

The Kittie Knox Award – for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Cycling

(The [League of American Bicyclists](#) recently presented its first annual Kittie Knox award, which recognizes a champion of equity, diversity, and inclusion. Although it went unnoticed in the cycling media, [Ayesha McGowan](#), the nation's first Black woman pro racer, won [the award](#) – for her competitive example and accomplishments, and her voice for more inclusion in bicycling. Ayesha's [initiatives](#) and story have been chronicled [elsewhere](#), but we also wondered: Who was Kittie Knox, and what made her a model for racial inclusion in bicycling? We contacted Dr. Lorenz Finison, Boston historian and author of Boston's Cycling Craze, 1880-1900: A Story of Race, Sport, and Society, who told us the story of Kittie Knox. – Steve Maxwell)

Kittie Knox was born in 1874, to a Black father from Philadelphia and a white mother from Maine. She grew up in multi-racial neighborhoods in Cambridge and Boston. In 1893 she was noted in the Black press for her “graceful cycling.” And she was a member of the League of American Wheelmen (L.A.W.), predecessor to the League of American Bicyclists.

But in the early 1890s, southern cyclists, alarmed by the surge of Black cyclists on the roads and the social equality that League membership symbolized, demanded a “color bar.” Led by Louisville's W.W. Watts and the *Southern Cyclist* magazine, they claimed that they could not recruit southern cyclists to the League without a color bar, that without this the League's Good Roads campaign would be stymied. Massachusetts and several other northern delegations opposed the change, but after several failed attempts in April, 1894, Watts finally got the votes to enshrine the color bar in the League's constitution.

Boston's all-Black Riverside Cycle Club protested their exclusion. Kittie's fellow Riversider, state representative Robert Teamoh, convinced the legislature to condemn the color bar. But it failed to reverse the L.A.W.'s new rule.

Nevertheless, on July 4, 1895, Kittie appeared at a Waltham Cycle Park meet. Amid the racing events, the track featured a cycling costume contest for five women. That they could not race was deliberate; the League prohibited women's racing. Kittie was a seamstress, and wearing her own gray knickerbocker outfit, she won the judge's vote. That offended some traditionalist long-skirt wearing fans, who hissed loudly. Reporters differed on whether the hisses were about her race or her dress.

Later that week, a large contingent of Bostonians, including Kittie Knox, traveled to the L.A.W. national meet at the seaside resort of Asbury Park, NJ. Bostonians had wanted to host the event but lost out to Asbury Park. Kittie was probably aware that her presence there would create controversy, but she didn't know that this would be a defining moment of her public life. The *New York Times* described the conflict: “This afternoon Miss Knox did a few fancy cuts in front of the clubhouse and was requested to desist.... Some of the Asbury Park wheelmen officials, it is said, will protest against permitting Miss Knox to remain

a member of the league.”

The cycling press and hundreds of local newspapers in the U.S. and Canada picked up the story with headlines like: “Miss Knox Could Not Get a Badge at Asbury,” “Wheelmen are Indignant at the Action of the Committee,” “Color Line Drawn,” and “Action of the Credentials Committee Generally Condemned.” Kitty became a central point of conflict. As the *Trenton Evening Times* put it: “The dark-skinned rider was petted and made much of by her sister wheelwomen from the East and West but was scorned and frowned upon by the visitors from Dixie.” The *Southern Cyclist*, outraged, called her a “murky goddess of Beanville.”

L.A.W. Vice President George Perkins, a Boston lawyer, stated that the “white” policy could be enforced only for cyclists applying for membership after the color bar was instituted. Despite conflicting headlines, Kittie was not ousted from the L.A.W.’s annual meet, she did not withdraw, and she even objected to the notoriety.

The *Jersey Journal* reported that Kittie “appeared in the various runs and the parade and has been well treated in most places.” She toured with a party of wheelmen to Pleasure Bay, Rumson, and Seabright. The *Referee and Cycle Trade Journal* thought she had “had her revenge” since “she was appointed to set the pace home from the Seabright run and in the final scorch of a mile finished twelfth, well up in a mixed [gender] field of fifty and far ahead of her lighter-hued sisters.” The *Boston Globe* praised its hometown cyclist and headlined: “Can’t Lose Her... Stuck to Leaders in Long Road Run.”

Because of restrictions in Asbury Park, she could not stay at area hotels or eat at restaurants, so she lodged at a local boarding house. Nevertheless, she socialized with League members and danced at the League ball. This aroused a stormy response, as reported by the *New York Herald*: “Among the visiting bicyclers is a bright young mulatto girl, from Boston, and the many snubs which have been placed upon her by many of the women culminated last night in dozens of them leaving the ball at the Auditorium, because she was not only there, but the first upon the floor in the waltz....” And she danced the night away.

