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MARSHALL “MAJOR” TAYLOR – LETTERS FROM 1897

Notes of discussions between Lynne Tolman and Andrew Ritchie

In 2020, five previously unknown letters, written by Major Taylor in 1897, were acquired by the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts. As readers may be aware, Andrew Ritchie was author of the biography “Major Taylor: The Extraordinary Career of a Champion Bicycle Racer”. Lynne Tolman is president of the Major Taylor Association. During his brief time as Editor of this journal, Andrew and Lynne made notes of their discussion of the contents of these letters, and what they reveal about a brilliant young African American athlete and his experiences in an often hostile environment. The letters have been transcribed as written, with original spellings preserved.



Fig. 1 Photograph of Major Taylor in 1897, George H. Van Norman, public domain.

Lynne kindly also drew attention to a video clip of Andrew speaking in Worcester on 21st May 2008, following the dedication of the Major Taylor statue. This clip was only released in 2020, having sat on a shelf for twelve years: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5m9xSOOb3kw>. This article is dedicated to Andrew.

LT: Marshall “Major” Taylor, at age 18, in his first full season as a professional bike racer (Fig.1), wrote letters to his friend Benjamin Walker in Worcester, Massachusetts, from his travels to bike races in several states. The existence of these letters was unknown to researchers until the American Antiquarian Society (AAS), a national research library, announced the acquisition in December 2020. The five letters were sent in summer and fall 1897 from Providence, Rhode Island; Springfield, Massachusetts; Cleveland, Ohio; Buffalo, New York, and Indianapolis, Indiana. They reveal details about Taylor’s home life and allude to difficulties he faced as the only African American racer competing on the pro cycling circuit during the Jim Crow era.

AR: In the letters Taylor reports his race results and entrusts Walker with errands such as sending Taylor’s suit and holding on to some of Taylor’s prize money for him. Walker was a cyclist, too, and Taylor also mentions cycling equipment, such as handlebars.

**Undated letter on stationery of City Hotel,
Providence. Postmarked July 25, 1897**

Dear Ben, Just a word to say hallo. I won two races here yesterday. I have your bars ready now, and will send them to you as soon as I return to Boston.

Good by

Maj.

Going to Newport today.

love to all

LT: Constance L. Whitehead Hanks of Auburn, Massachusetts, who donated the letters to AAS, initially thought that meant Walker was Major Taylor’s agent. Actually, Walker was a cycling friend, a charter member of the Albion Cycling Club, founded in 1895 in Worcester by and for Black riders¹ Taylor, who had moved from Indianapolis to Worcester with his employer and mentor Louis “Birdie” Munger that year, was an Albion member and the club’s up-and-coming star.

AR: Taylor had stayed previously in Middletown, Connecticut, where Munger had part of his bike manufacturing operation, and in Brooklyn, New York, where he trained with the South Brooklyn Wheelmen. He’d made his professional debut in December 1896 in a six-day race at Madison Square Garden in New York. Boston newspapers in summer 1897 listed Taylor as from Cambridgeport, Massachusetts, where he apparently stayed while training and racing at the Charles River Park track in Cambridge, just outside Boston.

LT: The Worcester Telegram reported in January 1897 that Taylor was in Worcester for a visit and would be “the guest of Benjamin F.B. Walker.”² Walker was an upholsterer and carpet installer, about 13½ years older than Taylor, who lived with his wife and children at 13 Parker St. in Worcester’s Beaver Brook neighborhood.³ That part of the city had become home to many African Americans who migrated from the South.⁴ The living arrangement with the Walkers solidified, and Major Taylor listed 13 Parker St. as his home address in the pocket diaries in which he kept track of his travels and expenses in 1897, 1898, and 1899.⁵

AR: Along with the letters is an invoice for \$2, written out to the Albion Cycle Club, for “engraving on Maj Taylor Trophy” ordered on June 1, 1896. (Fig. 2)

LT: I believe the trophy in question was a silver cup that was Major Taylor’s prize for winning the Albion club’s second annual road race in Worcester, on May 16, 1896. A front-page story in the next day’s Sunday Telegram was headlined “Cup is His for Keeps” and reported that “Taylor owns the silver cup, it being his second

