

# Thomasville and the Bicycle Craze of the 1890s

BY WILLIAM WARREN ROGERS AND  
ROBERT HOLLADAY

Had General William T. Sherman made a hard right turn (geographically, not politically) outside Atlanta instead of heading to the beach in Savannah, it is likely that Thomasville's emergence as a preeminent destination for Yankee sportsmen and those seeking a healthy milieu for their various ailments would have been somewhat delayed. Thomas County's seat of government would have presented a different picture for northern capitalists had it been surrounded by charred buildings and twisted railroad rails. Instead, that fate befell Columbus and Milledgeville.

Thomasville, on the other hand, escaped the war largely unscathed. Providence seemingly continued to favor the small town in southwest Georgia. Sportsmen and nature lovers—and their money—began to arrive later in the 19th century.

What drew them? Maybe the amazing abundance of the medium-sized, brown-speckled bob white quail, well known for its melodic anthem of "Bob, Bob, White." The bird is a wry and worthy opponent of sportsmen, difficult to bring down and unsurpassed for taste.

Some visitors and winter residents came to Thomasville for health reasons. They believed that the pine-scented air held the promise of physical improvement.

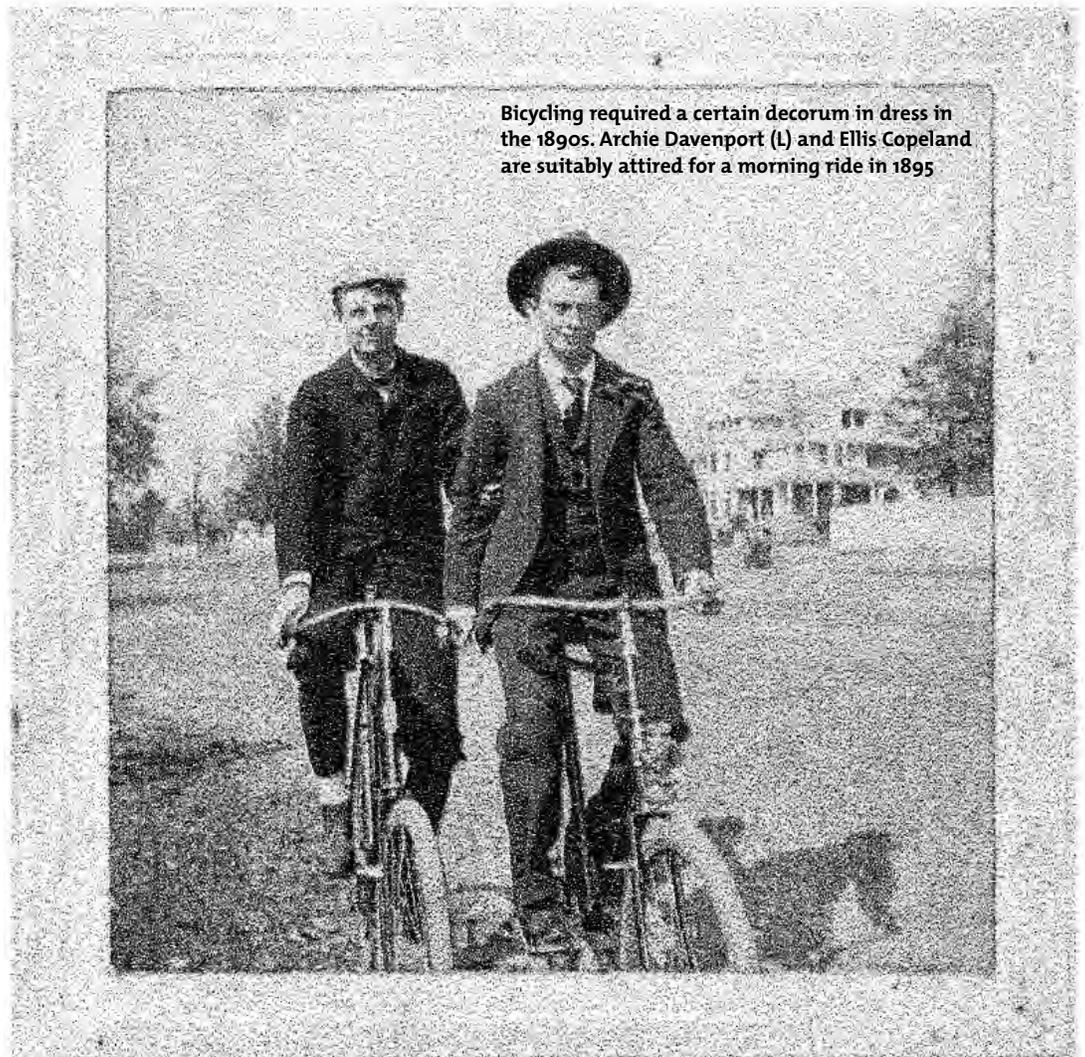
Many of those who made Thomasville their destination were from Northern and Midwestern states. Some built fine houses, even plantations, while others contented themselves by boarding for several months during the "season." Architecturally imposing hotels rose, well-appointed carriages traversed the dirt streets, and Thomasville, formerly unassuming, took on a distinctly vibrant air in the 1880s.

