

**Pedaling Toward Freedom: How the Invention of the Bicycle  
Transformed Women's Lives**

Mackenzie Walker

Senior Division

Paper

Word Count: 1,814

Process Paper Word Count: 435

## Process Paper

This year's theme focuses on *Revolution, Reaction, Reform in History*, which prompted me to analyze the diverse ways change can occur. Revolutions are not limited only to wars and political movements; things such as everyday innovations can also provoke a powerful shift in society. This perspective helped me develop an interest in how smaller advancements spark societal transformation and influenced me to research the significance of the bicycle in women's lives. Furthermore, I chose this topic as I wanted to take a deeper look into the limitations women endured in the past and examine an invention that gave women's lives a brighter future. Ultimately, I landed on the bicycle as I learned it was far more than just a form of transportation, but it allowed women to gain more freedom and independence, which challenged conventional societal norms.

I began my research by expanding my knowledge of the bicycle itself. This consisted of who invented it, how it was developed, and its first intentional uses. Once I grasped the basic concept, I transitioned to women's first encounters with cycling, along with the public's response. From there, I dug deeper into the larger impacts the bicycle had on women's lives, such as dress code modification, increased freedom, and greater community involvement. During this process, I relied on a vast number of primary sources, including interviews, newspapers, books, and magazines, to help me understand authentic viewpoints and women's experiences during that time.

After conducting my research, I wrote my paper and made sure to divide it into categories that clearly displayed the areas I delved into. Similar to my research, these categories consisted of early interactions with women's cycling experiences, societal expectations of women's clothing, and independence brought by bicycling. This format made it easier to

demonstrate the significance of a single invention. I reviewed my paper to verify that my thoughts were coherent and well-structured, while also confirming that each section of my paper reinforced my argument.

The bicycle was more than just a means of travel, as it emerged as a symbol of liberty and self-reliance for women. Beyond that, its impact challenged societal expectations and evolved women's apparel. This topic is significant in history because it indicates how small developments can leave a legacy. The bicycle highlights how revolutions and reformations do not always originate from major events, but that they can begin through ordinary innovations that break traditional norms and provide new opportunities. By assessing the bicycle's significance, we can see how a basic everyday invention helped women build inner strength, assert their control, and alter community practices, leaving an everlasting imprint on society.

## **Pedaling Toward Freedom: How the Invention of the Bicycle Transformed Women's Lives**

The early 19th century was a period of rapid transformation and revolution. Among many innovations, the bicycle had a significant impact on society. What originally began as a simple, steerable two-wheeled machine rapidly developed, eventually having an unintended impact on women's daily lives. German inventor Karl von Drais conceived the first bicycle in 1817, during a time of rapid technological and industrial growth. What began as a simple piece of exercise equipment, ultimately had a profound impact on societal norms. By the late 1800s, the latest ideas helped create advancements, leading to the development of the safety bicycle. This design introduced protective measures in cycling such as equal-sized wheels and a chain-driven pedal system, making the safety bicycle much safer and easier to ride than the original model.

Before bicycles were invented, women had limited freedom regarding transportation. Although walking or riding horses was an option of transportation at the time, bicycles allowed women to travel longer distances more efficiently than had previously been possible. Women in cities took advantage of the smoother roads to attend cycling groups and social gatherings, while women in rural environments also gained mobility, even if longer distances and rougher roads made it more challenging. Women also had to comply with many restrictions, such as following societal norms and conventional standards of dress. As times evolved, heavy skirts and restrictive garments were replaced by practical clothing, a shift that was accelerated by the rise of cycling. Aside from transportation, the bicycle became a symbol of personal freedom, empowerment, and societal evolution. Women who rode bicycles were able to explore communities, make their own decisions, and even participate in clubs that advocated for certain rights, such as suffrage and temperance. Through independent travel, bicycles enabled women to

participate in advocacy in ways that walking or relying on male escorts would have made challenging. The bicycle redefined women's lives, expanding their independence and allowing them to partake in social reform movements. Even though these movements may have developed eventually, cycling made it easier for women to get involved and be more active in public life as they were able to travel on their own to meetings and events. These changes marked steps toward a more equal society.

### **Women's First Encounters with Bicycles**

As the safety bicycle became a growing innovation, many women welcomed this new form of transportation with open arms, viewing it as a new and intriguing development that would allow them to have a more active and freer lifestyle. However, the first experiences of women cycling were met with mixed reactions, while some honored the practical invention, many men disapproved claiming it was entirely immodest. A common belief during this time was that women should appear proper and demure, but the safety bicycle challenged this approach, as it allowed women to display independence and physical capability. In 1894 *The Daily Gazette*, reprinted a piece from the *New York Tribune* that stated, "There is a good deal of talk...adverse to the use of the bicycle by women. The charge that it is immodest...is not deserving of serious attention" (Askins). This statement displays how society critically judged those who chose to ride a bicycle as it appeared unladylike, showing how societal norms created hardships for women.

