AT THE BEGINNING of the twenty-first century, Americans think recycling is a good, even moral behavior. We all would like to see more reuse of things, tempering our rampant consumption and reducing the amount of garbage we throw into landfills and incinerators. Recycling now means leaving a cleaner, better planet to our children. Yet even today, most of us look down on the actual work of recycling, displaying little respect for the people who handle our waste, whether residential or industrial.

That was even more true a century ago. In the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the creation of waste of all kinds increased dramatically, the industries that developed to manage those wastes (including garbage hauling, hazardous waste storage, and scrap-material trading) were much maligned. Industrialists, politicians, and even progressive reformers, who in many ways displayed the social concerns we associate with contemporary recycling, saw scrap handling as dirty work, work that was not just physically dirty, but morally degraded. That perception reflected revulsion at the kinds of people who did the work as well as the work itself, conflating the unsanitary status of the work with xenophobic stereotypes of the immigrants willing to do the work. Such disdain ensured that the people who entered the waste trades were not those perceived as respectable members of society but economically and culturally marginalized individuals.

This marginalization, modern thinkers suggest, is intuitive, for waste is by definition negative, and association with waste has social and cultural implications. Mary Douglas characterizes waste as taboo; handling waste requires breaking taboos about cleanliness and order. Individuals circumventing accepted
notions of sanitation are themselves unclean, and not in compliance with social norms. What objects are deemed waste or of negative value—be they old food, asbestos, rusty metal, or used automobiles—are socially constructed. In *Rubbish Theory*, Michael Thompson adds that a society’s designation of objects as durable goods, transient aging goods, or rubbish of negative worth is dependent on issues of need, order, and context that have class and status connotations.¹

Research into the relationship of Americans with their waste has revealed much about the systems we have constructed to manage it and our changing cultural and social norms. Martin Melosi and Joel Tarr’s work on urban waste management systems reveals that, though there never has been a perfect sink for our trash, American cities developed elaborate systems to remove waste from residential and industrial areas and put them in the ground, water, or (as smoke) air. Susan Strasser’s *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* traces the changing social constructions of waste, constructions that produced the culture of disposability that made a scrap industry possible. Both Strasser and Suellen Hoy demonstrate that managing waste disposal has had gender dimensions in the twentieth century, with women expected to maintain the order of things in the household. The historiography on American waste management reveals much about our society’s management and perceptions of waste, yet less attention has been given to the perception of waste handling as an industry.²

A comprehensive understanding of the social construction of waste requires consideration of both the discarded objects themselves and the people whose business it is to discard or reprocess the objects. We occasionally recognize the importance of waste-trade workers, especially when there is a garbage hauler’s strike or other crisis. Without their daily labors, the orderly removal of wastes breaks down. Despite their importance, the waste trades rarely have garnered respect. To call waste-trade labor “dirty work” is not novel, for waste handling involves unsanitary conditions. Stuart Perry titled a 1998 study of San Francisco garbage haulers *Collecting Garbage: Dirty Work, Clean Jobs, Proud People*. In Perry’s conception, the work is low-status, high-risk, and physically dirty, but also honorable and necessary. Perry’s study rightly emphasizes the importance of garbage hauling, but it does not examine the many ways in which garbage haulers and related occupations are seen as dirty.³

The term “dirty work” may be expanded to include other connotations of dirty behavior. The dirtiness of the waste trades extends beyond issues of sanitation to include notions of ethics and xenophobia. Garbage hauling, toxic-waste storage, and scrap dealing are three waste industries whose images are associated with crime; not coincidentally, they also are associated strongly with ethnic groups who migrated to the United States in large numbers between 1870 and World War I. Contemporary cultural examples abound: Anthony Soprano from HBO’s *The Sopranos* uses a garbage-hauling business as a front for his mafia operations, mirroring reports of toxic waste handlers being prosecuted for mafia-related activities over the past two decades. The two most recent *Star Wars* films featured a scheming, hook-nosed, seemingly Semitic junk dealer who enslaves the young boy who grows up to be Darth Vader. Scrap and garbage are linked to identifiable
ethnic and criminal identities in popular culture, a link that—justified or not—is both strong and long-lasting in American history.4

The United States is by no means unique in attaching stigma to waste handlers. The work by definition occurs on the border between what societies deem valuable and worthless. The industrialized world has several examples of this dynamic over the past two centuries; Donald Reid has observed the complex and often negative public image of Parisian cesspool workers despite the importance of their work. Americans, however, conflate waste not only with ethics and social standing, but also with xenophobia, raising questions of what handling this material has to do with being an American. This dynamic exacerbated tensions for the waste trades in the United States just as they were growing, tensions that forced waste-handling businesses to assert their legitimacy according to a set of cultural perceptions relating to ethics, economics, and patriotism. One of the methods scrap firms used to assert their legitimacy was to employ the rhetoric of conservation. This article’s contribution to the understanding of waste in America is to explore this dynamic at work between 1870 and 1930.5

SCRAP’S RISE AS A ‘DIRTY’ INDUSTRY

AMERICAN PERCEPTIONS of the waste trades as unsanitary and unethical extend back over a century. The experience of American scrap firms as they grew from small shops to scrap yards and brokerages between 1870 and 1930 provides perspective on that industry’s poor image and may stand as an example for the waste trades in general. Scrap trading has existed in the United States in some form since the colonial period as blacksmiths and paper manufacturers reused metal and rags in manufacture. The purchased-scrap trade grew in the postbellum era as industrial demand for secondary materials allowed individuals to make profits collecting, sorting, and selling scrap metals, rags, paper, and other materials to manufacturers.6

While scrap trading is an old activity, the scrap industry is a product of industrial life in the last two centuries. Its origins lie in the changing nature of demand for scrap materials produced by the onset of heavy industry in the nineteenth century. Beginning with paper manufacture, then extending to steel-making and other manufacturing processes, industrial producers demanded unprecedented quantities of scrap materials for mass production. This heightened demand led to new business opportunities for scrap collectors, transforming small, local trades into larger businesses with transatlantic trade patterns. Increased consumption and disposal of common household items in the late nineteenth century increased the amount of discards available for scrap peddlers to purchase or sort through.7

The increased demand for rags between 1840 and 1860 combined with continued local demand for old metals to produce a proliferation of businesses devoted to sorting and selling scrap materials in the United States’ largest mercantile cities. Boston featured many such dealers; Philadelphia and especially New York City hosted importers of rags, rope, waste paper, and scrap metals.
Business listings in New York City and Philadelphia city directories indicate a proliferation of firms engaged in trading rags and other old materials in the two decades prior to the Civil War.