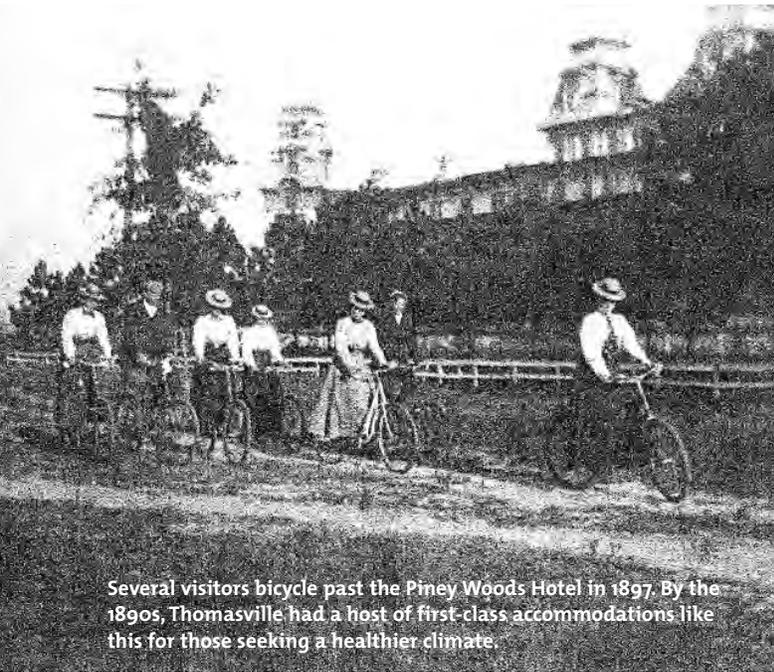
And it was in this setting that men and women, the

temporary sojourner and the bedrock resident alike, enthusiastically embraced a new mode of transportation called the bicycle.

The origin of the bicycle is uncertain. China makes a claim that goes back to 2330 B.C. Advocates also put forth prehistoric claims for Babylonia, Egypt, and Pompeii. And one of Leonardo da Vinci's students made a sketch that bears a striking resemblance to a modern bicycle.

Over the years, the bicycle evolved with added refinements and improvements. In the United States, the Velocipede was distinguished by its high (four feet) wheels. But it was through the Standard Safety bicycle of the 1880s that today's familiar cycle dates its ancestry. The Safety bike had two wheels the size





Several visitors bicycle past the Piney Woods Hotel in 1897. By the 1890s, Thomasville had a host of first-class accommodations like this for those seeking a healthier climate.

of modern bicycles and kept adding improvements such as pedals and easier steering. This bicycle was commonly seen in Thomasville.

The League of American Wheelmen, a nationwide bicycle club formed in 1880 in Newport, Rhode Island, had 180,000 members by 1890. Enthusiasts discovered that the bicycle served any number of purposes. It was functional in the sense that one could ride a bike to a destination. And its recreational value in a day when exercise opportunities were limited was also undeniable.

Francis Willard, the tireless and combative temperance reformer, even attributed to the bicycle a “moral force.” She claimed that bicycling reduced the number of drunkards because riders had a good time without using stimulants. She was also convinced that men could free themselves from smoking by biking. Her theories were open to question, but the future of the bicycle was not.

It was inevitable that the two-wheeled form of transportation would come south, and to Thomasville. Men and women contributed to bicycling’s phenomenal popularity in Thomas County. For any number of reasons—utilitarian, sport, or simple pleasure—bicycles immediately became popular. It was a natural fit for guests searching for relaxation, restoration, and pleasure in a warm and varied setting. In 1886 a local resident wrote in the *Thomasville Times*, “This mode of transportation is growing in popularity everywhere.”

