

OUR TURN

Major triumph

Worcester Magazine salutes all of the hard work and hoopla that has been associated with the establishment of the Major Taylor memorial at the Worcester Public Library, which was celebrated yesterday.

By now, all of our readers must know who Major Taylor was: "The Worcester Whirlwind," a turn-of-the- (19th/20th) century cyclist who moved to the city and became a world champion bicycle racer — the second African-American individual to become a world champion in any sport. Ten years ago, this was not the case, and the well-deserved retrieval of his legacy from relative obscurity in this town is entirely due to the efforts of a dedicated group of local cycling fanatics.

It has not been easy; it has been a distance race, not a sprint. The long slog of fundraising took place over many years, accompanied by the steady drum beat of consciousness-raising. The group weathered an internal coup attempt early on, persevered, and finally reached its goal through the miracle of state funding. Along the way they established a local cycling event of considerable magnetism: The George Street Challenge — a bicycle sprint up the street on which Taylor himself reputedly trained.

All of this constitutes a worthy accomplishment, not only for Taylor's personal story but for the city of Worcester. Taylor came here to escape the racial discrimination that had thwarted his cycling ambitions in the mid-West and found the acceptance he had been seeking. While he rode to prominence principally in Europe, he lived here for most of his life — owning a home and serving as a longtime member of the John Street Baptist Church. Although he failed in business later in life and died in Chicago, he was loyal to this city and praised it in his autobiography.

What better legacy to align ourselves with — a symbol of personal accomplishment and civic acceptance? Add to that the "green" value of cycling in today's environmental climate and we've got a triple win. We already renamed a portion of Worcester Center Boulevard after Taylor a year and a half ago. Maybe we should give him the entire street.

The question that this raises in our minds is whether we can leverage this moment to genuinely enhance the city more resonant ways. Recently an idea was floated to locate the homeless Bicycling Hall of Fame to Worcester. The ignominious fate of the FDR Museum should give everyone legitimate pause; but if such a facility could find a home that was integrated with other bike-related uses — say, the Historical Museum/Visitor Center, which will be served by the Worcester-to-Providence bike path; or the Armory at the head of Major Taylor Boulevard; or the Canal District — then it begins to make some sense.

For such a notoriously bike-unfriendly city (see *One on One*, p. 35), Worcester is blessed with a thriving cycling community. Such a facility could help convert their energy to civic advantage. They are an asset — they have proven that — and the full flowering of their avocation could be a profound asset as well.

Worcester — the city that bikes to work. Insanely optimistic, healthy, sensible, sociable, enviable. It could never happen here — not in a million years. Major Taylor would be proud.