Table 1. Junk, Rag, and Scrap Establishments in New York City Directories, 1840-1891.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Business</th>
<th>1840</th>
<th>1851</th>
<th>1860</th>
<th>1866</th>
<th>1880</th>
<th>1891</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Junk</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>333</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rags</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>139</td>
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<td>Scrap</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>40</strong></td>
<td><strong>71</strong></td>
<td><strong>233</strong></td>
<td><strong>383</strong></td>
<td><strong>473</strong></td>
<td><strong>356</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Longworth’s American Almanac, New York, New York Register & City Directory for 1840 (New York, 1840); Doggett’s New York City, New York Street Directory for 1851 (New York, 1851); Wilson’s Business Directory of New York City, New York for 1860 (New York, 1860); Trow’s New York, New York City Directory for 1866 (New York, 1866); Trow’s New York, New York City Directory for 1880-81 (New York, 1881); Trow’s New York, New York City Directory for 1890 (New York, 1891).

As demand for scrap materials increased, so did the presence of independent dealers. These firms, not beholden to one customer, scavenged materials from dumps and demolition sites, or purchased them from other scavengers. Scrap firms sometimes employed peddlers and scavengers, but they more frequently relied solely on the skills of the owner to sort and evaluate scrap from refuse. In addition to making rounds in residential neighborhoods, dealers purchased scrap from industrial firms that perceived no use for their wastes. New York’s Francis Bannerman Sons, Inc., for example, dealt in a wide range of goods, including scrap iron, lead, rope, waste paper, and war artifacts such as decommissioned weaponry. Railroads were large suppliers of scrap iron at mid-century; their discarded cars, engines, and especially old rails provided dealers with heavy, good-quality iron to sell to mills and to other railroads. Ships, including those of the U.S. Navy, similarly provided dealers such as Bannerman with large amounts of iron and steel. The Navy frequently auctioned off scrapped ships, a system that removed large amounts of waste from its property. Dealers were responsible for hauling the scrap away, dismantling it for its sellable assets, and disposing of any remaining waste.  

Scrap collection and sorting was hard work. Scrap metal did not come in neat, symmetrical sizes and shapes but in forms ranging from large ocean-going ships that were no longer seaworthy to bundles of wires enmeshed with other debris. In order to sell these materials, dealers had to convert them into portable shapes and sizes free from impurities. Ship hulls could be encased in rust that had to be scraped or cut off; potentially valuable copper wires had to be separated from worthless refuse. The work was not only hard but dangerous. The two most common ways of processing metal scrap involved cutting it with shears or acetylene torches, either of which could easily maim a man. Sharp or jagged edges.
of scrap metal could cut flesh; if rusty, they could cause tetanus. Rags often were stained or contaminated with disease-causing germs; these were separated by hand. Stored rags provided fuel for fires. The combination of fire and germs made rags hazardous to neighbors, not only to the people handling them. Warehouses and shops filled with rags often caught fire in New York City, sometimes spreading to neighboring buildings and causing thousands of dollars in damage.

Individuals associated with the waste trades had to handle “dirty” materials. Nineteenth-century firms were small operations, and shop owners, peddlers, and scavengers all performed physical labor. Scrap firms, though often dealing with large manufacturers as customers, did not themselves become large firms. Most had only a handful of laborers (often employed seasonally) and many were one-man operations. Low payrolls were but one reason why the trade required little investment capital for entry. Processing technology for rags and scrap metal was minimal until the 1920s, with the most important tools being the sorters’ hands and eyes. The work was dirty, dangerous, and of low status, and few natives with prospects in other lines of work chose to perform it for any length of time. The low starting costs, combined with a lack of competition from established natives, made it possible for immigrants to gain footholds in the trade by becoming peddlers or yard labor, then graduate to owning their own store or yard. Census data indicate that Irish-born individuals were highly represented in the waste trades in 1880. By 1920, the two dominant groups in the waste trades were the Italian-born and especially the Yiddish-speaking (a reliable indicator of Jewish ancestry). By 1936, Fortune magazine estimated that 90 percent of the scrap-metal firms in the United States were owned by Jews.

Sigmund Dringer’s story exemplifies the opportunities and difficulties immigrants found in the scrap industry. Dringer was a Jewish immigrant from Austria who migrated in 1867 to New Jersey at the age of thirty. Within ten years of entering the country, he rose from driving a wagon for a Newark junkman named Max Boehm for $10 a week to establishing his own yard in Patterson. According to The New York Times, Dringer had in less than a decade made customers of the local mill-owners and “claimed to be the most extensive junk-dealer in the United States, and was in a fair way to control the market. And yet this man [could] neither read nor write.”

Dringer’s success was unusual, but his status as a Jewish immigrant who ascended from the bottom rungs of the business to a position of elevated status would be replicated by hundreds of scrap peddlers and dealers who entered the trade between 1870 and 1920. With success came conflicts. As Dringer’s business grew, he encountered problems with a supplier. The Erie Railroad sued him, claiming he had conspired with some of its employees to purchase valuable old rails and machinery at prices well below their value. The railroad won an injunction to freeze Dringer’s assets, halting his lucrative business. After over a year and a half of court battles, Dringer won the case. The dispute, however, foreshadowed the problems scrap dealers would face as their industry grew.

