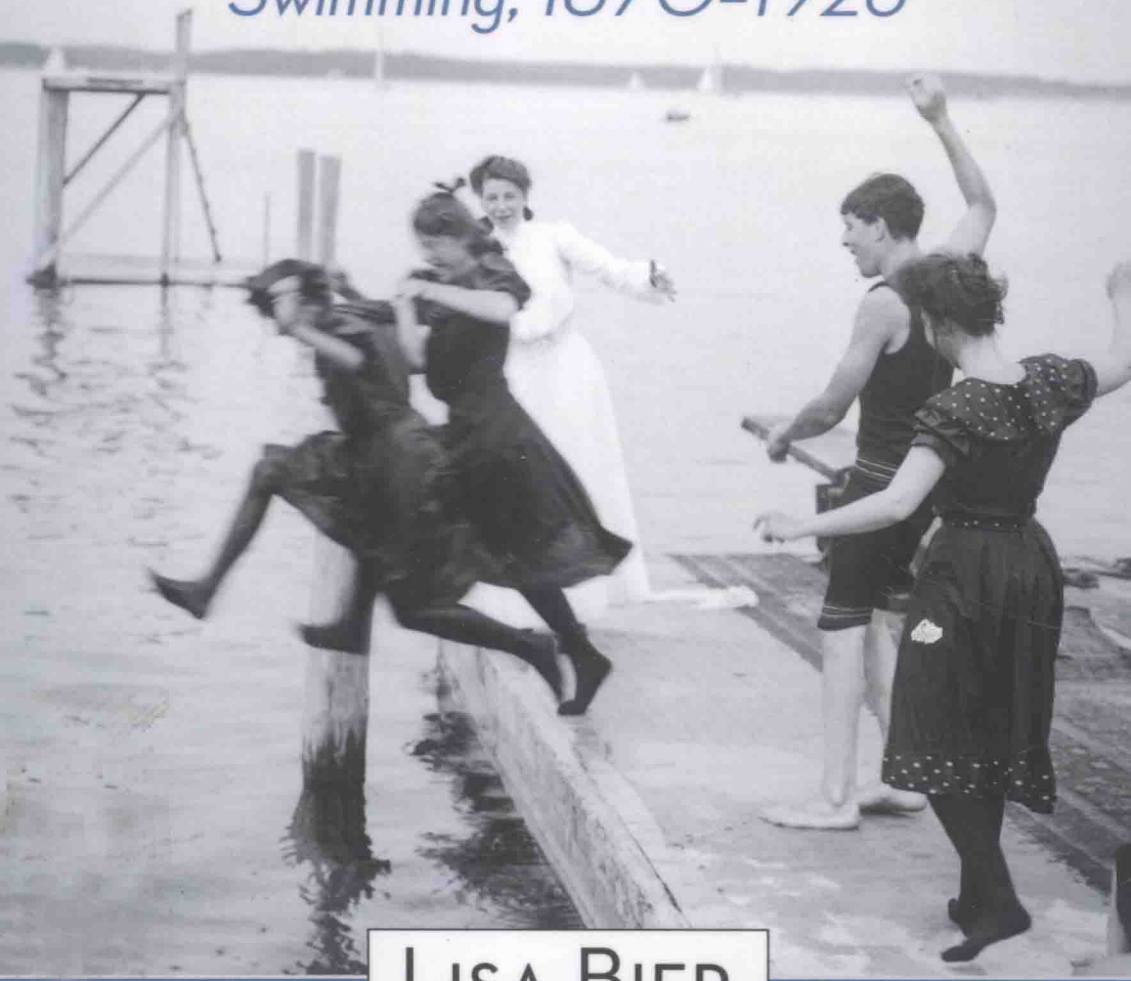
Fighting the Current

The Rise of American Women's Swimming, 1870–1926



Lisa Bier

Fighting the Current

The Rise of American Women's Swimming, 1870–1926

LISA BIER

McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Jefferson, North Carolina, and London

