

What Once Was Washington's First Bicycle Craze: 'Cycling in the 1880s and 1890s

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By **Matthew B. Gilmore***

A daredevil bicyclist riding his enormous two-wheeler down the Capitol's House-side east front steps — it's a famous image everyone recognizes. Any work even casually mentioning bicycles in Washington will refer to it; it's been on the cover of [books about Washington](#), but there's much more to the story — of the photograph itself, of the event, of the 1890s bicycle craze in Washington it represented.



"A Perilous Ride" photograph taken by the Platt Brothers of Nantucket (and Washington DC), 1884. photo-Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Div..

The image in question is a cabinet card titled "A Perilous Ride" taken by the Platt Brothers of Nantucket (and Washington, then at 1116 12th St., NW). The only date is indicated by the 1884 copyright date. Why is this image so famous? What kind of contraption was he riding? Who were the Platt brothers? Who was the rider?

Technology—American Star Bicycle

The American Star was a tremendous advance in bicycle technology — with the position of the large and small wheels reversed. As described by

Robert Cobcroft in his "[Velo Aficionado](#)" blog (the 1885 date noted should read as 1884), "This unusual bicycle features the reverse arrangement of the well-known penny farthing design in that the small wheel is at the front and the large one at the back. It is propelled by a system of treadles and is called the American Star. It was an attempt to make the penny farthing a safer and steadier machine and was achieved by the rider sitting further back over the rear wheel which meant that falling forwards over the handle bars, called a header, was prevented."

The Builder and Wood-Worker, glowingly described it in 1881:

"... the invention of Mr. G.W. Pressey, of Hammonton, N. J., ... is radically different in construction from the old and "accepted" style of bicycle. Mr. Pressey has based his new departure upon the principles of health, safety and convenience and an examination and test of his new plan bicycle, as compared with the older styles, will be convincing as to the soundness of these principles and the advantages of the new system.

"Among these advantages may be summed up the following:

"The carrying wheel is held firmly in line by the frame, so the push of the rider does not throw it out of its course.

"The small steering wheel being in front, serves as a brace to prevent the momentum of the rider throwing him forward when the wheels are stopped or partly stopped by any

obstruction, so it can be ridden safely even over logs six or eight inches in thickness.

"It steers and can be turned quickly, as the push of the rider does not affect the steering wheel, while in turning, a brace is formed on the outside of the circle. It is easily mounted or dismounted. The step being at the side near the saddle, the rider steps easily to and from his seat, instead of climbing up from behind as he must do with the crank machine.

"There is no bone shaking, both wheels being furnished with fine elastic springs, which add much to the comfort of the rider.

"It is easy to handle and control, and can be used by ladies in ordinary costume, while the machine is adjustable to the size of the rider, and the latter does not have to fit the machine as in the case of the old styled bicycle. ...

"The 'American Star,' by the use of levers and clutches, has a continuous power, which turns the wheel entirely around with the same motion and exertion required to move the crank one-half around the old machine, enabling the rider to go faster and easier with the same amount of labor, at the same time giving independent action of the levers, the rider pushing with one foot or both, at pleasure, or setting with foot resting on pedals, which do not move unless he moves them. The name of "Star " is given this bicycle on account of the peculiar arrangement of the wire spokes, which form a double star at the center. . . ." [1]

Compared to the penny-farthing bicycles which preceded them, American Stars were light and nimble.

The manual contained Pressey's own account of how he developed the bicycle. He was inspired by the troubles his son Burt had with his velocipede and he worried he might end up with only one son rather than two. By 1880 he had a product, but subject to continually modifying and improving it. He pointed with pride to his son's accomplishments racing using an American Star.