After 1870, changes in industrial production allowed for greater use of scrap iron. The open-hearth process of steel-making allowed the operator a greater
amount of control over materials used in the mills’ heat than did the older Bessemer process. This allowed the use of a greater percentage of scrap metal in steel-making without concerns about impurities. At the same time, Americans intensified their consumptive habits, demanding more manufactured goods and producing newly discarded wastes on an unprecedented scale. Between 1903 and 1907, for example, Pittsburgh’s generation of garbage almost doubled, increasing from 47,000 tons to 82,498 tons.\textsuperscript{16}

The changing industrial context provided opportunities for many individuals to reintroduce what had been perceived as waste materials back into industrial production.\textsuperscript{17} Most firms traded in a variety of scrap materials, though some specialized in rags, aluminum, or copper. Industrial production related to World War I drove scrap iron and steel prices higher, made millionaires of a few dealers, and established scrap iron and steel as the dominant scrap commodities. The federal government joined industrial manufacturers as a customer for scrap; despite wartime price ceilings, scrap dealers enjoyed tremendous prosperity as a result of the new demand.\textsuperscript{18} Ferrous scrap demand rose with the increased use of steel in the construction trades, mass appliances, and automobile manufacture, and the increased use of open-hearth steel making, a process that allowed for use of a greater ratio of scrap iron to virgin ore than the Bessemer and crucible processes did. As the United States became (in the words of historian Thomas J. Misa) a nation of steel, steel mills demanded increasing amounts of scrap iron to make their products. In the early twentieth century, iron and steel surpassed cloth rags as the most widely traded scrap materials in the United States.\textsuperscript{19}

By 1917, \textit{Scientific American} reported than the annual business in scrap iron had increased to a billion dollars, a tenfold jump from the level at the start of World War I.\textsuperscript{20} Between 1917 and 1929, demand for iron and steel further expanded the market for scrap iron. The mass consumption of the 1920s brought obsolescence based on style rather than technological function. General Motors pioneered the concept of the annual model in automobile sales, and manufacturers of washing machines, gas ranges, and other durable goods added stylistic considerations to the marketing and design of goods whose useful lives otherwise would span many years.\textsuperscript{21}

A consumption ethic based on style rather than functionality spurred disposal of durable goods. Junk shops and yards welcomed large numbers of mass-produced metal goods that could be resold as secondhand appliances or processed as scrap. The automobile graveyard became a new, specialized junkyard, where customers could purchase obsolete automobiles for scrap or purchase individual parts from junked automobiles in order to repair other automobiles. In 1920, Detroit’s business directory featured listings for thirty-six automobile salvage yards, and by the end of the decade, automobile graveyards full of discarded bodies, spare parts, and unwanted old vehicles were common in American cities.\textsuperscript{22}

By 1920, the future for scrap dealers appeared bright. The collection of small firms built by immigrants over the past four decades had grown into a flexible network of brokers, dealers, peddlers, and scavengers, with the largest firms enjoying international trade and relationships with the nation’s largest industrial
producers. In 1918, journalist George Manlove exclaimed that the “scrap industry... has risen from nothing to a position of full dignity and is just now coming into its own, a recognized member of the iron and steel family.”

CUSTOMER DISSATISFACTION WITH SCRAP FIRMS

WHILE MANLOVE was correct about the industry’s rapid rise, his assertion that it had risen to a position of full dignity was unduly optimistic. The hundreds of new scrap dealers competing to sell their goods to a smaller number of industrial customers encountered (as had Sigmund Dringer in the 1870s) conflicts relating to their business practices and handling of waste materials. Inherent in the dialogue between the scrap industry and its critics were different environmental values and concepts of legitimacy prevalent in American thought between 1870 and 1930.

New scrap dealers faced several problems. Scrap dealers had to overcome the dangers of injury, disease, and fire to survive in the industry. In addition, they had to establish relationships with customers in order to get repeat business in a field populated by many small independent firms and relatively few customers (many of whom were industrial giants such as U.S. Steel and the Ford Motor Company). Dealers competed to offer the best quality materials at the lowest prices. Some also found unscrupulous ways to undercut the competition, offering materials they could not deliver, or misrepresenting the quality of their materials.

A common complaint involved the quality of materials sold. By 1860, buyers and sellers of old rags, iron, and other materials developed widely used material classifications, with No. 1 material the most desired and No. 2 an inferior grade. For rags, No. 1 grade meant unstained material as opposed to stained, for iron it meant large, heavy pieces of metal as opposed to small scraps or bundles of wire. No written agreements defined the classifications, however, and many disputes centered on the question of material quality, leading to dozens of lawsuits and accusations between the Civil War and the Great Depression.

Conflicts arose as scrap dealers developed customer and supplier bases. Urban police recognized a relationship between the secondhand goods market and theft. As early as 1817, New York City enacted a statute to prohibit secondhand dealers from doing business with minors who might be induced to steal and sell goods. Police harassment of scavengers and junk-shops in New York City increased around 1850 as the number of such businesses proliferated. Other municipalities, including Boston and Philadelphia, enacted restrictions on the activities of junk peddlers and dealers in the second half of the nineteenth century. Many of the restrictions on junk sales were attempts to curb theft of goods that might be resold in shops.

The dangerous nature of the waste trades was evident to those outside of the trades. Municipal governments viewed scrap, rag, and junk dealers as nuisances because of the physical hazards they posed. Concern over health issues, especially the risk that the rags would catch fire or spread disease, led to restrictions on rag sales (and occasional quarantines) toward the end of the century. Fires in New
York City’s rag-shops threatened firemen and neighbors in densely built areas. Laws designed to limit rag and junk trading because of their threats to public health and comfort comprised one aspect of the nuisance laws proliferating in American cities and states in the nineteenth century. Nineteenth-century enforcement of nuisance laws varied from state to state, but by the end of the century, judges in New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania used the laws to curb some industrial nuisances. Nuisance legislation related to junk and rag dealers focused on licensing peddlers with the intent to limit theft and harassment by peddlers.