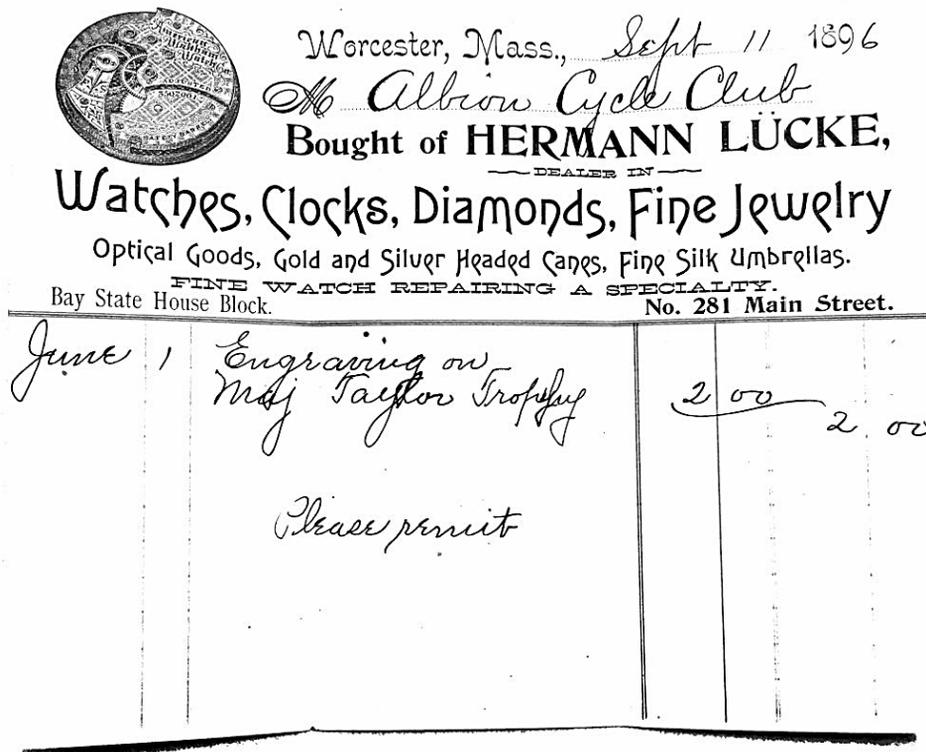


Fig. 2 Invoice for engraving trophy, ordered 1 June 1896

successive victory.” It makes sense that the invoice from Herman Lucke’s watch and jewelry store was in Walker’s possession along with letters from Taylor, because of Walker’s role in the Albion club’s leadership. By 1898 the Albion riders were known colloquially, if not formally, as the Major Taylors.⁶

How Hanks came to possess these documents is a story in itself. Her grandfather, Ernest Parker Whitehead (1899-1973), had trucking, wrecking, construction and architectural companies in Worcester, and he also appraised buildings for fire insurance. His father, an immigrant from England, had started the business, E. Whitehead Inc. The third generation, Hanks’ father, Richard D. Whitehead (1924-1998), liquidated the business in 1974 but saved boxes full of things that had been salvaged from buildings that the Whiteheads cleared out, some of them from 90 acres they developed on Salisbury Street. The boxes went from their Builders Lumber & Supply Co. warehouse at 97 Webster St. to the Whiteheads’ home in Auburn, and Connie Whitehead Hanks began going through them after her parents died. When she first read the letters signed “Maj” and “Major,” she didn’t know who he was. But after she noticed “Taylor” on one of the envelopes and recalled driving on Major Taylor Boulevard in Worcester, she looked up Major Taylor and put it together. That’s when she realized that the letters about winning races came from the Black cyclist who was trying to outrun racism and would become a world sprint champion in 1899 and the first African American athlete to become an international superstar. Before that, she told me, she had assumed the boulevard’s namesake “was just some military person.”⁷

Letter on stationery of The Worthy, a hotel in Springfield, Massachusetts

Sep. 14th, 1897

Dear Ben,

This leaves me feeling all right with the exception of a slight cold. I am riding very fast and I qualified in all my heats but one yesterday, four out of five.

Today if I can only do so well I can talk “turkey” some, for I certainly did beat out Bald twice yesterday for fair. But those were only heats and don’t count for much. Its the final you know.

I am sending you a paper also you can see for yourself.

Enclosed you will also please find \$40.00 which please lay up on the shelf for me with the rest. I am riding hard every day and I don’t care to be worrying about anything more than really is nessary.