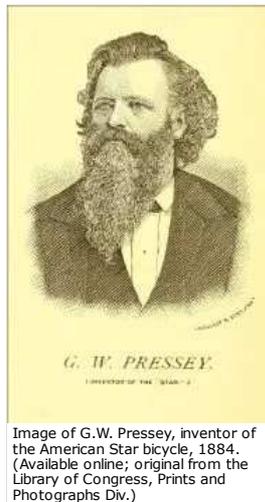


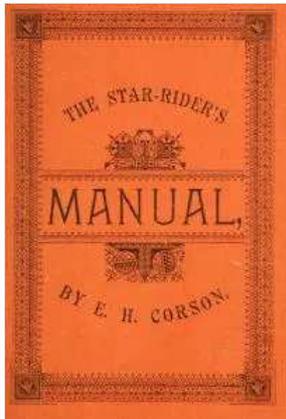
Image of G.W. Pressey, inventor of the American Star bicycle, 1884. (Available online; original from the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Div.)

The manual itself contained a good deal of valuable information for the American Star owner, beginning with "Learning to Ride," immediately followed by "Learning to Fall"! Then followed with the other elements of riding — mounting, dismounting, balancing, etc. With these mastered there was a section on "Fancy Riding," describing a variety of tricks. Of the 32 tricks listed the manual stated, "Mr. Pressey is the author, and the only one that can perform this full list of feats on the Star, at this date." [2] The American Star was intended as a recreational vehicle and there were two chapters of sage advice and tips on touring with the bicycle.

Photographers—Platt Brothers

Despite the fame of this particular photograph, the Platt Brothers are rather obscure. Henry C. (Harry) Platt was the prime mover in the photographic business. He had two brothers, Jacob and Robert. It is likely that Robert was the other brother in "Platt Brothers." The family was from Augusta, Georgia but Harry and Robert moved north. Robert lived in Washington, DC. Harry lived in Nantucket, perhaps moving there around the time of this photograph in 1884 — the Nantucket address appears to be an addition to the cabinet card, printed over the Washington, DC address.

Henry was a popular photographer in Nantucket and a



Cover of the *Star-Rider's Manual* by E.L. Corson, 1884.

photographic innovator, having obtained a patent for an improved camera shutter in 1892.

But Harry Platt did not live long enough to take much advantage of his patent, dying in 1895, just 44 years old. Brother Robert in Washington, DC left photography for engineering equipment sales and died in 1937.

Riding the Steps Challenge



Rendering of the American Star bicycle (plain) from the *Star-Rider's Manual*.

Riding down the steps of the United States Capitol was one of the challenges which was simply "because it's there."

The 1883 history of the Capital Bicycle Club in *The Wheelman* recounts Herbert (Bert) Owen riding

down the Senate side steps on an "ordinary 54-inch machine [bicycle]." No images of this feat seem to exist, leaving the Platt image as the first (perhaps) of a bicyclist going down the Capitol steps.

The "daring feat" of riding down the Capitol steps would be repeated, again and again, after this image was taken on a whole variety of bicycles (and by a unicycle rider — unsuccessfully in 1893). The challenge was simply irresistible. Everyone in Washington, the United States (and around the world) knew the Capitol. Everyone could imagine the challenge. Usually it was the east front steps but a decade later, in 1893, one-legged Charles Kirkpatrick rode down the west front steps, a distance about twice that of the east front. The feat was unannounced so only a few spectators witnessed it, as reported by the *Washington Post* on April 19, 1893. And it was not just in Washington that bicyclists were daring the steps of public buildings, but across the country as well.

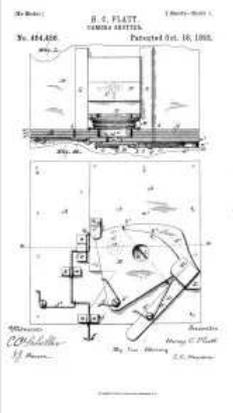


Image from Henry C. Platt camera shutter patent, 1892.

Capturing the Image

On May 19, 1884 the League of American Wheelmen (LAW) held its annual gathering in Washington — eagerly anticipated, as evidenced by coverage in the *Evening Star*.

The program included a testimonial to the safety of the American Star bicycle by Rex Smith: "There is always a feeling of safety riding the Star, and even the feat of coasting down the Capitol (H. of R.) steps, although supposed to be extremely hazardous, I do not consider very dangerous." [3] This rather blithe, off-hand wave was just one of eight testimonials to the American Star in the program, but probably the most impressive.