Licensing laws were upheld by state courts, but with some limitations. In 1881, the New Jersey Supreme Court found that the city of New Brunswick had used peddler licensing laws solely to raise revenue for the city, a purpose the court ruled illegal. Most of the appearances junk dealers made in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania courts in the nineteenth century had less to do with nuisance laws and more to do with allegations of fraud or receipt of stolen property and disputes over weight and quality of delivered materials.

Customer complaints of misrepresentation and fraud by dealers were common in the late nineteenth century and increased as the scrap industry grew larger. Customers often accused scrap dealers of selling false weights or qualities of goods. In a 1914 article in Metal Industry, W. H. Parry, superintendent of the National Meter Company in Brooklyn, warned customers “to be on the constant lookout, or some pretty raw deals will be slipped over on them that will prove at least why they prefer to be called ‘scrap dealers.’ If there is any one trick that these dealers do not know of I have yet to hear of it.”

The schemes Parry described included one involving a copper dealer who froze water inside copper casks he was to sell in order to inflate their weight. Another story involved a 150-pound St. Bernard: “This animal is so well trained that if his boss is selling materials he just loves to be weighed in with the load. He also has a strange antipathy to weighing out, but let his boss be the buyer, he then insists on being weighed as part of the empty truck, that is, to convey the materials outside the premises, but never as part of the truck gear when the load leaves.”

Other schemes Parry alleged dealers used to manipulate the weight of their materials included “the old dodge of weighing the driver plus a couple of well-weighted feed bags,” manipulating the balancing weight of truck scales, and having truck drivers “place one of the truck wheels so that half of its width, at least, is not on the scales.”

Lest one suppose that Parry was unusually suspicious of scrap dealers, other voices joined a chorus of allegations. A 1914 article in Technical World Magazine reported that “the old metal business is probably the crookedest of any that is classed as legitimate,” and one where collusion among merchants in regards to weights, measurements and prices was common. Often these complaints were couched in rhetoric that conflated the scrap dealer’s unethical business practices with his status as a mysterious, unscrupulous immigrant. J. P. Alexander, writing in the Electric Railway Journal, warned scrap buyers that “as the ‘scrap business’ is carried on to a great extent by foreigners, and classes of collectors who are
constantly going beyond the limit of the law, all sales where such people become bidders are best handled on a strictly cash basis, and with an exact agreement in writing as to the details of each sale.”

Distrust of foreigners extended to anti-Semitism. Nelson Whitaker, writing to his attorney in 1895 regarding a firm he felt was attempting to defraud his company, emphasized that they must be cautious in handling the situation as he was dealing with “a firm composed entirely of Jews.”

Popular depictions of peddlers and dealers emphasized their ethnic dimension, linking ethnicity to unscrupulous behavior. Dickens’s Fagin is an early English example of the nineteenth-century Jewish collector; Zerkow, the Polish Jew in Frank Norris’s 1899 novel *McTeague*, was Fagin’s American counterpart. In a novel populated by greedy characters, Zerkow is an extreme example, calculating the value of everything he sees. He marries a woman because he mistakenly believes she possesses gold dishes. Obsessed, he is driven to delusion attempting to track down the elusive gold. The popular image of the junk dealer at the turn of the century was a hook-nosed, scheming Jewish immigrant bent on cheating honest American businessmen.

Many scrap firms indeed attempted to manipulate prices and quality of materials at the expense of suppliers and customers. Given the volatile nature of scrap dealing, where prices of materials fluctuated from week to week and competition was fierce, many dealers were desperate enough to engage in the kinds of mischief of which these customers complained. Such short-term efforts to make quick money undercut the long-term viability of the industry, but as one veteran broker put it many years later, “that generation was just trying to stay alive,” and some individuals went to unseemly lengths to stay in business.

Though many men made their fortunes in scrap at the time, many more were unable to harness the requisite skills, good fortune, and ability to overcome the unscrupulous elements in the industry, and these men left the business. An unfortunate scrap man incapacitated by injury or unable to gauge the shifting demand for his commodity was soon out of work. Many dealers, even though they were successful, tired of the labor and low status and opted out. Some used the scrap industry as a springboard to more respectable endeavors. Jewish immigrant Jim Levinson founded a successful family scrap yard in Pittsburgh’s Hill District in 1903, his sons ran the business for a while after his death, but then they closed the scrap yard in 1926, and transformed the family business into Levinson Steel, which prospered as a steel fabricating concern over the next half century. Leaving an industry that was dangerous, volatile, and lacking respect was a viable option to the successful firms.

Customers who wished to avoid the chicanery of unscrupulous scrap dealers had two options. One was to salvage more of the scrap generated by their own operations. Between 1905 and 1920, engineers employed by large companies exhorted their employers to develop more rational, efficient means of reclaiming their scrap. As one executive claimed in 1917, waste was “extremely insidious in undermining and reducing the profits of a business,” and the problem was serious enough that “the general character of a whole business may be sized up pretty
accurately, and in a large measure be kept track of and regulated, by observing closely the waste from each department.”39 Foundries, mills, and railroads developed programs to reclaim and reuse their scrap. The Union Pacific Railroad Company estimated that it saved more than $1,000 a month in its Omaha, Nebraska, shops by reclaiming old bolts and nuts.40

Customers wishing to purchase scrap—a segment of the market that included mills and factories whose needs were beyond the most efficient reclamation of in-house scrap—could opt to purchase old materials directly from railroads, other mills, or military auctions instead of relying on scrap dealers. This practice was known as direct dealing. Many firms opted to use scrap brokers because they felt the skilled middlemen could produce the best quality material at the lowest prices. Others, however, felt the risk of fraud was too great. In the late 1920s, Bethlehem Steel opened its own scrap yards and purchased abandoned ships and machinery directly from sources such as the U.S. Navy, railroads and other mills. Scrap dealers were alarmed at Bethlehem’s moves and feared that direct dealing threatened them with the loss of their largest customers and suppliers. As steel manufacturers cited the dishonesty of scrap dealers as one reason to engage in direct dealing, this threat to the scrap firms’ livelihood was also an attack on their legitimacy.