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGUING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Bier, Lisa, 1971–
Fighting the current : the rise of American women's swimming, 1870–1926 / Lisa Bier.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7864-4028-3
softcover : 50# alkaline paper ∞

1. Swimming for women — United States — History.
2. Swimming — United States — History. I. Title.
GV837.5.B54 2011
797.210820973 — dc23 2011022793

BRITISH LIBRARY CATALOGUING DATA ARE AVAILABLE

Front cover image: jumping in for a race at Shelter Island, New York, 1904 (Library of Congress)

Manufactured in the United States of America

McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Box 611, Jefferson, North Carolina 28640
www.mcfarlandpub.com

Table of Contents

Introduction

This book was first conceived of as a biography of Gertrude "Trudy" Ederle, the first woman to swim the English Channel. I had heard Trudy's name when I was growing up because she was the closest thing my family had to a celebrity. My grandfather's cousin was married to one of Trudy's brothers. The brother had died young, so the marriage was brief and there was no longer a connection between the families, so I never actually met anyone who knew Gertrude. Out of curiosity, I typed her name in the *New York Times* online database, and was astounded at just how much of a celebrity she had been in her time. She had appeared in hundreds of articles in the *New York Times*, even long before her famed Channel swim. I was astounded that this had occurred when she was only 18 years old, and I was also impressed by some other facts — that no books had ever been written about her; that she is relatively unknown today, and that her fame had been turned sour by many who wrote about her. Perhaps the most notable thing about her was that sports writers often painted her as a tragic female pioneer.

Sadly, I am such a slow writer that three other books about Gertrude were published as I was working, including one by her niece. But, by then, I was so enmeshed in my research and had discovered so many other interesting swimmers that I decided to highlight the women who had preceded Gertrude. I learned that there was a tradition of women swimming competitively in New York City dating back to the 1870s. These women were breaking barriers 50 years before Gertrude Ederle, and they have been all but forgotten. Some of their names are known, but many more go unnamed because of the number of women who were involved in the sport. It was not just a few celebrity swimmers. Many women swam for sport, for health, and just for fun. The competitive achievements of Gertrude Ederle can be directly traced to the women of New York City who sought out natatoriums or learned to swim in the ocean in the 1860s and 1870s.

More importantly, these swimmers did not keep a low profile. They received extensive attention for their performances in the newspapers. I ini-

tially expected that their stories would be hard to come by, but newspapers revealed the opposite. They were, for the most part (with some notable exceptions), well accepted in their day, popular and appreciated, although they were not treated equally as male athletes. Interestingly, their achievements appeared in the sports pages, not the special sections of the paper set aside for ladies' interests, such as society news and homemaking. Yet, they and their impressive activities have been forgotten.

I would like to thank the librarians and archivists at the Cantigny Foundation, the Museum of the City of New York; the Dover Museum; the International Center for Olympic Studies at the University of Western Ontario; the Herbert Hoover Presidential Museum; Lake Forest College Library; the New York Public Library; and the Brooklyn Public Library (who sent me materials, answered questions, and connected me with hard-to-find items). I would like to thank Jeff Bridgers at the Library of Congress and Ivonne Schmid at the International Swimming Hall of Fame for assisting with locating photographs. I especially wish to thank the staff of the wonderful International Swimming Hall of Fame in Ft. Lauderdale for allowing me to use their archive and library, where I was able to see the personal scrapbooks that had been proudly assembled by these young athletes. That, more than anything, gave me a sense of the lives of these women, and how swimming had opened up the world to them.

I thank my very supportive colleagues at Hilton C. Buley Library and I thank Southern Connecticut State University for providing support in the form of reassigned time for research and travel grants.

I'd like to thank my friends Jessica Kenty-Drane for inspiration and support; Astrid Eich-Krohn for kindly translating some materials; Christina Tam and Rachael Payne for dog-sitting; Carol Skalko for keeping me sane during a tough year, and Mike Ryan for making sure I finished.

