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**Wheels of Change: The Safety Bicycle's Role in the  
Victorian Woman's Release from Ideological and  
Physical confinement**

The nineteenth-century American woman was clad in yards and yards of heavy material with tight corsets and the dragging weight of long heavy skirts. In 1892, under the auspices of the National Council of Women, a Committee on Dress presented a report that encouraged women to adopt the comforts of a reformed style of clothing. Arguing that dress reform would bring improved

health and *freedom of movement*, the group set forth a call for women's release from cumbersome garb and for their emergence from its bondage.

It was at this same time that the development of the safety bicycle prompted a select group of American women to consider the issue of dress reform. Among their leaders stood Mrs. Frances E. Russell, Chairman of the aforementioned Dress Committee and Mrs. Frances M. Steele, one of the founders of the Chicago Society for the Promotion of Physical Culture and Correct Dress. This paper examines the relationships that these feminists saw between the safety bicycle, dress reform, and the emergence of the New Woman. For these women the long skirt was both a symbolic and literal constraint that marked the boundary of their bodily limitations. They interpreted the safety bicycle as a technology that helped release them from their constraints by allowing them to enjoy independence. When they took to the wheel they put aside their corsets and skirts to reclaim a physical freedom that they had surrendered at the onset of puberty.

In works such as James McGurn's *On Your Bicycle* and Robert Smith's *A Social History of the Bicycle*, the bicycle is seen as an agent of social change. McGurn and Smith describe the modifications in dress that female cyclists adopted, but they do not discuss broader implications that these changes had for women's freedom. This paper uses the writings prepared under the auspices of the National Council of Women as published in the liberal periodical *Arena*, and an array of periodical literature of the 1890s to make a preliminary examination of the bicycle's involvement in women's release from both ideological and physical confinement.

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