



## The Cycling City: Bicycles and Urban America in the 1890s (Historical Studies of Urban America)

By Evan Friss

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Cycling has experienced a renaissance in the United States, as cities around the country promote the bicycle as an alternative means of transportation. In the process, debates about the nature of bicycles—where they belong, how they should be ridden, how cities should or should not accommodate them—have played out in the media, on city streets, and in city halls. Very few people recognize, however, that these questions are more than a century old.

*The Cycling City* is a sharp history of the bicycle's rise and fall in the late nineteenth century. In the 1890s, American cities were home to more cyclists, more cycling infrastructure, more bicycle friendly legislation, and a richer cycling culture than anywhere else in the world. Evan Friss unearths the hidden history of the cycling city, demonstrating that diverse groups of cyclists managed to remap cities with new roads, paths, and laws, challenge social conventions, and even dream up a new urban ideal inspired by the bicycle. When cities were chaotic and filthy, bicycle advocates imagined an improved landscape in which pollution was negligible, transportation was silent and rapid, leisure spaces were democratic, and the divisions between city and country were blurred. Friss argues that when the utopian vision of a cycling city faded by the turn of the century, its death paved the way for today's car-centric cities—and ended the prospect of a true American cycling city ever being built.

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**Editorial Review**

Review

“Friss has a good story to tell. In the late nineteenth century, bicycles were not just a sweet means of romantic transport—‘Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do,’ and all that—but a technological triumph creating fanatical followers and interest groups. The bicycle was more like a personal computer than like a love seat. . . . Friss is a demon researcher, and his book is full of revelatory facts.”

(Adam Gopnik *New Yorker*)

“An interesting and readable discussion of the bicycle’s role in the US in the 1890s. . . . Recommended.”

(*Choice*)

“Friss’s commendable book traces the rapid rise and equally precipitous decline of bicyclists’ influence on urban form during the late nineteenth century. His interdisciplinary study makes welcome contributions to environmental, urban, and cycling history and draws our attention to the inextricable ties among all three, in modern as well as historical contexts. Equally important, the work underscores opportunities for in-depth investigation of local history across a broad geographic region, a process revolutionized by access to old newspapers via the internet.”

(*Environmental History*)

“Friss’s *The Cycling City* deserves recognition as the definitive account of the 1890s bicycle ‘boom’ in the United States. . . . The book presents a story that deserves a wide readership, one that would benefit both academic and popular readers. . . . Combining exceptional research and clear-eyed analysis, Friss has produced an accessible yet authoritative account.”

(*Winterthur Portfolio*)

“Friss rejects as overly simplistic the standard explanation that motor vehicles replaced bicycles as a mode of transportation once cyclists abandoned their machines for motor vehicles, demonstrating persuasively that the vogue for cycling had already ended by the time that automobile registrations and sales began increasing. . . . Urban and cultural historians will find much of interest in this fine study.”

(*Journal of American History*)

“*The Cycling City* tells the story of an ephemeral city—half imagined, half real—a city of bicycles. Powering these new machines with their own muscles, Americans of the 1890s found that they could travel farther and faster than their legs alone would take them, in directions no streetcar tracks ran, through the city and into the countryside. Though sometimes ridiculous in their utopian pronouncements and their fashion choices, they understood the bicycle’s potential, and Friss has done important work in recovering their insights and their voices.”

(*Zachary M. Schrag, George Mason University*)

“As cyclists fight their way back onto the streets of American cities—they’ve had a prominent place in European cities forever—it is instructive and, yes, lots of fun, to travel back in time with Friss to the ‘cycling city’ of the 1890s and the moment in time when the bicycle offered New York’s wildly varied populations of natives and immigrants, men and women, boys and girls, the idly rich and working folk alike, a cheap,

healthy, efficient, effective, noiseless, pollution-free, and, in good weather, fun way to get to work and, when work was done, get out of town. Powerfully argued, beautifully composed, timely, and with some great photos, *The Cycling City* is history as it should be written.”

(David Nasaw, author of *The Patriarch: The Remarkable Life and Turbulent Times of Joseph P. Kennedy*)

“*The Cycling City* is a deeply researched and insightful study of the rise and fall of the bicycle as a critical factor in American urban transportation history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. At a time when the popularity of the bicycle is again sweeping the American city it would be wise for its proponents to ponder the lessons contained herein.”

(Joel A. Tarr, Carnegie Mellon University)

“Readers interested in bicycles, transportation history, and American urban development patterns will find this well-written and engaging book full of fascinating details and suggestive insights about the new urban possibilities that accompanied the 1890s bike craze.”

(Indiana Magazine of History)

About the Author

**Evan Friss** is assistant professor of history at James Madison University. He lives in Virginia with his wife and two sons.

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