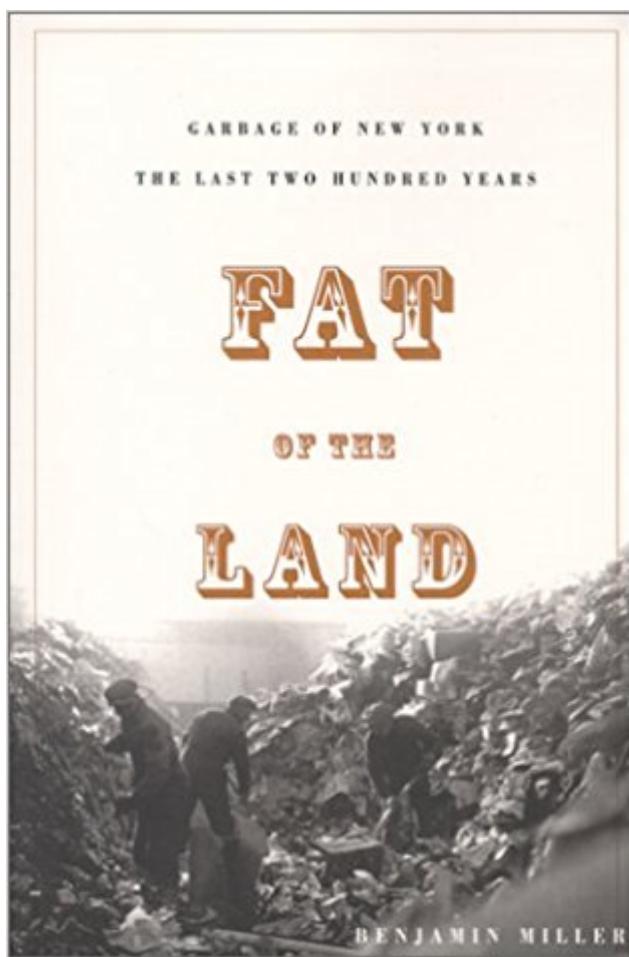


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# Fat Of The Land: Garbage Of New York -- The Last Two Hundred Years



## **Synopsis**

A city awash in garbage; rats skittering through heaps of rotting debris; disease spreading through choked waterways; citizens threading through piles of filth - urban nightmare or profiteer's dream come true? Benjamin Miller's panoramic view of New York's garbage takes us from the earliest antebellum collectors, to 19th- century barons trading in fertilizers and explosives, to the current feuding bureaucrats and environmentalists. Fat of the Land covers social and scientific theories of class and disease, in the process offering a richly textured history of urban development. The book reveals for the first time the plotting of power broker Robert Moses that gave birth to the controversial Fresh Kills landfill and examines the curious logic behind its untimely end. Fat of the Land brings to light an often hidden subject, assessing who gains and who loses in the endless battle over garbage.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Of all of New York's unnatural resources, garbage is perhaps the most lucrative and, historically, the most contested. This deeply researched, eclectic history of how New York has handled its increasingly mountainous accumulations of trash is social and political history at its best. As Miller's comprehensive view makes clear, the problem of urban garbage disposal has many tentacles. While social philosopher Jeremy Bentham viewed it as a moral problem, yellow fever and cholera outbreaks in the city later revealed that it was also a health problem. When new technology allowed grease to be easily extracted from refuse, however, it became an economic boon; as the metropolis

began to expand, garbage also became a basic landfill material, producing millions for developers and city politicians. Miller, the former director of policy for the New York City Department of Sanitation, is equally at ease with the intricacies of Brooklyn ward politics, Frederick Law Olmsted's theories of urban planning and Edison's plan for convenient electricity, and manages to work many fascinating details into his larger economic and political framework. His story grows pointedly relevant when he details the 1938 efforts of municipal administrator Robert Moses to designate the Fresh Kills marshland as a landfill area (in order to fulfill his secret plan to build a bridge to New Jersey from Staten Island) a move that infuriated environmentalists and continues to haunt the city's administrations. Miller has crafted a notably elegant treatment of this important though neglected topic. Agent, Malaga Baldi. (Oct.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

In densely populated New York City, garbage is a contentious political issue that, like the odorous stuff itself, never goes away. Miller is the in-house policy wonk for the city's sanitation department, and he has produced a remarkably readable history of the city's refuse-disposal problem. The smelly subject emerges as a fulcrum for the more obvious elements of civic life, such as politics and corruption, land-use battles, and the construction of the city's transportation infrastructure, which inevitably features public-works autocrat Robert Moses charging through Miller's narrative. Miller preludes that with the nineteenth-century's version of the problem: getting rid of dead animals. For decades a plant on "Barren" (Coney) Island dealt with the offal, while incinerators of other garbage dumped ashes in Queens. Miller's chapters about Moses underscore the paradox of his unaccountability with his ability to deal with garbage, albeit by creating the notorious Fresh Kills Dump on Staten Island. Coursing through the contemporary politics of NYC's garbage problem, Miller's case study is a must for the urban-studies shelf. Gilbert Taylor Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

