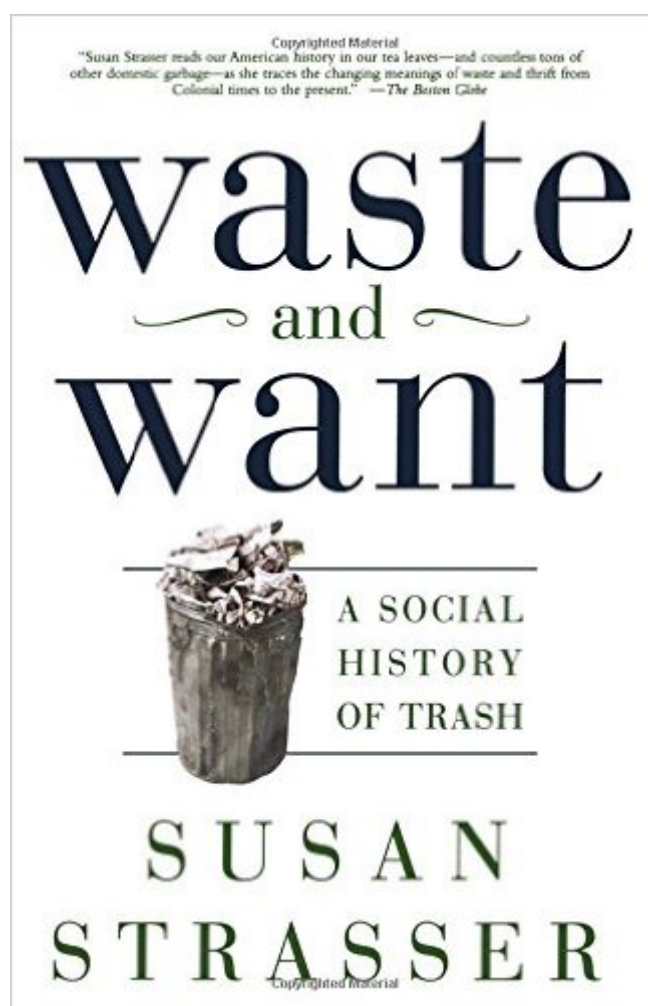


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# Waste And Want: A Social History Of Trash



## Synopsis

An unprecedented look at that most commonplace act of everyday life-throwing things out-and how it has transformed American society. Susan Strasser's pathbreaking histories of housework and the rise of the mass market have become classics in the literature of consumer culture. Here she turns to an essential but neglected part of that culture-the trash it produces-and finds in it an unexpected wealth of meaning. Before the twentieth century, streets and bodies stank, but trash was nearly nonexistent. With goods and money scarce, almost everything was reused. Strasser paints a vivid picture of an America where scavenger pigs roamed the streets, swill children collected kitchen garbage, and itinerant peddlers traded manufactured goods for rags and bones. Over the last hundred years, however, Americans have become hooked on convenience, disposability, fashion, and constant technological change-the rise of mass consumption has led to waste on a previously unimaginable scale. Lively and colorful, *Waste and Want* recaptures a hidden part of our social history, vividly illustrating that what counts as trash depends on who's counting, and that what we throw away defines us as much as what we keep.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book is a history of household waste in the United States and what we have done with it over the years. Although Strasser takes her research as far back as colonial times, most of the focus is on the habits of the Nineteenth Century, and how they evolved with our changing society. The first chapter introduces the central theme of the book, how in the past, especially before the turn of the

Twentieth Century, waste products served as raw materials for other products. In other words, before we ever invented the word "recycling", practically everything was recycled. Over the past 100 years, this has changed, so that now recycling seems like a new idea. Whereas in the past, cities and households constituted one component of a closed production/consumption system that included manufacturers, following the age of industrialization and mass production, that system has broken apart, and there is now a one-way flow from the factories to the consumers. And this flow leads eventually to mountains of garbage, for which we currently seem to have no better solution than mass burial. Strasser begins her story by describing an archeological dig of a 1620s settlement, where matching pieces of potshards were discovered at great distances from each other, suggesting that if a pot was broken, residents might have been in the habit of reusing the pieces for other purposes. Social history is notoriously hard to reconstruct, since people of the time rarely thought the details of their daily lives important enough to document. This is especially true with the topic of waste, refuse, and garbage. But by carefully picking through such items as housekeeping manuals and business accounting ledgers, Strasser was able to pull many of the pieces of the garbage story together.

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