Those smitten by bicycling placed orders at W.F. Moss’s general store, which sold the American Star, American Standard, and American Safety bicycles. Making concessions to the increasingly ubiquitous bikes, Thomasville built wide pathways, trails and circular tracks linked to the town’s network of existing roads. The mule and horse were not displaced and presumably suffered no identity crisis. Even so, the bicycle, new and exciting, had arrived.

Bicycling was not, constitutionally speaking, for everyone. And some could not afford one. In the 1890s, the average

retail price was \$75 to \$85, placing it beyond the means of nearly all working class Americans. But in a few years, the bicycle market became less expensive due to increased demand; inevitably, a second-hand market for used bicycles developed, further expanding availability and reducing prices.

By 1890, enthusiasts in Thomasville had formed a local biking association. Thomas County Commissioner Henry Sanford had long championed construction of a street to encircle all of Thomasville. Bike enthusiasts supported his proposal and the county eventually came around. The resulting thirteen mile trek, initially known as Sanford Avenue (now Boulevard), became an increasingly popular bike path. Two favorite local destinations for serious bikers were in Florida: Tallahassee, 40 miles away, and Monticello, some 25 miles distant.

As the number of bicycle riders increased, so did the number of dealers. W.F. Moss gladly took orders, but nobody thought he would be the only agent available for long.

The early dealers experienced some hard times. To make ends meet, most of them also worked as gunsmiths and watch repairmen in addition to selling bicycles. Dealers offered customers their choice of the Columbia, the best-selling bicycle in America, or if they preferred, the Rambler, Monarch, Raleigh, Eagle, or Imperial. Only the more affluent bought the Waverly, available locally at the George W. Forbes Furniture Company.

Some bicycles were unusual. Charley Thompson, a visitor from St. Paul, Minnesota, wintering at the Piney Woods Hotel, had a bamboo bike that weighed only eighteen pounds. Another person had an electric bicycle. The Velocipede was equally rare. One was displayed in front of Jerry Chastain’s store. Chastain later moved the vehicle to his front yard on Fletcher Street and placed the imposing Velocipede in a glass case to advertise his business. Later, in the 1980s, thieves (never apprehended) stole this iconic symbol of early American bicycling.

Women were among the most enthusiastic in negotiating Thomasville’s byways on “wheels.” Riding offered the appeal of exercise and socializing. Linking the bicycle and a new, exhilarating sense of freedom and personal accomplishment might have seemed a divine blessing.

“The ladies have caught the infection,” one admiring male reported in 1895. Another Thomasville man allowed that “many ladies have become experts at the wheel.” Bicycling also required the ever-fashionably conscious women to indulge in livery that was both functional and de rigueur. The town’s most beloved physician, Dr. John A. Hopkins, wrote a public letter praising the bicycle and urging women to participate in the sport. He also advised them to do away with the greatest of all curses to women, the corset.

Cycling developed a level of athleticism that most riders never suspected they possessed. Clumsy and unsuccessful efforts to master riding suddenly and almost magically blossomed into the ability to ride. Once learned, folklore held, it was never forgotten. One exception and hold out was a local preacher who wrote a public notice complaining that, “These bladder wheeled bicycles are devices of the demons of dark-



Bicycling not only provided exercise, but also the chance to display the latest fashion. This is Olive Blackshear, circa 1890.

ness. They are full of guile and deceit. When you think you have tamed one to ride and have subdued its wild and satanic nature behold it bucketh you off [sic] and tears a great hole in your pants.”

There was also the sense of personal accomplishment. Helen Ross, a visitor from Philadelphia, traversed fourteen miles of muddy roads from Susina Plantation to Thomasville. That feat earned her an invitation to join the Thomasville Cycling Association. But some women wanted an organization of their own. Shortly, they created one. President J. Hansel Merrill could cite the joys of riding, and the Ladies Cycling Club of Thomasville became identified with gold regalia that included silk badges bearing their club's name and its motto: "Come Forth In The Light Of Things. Let Nature Be Your Teacher." After the founding meeting adjourned, the members performed a symbolic ritual by going through a few spins around a recently constructed track. The club literally gave women a place in the sun.