Rex Smith was not the star (so to speak) of the "Perilous Ride" image. He is the wheelman at the top of the steps waiting for his turn. Eighteen-year-old clerk Will Robertson was the man descending the steps on his American Star.

It seems likely that Robertson and Smith would have been prompted by the upcoming LAW event to do some showboating (so to speak). The photograph of Robertson's feat, was published. (Being in the collections of the Library of Congress it is easily accessible and frequently reprinted.) There exists a similar photograph of Rexford Smith coming down the same steps shortly after completion of Robertson's ride.



W.I. Lincoln Adams, "Instantaneous Photography" in *Outing*, an illustrated monthly magazine of sport, travel, and recreation. (Vol. 15, Oct. 1889-Mar. 1890.)

Curiously, there exists a third photograph of yet another wheelman coming down the same steps. This clearly is not Smith (no moustache); it does not look much like Robertson either. Even more curious, the position of the shadows for cyclist and the elaborate lamp behind him seem to indicate it was taken earlier in the morning than "Perilous Ride."

But there is a long-overlooked, published, origin story for what we have to assume is "Perilous Ride." In 1884 *The Photographic Times and American Photographer* published a brief

article by Harry Platt. Entitled "Rapid Instantaneous Work," it described how the Platt Brothers came to photograph wheelmen coasting down the United States Capitol steps:

"Early last April, the firm of Platt Brothers, of which I am a member, learned that two noted bicyclists of Washington, D.C., Messrs. Smith and Robertson, had ridden bicycles of the American Star pattern down the long marble steps of the east front of the United States Capitol building, and with the information came word that if a photograph could be taken they would repeat the dangerous feat. [Emphasis added.]"



Unknown cyclist descending the Capitol east front steps, 1884. (From *I Love To Make The Dirt Fly*, a biography of Carl G. Fisher 1874-1939. (Carl Hungness Publishing, www.carlhungness.com/fisher.html)

After a failed attempt producing a blurred image due to slow shutter speed, the second attempt succeeded.

". . . we had what several noted photographers at the head of the fraternity in America pronounce to be two of the most remarkable instantaneous negatives they have seen; in one, the machine is actually in the air, as it jumped for step. . . ."

Platt was pleased enough with the product to give it the title and sell it. What has gone unnoted is that those photographs were posed recreations of the actual initial descents down the steps.

There is at least one other Platt Brothers Washington DC American Star bicycle image. The rarely seen "Close Quarters" is another cabinet card published by the Platt Brothers in 1884. What's happening is unclear at first glance; it shows men playing bicycle polo. Tellingly this has no "Nantucket" stamp. It is an interesting image to the historians of bicycling, but would not be widely marketable.

The *National Republican* newspaper reported in its August 12, 1884 issue on such bicycle polo games — both one-on-one and two-on-two. Will Robertson and Rexford Smith would



The rarely seen "Close Quarters" is another cabinet card published by the Platt Brothers in 1884. photo—Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Div..

compete against each other then each with a teammate. (Note, also, the fifth bicycle leaning against the fence.) The games were held in Harrison's Star Bicycle Park at 14th Street and New York Avenue, NW, an empty lot

directly across from the **YMCA, which at the time** was housed in the old Chamberlain Clubhouse 1409-11 New York Avenue. This is likely the location where this photograph was taken. The polo competitions continued through the summer and in August, Smith and Robertson competed best in three out of five games.

Washington's Bicycle Craze

The Capital Bicycle Club (C.Bi.C.) was founded on January 31, 1879 by Frank G. Wood, Max Hansmann, Fred D. Owen, L.P. Einolf, Herbert S. Owen, Louis N. Jesunofsky, and (the younger) Charles Krauskopf. **[4]**

Early feats included a 100-mile race in downtown Washington in 1879 which followed a tight triangular route up 14th Street from K to Thomas Circle, down Vermont Avenue back to K, and over to 14th, and repeating for a total of 100 miles. The winner completed his laps in 10 hours, dismounting only once. Quite a feat, considering the bicycle technology of the day. But the following year the race was confined to Thomas Circle.