1. Safe Waters

Dirty Water

Generally speaking, whenever women in the United States have engaged in an activity that was new to them — be it voting, owning property, or entering the workforce — they have been scrutinized, supervised, and criticized. Women's early participation in sports and leisure activities was likewise resisted and protested. One hundred years ago, opportunities for women to exercise, play sports, and have fun while doing so were few and far between. The very ideas of exercise, health, fun, and recreation as individual concepts were fairly new; combining all four in one activity may have seemed highly perplexing or self-indulgent, if not offensive and even dangerous to a women's health and supposedly delicate body.

As a recreational activity, swimming was slow to reach the masses. It was different from other kinds of activities, especially for city dwellers, for a few very important reasons. One, it required access to safe and clean water that was at least deep enough to float in. Two, when performed incorrectly, it could be fatal. Three, it usually involved wearing fewer, smaller, and more revealing items of clothing than was considered acceptable for the time.

Safe and clean water was first and foremost necessary for swimming, but it was in short supply in the 19th century, especially in cities. Considering the conditions, there are good reasons to ask why anyone would have wanted to go swimming at all. For instance, in 1870, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* reported a most disgusting scandal. The crews who had been hired by the city of New York to remove and dispose of dead animals were not doing their work correctly. They were supposed to be taking dead cats, dogs, carthorses, and remnants from butchers, far out into the wilds of New Jersey and burning them. Instead, they were tossing them into the water not far from Manhattan, where they easily washed back up on beaches or floated close to land. New York was suffering through a heat wave that summer, and the citizens could not ignore the horrible sight and the noxious stench coming from the offshore

carcasses. According to the paper, the carcasses drifted "about in the bay, going out and returning as the tide serves, until the effect of water and sun in these seething days renders them so absolutely putrid that human olfactories cannot stand the stench. Such is the condition at present in our bay and alongshore, that it is next to impossibility to breathe. At a moderate estimate, from Fulton Ferry to Coney Island, there are from 50 to 100 carcasses floating about or roasting upon the shore. There are cats, dogs, cows, goats, and horses, with tons of putrid liver and entrails, now slowly floating in and out, or else stranded, and all of them giving forth odors that would sicken the stoutest stomach in Christendom."[1]

When people in cities looked at the rivers, lakes, or ocean around them, they didn't necessarily see a beautiful view or a cool, refreshing place for splashing, frolicking, and other aquatic fun. They saw a barrier to travel, and they saw danger. Often they also saw animal entrails, jagged pieces of lumber, and rotting garbage bobbing along in oil slicks. Waterways were essentially highways for infectious diseases to travel upon, and Manhattan, being an island, was surrounded on all sides by fetid rivers carrying the wastes of upstream industries and the effluvia of the city's own production. These rivers are brackish, closer to salt water than freshwater, and out of necessity the city had decided to bring in its own drinking water from the upstate Croton Reservoir by the 1840s. This improved public health immensely but didn't solve the problem entirely. Even so, the piped-in water could carry illnesses such as cholera and typhoid, and in 1849 New York suffered a cholera outbreak that killed approximately 5,000 people.[2] Of course, bringing fresh water into a city did not solve the problem of removing waste from the city. Most sewage and garbage still ended up in the waters immediately surrounding the city.

New Yorkers recalled the disgusting state of the water in the oral history compilation, *You Must Remember This: An Oral History of Manhattan from the 1890s to World War II.* One man remembered, "When I think about it now, the sweat goes runnin' down my neck. We swam among the condoms, the garbage, and the filth, everything the Hudson was noted for. As a matter of fact, the first intestines I ever seen came floatin' down there once."[3] Another Manhattanite cheerfully recalled, "At 114th Street they had the sewer that went right out there when we went swimmin'. It was a big sewer — maybe six feet in diameter. We used to be on top, because it was encased in a concrete box. We would dive offa that. Every once in a while the sewer stuff would come out. Gheeegh! Everything came out. 'Hey, it's comin,' boys! Move out.' It was a riot. Ya got hit all over. Goddam, we had to push that crap away when we went in there, otherwise ya caught it in the face."[4] Someone else remembered swimming in a virtual abattoir. "We hung out by the river seven days a week.... The slaughterhouses were there, too. They used to kill sheep and

cattle. They had a big sewer pipe goin' into the dock, and every now and then there would be a big gush of blood into the river while we were swimmin,' and we'd get caught in it and be covered in blood."[5] Not everything in the water was dead. "The water was clean at high tide, and when the ferry pulled out, we swam around there. The water rats were gigantic, but if we didn't bother them, they didn't us."[6]