AR: We see in the letters from Providence and Springfield that Taylor is racking up victories on the national circuit and is focused on vanquishing the reigning national sprint champion, Eddie “Cannon” Bald. “I certainly did beat out Bald twice yesterday for fair. But those were only heats and don’t count for much,” Taylor wrote to Walker. “Its the final you know.” The rivalry between Taylor and Bald was one of the hottest attractions of the season. The crowds loved Taylor and his sudden bursts of speed, shocked though they might be at the novelty of a Black athlete going head to head with white men at a time of strict segregation. His competing always carried an unstated but obvious racial symbolism.

LT: You wrote in your book that there was no suggestion that Bald himself had any racist animosity toward Taylor, but that many of the white riders, especially the ones Taylor kept defeating, had a hard time accepting his presence.

AR: Most of them were furious at being beaten by a man they regarded as their social inferior. And as the competition for the sprint rankings heated up, some began to react with outright physical hostility. This was late August, early September. For example, on Aug. 31 in a race in Worcester, Taylor was crowded into the fence, and he crashed and was badly bruised. He lodged a protest against C.S. Wells for foul riding, and Wells was disqualified from any of the other races. Then, at a meet in New Jersey, other riders threatened Taylor after he won a race, and he tried to withdraw from the next race. His trainer told a newspaper reporter that “the white riders were threatening to take the Major’s life if he went out again and he was scared pale.” The referee demanded evidence, and in the end Taylor rode, but he hung back and didn’t try to win.

LT: Your book explains that the New York Sun called for an investigation after the Worcester crash, and Taylor himself told reporters that he felt he was in mortal danger. He was quoted Sept. 20 in the Worcester Telegram: “I have a dread of injury every time I start in a race with the men who have been in the circuit this year. They have threatened to injure me and I expect

that before the season is finished they will do so.”

AR: The hostility climaxed on Sept. 23 at a meet in Taunton, Massachusetts, after Taylor outsprinted William Becker of Minneapolis for second place in the final of the 1-mile event. Becker came up behind Taylor, hauled him off his bike, and choked him into unconsciousness for about 15 minutes. The police had to intervene to restrain Becker. (Fig. 3)

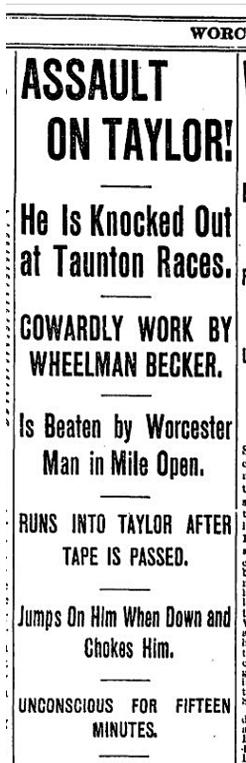


Fig. 3 Worcester Telegram 24 September 1897

LT: So the physical danger was very real. Already it was more than a threat. Taylor had been the victim of violence more than once on the racetracks, and yet he kept putting himself out there. The choking in Taunton was on Thursday, and he got on a train to Cleveland on Thursday night or early Friday. To me, that makes the letter that Sunday from Cleveland stand out. Think of the courage it took for him just to get on the track in Cleveland.

**Letter on stationery of the Forest City House,
Cleveland**

Sunday 845am Sep 26th, 1897

Dear Ben

I arrived here Sat. A.M. at 1:20 and was about 6 hours late owing to a freight train wreck on the road, which we had to wait until it was cleared off the track so we could pass, how-ever I raced in the P.M. and started in three events and won two of them, also won all of my heats. I created a big sensation here among the colored population by winning out yesterday, and among the whites as well.

I shall leave here to-night on the boat for Buffalo where I shall race Tuesday. I shall not go to Trenton as I expected to do as the jump I think would be too much for me to make a good showing. I made \$150 out of this trip and I will send you \$100.00 of it by first mail in the A.M. I guess I will go to Detroit from Buffalo but I don't remember the date. I am feeling much better than I expected to be, after the fall I had. Well I will not say much just now as I haven't had any breakfast yet, and of course you know what that means, I don't want no fooling.

If my suit comes, take out the sweater and send the suit to me at Buffalo c/o Buffalo Athletic Field, and I will get it all right.

Good by love to all

Maj.

