

## An overdue honor of Major proportions

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A three-time Tour de France winner, Olympians, national champions and world champions traveled thousands of miles to see it. Local officials, state legislators, three generations of relatives, an official from the U.S. Bicycling Hall of Fame, authors and students from local schools eagerly attended.

Cyclists from Minnesota, Tennessee, Indianapolis, Washington, D.C., Maryland, Boston and, of course, Central Massachusetts converged on Worcester last Wednesday for the unveiling of the Marshall Walter "Major" Taylor statue at the Worcester Public Library.

Rising 10 feet high and standing more than 12 feet wide, the two-sided sculpture wall stands as a monument to not just a world champion cyclist who made a home in Worcester at the turn of the 20th century, but a black man of courage who persevered with dignity in a white man's world, the era of Jim Crow segregation.

At its annual convention in Louisville, Ky., in 1894, the League of American Wheelmen, a national cycling organization, approved an amendment restricting membership to white cyclists. The measure passed, 127-54, with the Massachusetts delegation voting unanimously against it, according to Andrew Ritchie in his book, "Major Taylor: The Extraordinary Career of a Champion Bicycle Racer."

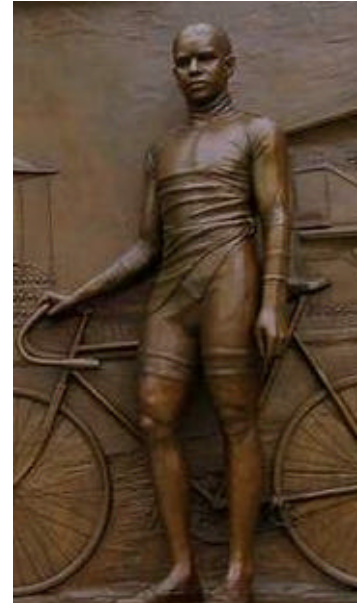
Not long removed from the Civil War and decades before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball in 1947, Major Taylor, known as the "Worcester Whirlwind," set seven world records and won the 1-mile world championship in Montreal in 1899. Taylor, also called the "Colored Cyclone," accomplished these feats amid racial bias and during the height of cycling, which was more popular than baseball as Americans filled velodromes and stadiums to watch sprints and six-day races. He overcame tactical hostility on the bike as well as threats and assaults from white riders.

During a 1-mile race in Taunton in September 1897, Taylor finished second to Tom Butler. The third-place finisher, William Becker, a white rider from Minneapolis, grabbed Taylor by the neck, threw him off his bike and choked him into unconsciousness. According to Ritchie's book, the crowd reacted strongly against Becker, who was not arrested by police and was later fined \$50 by the League of American Wheelmen.

A crane put the granite and bluestone monument with bronze bas relief sculptures of Taylor in place at the south entrance of the library at Salem Street and Library Lane, but the weight of the large statue is light compared to the heavy burden Taylor carried throughout his career.

And it was recognition of those achievements that brought three-time Tour de France winner Greg LeMond, "Raleigh Boys" Bill Humphreys and John Howard, Olympic silver medalist Nelson "The Cheetah" Vails, three-time Olympic medalist Edwin Moses and hundreds of others to see the unveiling of the statue.

Though Taylor was known for his sprinting speed, the effort to erect the statue became a grueling marathon. The project began 10 years ago and would not have been completed without the unflinching and tireless efforts of Lynne Tolman, a founding member of the Major Taylor Association.



T&G Staff File Photo/  
CHRISTINE PETERSON

It took a long time to come to fruition, but Major Taylor is now immortalized outside the Worcester Public Library.

"It's been a long road — more of a test of endurance than speed," Tolman said at the unveiling ceremony.

The effort to build the statue began about a decade ago with a group of area residents. The fundraising was slow, then a dispute within the group reached a head in March 2000, when a member filed a lawsuit, which was dismissed about 17 months later. The Major Taylor Association carried on, but the drive to raise \$250,000 proved to be difficult.

Led by area lawmakers such as state Sen. Harriette L. Chandler and state Rep. John J. Binienda Sr., \$205,000 for the memorial was included in spending bills and signed by Gov. Mitt Romney in 2006, a year when many other projects were slashed from the budget. The group also had about \$70,000 in pledges and commitments, which allowed the project to move forward. Robert Nasdor, president of the Major Taylor Association, said during the ceremony that despite the obstacles, Tolman never gave up.

"There were some very difficult times when I just thought we should put a plaque on George Street and call it a day. But Lynne wouldn't hear of it," Nasdor said.

George Street is a steep road in Worcester on which Major Taylor used to train. The Seven Hills Wheelmen hold an annual hill climb there in July called The George Street Bike Challenge for Major Taylor. Also in honor of Major Taylor, the group holds the Major Taylor Century in September. One side of the statue, made by sculptor Antonio Tobias Mendez, shows a larger-than-life, three-dimensional figure of Major Taylor standing next to his bicycle in front of a velodrome in Australia. The other side shows Taylor coming from behind and passing on the outside during a race in France in 1903 with the following words:

"Marshall Walter 'Major' Taylor, World Champion Cyclist. At the turn of the 20th century, when bicycle racing was more popular than baseball, the biggest draw of all was Major Taylor (1878-1932), the 'Worcester Whirlwind.' He held seven world records in 1898 and won the 1-mile sprint at the 1899 World Championships in Montreal, becoming the second black world champion in any sport and the first African-American international sports superstar. He had to fight racial prejudice both on and off his bike. He faced closed doors and open hostility with remarkable dignity to become the fastest bicycle rider in the world, as he titles his autobiography."