‘A MORAL MENACE’: SCRAP AS PUBLIC NUISANCE

CONCERN OVER customer satisfaction—though significant—was not the only reason why scrap dealers needed to worry about legitimacy; a business perceived as illegitimate encountered conflicts with other segments of society. Concern over theft, violent crime, and the physical hazards posed by scrap materials led reform groups and law enforcement officials to regulate or eradicate scrap businesses at a time when reform, order, and beautification were important ideals in American cities. The threat rag dealing posed to physical health led to municipal regulations designed to protect public safety. The incendiary and infectious nature of rags led to quarantines in port cities in order to prevent epidemics.41

Iron and steel scrap posed fewer threats to public health, yet the scrap-metal trade was blamed for a variety of moral and physical ills.42 The Chicago Juvenile Protective Association, one of many Progressive efforts to improve the welfare of urban children, conducted an investigation after World War I to assess the impact of the city’s junk dealers on the city’s children. The association echoed many customers’ complaints in charging that junk dealers were “low in the scale of ethics and intelligence.” It found that junk dealing was dangerous, promoted theft and violent crime, and was “a moral menace to minors ... fraught with grave dangers to health and physical well being.”43

The association singled out junk dealers as a danger to children because they encouraged theft, taught the lesson that one could put a price on any object, and engaged in a trade that was highly competitive, disorganized, and prone to violence. The association was primarily concerned with the relationship between children and junk peddlers using wagons, a group the study estimated had doubled
in number during World War I to about 1,800. These peddlers collected scraps and sold them to the increasing number of retail junk shops and wholesale scrap yards which were becoming more common in poorer urban neighborhoods, and it was in this environment that they came into contact with children.44

Jane Addams’s work in Chicago’s neighborhoods at the turn of the century shaped the association’s concerns. Addams observed neighborhood boys breaking into vacant houses to remove faucets and pipes to sell to junk dealers. The money they received from this work went to buy beer.45 Such concerns were neither unique to Chicago nor new to the waste trades in 1920. An 1873 case in New York City concerned a junk dealer who received stolen iron from boys. In testimony against junk-shop owner Stephen Coleman, iron manufacturer Martin Briggs accused Coleman of having iron stolen from Briggs’s business and complained that Coleman should have known that “when pig-iron was brought to be sold by boys they must have stolen it in all human probability ... that we ought to be careful about buying of boys; he said he was in the habit of buying iron and he did not know where it came from, and did not think it his business to look around and find out where it came from.”46

Jacob A. Riis observed in 1894 that the problem of junk dealers purchasing stolen goods from boys was still serious. Riis saw soda-water wagons as easy marks for young thieves beginning the descent into lives of crime. “The bottle is worth so much cash at the junk-shop. The driver’s back is turned; the boy ‘swipes’ one. It is not a very great crime, but it is the stepping-stone to many greater. A horse-blanket or a copper-bottomed boiler may be the next thing. It is the first step that costs an effort, and that not a very great one, with the clamor of a hungry stomach to drown the warning voice within him that whispers of the policeman and the lock-up.”47

Riis, Addams, and the Chicago Juvenile Protective Association also attacked the aesthetic nuisances associated with scrap yards. As most scrap men lived in urban areas, their yards often were located in residential neighborhoods. Many stored their goods in their front or back yards in plain view of neighbors and onlookers. The association report noted that scrap dealing out of residential neighborhoods posed a health risk to the area’s children. “Boys hang about the shop while junk wagons are being unloaded or play in dirty piles of rubbish heaped up in the street.”48

The threats to health, children, neighbors, and customers produced municipal efforts to control or eliminate the nuisances posed by scrap dealers. Cities established zoning regulations to regulate where scrap yards and junk shops could be located and bar them from residential areas. In 1918, Philadelphia banned junk shops from residential and business districts and buildings “occupied in whole or in part as dwellings, two-family dwellings, rooming houses or tenements.”49 The chief of the city bureau of health’s division of housing and sanitation explained that these ordinances were passed to place restrictions “upon those persons handling waste without any respect for sanitary law or for the health and comfort of their employees.”50
Many cities licensed waste dealers and peddlers in an effort to get them to comply with local sanitary and trade regulations, and zoning laws prohibited their activities in some areas altogether. By 1920, municipal governments saw the scrap industry as a threat to the public welfare, and many customers saw scrap dealers as unsavory elements. The industry had a poor image associated with physical and moral ills.51

‘A LEGITIMATE BUSINESS’: DEALERS RESPOND

FACED WITH the loss of their customers through direct dealing, and with the possible loss of their business location through municipal zoning, scrap dealers attempted to establish their legitimacy. Between 1900 and 1930, they established trade associations and journals, set industrywide standards and ethical codes, and crafted rhetoric affirming scrap dealers’ importance to the nation.

Scrap dealers began establishing national trade publications and associations before World War I. The Waste Trade Journal was one of the earliest. While the iron trade publications had featured regular columns and articles on the scrap iron trade since the 1860s, the Waste Trade Journal was the first periodical devoted to the interests of scrap and rag firms. Founded by New York City journalist Charles H. Lipsett in 1904, it began as a weekly paper publishing the prices of waste materials in several markets and allowing firms to advertise their materials or solicit employees. By the early 1920s, Lipsett had expanded the journal to include editorial content advocating the interests of scrap firms.

