

Primary Source: Bicycles and the Public ^[1]

By the late nineteenth century, the bicycle had become a popular mode of transportation. Over the course of the nineteenth century, inventors had tinkered with the basic design of the bicycle until it came to resemble the object we are now familiar with.

Earlier in the nineteenth century, bicycles were quite dangerous machines. They had a large front wheel and the rider sat high above the ground. If the rider hit a rock or bump, he could be thrown from the vehicle and on to the ground.

With the invention of the rubber tire and the development of lighter metals, the bicycle became more practical. The large front tire was replaced and inventors created a design that was fast, stable, safe, and relatively inexpensive.

The bicycle was a radical invention because it gave the rider individual freedom to travel independently at a fast pace. Previously, people had been restricted to horseback or horse-drawn wagons, but the bicycle was much more practical and affordable, especially for people in urban areas.

As bicycles became more and more common on the streets, they became more and more controversial. Riding at night required that cyclists carry a lantern, which did not necessarily make it easier for them to see at night and at times actually made it more difficult for them to see and control their bicycle. Pedestrians didn't appreciate the high-speed competition for the streets. Cyclists didn't always pay attention where they were going. Of course, there were accidents. And as you can see from these newspaper articles -- both published in Wilmington's Semi-Weekly Messenger in December of 1897 -- when people started arguing about whom to blame for an accident, race often made its way into the picture.

Another Bicycle Accident

Dr. T. B. Kingsbury, Run over and Badly Hurt, last Night, by a Colored Bicyclist. He will be Laid Up Several Days.

Another serious bicycle accident occurred last night at 8:30 o' clock at Sixth and Market streets, Dr. T. B. Kingsbury, editor of The Messenger, being the victim. He was run into by R. B. Reardon, the colored barber, and was badly hurt.

Dr. Kingsbury, the Rev. J. W. Craig and Mr. Craig's little daughter were returning from Market Street M. E. church, and when they got to the north-east corner of Sixth and Market streets, (St. Paul's Lutheran church) they started to cross Market street towards Mr. George Harriss' residence on the south-east corner. The little girl was between Dr. Kingsbury and her father, and they were holding her by each hand. Reardon came riding along at a good gait on Market street, on his way out, and when he came to the crossing he rang his bell. He was about twenty feet away from Dr. Kingsbury, who did not hear the wheel approaching and who did not have his spectacles on and could not see very well. When he saw the lamp of the wheel it blinded and confused him, and he hollowed to the wheelman: "Look out, you will run over us." He then turned the little girl's hand loose and jumped to the right. The bicycle was only twenty feet away and as the wheelman had turned to the left he saw the wheel was going to collide with the doctor. He, therefore, threw up his elbow and it struck Dr. Kingsbury, knocking him about eight feet to the hard paved street. Reardon and his wheel were violently overturned, but the wheelman got up, apologized to Dr. Kingsbury and tried to help him up. Dr. Kingsbury, however, was hurt so badly that he could not get up.

Mr. W. F. Robertson was on the street and went immediately to Dr. Kingsbury, and ex-Mayor W. N. Harriss, who resides across the street, having heard the noise of the collision, also came out. With the assistance of Reardon and Mr. Craig, Mrssrs. Harriss and Robertson got Dr. Kingsbury in a chair and carried him to the residence of ex-Mayor Harriss.

Dr. A.H. Harriss was telephoned and was soon on the spot, rendering relief. Dr. Kingsbury's right elbow was badly skinned and bruised, and his right hip and thigh were contused ^[2] and sprained. After receiving treatment, Dr. Kingsbury was placed in a carriage and at 9: 30 p.m. was taken to his home on South Third street, near Church street.

At last accounts last night he was in considerable pain, and especially when he moved, and he could not use his right leg. It seemed to be paralyzed, but no bones were broken.

Dr. Kingsbury says he cannot censure ^[3] the wheelman, as he could not see well enough to observe the approach of the wheel. He will be laid up several days, we fear.

The Bicycle

These are indeed parlous ^[4] times when it is dangerous for quiet, peaceable citizens to go about their daily business, to visit the sanctuaries of God, or to attend the social amenities ^[5] of life without being subjected to dangers often unavoidable. It is a singular circumstance, that all the five recent accident in the city from bicycle riding, were produced by negroes. We do not know, we do not suppose that in these instances of injury the riders deliberately purposed committing

the wrong. It would be very grievous ^[6] if this were the case. We write now for the purpose of making a point, and in order to do it we must make a personal reference to ourselves. In the accident that befell ^[7] us, as is known, we were crossing Market street with a friend, utterly oblivious ^[8] of the near presence of the cyclist engaged in a sort of John Gilpin race. We heard the bell and being next to the rider we turned facing him.