The first female riders had to endure judgment from a vast number of people who considered them improper. These initial encounters helped women develop a greater sense of determination and self-confidence as they continued riding despite the public criticism they were facing. Cycling clubs started to surface, establishing safe environments for women to connect

and encourage one another. These clubs not only provided support but also normalized women's presence in public spaces, challenging societal norms that limited women to the home. The *Auckland Star Newspaper* referenced the first ladies' bicycle club that was created in 1892: "A numerously attended meeting of ladies interested in cycling was held in Christ-church last week, when it was resolved to form a ladies' bicycle club, to be called the Atlanta Cycling Club" (*Auckland Star*). These communities contributed to the acceptance of women's involvement in everyday life and slowly began to defy traditional gender roles by encouraging leadership roles in clubs and allowing women to ride together publicly, highlighting how women could lead and partake in positions that were traditionally male-dominated. Women's first experiences with bicycles were not focused on learning how to use them; it was about rewriting a future that embraced and validated women.

### **Shifts in Women's Clothing for Female Cyclists**

The rise of the bicycle provoked a revision of female apparel, as it became apparent that women's current clothing was not compatible with cycling. Even as the shift towards less restrictive clothing was beginning, long skirts, dresses, and corsets still limited mobility and caused severe hazards when riding. The growing popularity of bicycles drew more attention to these challenges which motivated women to discover new clothing that integrated functionality while also receiving public approval.

Ranked among the most significant changes was the development of bloomers. First introduced in the 1850s, they gained popularity later in the century due to their convenience for activities such as cycling. Bloomers were a relaxed-fit pair of trousers often worn under shorter skirts that enhanced the mobility of women when riding the bicycle. Soon, many women began to advocate for this type of clothing, even as critics described it as unfeminine for women to

wear. In the *New York World* Interview, journalist Nellie Bly spoke with Susan B. Anthony, where Anthony expressed her opinions about the trending topic, “It is as I have said... dress to suit the occasion. A woman does not want to wear skirts and flimsy lace to catch in the wheel. Safety, as well as modesty demands bloomers or extremely short skirts” (Bly). Her remarkable words showed how bicycle attire was not supposed to be just a fashion choice, but it was essential for safe riding.

In 1881, Lady Florence Harberton founded the Rational Dress Society in London. Harberton was an avid cyclist and became an advocate of exercise and functional clothing for women at the time. In one of her speeches, which was later reprinted in the *Rational Dress Gazette*, Harberton announced, “No one is free who is unable at least to have the unrestricted use of her own limbs, and woman’s present appearance is the perpetual expression of this fact, and of her abject acquiescence in a humiliating position” (Pomeroy), emphasizing Harberton’s thoughts as she believed women’s clothing symbolized their lack of independence. She took the controversy over cycling fashion a step further by personally designing her own cycling attire, including the divided skirt. This skirt appeared as an ordinary skirt from the outside, but it concealed the trousers hidden underneath. Even though Lady Florence Harberton faced injustice for wearing her skirt, her perseverance helped show many women that they have a choice. A choice to embrace what they wear and as a result, have more freedom.

### **Social Independence and Mobility**

While the bicycle has marked many turning points in women’s lives, the most important shift was how women experienced their day-to-day lives. Before cycling existed, the societal norm left women relying on men to transport them, whether that meant taking them to run errands, visit friends or just simply get around. The bicycle presented a new form of liberty,

allowing women to get around on their own. A minor change in travel marked a shift in women's roles and societal expectations. For the first time, many women could travel independently, covering longer distances more efficiently than walking, horseback riding, or even using trolleys without being monitored by men. This new mobility gave women unprecedented control over their daily lives and a sense of personal freedom. In 1896, Susan B. Anthony expressed her views about having this power when she was interviewed by *The New York World*. By stating that bicycling "has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world" (Bly). Anthony linked women's mobility to independence, self-sufficiency and equity.

To add to Anthony and her insights, Frances E. Willard, who was a major American social reformer and leader in women's suffrage movements, conveyed her similar views about what cycling symbolized for women. In 1895, Willard authored a book called *A Wheel Within a Wheel*. By stating that "she who succeeds in gaining mastery of the bicycle will gain the mastery of life" (Willard 28), Willard suggested that the bicycle served as more than simple functionality, but it helped women build the courage and self-esteem that they needed to fight for their freedom. Her book quickly grew popular, and it inspired many women by emphasizing liberty and public change for women's roles.