Trade associations advocating the common interests of firms were commonplace by World War I. Steel producers formed the American Institute of Iron and Steel (AISI) in the 1870s, and dozens of industries established similar associations in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to establish industry standards and lobby on behalf of their members’ common interests.52 The scrap industry lagged behind the steel industry in forming trade associations, forming its first national trade association—the National Association of Waste Material Dealers (NAWMD)—in 1913. NAWMD represented brokers, dealers, and processors of waste materials including cloth rags, waste paper, scrap rubber, metals, and other materials. Its charter emphasized “that the scrap-iron business is legitimate” and essential. To protect the image of members, the association intended “to tone up the general morale of the trade. We intend to encourage honest dealings and discourage dishonest and unscrupulous dealings.”53

NAWMD worked with regulating authorities and customers to prevent undue restrictions on trade and maintain goodwill, punished rogue members with expulsion, and promoted the trade as a vital, unique, and necessary industry. The association claimed international membership by 1923, boasting members in Canada, England, Germany, Italy, Belgium, France, Switzerland, Holland, and Sweden. Most of these firms were involved in the paper, cloth, and rag trades, though scrap-metal firms in England and Italy were involved. The New York metropolitan area boasted the largest delegation within the United States, with 87 of 277 members listed in the 1928 association directory. New England boasted
26 members, Philadelphia 25, and Chicago 18. Fewer than 10 members were located west of St. Louis, indicating that though the trade spanned the entire nation, it remained concentrated in the industrial northeast. The largest trades advertised by the members in 1923 involved metals and paper-mill supplies.54

By the time NAWMD celebrated its fifteenth anniversary, the growth of the scrap-iron and steel industry had prompted the foundation of a second national trade association. In 1928, the Institute of Scrap Iron and Steel (ISIS) organized in New York City under the directorship of lawyer Benjamin Schwartz. ISIS differed from NAWMD in that it specialized in the concerns of scrap-iron dealers rather than the concerns of all secondary material dealers. Schwartz’s immediate concern was the threat of direct dealing posed by Bethlehem Steel’s new scrap yards, but the association’s agenda was broader, including lobbying the federal government, building bridges with AISI, and managing relations among its own members.

Both NAWMD and ISIS defined scrap dealing as a method of conservation. Conservationism grew in the early twentieth century as citizens worried about the fate of forests and undeveloped land in the wake of an industrialized and consumptive society. By the 1920s, conservationism in Republican hands evolved to include an emphasis of industry concerned with what historian Samuel P. Hays calls “the gospel of efficiency.” The federal government and private industries worried about the finite availability of lumber, iron ore, and other resources that fed the economy.55

During the administrations of Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover, citizens and businesses were urged to avoid what contemporary economist Stuart Chase labeled “the tragedy of waste.” Chase argued that waste was a serious concern that hurt the nation’s economic well-being by destroying natural resources at levels above the needs of prudent current consumption. He claimed that waste was an engineering problem that could be solved by trained professionals working in industry and government both to improve production techniques and conserve and reuse materials, including scrap metal and pulp wood. Chase’s argument resonated with industry and especially with Hoover’s efforts as commerce secretary and president to minimize waste.56 The new scrap-trade associations crafted public statements equating their work with conservation. Theodore Hofeller, a Buffalo scrap-rubber dealer who became the first president of NAWMD in 1913, stated “the waste material dealers are the true conservationists. They have reclaimed millions of dollars from the dump heaps throughout the country.”57

ISIS used similar rhetoric to promote its members’ virtues. Director Benjamin Schwartz compared scrap dealers’ work to the resource conservation advocated by President Hoover. Schwartz often quoted the president in his speeches and linked the scrap industry’s well-being to the economic health of the nation. A disorganized scrap industry, according to Schwartz, was the result of direct dealing and other practices that undermined brokers’ abilities to acquire, process, and sell materials. If dealers were undermined, Schwartz argued, the nation’s economy would be undermined. “The ramifications of a disorganized scrap
industry go beyond the realm of the steel industry and that the effects on the national policy of conservation may be marked in a comparatively short time.58

In addition to promoting scrap dealers as agents of conservation, the trade associations took other measures to improve their constituents’ status. NAWMD and ISIS prepared industry codes of ethics in consultation with customers and the Federal Trade Commission. These codes provided for specific guidelines on quality standards, independent arbitration of grievances, and penalties doled out to members who violated the codes.59 Trade associations worked with customers to establish uniform standards on grades of quality. While standards classifying materials into grades had existed since the mid-nineteenth century, disputes over what constituted preferable No. 1 grades of material over inferior No. 2 grades of material were frequent and contentious. Written standards agreed to by the FTC, ISIS, NAWMD, and manufacturing trade associations such as AISI codified grading standards in an effort to reduce disputes.60 These standards allowed customers some measure of confidence when purchasing materials that they were getting heavy melting steel and not lightly sorted bundles (or casks filled with ice). Breaches of the code could subject the violator to fines or expulsion from the trade associations. By 1938, NAWMD threatened to publish the names of expelled members. The punitive measures were designed to give customers confidence that association members were certain to be upstanding businessmen. These steps allowed scrap dealers to gain some measure of trust with customers and regulating bodies.61

Scrap dealers distinguished themselves from unethical competitors by identifying themselves as modern, honest agents of conservation versus pre-modern, unscrupulous junk men. Nomenclature became crucial. Many dealers stopped identifying themselves as junk or waste material dealers, arguing that their work prevented waste and maximized efficiency. The materials dealers handled were not wastes, but valuable commodities vital to the nation’s productivity.62 City directory listings increasingly featured entries for scrap rather than junk firms after World War I.63 Schwartz emphasized this dichotomy, exclaiming that direct dealing “undermines the very foundation of that service and substitutes an exalted junk collector for the modern scrap iron dealer.”64

Scrap dealers implicitly addressed the threat to the moral and physical health of city residents. This response lay in the dichotomy Schwartz posited between the “modern scrap dealer” and the “exalted junk collector.” According to this dichotomy of images, the junk collector was corrupt, foreign, mysterious, and a threat to the public welfare. Conversely, the modern scrap dealer was a rational, efficient, honest, patriotic businessman concerned with the nation’s well-being: He saved valuable resources from being wasted. The modern scrap firm did business away from residential areas in an organized, technologically modern industrial setting, where it performed a valuable economic service. Modernity, honesty, and cleanliness all were part of the attempted Americanization of the scrap industry—a sustained effort to divorce the larger firms from the negative connotation of their immigrant roots. The industry’s attempts to portray itself as modern held some truth. Much of the older criticism of aesthetic and moral
ills had to do with scrap businesses’ proximity to residential areas. By 1930, most of the larger yards were located on the urban periphery or in industrial areas away from residential neighborhoods, a spatial pattern due more to economic interest than to zoning ordinances. Industrial customers usually were located in such areas, and access to warehouse space for large holdings was more readily available in the vicinity. Scrap yards often located near railroad tracks, allowing shipment of large loads to and from the yards, and many yards located at ports to rivers, lakes, and oceans, allowing for affordable water transportation.65