For boys and men willing to take the risk, it was possible to swim around the docks on the East and Hudson Rivers. This was usually done stark naked and was illegal, not to mention unclean and dangerous. A great amount of police energy went into chasing naked men and boys away from piers and docks, lest they expose themselves to women on passing boats. Women of all social classes would have avoided swimming in this situation, and the occasional outrage sparking from this improper display eventually helped lead to the creation of more controllable swimming facilities in the city. But for women who were interested in swimming, it was almost impossible to find a clean, safe place to swim.

A crowd of bathers at Atlantic City, New Jersey, 1903. Detail (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division).

It was at the beach that most average people received their first introduction to swimming. By the 1860s, resort areas were opening outside the city, where New Yorkers could leave the tightly enclosed city neighborhoods behind and spend a day strolling the shore, watching the amusements, and taking a dip in the sea. Coney Island was reachable by steamboat, train, or horsecar, and it could draw hundreds of thousands of people on a hot day. For those who owned a swimsuit or had the money to rent one, swimming or wading was a wonderful, cooling possibility. In 1868, a reporter for the *New York Times* wrote, "Surf-baths and clam-bakes — for these Coney Island is justly celebrated. The beach slopes rapidly into the sea so that you do not have to go far from the shore to get a full immersion. Almost anywhere along the shore bathing dresses may be hired for twenty-five cents each, and in some places remote from public view even these are dispensed with. Toward sunset, all along the shore, on a Midsummer's day, myriads of people of all ages and both sexes may be seen tumbling about among the breakers. It is an amusing sight to gaze upon and much more entertaining to be part of the spectacle."[7]

Unfortunately, the beaches at the resort areas were not much cleaner than the water immediately surrounding Manhattan. Brooklyn, then not yet part of the city of New York, contained the seaside resort areas of Coney Island, Rockaway, and Manhattan Beach, and it was there that the problems of inadequate garbage disposal had a more visible impact. Garbage dumped off Coney Island almost immediately washed up on shore, including large numbers of dead dogs, cats, and rats. In 1876, Brooklynites testified that "as many as 150 carcasses of animals have been found on the beach in a single day. William Harker, who has charge of the beach from the Brooklyn City line to Fort Hamilton, avers that he finds on an average from thirty-five to forty dead animals per day on the shore." Hotel and bathhouse owners in the resort areas were enraged at the impact on their businesses. No one wanted to make the long trip from Manhattan, rent a bathing suit, and walk down to the shore only to discover the water was disgusting. "Bathers are compelled to leave the surf on account of the stench, and the water itself, encumbered with a mass of putrescent material, is rendered unfit for bathing purposes. In this way it is a cause of serious loss and injury to those who make a living by furnishing bathing-suits."[8]

The following year, the problems continued unabated as the garbage scows moved north of the city. "Capt. Charles Smith, of the Seawanhaka, reports that the beach at Cow Bay, New-Rochelle, Sea Cliff, Hart's and City Islands, and all the other resorts between the points named, is strewn with dead dogs and cats, putrid liver, rotten oranges, and all kinds of similar offal that will float, and that a stench pervades the air which is unbearable. Private summer residences are rendered uninhabitable, the bath-houses are sur-

rounded with disgusting odds and ends, and unless something be done a pestilence promises to sweep the shore as soon as the regular heated season sets in." The impact of the dumping was such that entire oyster beds were dying out and the river bed was becoming shallower, filled to capacity by the strata of refuse that New York had sent upriver for dumping. Citizens were so disgusted by this that the "more hotheaded are loudly advocating summary measures, such as firing the scows and driving the tug-boats off by musketry and artillery."[9]