These events at Asbury Park gained wide publicity and thrust the issues of race and gender into the national spotlight. While Kittie received a mixed reception, she had attained renown — with her courage, stylish outfits, and cycling stamina. Her celebrity continued beyond her encounters at Asbury Park. Returning to Boston she was a pacemaker — a sure sign of honor — for a large group of Boston cyclists going to the L.A.W.’s Massachusetts division summer meet. The *Worcester Daily Spy* featured a drawing of her coasting down a long hill at the meet.

Century (100 mile) rides were a great opportunity to build the social circle of cyclists, and provided an opportunity for women riders to show their prowess since racing was closed to them. Kittie was often among them. One August 1895 century ride from Boston to Providence and back was almost washed out by a thunderstorm, and Kittie was the only woman in the second division who finished. She was reportedly

“muddy but not at all played out.”

Yet the very sociability of century rides challenged the Boston cyclists’ liberalism. In September, the *Boston Daily Standard* headlined: “Kittie Knox Refused: Boston Wheelmen Would Not Allow Her in Their Run.” According to news reports, fifteen “colored” men (likely Riverside Cycling Club members) were all refused entry to the Wheelmen’s open century ride from Boston to Newburyport. One of them happened to be a Boston City councilman who filed a lawsuit under existing civil rights laws, and lost.

But Kittie persevered. By September 29, she was in the mix again in a multi-club century ride to Newburyport. She rode with the coed Commonwealth Club.

Another club, the Roxbury Wheelmen, jumped into the fray with their own color bar. The *Daily Standard* headlined: “Roxbury Wheelmen Bar Negroes from Their Century Run.” The struggle stretched into November when the Century Road Club of America advertised an open century, specifically “without a color line.”

Kittie Knox won at least some part of the battle of Asbury Park and continued to be accepted —occasionally even lionized — in Boston bicycling. But unfortunately, she did so only as an exceptional individual. The larger cause was lost, especially with the increasing wave of Jim Crow restrictions, statuary, flags, and other symbols of white supremacy. Among cyclists in Boston too, demeaning cartoons, cycling songs and minstrel shows, with some characters in “blackface” were especially popular as winter-time entertainment – an opportunity to roast their own leaders using a form demeaning to Blacks.

Through the late 1890s, a few cyclists fought to overturn the color bar, but they failed.

By 1900 the cycling craze had collapsed. This happened before cars were any major presence on the roads. In the huge expansion of the 1890s, bicycling simply lost its chic, and the original gentlemen cyclists largely abandoned it. The L.A.W. was a wreck. The color bar soon passed out of memory and practice. The League limped along until the 1920s, mostly as an annual banqueting venue for nostalgic older men, and a small-circulation League Bulletin. It was revived by mid-western cyclists from 1942 to 1955, and then as a national membership organization in 1965. The original color bar was rediscovered by cycling historian [Andrew Ritchie](#), and was formally repudiated in 1999 under the leadership of the League’s first Black president, Earl Jones.

Kittie’s real motives for going to Asbury Park will likely never be known. We have no diary or other writing or press commentary *from* her, although plenty was written *about* her. She either “walked defiantly out” of the Asbury Park Wheelmen’s clubhouse, according to one account, or “withdrew very quietly” according

to another. She may have been taken to Asbury Park as revenge for Boston not getting the national meet. She may have been an agent of the Riverside Cycle Club's protest. Her biracial family background, her life in an activist multiracial neighborhood, her several years of experience at Massachusetts L.A.W. events, and her costume win at the Waltham track may have given her the confidence and motive to enter a whites-only national meeting among thousands of other cyclists. What is certain is that she persevered despite a confusing mixture of acceptance, rejection, and ambivalence within the cycling community.

Kittie appeared only twice more in the press, once in 1896 to welcome her back from a "pleasant visit to Paris, where she delighted in many spins on her wheel." Another note in 1897 has her appearing with Isham's Octoroons in New York City. This was one of the first all-Black – as opposed to blackface – vaudeville troupes, and she may have appeared as a "bicycle girl," a common role at the time. Both notes are interesting but, as yet, unverified.

Kittie Knox died in obscurity in 1900 at age of just 26. A victim of chronic nephritis, she was buried in an unmarked grave at Mount Auburn Cemetery, in Cambridge, MA, a place of internment for many of Boston's elite. In 2013 Cambridge issued a Kittie Knox proclamation and dedicated a headstone, purchased by descendants of Kittie's Maine family. Her grave is now part of the cemetery's [African American Heritage Trail](#). In 2019, Cambridge named a Kittie Knox Bike Path.

Hats off to Ayesha McGowan. Kittie would be surprised and proud.

By Lorenz J. Finison, July 29th, 2020.

Lorenz J. Finison is also a founding member of the Friends of the Bicycling History Collections at the University of Massachusetts-Boston [Archives](#) and author of Boston's Twentieth Century Bicycling Renaissance: Cultural Change on Two Wheels. Kittie Knox's full story is told in Finison's book, Boston's Cycling Craze, 1880-1900: A Story of Race, Sport, and Society, published by the University of Massachusetts Press.