Smaller yards and shops persisted in poorer inner-city neighborhoods, where they were close to post-consumer sources of scrap and might be overlooked by lax zoning enforcement. Junk peddlers canvassed some neighborhoods as late as the late 1940s, though canvassing was in decline after 1930. These businesses, some consisting of little more than collections of scrap metal piled in a front or back yard, drew many complaints from neighbors and police, as did peddlers roaming residential streets with wagons of miscellaneous junk. The negative public images associated with scrap typically focused on the smaller businesses in the industry, as they were more conspicuous in everyday urban life.66

The larger scrap dealers disassociated themselves from their smaller contemporaries in image though not in business. They continued to purchase smaller collections from peddlers and inner-city yards in order to fill out large orders from their own customers. Many scrap dealers loathed their contemporaries’ dishonesty not simply because it gave the occupation a bad reputation, but because they themselves risked becoming the victims of fraud. Thus, arbitration of disputes by association officials was an important aspect of associational life, attempting to give dealers some measure of protection against unscrupulous partners. Such business dealings and conspicuous, negative profiles of peddlers and inner-city dealers caused problems for larger dealers. The dichotomy scrap dealers set up between their modern, upstanding image and one they characterized as antiquated was intended to distance themselves from negative views held by customers, regulators, and the public.

Aspects of the industry remained volatile but, despite occasional periods of depressed demand (such as the depression of 1920-1921) and the threat of direct dealing, the industry continued to grow and diversify.67 Though mills invested in the same technologies as scrap dealers, and had more capital to spend on such investments, scrap dealers argued that they had developed a specialized expertise that could neither be replaced nor ignored.68 Customers concluded that they were better off letting experienced scrap dealers locate and purchase scrap for them than they would be through direct dealing; with few exceptions, large steel producers continued to purchase scrap from independent brokers in the 1930s and 1940s.69

The trade associations’ claims that scrap dealers were modern, ethical agents of conservation with unique and vital skills became standard rhetoric in lobbying efforts. ISIS and NAWMD representatives frequently testified in congressional hearings, influencing legislation related to the industry.70 Though friction continued between scrap dealers and their customers, many scrap dealers enjoyed
long-term relationships with large clients, relationships built on trust, understanding, and a mutual recognition of dealers’ value to their customers.\textsuperscript{71}

Dealers did not, however, completely rehabilitate their images. ISIS’s campaign was unsuccessful in eliminating direct dealing; Bethlehem Steel opened several more scrap yards between 1930 and 1950. Yet Bethlehem simultaneously purchased scrap from independent dealers, and Lukens, U.S. Steel, Jones & Laughlin and other large firms continued to purchase scrap from independent dealers through the 1930s and during and after World War II. Furthermore, Bethlehem Steel’s success operating its own scrap yards was unique in the steel industry as mills found it difficult to compete with experienced dealers to find optimal prices and quality.\textsuperscript{72}

The trade associations’ efforts to advocate the virtues of scrap dealers did not prevent the establishment of new local ordinances designed to limit the industry’s nuisances. Statutes such as Philadelphia’s ordinance banning junk sales in residential buildings remained on the books. Dealers attempted to fight local licensing measures, but were rebuffed by courts deciding that junk and scrap businesses posed too great a risk for theft and other crimes. A Kentucky judge, making such a ruling in 1930, directly addressed the scrap industry’s claims to legitimacy: “It is, to be sure, a legitimate business, meeting a public demand, but it is the history of experience that it is sometimes conducted in a dubious fashion and becomes a place where thieves turn into cash their ill-gotten plunder. It is, perhaps more often, an innocent receiver of contraband ... It is therefore a business having a potential danger to public peace, to public safety, and to public health ... The nature of the business supported the reasonable regulation contained in [Kentucky’s junk] ordinance.”\textsuperscript{73}

Efforts at zoning junkyards out of residential areas were not altogether successful. Shops and yards remained open in neighborhoods where enforcement was lax. In a 1957 study of Chicago’s scrap industry, Gerald A. Gutenschwager noted that establishments tended to be located in poor, predominately African-American neighborhoods on the city’s south and west sides. As with prostitution, gambling, and other vices cities sought to limit, public officials pushed scrap dealing into areas with little political power rather than eradicating the activity within the city limits. Despite steps to improve the industry’s image, scrap trading remained an undesirable activity that shared moral and physical space with other undesirable activities.\textsuperscript{74}

CONCLUSION

Why should environmentalists care about how foreign-born waste-trade workers and businesses were treated a century ago? The marginalization of waste handling and storage among minorities remains an issue affecting the well-being of many Americans. Recycling centers today tend to be staffed by African-Americans and recent immigrants in neighborhoods populated by the same groups; these workers and residents are exposed to noise, odor, and any toxins or contagions present in the materials being processed. Even in a time when we perceive separating
recyclables from trash as a moral good, the people charged with processing recyclables remain marginalized.75

Environmental justice advocates and historians alike would be wise to examine the social construction of dirty work to address these inequalities and illuminate an important dimension of American identity. The scrap industry’s history between 1870 and 1930 demonstrates the complexity of Americans’ relationship with waste. In the spheres of both industry and public life, aspects of the scrap trade were criticized as breaking social convention. As scrap firms became conspicuous presences in American industry, they faced threats to their claims of being legitimate professional enterprises. Customers and suppliers criticized scrap firms for not adhering to the conventions of accepted business practices, and attempted to reduce or eliminate business dealings with the new immigrant-founded enterprises. Reform groups and zoning offices in many cities viewed scrap dealing as both a threat to public health and a cause of illegal activity and took measures to restrict the trade. The deep discomfort native-born white Americans had with the consequences of their consumption meant that those charged with handling their wastes would be foreign-born or nonwhite. While this provided immigrants with the opportunity to establish businesses, it also presented a more complex marginalization based not simply on ethnicity but on a conflation of ethnic and environmental prejudices. Junkmen were foreign and unsanitary and criminal. At a time when cleanliness was an important aspect of American identity, this conflation indicated a schism between the imagined American ideal and the realities of handling waste in a consumptive society.