Women continued using bicycles to become more involved in community and public matters as increased mobility enabled them to attend social events, campaigns, and meetings on their own. Advocates of women's suffrage, including Nellie Bly and Susan B. Anthony, carried on promoting cycling, connecting the ability to ride with women's growing independence and engagement in social and political life. *Puck Magazine* created a cartoon entitled "*New Woman and Her Bicycle – There Will be Several Varieties of Her*". This cartoon highlighted the "New Woman" in the center, wearing bloomers, surrounded by many women also riding bicycles with

different occupations. It was an image designed to represent how women were “moving ahead” in society, while also reflecting the resistance they faced, as satire often mocked women who challenged traditional gender roles. The bicycle served as a clear symbol of women’s rising independence, displaying that they were ready to take on the world by themselves and alter the perceptions of what it meant to be a woman.

### **Conclusion**

The invention of the bicycle did much more than just change transportation. For women specifically, it was a breakthrough that redefined how they viewed themselves and how society perceived them. What began as simply a two-wheel exercise machine emerged as a powerful means of transport that helped women obtain self-reliance, leadership, and independence. What started as a challenge with being criticized and judged, became a turning point, as women joined clubs and adopted functional attire. Women established control over their own lives and received a declaration of freedom. Reformers such as Susan B. Anthony, Lady Florence Harberton, and Frances E. Willard all helped contribute to this drastic revolution in history.

While current modes of transportation have advanced well beyond the safety bicycle, its influence remains. The basic action of women riding bikes without restriction showed that equity and justice can begin in the smallest ways. The bicycle offered far more than just mere mobility; it set women in motion and carried them towards freedom. It became a permanent representation of tenacity, bravery, and forward movement, conveying to future generations that all progress and strides towards independence starts with one small step, or pedal forward.

## Annotated Bibliography

### Primary Sources

“Auckland Star.” Papers Past, National Library of New Zealand, 3 September 1892.

<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/AS18920903.2.66.17.8#image-tab>

This primary newspaper source shows how women began organizing and participating in public life through women’s cycling clubs. I used this source in my section regarding women’s first encounters with bicycles to show that, even though women faced social challenges, they were actively building supportive communities. This source is valuable because it highlights the growing acceptance of women’s involvement in everyday life.

Bly, Nellie. “Champion of Her Sex: Miss Susan B. Anthony Tells the Story of Her Remarkable Life to ‘Nellie Bly.’” *The World*, 2 February 1896. Rare Newspapers.

<https://www.rarenewspapers.com/view/621269?acl=851761768&imagelist=1>

This primary newspaper source helps explain how Susan B. Anthony advocated for suffrage. I referenced it in my paper to illustrate how individuals like Anthony who demonstrated courage worked hard to challenge societal norms and move women’s rights forward. It is significant because it offers a perspective on women’s experiences while fighting for equality.

Keppler, Joseph. “The ‘New Woman’ and Her Bicycle – There Will Be Several Varieties of Her.”

*Puck Magazine* 37, 19 June 1895. Library of Congress.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2012648801/>

This cartoon illustrates the impact that bicycles had on women’s lives and the changing roles they experienced. It helped me explain how bicycles gave women more independence and greater participation in public life. It is important because it shows how society viewed the changing role of women and the rise of the “New Woman” in society.

Willard, Frances E. *A Wheel Within a Wheel: How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle, with Some Reflections by the Way*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1895. Internet Archive. <https://archive.org/details/wheelwithinwheel02rade/page/1/mode/1u>

This is a reliable source as it is a primary account by the woman cyclist, Frances E. Willard. I used it to show how women riding bicycles symbolized independence and freedom. This source is valuable because it helps explain how women experienced empowerment.

## Secondary Sources

Askins, Alice. "As Modest on a Wheel as in a Drawing Room: Female Bicyclists in the 1890s." Historic Geneva, 28 April 2017. <https://historicgeneva.org/recreation/female->

This is a secondary source written by historian Alice Askins. I used it in my paper to show how society viewed women cyclists in the 1890s and to understand the social challenges and criticism women faced while gaining independence through cycling. It is significant because it provides context about social attitudes and how it shaped women's experiences.

Pomeroy, Florence Wallace, Viscountess Harberton. "Statement on Dress Reform, June 1898." Generalist Academy, 6 December 2021. <https://generalist.academy/2021/12/06/rational-dress/>

This is a secondary source. I used it to show women's efforts to reform restrictive clothing and to understand how dress reform was connected to women's independence and mobility. It is valuable because it highlights the struggles women faced in challenging social norms and how restrictive clothing affected their daily lives.