With the addition of women as equal partners in the sport, Thomasville's streets, parks, and tracks became crowded. The bike, at first an oddity, surely the target of cynical skeptics, had in fact become nothing less than ubiquitous. A long poem, one of many similar efforts, entitled "Thomasville's Bicycle Girl" appeared in the *Thomasville Times-Enterprise*. One verse declared:

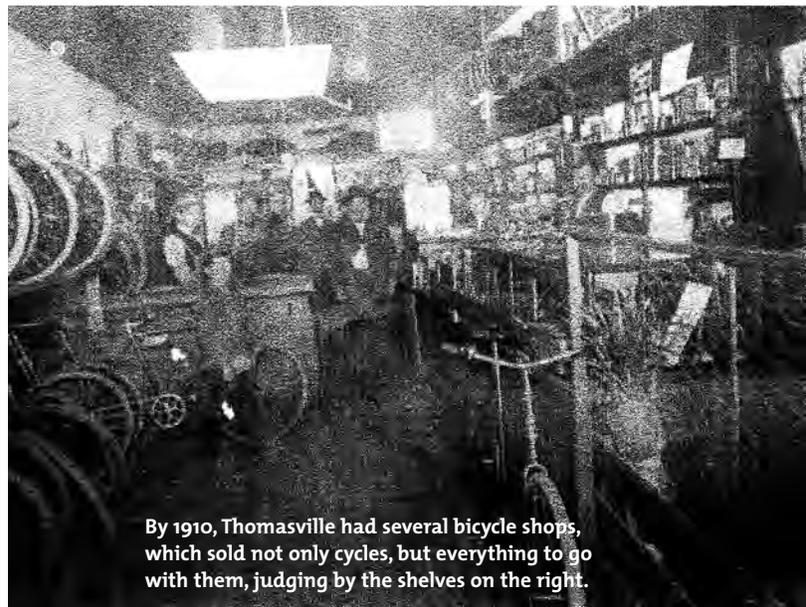
*'She's dainty and she's nice  
She'll pass you in a trice,  
While her wheel it swiftly turns,  
And the very air she burns,  
On her wheel*

In addition to the poetic contributions the women inspired, some citizens owed females a debt of gratitude for registering complaints against reckless drivers. By 1896 a concerned resident noted that Thomasville had reached a point where "the population of the town is divided between two elements: those who ride and those who dodge the wheels."

Action followed. The town council made it illegal to ride a bicycle on the sidewalks in certain districts. Where it was permitted, the speed limit was five miles per hour. At night, all bikes had to have "a lighted lantern and at all times a bell or other instrument of alarm..."

In Thomasville it seemed that the saying "everyone rides who can and those who can't are learning" was no exaggeration. But the town's residents were merely keeping step with the nation. The *St. Louis Globe Dispatch* estimated that in 1896 a million bicycles would be sold. To maintain some order, the *Chicago Times Herald* published the Ten Commandments of Bicycling: Thou shall not covet thy neighbor's bicycle, nor his costume, nor his wife's costume, nor her bloomers, nor his cyclometer, nor his saddle, nor anything else that is thy neighbors."

A great deal of thought went into choosing the proper attire for cycling. At first, riders favored darker colors like



By 1910, Thomasville had several bicycle shops, which sold not only cycles, but everything to go with them, judging by the shelves on the right.

brown, a concession to the dirt roads on which they traveled (Broad Street wasn't paved until 1909). Concerned with preserving modesty, female riders practically suffocated in multiple petticoats, whalebone corsets, and uncomfortable heavy outer garments.

But adaptations were in order. The irrepressible Francis Willard declared, "A suitable bicycle costume is a prerequisite." American women converted to the British style known as "Rational Dress," which meant better and lighter clothes designed to fit individual preferences. The popular French style reached Thomasville by 1890. It introduced the bloomer girl to American culture. Shocking at first, it soon dazzled thousands of the nation's women, who donned bloomers and giant sleeved shirts. Women could then bicycle as comfortably as men.

Well-heeled Northerners continued to travel to Thomasville seeking restorative health benefits and the brown-speckled bob white quail. These attractions conceivably accounted for A.J. Boynton's extended stay in Thomasville. The Clearfield, Pennsylvania, resident wintered at the Piney Woods Hotel between 1888 and 1893. No one was more positioned to expound on the bicycle's virtues than Boynton. He kept a careful record of his bike-filled days and made entries about all of the area's attractions. He was a shining example of what one woman wrote about the area's challenges: "The hills are sufficiently rolling to enable one to coast about half the time, but enough to provide exhilaration and excitement."

Bicycling remains the single most popular sports activity in the United States. Today, a vast army of all ages and sexes considers owning a bicycle an inalienable right. What drew Thomasville's first intrepid fans to the new mode of transportation—pleasure, social fraternization, exercise, economy, and convenience—continues to draw devotees today. The bicycle was no fad. ■

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*William Warren Rogers is a professor emeritus of history at Florida State University in Tallahassee. Robert Holladay is adjunct professor of history at Tallahassee Community College.*