

The Good Roads Movement and Jacob's Ladder Trail  
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The development of the bicycle and its popularity as a mode of transportation in the 1870s brought to light the inadequacy of the road system in the U.S. Roads were fine in towns and villages where they received regular maintenance. In between, though, maintenance was left to those who lived along the roads. Consequently, especially in rural areas where residents were sparse, maintenance was irregular and roads were often barely passable.

In the 1880s, a group of bicyclists formed the League of American Wheelmen (LAW), in large part to advocate for an improved system of roads. This advocacy became the Good Roads Movement, which spread across the country. The cause was taken up in the name of improved and less expensive mail delivery and better access for farmers to urban markets, but it continued to be spearheaded by the LAW.

In 1892, in response to the demand for better roads, the Massachusetts legislature passed a bill creating the Massachusetts Highway Commission (MHC), the first such commission in the nation. Prior to this action, other than mandating or authorizing the building of early turnpikes, roads had been left entirely to the counties and local communities. The MHC represented the first direct state-level involvement in road construction or maintenance in the nation.

By the turn of the century, automobiles were gaining popularity. Motorists and bicyclists became allies in the cause of improved roads. Within a few years, though, the number and influence of motorists eclipsed that of bicyclists, and the Good Roads Movement became theirs, the role of the LAW largely forgotten.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, bicycles were on the cutting edge of technology. Victorian-era techies – mostly the well-to-do – embraced them in the same way people of today have embraced the technology of our own era. There is no evidence that Cortlandt Bishop was a bicycle enthusiast, but it seems likely that he was in the years before the automobile. In any event, he adopted the principals of the Good Roads Movement in his pursuit of an improved road over the mountains.

On the centennial anniversary of Jacob's Ladder Trail, it's good to remember that it was bicyclists, not motorists, who began the movement that made this road possible.