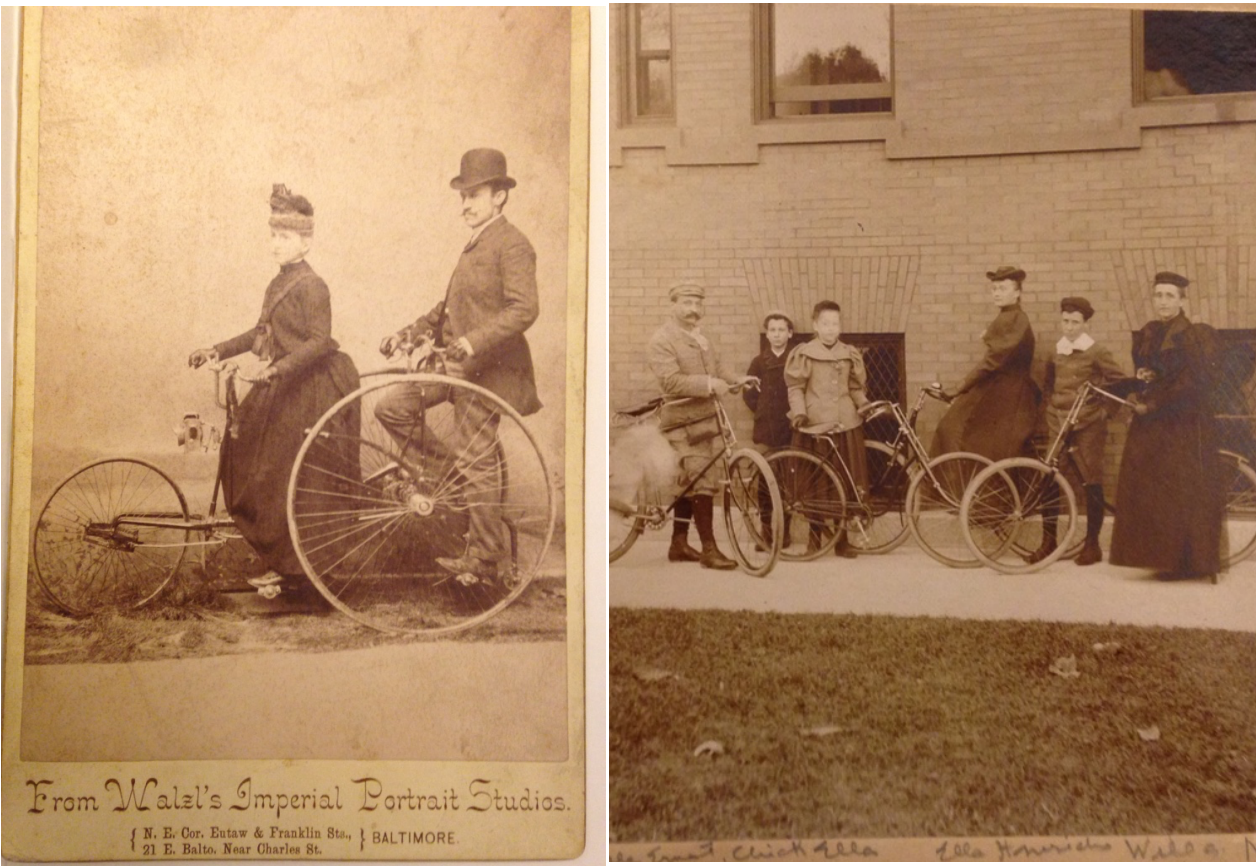


# Baltimore, Maryland: Birthplace of Bicycling in the United States

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**ABSTRACT:** When one thinks of bicycle-friendly cities in the U.S. Baltimore, Maryland does not spring to mind. According to Bicycling.com’s 2016 list of “best bike cities,” Chicago, San Francisco, and Portland lead the way. Charm City does not even crack the top 50. And yet Baltimore has been called the “birthplace” of bicycling in America. This is due largely to the initiative of Baltimorean James Stewart, a piano-maker by trade, who built the first velocipede in the U.S. in 1818. First constructed in Germany in 1816 the velocipede was an early antecedent of the modern bicycle. Stewart’s contraption proved popular albeit controversial. One editorial in the *Federal Republican and Baltimore Telegraph* in 1819 is particularly disparaging: “A curious two-wheeled vehicle called the Velocipede has been invented, which is propelled by Jack-asses instead of horses.” Such negative commentary did not discourage curious passersby, including 80-year old portrait artist Charles Wilson Peale, from giving the velocipede a spin. In this poster we revisit Baltimore’s nineteenth-century experience with bicycling. We rely chiefly on documents housed at the Maryland Historical Society, including records of the League of American Wheelmen and the Thirteen Cycles Club of Baltimore; the letters and correspondence of Clifton S. H. Denning, a salesman with the American Bicycle Company; rulebooks governing the use of bicycles, tricycles, and carriages in public parks; and photograph collections spanning the period 1845-1909. As cities like Baltimore seek to promote alternatives to fossil fuel based transportation they would do well to look to their past for guidance and inspiration. *Keywords: bicycling; Baltimore, USA; historical geography, urban sustainability*



