfect of roads.46

By 1898 the Commonwealth had expended two million dollars in 125 different municipalities, under the supervision of the State Highway Commission's sixty resident managers.47

Bolstered by officers of the state's chapter of the LAW, cyclists remained ever vigilant of their legal rights. In 1894, George Perkins prevailed upon the parks commissioners to rescind a regulation requiring lanterns on the bicycles of night riders.48 Three years later, Sterling Elliott, editor of the LAW Bulletin, hastened the defeat of a similar state law by exposing the fact that the politician who introduced the bill was scheming with a near relative

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to "make hay" on the manufacture of bicycle lamps. Successful lobbying ensured that state road laws applied equally to all vehicles, in all cities throughout the Commonwealth. The wheelman was assured that his rig and his habits were as legal in Brockton as they were in Boston.49

The ordinary had paved the path for the safety bicycle's ascendance, and the mid-1890s witnessed the reign of the bicycle:

The great body of riders find in the bicycle a new pleasure in life, a means of seeing more of the world, a source of better health through open-air exercise, a bond of comradeship, a method of rapid locomotion either for business or pleasure, and many other enjoyments and advantages which they will not relinquish.50

The constituency of the reign, however, was basically urban, as Gary Allan Tobin points out.51 But the ordinary's appeal had been confined to the city as well, and with good reason. The bicycle addressed a number of desires of city dwellers to remedy the deficiencies of urban living. It was a machine that combined the blessings of exercise, practical transportation, and travel. The safety bicycle simply exposed a wider population to these benefits.

Bicycle enthusiasts claimed that it met the needs of all social classes, including "the artisan, the millionaire, the professional man, the laborer, the rich merchant, the lady whose name appears in all the 'society movements of the day,' the shop-girl, the banker and his clerk."52 The bicycle was "the people's carriage," the "crowning luxury of the common people and the necessity of the well-to-do," the "destroyer of caste and the annihilator of age." Prowess on the wheel brought anyone self-respect.53

Bicyclists did include a wide range of Bostonians; the bicycle was never the province of the elite only. From the beginning of the renaissance of wheeling with the ordinary, bicycling took on a decidedly middle-class stamp. The safety bicycle and the "drop" or open frame meant that women could easily enjoy the sport. In 1896 the Herald described the different types of women cyclists: the stout matron, out to lose some weight, in black skirt and heavy sweater, "so warm that it really makes one hot to see it"; the attractive young beauty, in "divided skirt and white waist," using the wheel as a machine of courting; the serious "scorchers" who "much prefers to wear bloomers that resemble as nearly as possible the attire of the sterner sex, and who dotes on riding a diamond
framed safety with the speed of a racing man." Indeed, one can find reports of races for women.54

It is harder to wax euphoric about the bicycle's ability to annihilate class distinctions. In 1892 the Pilot described the cyclists as professional men, "brain workers," clergy, or women. And while secondhand bicycles could be purchased as cheaply as fifteen dollars by 1896, one finds no evidence to suggest that the unskilled laborers in the North or West Ends ever wheeled merrily in the parks. When newspapers reported the numerous "working class" taking to their bicycles, they doubtless meant skilled workers.55

The bicycle’s appeal, however, was universal. To begin, the ordinary and the safety bicycle offered a pleasurable form of healthy exercise, a means of enjoying the fresh air. Like all active sports, bicycling was perceived as a tonic for the mental stress of business life in the city:

The man who goes through ten hours' daily mental fret and worry will in an hour of pleasant road-riding throw off all its ill-effects, and prepare himself for the effectual accomplishment of another day's brain work.56

No wonder a ride through the parks was so popular; it combined the virtues of fresh air and exercise. In this sense, the bicycle can be linked with the underlying drive of park and playground advocates to redress the physical decline of the city and its inhabitants. As Sylvester Baxter maintained, universal acceptance of the quiet-riding bicycle would not only improve the health of the rider; it would also reduce or eliminate the "exasperating noise and confusion of city life" which proceeded from the "harsh rattle and clatter of vehicles in the streets." Even better, the new, silent steed of steel was not likely to dump manure!57

The bicycle was the temporary release needed for full enjoyment and employment of the city's demanding business opportunity. This theme continually runs through the wheelman's literature:

"Whither, on the whirling wheel? Whither, with so much haste, As if a thief thou wert?" "I have the wheel of life; Soiled from my city's dust, From the struggle and the strife Of the narrow street I fly

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To the road's felicity,
To clear me from the frown
Of the moody toil of town.”38

As one rider explained, when rolling along the smooth, hard
driveway through the Back Bay Fens, he lived “on the borderline
of Utopia.” Nothing stood between him and “the realization of
perfect happiness,” except perhaps the clatter of horses’ feet.59
Bicycling World admonished wheelmen that the intoxicating effects
of shady elms, exhilarating air, quiet, winding roads, and jolly
companionship could consume all psychic and physical energy, to
the detriment of family and business obligations.60

The improved roads for which clubs and the LAW fought were
the arteries for this great escape. Weekend spins to the outlying
suburbs remained a central feature of club life throughout the
eighties and nineties. Medfield and Dedham were within easy
reach. So was Waltham, where Prospect Hill offered a panoramic
view of city and country alike. One must remember that these
areas were still quite rural. Magnificent oaks, elms, and maples
protected the cyclists from the hot summer sun, where “the fresh
country air and picturesque landscape of green fields dotted with
farm houses and haystacks” added attraction to the run. Summer
also brought whirls to the North Shore and its beaches, where,
along with good opportunities for cycling, wheelmen found “the
seldom-combined enjoyments of cool sea breezes, fragrant whiffs
from the pine woods, deep-sea fishing and shady avenues.”61

But the bicycle’s popularity did not represent a renunciation of
the city. It was, rather, a medium for melding the best of all worlds.
The bicycle produced a de facto expansion of the public parks;
for all the suburban roads were public. Echoing the earlier views
of park supporters, the LAW Bulletin noted that the bicycle “brings
city and country close together, and places ‘green fields and run-
ning brooks’ where once there were but smoky walls and a heavy
atmosphere.”62 But conversely, as with the parks, urban cyclists
demanded that the city's amenities accompany them on their treks
to the suburbs. Thus the fight for better roads and clearer road
signs, the provision of bicycle tour maps and guides to identify the
best routes, and the promotion of runs that encompassed inns,
hotels, and shops.63

Further, the bicycle was not just a means of leaving the urban
environment. Wheelmen actively promoted the machine’s value as
a practical means of transportation within the city. As early as 1881, *Bicycling World* claimed that the cycle was used "by all classes as an ever-ready and inexpensive horse, a car at one's own command, a 'quick transit' held to no arbitrary rails, available with the utmost of freedom and exhilaration for social and business purposes.""64 Capable of easily doubling or tripling the speed of a horse, the bicycle needed much less time and expense in upkeep and care."65 Little wonder that the parks commissioners equipped their police with brand-new Columbia cycles."66

Some felt that the bicycle would make the streetcar superfluous, claiming that company profits had suffered considerably "since thousands of persons travel to and fro between their offices and their homes on wheels.""67 The early wheelmen looked with scorn on the horse railway:

Go not with the crowd that crawls
Where the rattling horse-car hauls,
Sit the quiet nag of steel,
Like together wheel and weal.

In the 1890s cyclists fought against the spread of trolley-car lines. But after receiving several complaints and calls for action, Boston's Sterling Elliott, the editor of the *LAW Bulletin*, replied in 1897 with a plea for conciliation. His argument was both realistic and ominous:

If all people were wheelmen and always rode wheels, the street railroads, that are already made, wouldn't pay a dividend once in a hundred years. . . . The fact is, however, that since the successful introduction of electricity as a means of transmitting power, stock in street railway companies averages to be a good investment. Such roads carry a very large number of passengers who, because of age or youth, cannot be riders of the bicycle, while a very large percentage of the fares are paid by people who own bicycles, but who still find the electrics a great convenience.