The poor reputation of the industry led to regulation, which had some important consequences. The scrap industry’s image of being unhealthy, corrupt, and foreign hurt its ability to maintain customers. To counter popular mistrust of scrap handlers, industry leaders tried to persuade public officials that scrap handling was a patriotic and necessary part of the nation’s conservation efforts. That effort effectively was an Americanization project, emphasizing vital economic services and patriotism rather than foreign identity, fraud, and waste. The industry gained legitimacy as it grew, forging relationships with customers and the federal government. Even so, waste handling was not recognized as a noble act, and the industry discouraged use of the terms “waste” and “junk.” The dirtiest work of sorting and processing scrap continued to be done by marginalized workers, often in inner-city neighborhoods—spatial and employment trends that produced environmental inequalities that persist to this day.

In the twenty-first century, the industry still bears the stigma associated with its immigrant and waste-handling origins. Why this is so is worth pondering; the image of scrap dealers as corrupt and dangerous is discordant with the view that sorting one’s recyclables is moral, environmentally sound behavior. Yet the practice of recycling depends upon the ability of private enterprise to reuse the collected materials. In 2002, New York City temporarily eliminated its collection of glass and plastics because it could not find markets for them, causing many to question how to mount effective recycling campaigns. Perhaps a new
understanding of recycling, in which waste-trade workers are indeed vital agents who find markets for our discards, will force Americans to see the individuals charged with returning these materials to the cycle of production as more valuable than dirty.76

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**NOTES**

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8. Susan Strasser notes the change in Americans' behavior from a “stewardship of objects” stressing reuse and extending the lives of household goods to a more disposable ethos by the turn of the twentieth century. See Waste and Want, 69-110.


13. My analysis of samples of the population using the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS-98) reveals that 68 percent of individuals listed as working in “junk” in 1920 spoke Yiddish (about twenty times their representation in the general population) and about 11 percent of such individuals were born in Italy (about twelve times their representation in the general population). IPUMS-98, created at the University of Minnesota in October 1997, consists of twenty-five high-precision samples of the American population drawn from thirteen federal censuses between 1850 and 1990. Steven Ruggles and Matthew Sobek, et al. Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 2.0 (Minneapolis: Historical Census Projects, University of Minnesota, 1997). URL for the IPUMS site: http://www.IPUMS.umn.edu. The Fortune estimate is from Archibald MacLeish, Jews in America (New York: Random House, 1936), 9.


15. Ibid.


19. Misa, A Nation of Steel; Lipsett, 100 Years of Recycling History, 12.


28. Christine Rosen argues that nineteenth-century nuisance laws were enforced by judges using something akin to cost-benefit analysis, with the cost of alleviating human discomfort weighed against the cost to industry to prevent nuisances. Rosen found that judges in industrial Pennsylvania and New York tended to side with industry in nuisance cases. Christine Rosen, “Differing Perceptions of the Value of Pollution Abatement across Time and Place: Balancing Doctrine in Pollution Nuisance Law, 1840-1906,” Law and History Review 11 (Fall 1993), 303-81.


31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. “Business and Old Iron,” Technical World Magazine, April 1914, 244-5.


35. Letter from Principio Forge Co. to John S. Wirt, 16 September 1895, George P. Whitaker Co., MS 1730.1, Manuscripts Department, Maryland Historical Society Library, Baltimore, Md.

37. “The Original Recyclers.” Videotaped interview conducted by ISIS, 1980. Videotape available from the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries, Washington, D.C. Mordecai Richler immortalized this mercenary attitude in his novel *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1964), 264-5. Scrap dealer Moishe Cohen tells the protagonist that all successful businessman had “something locked in the closet” regarding their past business dealings and that the young man had to have the ability to “make himself hard” to the realities of business, be ruthless and succeed. For Cohen, this meant squeezing every penny out of his customers and investing in cheap equipment that might get his employees killed.


39. “It Pays to Watch the Dump,” *System* 31 (January 1917), 97-98. The impulse to reclaim wastes was rooted in a notion that all waste could be reused if engineers made the effort. Theodore Waters claimed “every possible substance we use and throw away comes back as new and different material—a wonderful cycle of transformation created by the scientist’s skill.” This “waste to wealth” movement posited that all industrial and post-consumer material had economic value and that maximum economic efficiency depended upon proper reclamation procedures. Theodore Waters, “The Chemical House That Jack Built,” *Cosmopolitan Magazine* 43 (July 1907), 290-3; “A Chance to Save Money from the Refuse of New York City,” *Engineering News* 67 (8 February 1912), 265. For a discussion of the waste to wealth movement, see Melosi, *Garbage in the Cities*, 181-3.


42. One immediate physical threat was the risk of handling ammunition, which could explode and maim workers. “Accidents, Explosions: New York City: Junk Dealers Breaking Up Shells, Three Injured,” *New York Times*, 29 March 1915, 1.


44. Ibid.


49. “City Regulation of Junk Shops,” *American City* 18 (July 1918), 24-25.

50. Ibid.


62. The term “waste” was sufficiently pejorative by the 1950s that NAWMD changed its name, dropping the term “waste material” and opting to become the National Association of Secondary Material Industries (NASMI). The *Waste Trade Journal* continued to publish under that title into the 1970s.


64. “American Iron and Steel Institute,” 1-2.


66. Oliver B. Pollak argues that pressure for second-generation immigrants to find more respectable occupations, as well as changes in the economy, made peddling a marginal activity in Omaha by 1940. Oliver B. Pollak, “The Jewish Peddlers of Omaha,” *Nebraska History* 63 (1982), 474-501.


70. For example, see U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Military Affairs, *Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Military Affairs on S. 2025 and S. J. 180*, 75th Cong., 1st sess., 1937.