Figs. 1 and 2 – Left: “Yates, Peter Price (1856-1925) and Katharine Elizabeth Chandlee Yates (1859-1943) — [ca. 1899]”; Right: “Group of bicyclists, including Ella Hinrichs, ca. 1905.” Source: Maryland Historical Society. Cycling was a popular pastime in Baltimore during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Contrary to what we might think today, Baltimore was once considered a mecca for cycling (figs. 1 and 2). Prior to the widespread adoption of motor vehicles, bicycles were a popular and relatively inexpensive alternative to the horse and carriage and other forms of transportation. Several data sets offer insights into the popularity of cycling in Baltimore in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as the infrastructure – both physical (e.g., smooth roads) and commercial (dealers, repair shops) – that supported this activity.

Clifton Denning was an employee of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company (PRR) stationed in York, PA who sold “Ramblers” for the American Bicycle Company on the side. His correspondence with supervisors in Philadelphia and New York reveals that sales of “wheels” was brisk during the early 1900s as was demand for parts and accessories such as springs, sprockets, chains, inner tubes, tires, coaster brakes, forks, saddles, pedals, lubricating oil, and repair kits. Indeed, Denning often expressed frustration that the factory was not able to meet his requests for parts and wheels in a timely fashion. As the following extract from a letter dated 14 September 1901 shows, he was dedicated not only to bike sales but to bike customers: “In regard to stimulating the wheel business, I think it good policy for an agent to get as intimately acquainted as possible with the better class of popular wheelmen, and encourage and stimulate them to use the wheel, and often by becoming personal friends with these riders will get them mounted on the wheel you represent, which of course carries a great deal of weight with it.” In 1902, the PRR transferred Denning to Wilmington, DE at which point he resigned his membership with the York Wheelmen’s Club. A few years later he was transferred again – this time to Baltimore, MD. Enamored with cycling he left the PRR and opened a bike shop at 1910 Garrett Avenue.

