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### **Bike-geist NYC**

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More people ride bicycles in New York City than ever before. In fact, the number of cyclists has more than doubled since 2007. This explosion in ridership is due in large part to shift in ideology at the Department of Transportation, where new leadership began to focus on transforming the city's infrastructure. As of 2016, over 1,000 total miles of bike lanes have been installed, and fewer cyclists are killed in collisions each year. Simply, it's safer and easier to get around by a bicycle than it used to be.

But the bicycle's popularity is nothing new for New Yorkers.

"Throughout the 1890's what went from a novelty became ubiquitous around New York. All of a sudden there's this great fever for bicycles that people catch. Everybody is talking about bicycles, riding bicycles, more in NYC than anywhere else in the United States," says Evan Friss, a history professor at James Madison University whose recent book, *The Cycling City: Bicycles and Urban America in the 1890s*, explains this story.

For a brief period of time--only about ten years--the city was the cultural epicenter of an obsession with bicycles. At first, the only bicycle available were the ones you probably already think about when you think "19th century bicycle"--the stereotypical, precariously tall-wheeled kind. They were wildly cost-prohibitive, too, costing over \$2,500 today when adjusted for inflation.

Then everything changed, beginning with the bicycle itself. The wheels became equally sized, and it turned into what was called the "safety bicycle." This redesign has remained ostensibly unchanged through the version of today's bicycle.

"One of the reasons they called it the safety bicycle was to attract a much broader audience," Frisk says.

American bicycle clubs had already been in existence since the 1870's, and catered to "bachelors of a sporting crowd," according to Frisk. "It was typically young men of

means, but who had some adventurous streak in them and were interested in this new and exciting sport and what it offered.”

“They’d have extremely expensive application fees, membership dues and all sorts of ways at keeping uncouth applicants at bay, have erect grand clubhouses. And they’re social parlors; they’re settings for elaborate parties and there’s billiards rooms often in there,” Frisk says.

“They do of course use their wheels often to take trips--or 'runs' as they would often call them--around to the country and then come back and eat and drink and smoke.”

But the safety bicycles were cheaper than their predecessor, allowing for ownership among the city’s various classes. Soon, clubs began to appear throughout the city’s boroughs, forming within neighbors along ethnic and racial boundaries, particularly among immigrants.

“It’s this great moment in which people begin to think about what New York could look like and what American cities could look like if they were designed around this new tool,” Frisk says.

Although the clubs were dominated by men, Frisk estimates that one-fifth of their membership consisted of women. And even though female riders were discouraged by the establishment and status quo, they continued to ride.

“In the end, they couldn’t stop what the bicycle seemed to represent for all these women, some of whom began to embrace the bicycle as a means of emancipation, or as a kind of status symbol of what women wanted to achieve, and imbued the bicycle with a political and social meaning,” Frisk says.

Today, as ridership in New York City continues to grow, cyclists are becoming more diverse, and the gender gap is shrinking. And while the bicycle utopia once dreamt in the

**1890's may never fully become a reality, this simple machine continues to mean everything in so many ways, just as the city itself through which they travel.**