Excuse every thing this time

AR: In the letter he seems most pleased at what his winning in Cleveland meant to Black people there. "I created a big sensation here among the colored population," he wrote, "and among the whites as well."

LT: There were 2,000 spectators at the Cleveland races, hosted by the Quill Club. Different newspapers used variations of the same wire report, which said Taylor would have won all three of his events were it not for "a blunder in starting."⁸ The Atlanta Constitution ran just two sentences of the story, in a column of tidbits headlined "What the Negro Is Doing. Matters of Interest Among the Colored People," and added a parenthetical note: "at the Quill Club (white) races."⁹

AR: Taylor raced in Cleveland, and wrote home about it, before the punishment for the Taunton choking was meted out. Over that weekend there was speculation in the press that the assailant would be suspended from racing for a long time or even permanently. But in the end Becker was fined a paltry \$50, and other white riders gladly chipped in to pay the fine.

Letter on stationery of the Tifft House, Buffalo, postmarked Sept. 27

Dear Ben

Enclosed you will please find the sum of \$50.00, please put it away for me in case I may need a little ready money. Did you get my last letter and the paper?

It is time for me to go to the track and train. I race here to-morrow, didn't go to Trenton, the jump was too much

Love to all and kiss the baby for me

Send mail to me at 4938 Dearborn St. Chicago I will be there on the 29th or 30th

Good by as ever

Major

LT: The choking incident in Taunton was on a Thursday. Becker was suspended on Saturday and told that if he paid a \$50 fine the suspension would be lifted. The money was paid on Monday in Trenton, New Jersey,¹⁰ where there was a meet that Taylor decided over the weekend not to attend. "I shall not go to Trenton as I expected," Taylor wrote to Walker on Sunday from Cleveland, "as the jump I think would be too much for me to make a good showing." The day of the Trenton meet, the top racing official – Albert Mott, chairman of the racing board of the League of American Wheelmen – made the announcement in Maryland that Becker was back in good standing. Taking a ferry across Lake Erie on Sunday night from Cleveland, Taylor would have been in Buffalo, New York, a day ahead of Tuesday's race there, by the time he learned of Becker's reinstatement.

Writing home on Sunday morning, before the \$50 penalty was announced, Taylor chose his words carefully. He wrote to Walker that he felt better than expected "after the fall I had" and went on to say, in essence, not to get him started on that topic. "Well I will not say much just now as I haven't had any breakfast yet, and of course you know what that means, I don't want no fooling." To me, "fall" seems like a mild word for the way he was hurled to the ground in Taunton and then choked, or the way the Aug. 31 crash in Worcester happened. The Worcester incident was deemed a foul – in other words, not purely an accident – and in Taunton it was an outright assault.

I think Taylor knew that everyone at Taunton had seen what happened and that he was already getting

sympathy in the press, so he didn't want or need to express indignation, even in a private letter. He may have figured that complaining or lashing out could be interpreted as whining or protesting too much and could turn the officials against him.

AR: *The New York Journal*, for example, suggested that Taylor had not really been so badly treated and that Taylor himself was to blame for many of the problems that he was encountering.

LT: Keeping tight-lipped also reflected Taylor's general demeanor of not expressing anger or resentment, of just letting his legs do the talking. The famous quote from his autobiography, published about 30 years later, is "Life is too short for a man to hold bitterness in his heart."¹¹ Given the racial climate, declining to speak out plainly against injustice was also a political choice and a survival tactic. To be seen as "uppity" would only heighten the danger.

Letter on plain lined paper, postmarked Nov. 2 and 3, 1897

Indianapolis

Nov. 1st, 97

Dear Ben

I hope you will pardon me for not answering your letter before this, I have been pretty busy for the past few days, and then I expected to start Friday but I had to straighten up a little business just at the last moment; and I was detained longer I expected to, however I shall start Wed. A.M. sure unless prevented by sickness or business of great importance. I am going to stop over at Cleveland O. for a few days and I will be home by Sat. sure, if not before. It is very rainy and bad here just now. I was at church most all day yesterday. Say Ben I just received another letter from the factory saying that they had not got the tandem yet. I am very much worried about it but maybe I can find it when I come. By the way, Ben I hope that I have not put you out in any respect by not coming on the 30th if I have I will just have to let you beat it out of me when I do get back home. Well I don't know what to say, or rather I don't care to write too much or I won't have much to talk about when I do get back, you can tell the boys that they had better begin to walk mighty straight, and you can kiss the baby for me.