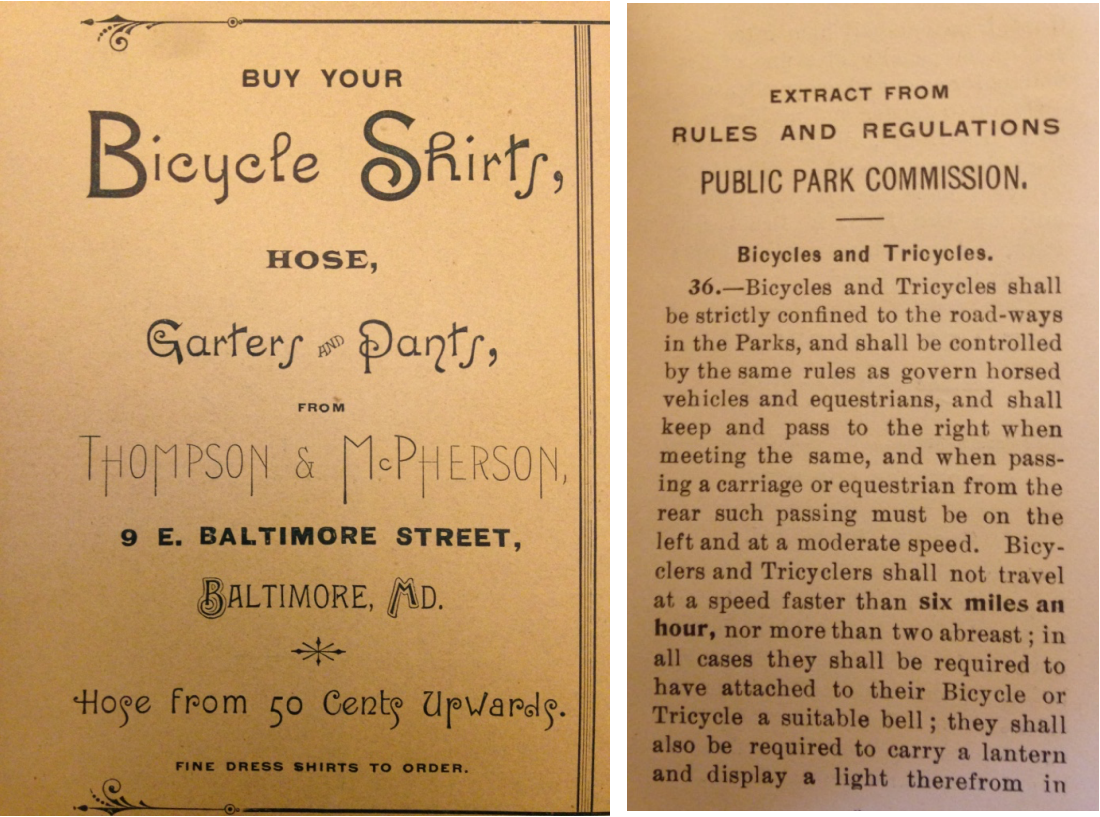
Another indicator of cycling’s popularity is that the sport’s national organization – the League of American Wheelmen – held its annual meeting in Baltimore in 1888 (fig. 3). Among other things, the League sought to promote cycling and defend the rights of wheelmen. Long before automobiles arrived on the scene the group also advocated for the construction of smooth roads (Box 1). The advertisements in the official program are especially valuable because they give us an idea of the type of equipment that was in use at the time,



Fig. 3 – The League of American Wheelmen held their annual meeting in Baltimore in July 1888. The organization’s selection of Baltimore – the “Queen City of the South” – suggests that it was considered a hotbed of cycling activity.

**Box 1**  
**MISSION of the LEAGUE of AMERICAN WHEELMEN:**

- To promote the general interests of cycling.
- To obtain privileges for wheelmen.
- To give legal protection to members.
- To ascertain and defend the rights of wheelmen.
- To secure improvements of roads and pavements.
- To facilitate touring and provide books and maps.
- To secure and enjoy privileges at wheelmen’s meets.
- To secure reduction of rates at hotels and free transportation of wheels.
- To secure proper regulation of a gentlemanly sport.
- To secure publication of a weekly newspaper, which is presented to every member.



Figs. 4 and 5 – The existence of bicycle dealers, repair shops, and clothing outfitters, as well as the establishment of city rules and regulations indicates cycling was popular in Baltimore.

as well as the names and locations of major bike shops and outfitters in Baltimore (fig. 4).

Yet another important sign that cycling was a major activity is the existence of regulations governing the operation of bicycles, tricycles, and carriages (fig. 5). Developed by the Public Park Commission, many of the rules – a speed limit of six miles per hour for example – seem quaint to us today. The “need” to establish a set of rules suggests that the number of bikers in Baltimore was sufficient to merit such an investment of time and effort.

Perhaps the most informative – not to mention entertaining – data source available from this period are the riding logs of the Thirteen Cycles Club of Baltimore, spanning the period 1894 to 1899. Comprised of thirteen members, the club – apparently one of several in Baltimore – was dedicated to riding the most miles and exploring as much “new territory” as possible (Box 2). The entries are filled with the humor and braggadocio one might expect from a group of adventurous young men who spend a great deal of time together (fig. 6). Their accounts are filled with stories about local eateries, bad weather, and accidents (Box 3). They also contain valuable information regarding local geography, weather, and road surfaces and conditions (fig. 7). Sometimes roads are described simply as “good” or “miserable.” In other cases more detail is provided: “After struggling through 2 more miles of sand, we struck a very even road which we left at Bel Air road, and here I must say, though most of the boys were kicking part of the time about the sand, I think that all enjoyed the new country and new roads they went over, and believe them all ready to repeat the dose.” On another occasion, the riding log describes “a lovely spin on the Joppa road, which by the way is the most scientifically constructed road in this section of the country.” More commonly conditions took a toll on the wheelmen and their wheels: “[Will] . . . distinguished himself today by picking up all the loose punctures on the road. He counted and repaired nine and still had more to mend. By a vigorous and continuous use of the inflater, he arrived home in fair shape, and he is advised to advertise the healing qualities of the Victor single tube, and to put his tire on exhibition at the Baltimore Exposition 1897.”