In 1883 *The Wheelmen* was praising Washington's streets with extravagant gusto:

"Washington has always has been called 'the city of magnificent distances.' The stranger tourist finds it so . . . but to the wheelman, tourist, or native, the name loses much, if not all, of its significance, because the distance is so completely lost in the superlative magnificence of its broad, asphalt paved streets. The home of the Capital [Bicycle] Club, therefore, has earned another name . . . 'the bicycler's paradise.'"

The Capital Bicycle Club, Washington's first, founded in 1879, disbanded in 1911. Its prominent members kept the memory of its glory days bright, however. Surviving members able to travel to Washington held a 50-year anniversary reunion at the Cosmos Club in 1929. As reported by the *Evening Star* on February 3, 1929, they recalled the heady days "when bicycle riding was popular."

C.Bi.C. was the pioneering club but there were others, including the Washington Cycle Club, the Century Club, and the Park Cycle Club. The national organization, the League of American Wheelmen (LAW), established itself in Washington too, led by Washington Cycle Club men. C.Bi.C. was the most self-conscious about itself, publishing a lengthy history of itself after only five years in existence. It was composed of prominent (or in due course prominent) men in various fields of science, the press, and real estate. Some more obscure clubs — the Chain and Sprocket Club, the Levant Wheelmen, Cross Country, and Spoke and Hub Clubs — caught the attention of the *Star* on August 28, 1897. Georgetown had its own Club, Georgetown Cycle Club, at least briefly; **Georgetown Courant** newspaper publisher Frank Wissner was a member (*Post* July 11, 1893).

In its edition of December 8, 1897, the *Star* reported on the enactment by the District Commissioners of amended traffic regulations to include bicycles. It had been relatively quick work — the District's hack inspector sought the added regulations in his annual report published a few months prior.

The Capital Bicycle Club had offered three basic rules for bicycle behavior as far back as 1879. As reported by the *Post* on July 4th of that year, these were: keep to the right, use lights in the dark, and use warning alarms (bells) when approaching other traffic. Now, 20 years later club representatives met with District Commissioner Maj. Bradley about concerns over excessive bicycle speed and gave the major a copy of the club rules.

With the advent of automobiles at the turn of the century, the craze for bicycles had passed and the bicycle clubs shrank and disappeared.

Rexford Smith, the second cyclist, transitioned from bicycles to airplanes — much like the Wright brothers. In 1910 Smith was the first Washingtonian to build and successfully fly an airplane and went on to manufacture them in College Park. He died in 1923. Will Robertson would end up a civil servant in the Panama Canal Zone. He died in Florida in 1936.



Photographer Harry Platt standing in the doorway of his store on Nantucket Island, most likely on Centre Street (ca. 1880s). photo-image #P14431—courtesy Nantucket Historical Association.

Acknowledgements

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Footnotes

[1] *The Builder and Wood-Worker*, September 1881, cited in Robert Cobcroft, "American Star Bicycle Will Robertson pedals down the steps of the United States Capitol in 1885" ([Velo Aficionado blog](#).)

[2] E.L. Corson, *Star-Rider's Manual*, page 332 (1884).

[3] League of American Wheelmen. "Programme" (annual meeting, May 20, 1884, Washington, DC).

[4] "Bicycle Riding in the District Runs Back Quite a Number of Years" ([Wheels to Bikes blog](#), Sat., April 7, 2018). [Note: I suggest that the younger Krauskopf is more likely to have been part of C.Bi.C. He is not listed in the City Directory but is in the U.S. Census for Washington, DC.]

References and Resources

See resource list published on author's [Washington DC History blog](#).

Matthew B. Gilmore is the editor of the H-DC discussion list and blogs on Washington history and related subjects at matthewbgilmore.wordpress.com. Previously, he was a reference librarian at the Washingtoniana Division of the DC Public Library for a number of years and chaired the Annual Conference on DC Historical Studies for four years.

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