Despite laws enacted as to where the scows could drop their loads, illegal dumping continued. This 1880 account of bathing at Manhattan and Brighton Beaches gives an idea of the massiveness and foulness of the problem. "Persons who had gone in bathing when the tide was down, and found the water clear and bright, observed that when the tide came in it brought quantities of decaying straw and hay, floating vegetable cans, rotten lemons and melons, great patches of these offensive things coming ashore, to be dashed upon the bathers as they sported in the surf. It was impossible to avoid the noisome stuff, for it was stretched out in a disgusting mass for miles along the shore, and could be seen floating for a distance of half a mile out to sea. The rollers tossed it upon the beach, where it lay exposed to further decay in the sun, or was dried up and blown away with clouds of sand. Occasionally, small carcasses of cats and dogs would be found with the decaying vegetable matter and miscellaneous refuse, and bathers who ventured out without noting which way they were swimming were disagreeably surprised to find themselves floating besides one of the nauseating objects. Human nature at Coney Island beach is very much like human nature in the City, and it is not particularly partial in either place to unburied dead cats. Troops of disgusted patrons of the large bathing houses freed themselves from the refuse which clung about them, and went in hot haste to complain, and to suggest that something should be done to put a stop to the nuisance."[10]

The illegal dumping continued in spite of the anger of the resort proprietors and the swimmers. Even as beach resorts invested in massive ocean-front hotels, boardwalks, and pavilions, the stench and sight of the garbage continued to ruin vacations. One summer day in August of 1886, the garbage brought business to a standstill. "On Monday morning Manager Schumann, of the Manhattan Bathing House, declined to receive bathers. Four or five hundred came along with quarters in their hands, but he refused to take the money. For twenty yards out from the water's edge there were layers of stuff like a big raft. The substratum seemed to be of straw, hay, and weed. This was cemented with mud, ashes, and sewage. It carried a miscellaneous cargo, in which cut melons, decayed fruit, grease-coated barrel staves, old bottles, and an exhaustive assortment of cats and dogs in various post-mortem stages

appealed with staggering arguments to the senses of smell and sight. The breakers came up and lapped this mass, but could not get over, under, or around it."[11] When confronted with this kind of enormous barge of garbage, the beach managers had to wait for it to float ashore, and then were forced to dismantle it physically to cart it away for burial under the sand, which was hardly a long-term solution.

The situation was so serious that in 1891, the Manhattan Beach Hotel, Land, and Improvement Company sued New York City and its New-York Street-Cleaning Department, which was responsible for dumping that city's garbage in the waters off Brooklyn's beach areas.[12] In 1893, responding to the general public's outrage and the knowledge of the more educated citizens that no other world-class cities were so barbaric in their disposal of garbage, the city acquired Riker's Island and began putting the garbage in a landfill. By 1900, the city had created plants for burning the garbage, a solution that sent the trash up into the air and into people's lungs, but at least kept it away from the beaches. When the Barren Island incinerating plant was destroyed by fire in 1906, the problem returned almost immediately. Scows were required to dump at least 50 miles from shore, but trash almost immediately began to wash up on the beaches of Long Island and New Jersey. Illegal dumping from scows continued sporadically into the 1920s, when a vacationer at Long Island's Long Beach sent the following complaint about polluted beaches to the *New York Times*: "It is an uncanny feeling to have a dead body of a dog, sheep, chicken or cat roll against one's leg while in the surf, but a more serious blow to one's nerves to get a crack in the head from a bottle on the crest of a wave."[13]

The putrescence washing ashore may have been the impetus for some of the resort areas to begin installing swimming pools. In 1890, the upscale Hollywood resort in Long Branch, New Jersey, unveiled its newest amenity, a saltwater bathing pool. The enormous concrete tank was enclosed by wooden walls decorated with stained-glass windows, sheltered by a partially open roof. The pool area featured a bandstand and a café and was an immediate success. "Hundreds of persons, not only women and children, but men who love to perform feats in the water, have given up surf bathing and enjoy swimming in the tank. It is so large that it is not crowded even when from 300 to 500 persons visit it in a day, and the nicely graded depths of from three to six feet put danger out of the question."[14]

For those beachgoers who were able to enter the water at the seashore, being in the water was usually more a form of wading as opposed to fully immersed swimming. Many resorts strung ropes from shore out into the sea that bathers could cling to while they bobbed in the water or splashed about. Swimming wasn't the primary goal of a day at the shore; it was just one possible aspect of the excursion.