Unaware that the bicycle boom was almost over, Elliott was offering a partial analysis of its demise!"68

By the turn of the century, the bicycle was no longer in vogue. Membership in the LAW had dropped 50 percent in two years. In 1901, the League *Bulletin* changed its name to simply *Good Roads Magazine*, and contained little news on cycling. By 1904 the Bos-
Bicycle Crazes

tonian secretary-treasurer of the LAW lamented that "the enthu-
siasts among wheelmen today are the old-timers." In the spring
and summer of 1902, local newspapers carried almost no coverage
of the pastime. Gone were the lengthy columns of club news and
club runs. 59

Society embraced new vehicles for temporary release from the
strains of urban life; among them, the automobile and the sub-
urban golf club. 70 But greater competition probably came from
the improved efficiency in mass transit. The country's first subway
had opened in Boston in 1898, and an estimated fifty million
people used the line in its first eleven months. The revamped
Boston Elevated Company bought out this and other lines from
the West End Street Railway, and consolidated its new elevated
lines with older street lines by way of transfers. By 1901 it was
operating a unified streetcar and rapid transit system servicing
most of the metropolitan area on three hundred miles of track.
For a nickel fare, more than 222 million passengers annually rode
its rails. 71

NO ONE HAS DEFINITIVELY ANALYZED the rapid decline
of the craze. Perhaps no one will. Nonetheless, the bicycle's brief
but amazing ascendency, both in sales and interest, provides rich
insights for the curious historian. It tells us much about the reac-
tions of urban residents to the growth of their cities; for the bicycle
was not only a vehicle for release from the congestion, the strain,
and the pressure of urban living, it was also a means of improving
the quality of transportation and life within the city itself. And it
helped convey urban tastes further and further into the suburbs
and beyond.

But this was not an instinctive or natural process. The bicycle
crazes, especially the boom in the 1890s, illustrate the interpen-
etration of production and consumption in the capitalist economy
of which the cities were centers of exchange. Bicycle manufacturers
created the machines which city dwellers could "consume," i.e.,
buy and use, to satisfy their desires for an instrument for exploiting
and escaping the city. At the same time, manufacturers like Albert
A. Pope worked hard, in advertisements, articles, and apostleship,
to create and nurture the need which their products were designed
to fill. As Pope himself admitted, it was necessary "at the outset,
to educate the people to the advantage of this invigorating sport, and with this end in view, the best literature that was to be had on the subject was gratuitously distributed."72 It is clear that to this extent the bicycle boom was artificial; its demise would occur rapidly when a competitor, such as trolley, auto, or golf club, could sell itself as better suited to fill the need, or as servicing a slightly different, more important need.

The social appeal of the bicycle was very much related. While the ordinary's popularity had been restricted to clubmen, and while the safety bicycle had spawned countless clubs, the bicycle crazes especially in the 1890s had also created a much wider network of association, which transcended club membership. Bicycle advertising and sales created a new community of consumption, the cement of which was a commodity, the bicycle. As Daniel Boorstin has described it, the consumption community was in many ways like other communities; it "consisted of people with a feeling of shared well-being, shared risks, common interests, and common concerns." At the same time the ties were "thinner" and "more temporary."73 The requirement of kinship in this community was merely the ownership of a bicycle, for which one needed only the common denominator of capitalist society—money. Although never a threat to basic distinctions of class and status, the bicycle community had its own system of stratification. The expert rider had higher status than the novice; a new Columbia rode above the level of a used Overman. But status could be topsy-turvy from that in the outside world—a Roxbury salesman might well have a more stylish bicycle than the Beacon Hill banker.74

Ultimately, however, the critical distinction lay between the cyclist and the noncyclist. Of course, in the end this was a tenuous tie, for it lasted only as long as manufacturers could sustain the consumer's desire for the commodity. By the turn of the century the boom was over; so was the wide community of cyclists. The network shrank to its beginning size. The bicycle was less a social machine, more a practical means of exercise and transportation for diehard enthusiasts. Pope turned his attention to the automobile, but it was too late. His conglomerate fell into receivership; shortly thereafter he died, in 1909.75

While they lasted, however, the bicycle crazes produced widespread consumption communities whose common interests re-
involved around the quality and meaning of life in the city. But equally important, it is unlikely that the crazes could have occurred without a combination of peculiarly urban situations, including population density, ready advertising media, superior road surfaces, and higher levels of discretionary income. Like the sporting club, then, the bicycle boom was a community form produced by the urban reality.