Well Ben please excuse this short letter and look

for me this week sure. Tell Annie I write her when
I get to Cleveland.

Again hoping to see you and all of the folks
Saturday

I beg to remain your sincere friend

Major

LT: We know from Taylor's pocket diaries that the Chicago address he gave for where he could be reached at the end of September belonged to his sister, Gertrude. "Kiss the baby for me" in the Buffalo and Indianapolis letters apparently is a reference to the Walkers' youngest child at that time, Alice, who was born in February 1897. "Tell Annie" may be referring to Ben Walker's wife, Annie. And "tell the boys" likely refers to the Walkers' other children at that time, Richard, 7, Albert, 6, and Raymond, 4.¹²

AR: He wrote in the Indianapolis letter that he was "at church most all day" Sunday. This is consistent with a promise he had made to his mother before she died earlier that year, to live an upright Christian life. His Baptist faith shaped his identity and impacted his career. For many years he refused to race on Sundays, turning down lucrative offers to race in Europe – until he was able, by virtue of his star power, to negotiate a "no racing on Sundays" provision in his contract.

LT: In the Indianapolis letter, Taylor says he has been occupied with business. It was a fraught time for Munger's enterprise, the Worcester Cycle Manufacturing Co. The company had gone into receivership that summer,¹³ victim of a shakeout in the bike industry. As for racing, Taylor by then was out of the running for the national championship. After the Cleveland meet in September, Taylor and other racers had embarked on a "southern extension" tour for the final third of the national circuit. But in town after town, Taylor was shut out of competition. Either racist promoters refused his entry, or the white riders refused to race against him. In mid-October, "discouraged at his chances in this country," Taylor quit the circuit and headed home, telling reporters he would go to France.¹⁴ Ultimately, Bald would be declared the national champion again.

AR: Despite the racism from white riders, 1897 was a remarkably successful season for Major Taylor. He beat Bald in several races and pushed him to tight finishes in others. In most of his races with the highest-ranked professionals, he finished in the top four. He won thousands of dollars, became a fan favorite, and

found managers and promoters eager to back him.

LT: A Worcester Telegram headline that fall declared Major Taylor "the Surprise of the Year."¹⁵ His career trajectory bore that out, with numerous speed records in 1898, the world title in 1899, and successful tours in Europe and Australia. The letters he wrote home during his first pro season of bike racing give us a glimpse of his ambition and his focus, and the making of a champion.

End Notes

- 1 "Second Meeting of Albions." *Worcester Telegram*, August 13, 1895.
- 2 "Major Taylor on Worcester Visit." *Worcester Telegram*, January 17, 1897.
- 3 1900 United States Census, Worcester, Massachusetts, District 1773; Massachusetts Marriage Records, December 17, 1889; Major Taylor pocket diaries in the collection of the Indiana State Museum and Historic Sites
- 4 Kathryn Burns and Janette Thomas Greenwood, *Rediscovering an American Community of Color: The Photographs of William Bullard, 1897-1917*. Worcester: Worcester Art Museum, 2017.
- 5 Major Taylor pocket diaries, *Ibid*.
- 6 "Forty-Eight Men Will Get Word." *Worcester Telegram*, May 21, 1898,
- 7 Constance Whitehead Hanks interviewed by Lynne Tolman, May 19, 2021.
- 8 "Major Taylor at Cleveland." *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, September 26, 1897; and "Took Two Out of Three." *The Boston Globe*, September 26, 1897.
- 9 "What the Negro is Doing. Matters of Interest Among the Colored People." *The Atlanta Constitution*, October 3, 1897.
- 10 "Becker's Light Penalty." *Worcester Telegram*, Sept. 29, 1897.
- 1 Marshall W. "Major" Taylor, *The Fastest Bicycle Rider in the World*. Worcester: Wormley Publishing Company, 1928.
- 2 1900 United States Census, Worcester, Massachusetts, District 1773; and Massachusetts Death Records, Feb. 23, 1898 (death of Raymond Walker)
- 3 "Wheeling Notes." *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, August 4, 1897.
- 4 "Major Taylor Is to Go to France." *Worcester Telegram*, October 13, 1897.
- 5 "Practical End of National Circuit." *Worcester Telegram*, October 5, 1897.