Barriers for Women

Women's bathing costumes ranged from the rented plain suits to very fancy silk ones, but what they had in common was coverage. These suits provided more skin coverage than today's dresses, with skirts that reached at least the knee, corsets, sleeves, bloomers, stockings, and bathing shoes. They were dark in color for modesty's sake, and often quite heavy when wet. Pressures from society concerning modesty conflicted with issues of safety and function. For women interested in venturing away from the ropes and actually swimming, not just wading, the suits were a hindrance and a danger.

Women's access to swimming was also hindered by attitudes about women's physical capabilities, which were shaped by the dualistic beliefs of the times. Men and women, it was believed, were opposites, each providing one unique and noninterchangeable half, if not an equal half, of the natural whole. What men could do and did do, women were believed incapable of and generally prevented from even attempting to do. Men did what was masculine, females did what was feminine, and everyone was supposed to know which was which.

Just as there were objections when women encroached on the societal

Bathers at Rockaway Beach, 1904. The ropes allowed non-swimmers to immerse themselves in the water safely. Detail (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division).

territory of men by becoming educated, having careers, owning property, and trying to gain the right to vote, there were objections to women participating in sports, couched in concern for their supposedly delicate natures. Sporting activities were allegedly too difficult or exhausting for women to handle without causing irreparable damage to the uniquely female aspects of their health, especially the ability to produce and rear healthy children. Some of the earliest and strongest objections to women participating in athletics and sports centered around concerns for women's reproductive systems, which seemed to be, then as now, everyone's business but their own.

There were a number of objections to women participating in sports and swimming over the years, and the objections seemed to change and grow stronger each time the previous objection was disproved or forgotten. First, it was thought that athletic exercise was too difficult for women, that they might injure themselves or deprive themselves of reproductive abilities. Then it was thought that while healthful exercise was acceptable, competition was not feminine, and in fact, had a masculinizing effect on women. Some in the medical field expressed grave concern that women who engaged in athletic activities were headed down a dangerous path on which they would forever lose their femininity and abilities to be mothers.

The idea of play and exercise for girls was not something advocated as natural and fun, as we like to think of it today, or necessitated by cultural norms about extreme fitness or thinness for girls and women. Early physical educators believed that girls and boys were entirely different and, even in matters of play and recreation, needed to be guided to appropriate activities that would train them for the roles they would ultimately hold.

As a result of attitudes such as these, girls weren't entirely barred from participating in exercise and sports, as long as such activities were noncompetitive, not overly strenuous, and ultimately led to their development as better wives and mothers. Despite this, some women were able to ignore these attitudes and do as they pleased, with little negative result and much personal benefit.

Private Pools

In cities like New York, open space was rapidly disappearing as real estate became more valuable by the hour. It was somewhere between difficult and impossible for women to find opportunities and places where they could engage privately and safely in recreation, leisure, or exercise. In a time before public parks and mandated physical education, private organizations stepped in to carve out space in the city for their members.

By the 1880s, working-class and middle-class women were beginning to have a few options for joining private civic groups that promoted physical fitness, many of which were religious or ethnic organizations. The Young Women's Christian Association provided some access to sports, exercise and self-improvement for women. Founded in its earliest form as the Ladies' Christian Association in 1848, it was an entirely separate organization from the Young Men's Christian Association, the YMCA, although the two mirrored each other in many ways. Both were founded to keep the young people who had been drawn to cities looking for work from being lured into the dangerous, seamy, and sinful aspects of city life. They offered lodging and opportunities for learning, recreation, and worship.