**Box 2**  
“We start the new year with a bright future. Every indication points to the fact that we will maintain our superiority over the rest of the clubs, in riding, and average attendance. We are all equipped with new wheels, and physically in tip-top condition. Being thus equipped it will be our object to go over as much new territory, as the topography of the country, and the time at our disposal permit.”  
– 31 March 1895

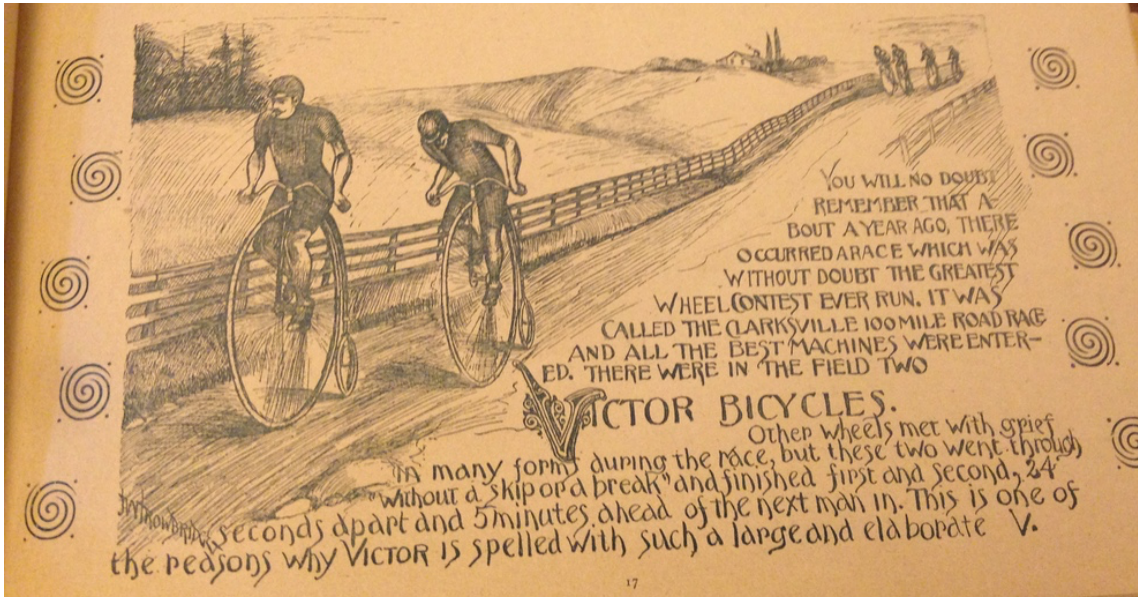


Fig. 6 – An advertisement for Victor Bicycles taken from the official program of the ninth annual meeting of the League of American Wheelmen in 1888. It is likely that members of the Thirteen Cycles Club rode bicycles such as these on their monthly excursions into the countryside.

**Box 3**  
“We took a turn around and Porter leading, Eck grabbed his coat tails to make him play horse. Watters then grabbed Eck, and the boss spurted up to grab Watters. Hoffman and I were close behind the boss and were about to hook on to him, when by the sudden turn of a handle bar, the boss just missed Watters and took another tumble, precipitating Hoffman and Shipley on top of him. After the smoke rolled away, the boss picked himself up and found he was bruised in several places.”  
– 23 February 1896

|  |     |       |   |   |         |
|--|-----|-------|---|---|---------|
| Route 9. Baltimore via Old Court Road July 1st |     |       |   |   |         |
| Rhodes Road                                    | 0   | 1     | 1 | 1 | Dephelt |
| Edmonds Rd                                     | 3/8 | 1 1/8 | 2 | 3 | Sand.   |
| Bellevue                                       | 3/8 | 1 1/8 | 2 | 3 | Rocky.  |
| Gwynn Falls                                    |     |       |   |   |         |

Fig. 7 – In addition to narrative descriptions of their rides members of the Thirteen Cycles Club maintained a detailed record of road conditions and surface types, including asphalt, clay, dirt, sand, and Belgian block.

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