

Bicycles: Scourge of the streets?

The Semi-Weekly Messenger (Wilmington, N.C.), 14 December 1897 and 17 December 1897.

As you read...

Women's freedom was not the only controversy raised by bicycling. Cyclists didn't always pay attention where they were going. Pedestrians didn't appreciate the high-speed competition for the streets. Of course, there were accidents. And as you can see from this newspaper article, when people started arguing about whom to blame for an accident, race entered into the picture.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. According to this newspaper article, what happened the night Dr. Kingsbury was hit by a bicyclist?
2. In the first newspaper story, we learn that the rider was a "colored" barber. Why does this matter to the editor or to his readers?
3. How do you think this might have unfolded if the rider had also been white, or if the man he hit had been African American?
4. Do you think this was an accurate representation of the events? Do you suspect any bias or exaggeration on the part of the newspaper editor?
5. What was the problem with bicycles?
6. What solutions had been tried by the city of Wilmington? By other cities?
7. What does this newspaper editor believe is the solution to the problem of bicycle riders?
8. The editor writes that all bicycle accidents in Wilmington were caused by African American riders. Why might a white Southern man be upset at the image of black men riding through the streets of Wilmington, supposedly knocking white people over in the streets?

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.

The Semi-Weekly Messenger (Wilmington, N.C.), Tuesday, 14 December 1897

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 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 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.

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The Bicycle

The Semi-Weekly Messenger (Wilmington, N.C.), Tuesday, 17 December 1897

These are indeed parlous 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 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 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 us, as is known, we were crossing Market street with a friend, utterly oblivious of the near presence of the cyclist engaged in a sort of John Gilpin race¹. 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 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 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 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 Diogenes² 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 breaks³. 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, 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 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 by inquiry. How long shall this continue?

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Notes

1. John Gilpin was the subject of an eighteenth-century poem (see <http://www.learnnc.org><http://www.bartleby.com/41/324.html>) in which he becomes separated from his wife and children on a journey, loses control of his horse, and is carried on for several miles, unable to stop.
2. Diogenes was a Greek philosopher of the fourth century BCE. He is said to have walked through the streets of Athens carrying a lamp in the daytime, claiming to be looking for an honest man.
3. This was the original spelling of “brakes.”