Many Jewish synagogues invested in large community centers that functioned as place of worship, community center, cultural center, and recreation facility, a phenomenon that has been referred to as the "shul with a pool." In 1916, the New York Young Women's Hebrew Association completed the construction of an eight-story multi-purpose building. Located at 110th Street in Harlem and overlooking Central Park, it featured a modern pool and gymnasium, dormitories, classrooms, and a library. Importantly, this was not a men's organization that offered use of its facilities to women a few hours a week — this was a facility created especially for the recreational needs and betterment of Jewish women.[15]

Ethnic organizations, including the German Turnvereins, provided thousands of women with recreational opportunities that would never have been available otherwise. The first American Turnverein was founded in Cincinnati in 1848, and soon thereafter many more were established in cities up and down the East Coast and all over the Midwest. The Turnvereins were athletic and social clubs founded on the teachings of the German father of gymnastics, Friedrich L. Jahn, who had created a system of gymnastics as a means of restoring his countrymen's lost morale after Napoleon's occupation of Germany. Jahn's methods incorporated calisthenics, marching, running, dancing, swimming and work on apparatuses like the balance beam and pommel horse. Jahn had wanted his gymnastic programs to provide Germany with an army of strong, able, and agile citizens ready to defend the fatherland, and this belief came to America with the Turnvereins. Vast numbers of Turners, as they came to identify themselves, joined the Union Army during the Civil War; there were at least four regiments whose membership consisted solely of Turners. By 1896, there were at least 24 Turner societies in Chicago alone, where they were active in pushing public schools to teach physical education and in the development of public parks.[16]

Some factories and textile mills sponsored athletic organizations for their workers. In addition to keeping workers fit and entertained, these programs

were thought to bond the workforce, improve morale, and create better relationships between workers and management.[17]

There were also more exclusive private athletic clubs founded by and for the wealthy. These generally excluded women from participating in most sports, although they did provide some of the earliest opportunities for women to play a few activities, specifically golf and lawn tennis. Many of these clubs gradually evolved from athletic facilities to competitive athletic clubs to country clubs, with an emphasis on socializing rather than athletics.

Some women were interested in learning to swim for social reasons, such as those who might spend the summers at a resort or aboard a wealthy husband's yacht. But for many others, knowledge of swimming was a matter of life and death. In a world where people commonly traveled by boat, and women wore large, voluminous clothing that could drown them if waterlogged, any swimming skill to speak of was a needed advantage in the fight against a watery grave. Whether for safety or health, by the mid–19th century there was a demand for women's swimming lessons.

Private baths provided a place where, for a fee, women could learn to swim in privacy for educational, recreational, or health reasons. Some of these early swimming pools were little more than small tanks in the basements of buildings, while others were privately owned floating baths. The floating baths were large wooden cages that were anchored to the ends of piers or docks. The slatted woodwork of the pool enclosure allowed water to enter and exit the pool, freeing the employees from having to clean the water as they would in an enclosed tank of water. The floating pool was surrounded by a tall enclosure that provided privacy to the clientele from prying outside eyes. The floating baths were occasionally the source of confusion for city authorities who couldn't decide whether to treat them as boats or as buildings.

One of these early private baths, Benton's Warm Ocean Swimming Bath, was just opposite Brooklyn's City Hall, and opened in 1861. Their facilities were advertised this way: "At this novel and unique establishment may be found a swimming lake, from three to seven feet deep, large enough to accommodate hundreds of people at one time, into which cascades and jets of perfectly filtered ocean water are constantly flowing. Steam pipes have been so arranged as to keep the immense body of water summer heat during the winter. A commodious and completely furnished dressing-room provided for each bather. Also, hot or cold salt or fresh shower and private baths for both ladies and gents. Competent teachers, male and female, in constant attendance, to teach the art of swimming. The luxury of a bath in a lake of pure ocean water, with a perfectly smooth and even bottom, free from shell and other annoying construction, in a fairy-like grotto, protected from sun, wind, and the gaze of the multitude, in the very heart of a great city, was never