Now the point we wish to make is this: but for the ringing of that bell, we would never have been hurt. We were ignorant of the presence of the rider until the bell rang. But for the ringing of the bell we would have passed beyond the dangerous point before he could have reached us possibly, swiftly as he was riding. We are gratified ^[9] to hear that Ref. Dr. Hoge had a brief communication with the Messenger, suggesting that the bell be removed from the bicycle. Our late experience leads us to endorse ^[10] heartily this timely suggestion. If the bells were removed, the responsibility would be placed where it belongs, upon the men who ride bicycles. It has been suggested as we hear, by some one, that pedestrians hereafter in Wilmington carry a lantern, in order that the bicyclists may see the walkers and not run full tilt into them. Some men of fiercer temper and more pugnacious ^[11] bent might suggest, that in addition to the lantern, each pedestrian carry his revolver in his hand and when the knight of the bicycle, in spite of lantern, seems bent to make direct headlong into him, that Diogenes might pop away and make an example. Reckless riding had been carried already quite too far. In some cities, all riders are required to go at a very slow pace at crossings. We learn that in Philadelphia no one is allowed to ride more than six miles an hour, and all bicycles have breaks. IF breaks were required in Wilmington and the bells taken off, there would be less danger no doubt. We heard an experienced bicyclist say that he found the light he carried was sometimes blinding to him, so that he failed to discover the object ahead of him. Let the city regulations governing in this matter be strengthened and enforced.

All good citizens should feel it a duty to report all violations of the ordinance ^[12], without fear of favor. Recently we were going from our home to the office, after breakfast and while walking on Nun street between Third and Second, a stalwart ^[13] rider on a bicycle whirled by us to our great surprise and continued his rapid speed in all probability to Front street, keeping well in the side walk. HE had no bell and made no sound, and therefore he whizzed by us, without any knowledge on our part that he was in a hundred miles of us. IF he had rung his bell as he was riding so strangely on the side walk, we should have been alarmed and possibly would have striven to have gotten out of his way. We do not know the rider, nor do we know the two other violators of the city ordinance whom we have seen. Not very long since, a lady of this city at a special place, got out of the street car, and would probably have been killed on the spot, as a negro rider came swiftly close up to the car as she descended. A gentleman who took in the situation, promptly reached out and drew her back, but not in time to save her from a severe blow upon the ear which necessitated the service of a physician. This riding close to the car we have often observed and it ought not to be allowed here or in any city. A friend of ours, the very night after our own hurt, came extremely near being ridden over by a bicyclist and barely escaped by his own effort. Doubtless many such experiences could be ascertained ^[14] by injury. How long shall this continue?

Source Citations:

"Another Bicycle Accident." *The Semi-Weekly Messenger*, December 14, 1897. Chronicling America, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn91068367/1897-12-14/ed-1/seq-2/> ^[15]

"The Bicycle." *The Semi-Weekly Messenger*, December 17, 1897. Chronicling America, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn91068367/1897-12-17/ed-1/seq-2/> ^[16]

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[Ordinances of the Town of Washington, North Carolina](#) ^[31], 1903

**CHAPTER III.
STREETS AND PUMPS.**

Sec. 41. That no person or persons shall be allowed to use any of the sidewalks of the town for bicycle riding. The use of said sidewalks as above specified shall subject the offender to a fine of five dollars for each offense.

None of the streets of the town shall be used at night for bicycle riding unless the bicycle so ridden displays a signal light, and in addition is provided with signal bell, horn or whistle, by means of which all persons shall be made aware of the approach of the bicycle rider, by ringing the bell or repeated blast of the signal horn or whistle. Any violation of this provision shall subject the offender to a fine of two dollars and fifty cents (\$2.50). All persons, when using the streets for bicycle riding, shall, when turning the corner of the streets, ride very slowly and give notice of approach by ringing the signal bell or repeated blasts of the signal horn or whistle. Failing to comply with the requirements of this provision shall subject the offender to a fine of two dollars (\$2.00).

Artifacts:

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[15]

"Another Bicycle Accident" article as it was printed in Wilmington's Semi-Weekly Messenger. Click the image for a view of the entire newspaper page, courtesy of Library of Congress' Chronicling America.

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