The colorful and fetid history of waste makes for an enervating read. Miller has done exhaustive and meticulous research to share with us the forgotten tale of where the trash went and the distressing facts about where it goes today. There are many new, never-before revealed facts Miller has unearthed from the landfill of time-- he introduces us to an astounding and entertaining parade of bold scoundrels, do-gooder public health pioneers, social theorists, corrupt politicians, self-righteous environmentalists and a few good, clear thinkers tossed in for good measure. Miller himself is certainly one of them. He digs deep and leads us with a steady hand and a cool, observing eye to the places where were planted the seeds of public policy that have brought us to the ruin we face

today. This cautionary tale applies not only to New York, though New York, as in many things, stands as the example, good and bad, of how disposal works. Don't be put off by the subject or think this is an academic book. Miller is a superb prose stylist and his ability to summon vividly the characters and tenor of past times is often wonderfully Dickensian. This sleeper is a ripping good read. Enjoy! I've heard the author is going to be on NPR's Fresh Air in December. No pun intended, I gather...

I've had this book on my office shelf since it was first published, and though I agree with some the criticisms of the other reviewers - such as inadequate coverage of contracts and more attention paid to personality than to the deeper structures of politics - it is one of the few books of New York history to which I return again and again. *Trash - the third pollution* - is a great way to approach urban history and Miller's work is wonderfully engaging and accurate.

This book contains a useful timeline, just a few pages long, chronicling the significant events contained in the rest of the book. Save time -- read that part instead. He has a few good points to make, but then it comes across as mostly padding. I had been hoping for more, on such a fascinating topic. (yawn) On second thought, it did help me get to sleep.

We are certainly indebted to Benjamin Miller for writing this highly informative and fascinating history of NY City's waste management. It reminded me of William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. However, this book could have been better. I feel the book was hastily written and is too condensed. I wish Miller had written it in 3 or perhaps 5 volumes. So many people are mentioned in the book that I certainly would have benefitted if the book contained a section describing the *dramatis personae*. Miller uses NY-specific terms, such as Tammany, without explaining them. The book should have had a better map, pinpointing more locations mentioned in the story. I very much appreciated the photos and other illustrations in the book. I hope that Miller will bring out a revised edition, bringing readers up to date on developments with NY's waste management over the past decade (since the book was first published), and adding detail to the contents of the first edition. I expect that this book will be of great interest to all New Yorkers, and to everybody interested in solid waste management.

This book is the story behind the people responsible for taking care of waste removal in New York City. The book begins with a chapter that traces the infamous woeful journey of the *Mobro*, the

garbage barge that could not find a home. The main text of the book is divided into 4 sections: Engineering Reform (public health in Europe and America in the mid-1800s, early NYC contracts for gathering bones and organic matter in the mid-1800s), Expanding Opportunities (contracts for Central Park, elevated railways, the Brooklyn Ash incinerator), Public Work (roads and rails, bridges and tunnels, parks and parkways, ports and airports, all covering the 1930s to 1940s), and Landscape Sculpture (Rachel Carson, DDT, dioxins and incinerators, landfills, transfer stations, and NIMBYs). The book concludes with a chapter on the "Pew Yew Choo-Choo", a Mobro-like train that looked in vain for a place to unload. The book is amply illustrated with black and white photographs and drawings. At the end of the book are 90 pages of documentary notes, but presumably to strengthen the narrative of the text, they are not linked directly to the main text with endnote numbers. The subtitle of the book, "Garbage of the New York the last two hundred years", is a very inaccurate guide to the book's actual contents. The book isn't about garbage, but about the people who wanted the garbage contracts over the years, and the politics involved with getting the contracts. Actually, the book also doesn't focus particularly strongly on garbage contracts either, since quite a few pages or even chapters are devoted to the contracts for other infrastructure projects, like Central Park and public transit systems. Many of these other projects do have a loose connection with garbage, in the sense that some of them depended on garbage for fill (such as LaGuardia Airport), but others seem to be included only because they involved some of the same people who were also vying for the garbage contracts. In any case, the book can hardly claim to cover the last two hundred years, since the text begins in the 1840s. I picked up this book because I was interested in learning more about how one of the largest cities in the country has dealt with its garbage over the years. There was no description at all of early garbage disposal arrangements in NYC before the 1840s. I did learn how dead animals and bones were boiled for grease in the mid-1800s, and there was limited discussion of incinerators, as well as some information about landfills and shipping garbage out of town. But a few clues in the book lead to me to believe there was more to be said about garbage. For example, at one point, Miller mentions a NYC law that required all buildings with more than 12 residential units to have their incinerators. Does this mean that there was some sort of responsibility or expectation for garbage to be dealt with at the point of disposal? Was this a wide-spread practice? For how long? To write a comprehensive history of garbage in NYC, Miller might have put more focus on questions such as these, and a bit less on issues that are only marginally, if at all, related to garbage.

As a former New Yorker, I'm enjoying this engrossing tale of money and politicians, public health

and urban real estate moguls, and behind the scenes views of the forces that shaped the growth of one of the world's most dynamic cities. Good read for those interested in history and politics, but also has enough nitty-gritty gossip and well-researched tales of corruption to be entertaining for the general reader.

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