The Fresno Sanitary Landfill in an American Cultural Context

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As sometimes happens, controversy can spring from unexpected places. So it was with the designation of the Fresno Sanitary Landfill (FSL) as a National Historic Landmark on August 27, 2001, and Secretary of the Interior Gail Norton’s about face to “temporarily rescind” the designation the very next day. For many people, the naming of a landfill as a historic landmark seemed ludicrous. How could a “dump” be compared to Mt. Vernon or to any number of other venerable sites on the list of about 2,300 landmarks? For others, the designation offered an opportunity to pillory the George W. Bush administration for its increasingly unpopular and often wrongheaded environmental and energy policies.

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Portions of this paper are based on the National Historic Landmark Nomination (NPS Form 10-900) of “Fresno Sanitary Landfill” (August, 2000) prepared by Martin V. Melosi, and Martin Melosi, “To Discard, or Not to Discard: Some Thoughts from the Center of Denmark,” Newsline (2001), 2. The paper was originally presented at “The City in North America” conference in Mexico City in October, 2001.

1. As of the publication of this article, the status of the Fresno Sanitary Landfill as a National Historic Landmark remains unresolved.

2. Another effort at preservation and documentation of an engineering structure—this time part of the Big Inch pipeline that was used to supply oil to the American military in World War
What got lost sight of was why the nomination was made in the first place, and whether it had any merit on its own terms as a historically significant site. The controversy also exposed, as will be discussed later, the inability of many people to take the waste issue seriously, to view it as an integral part of the process of living, and thus to conceive it as culturally and historically important.

The Controversy

On August 27, 2001, the National Park Service released the following:

Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton announced the designation of the Fresno Sanitary Landfill in Fresno Calif., as a National Historic Landmark (NHL). The Fresno Sanitary Landfill is one of 15 sites recommended to the Secretary by the National Park System Advisory Board for their national significance in American history and culture.3

Referring to the fifteen new NHLs, Norton added: “These special sites underscore our heritage and tell stories of periods and events in our history. By preserving these unique sites, we share our culture and rich diversity with our children for future generations to learn from.” Speaking for the National Parks Service (NPS), Fran Mainella added, “National Historic Landmarks guide us in comprehending important trends and patterns in American history. The Fresno Sanitary Landfill possesses those exceptional qualities that help us as a Nation illuminate and understand trends in emerging and developing technology.”4

No sooner had the press release been made public than Secretary Norton “temporarily rescinded” the NHL designation for the Fresno Sanitary Landfill. In a memorandum to Secretary Norton on the 27th, Denis P. Galvin, Deputy Director of the National Park Service, had recommended that the site needed “further review and its designation should be withdrawn.” “I will,” he added, “review with the Advisory Board the Record of Decision on the landfill by the Environmental Protection

II—also met with public derision. A lobbyist for the Interstate Natural Gas Association of America stated, “This is silly. These are buried natural gas pipelines.” The reaction of the Bush administration and members of Congress was to exempt many pipelines from historic preservation efforts. See Jeff Bliss, “Historic Status for Pipelines Resisted,” Houston Chronicle, 16 August 2001.


4. Ibid.
Agency as well as the standards that should apply to designating such sites in the future.”

What Galvin meant by “such sites” were Superfund sites. Apparently, somewhere between the NPS recommendation of landmark status and the Secretary’s public announcement of the designation of the landfill, the information that the site had been placed on Superfund’s “National Priority List” in 1989 slipped through the cracks. Park Service spokesperson Cindy Wood stated that “the Superfund part got lost in the translation of the signing-off process at the Department of Interior.” It was, she said, an “honest mistake.” The apparent oversight, however, did not escape the attention of environmentalist groups and other critics of President Bush’s environmental policy.

On the morning and afternoon of August 28, a feeding frenzy was underway in the press. Comments attributed to Carl Pope, executive director of the Sierra Club, were everywhere to be found. In one story, he was quoted as saying, “It’s unconsciously revelatory of the way [the Bush administration] views the state of California and how out of touch they are that they would think that what the city of Fresno would want to be known for its having pioneered an early 20th century landfill technology that didn’t work very well.” In another story he charged, “Should the federal government be protecting a Fresno landfill while not protecting California’s remaining wild forests, or its giant sequoia trees all the while trying to reopen the coastline to offshore oil drilling?” And finally, he concluded, “This is what the Bush administration undoubtedly would like to do to the entire state of California. Trench it, compact it and shovel dirt over it.”

Others pounced on the Bush administration, also using the landfill designation as a symbol of its insensitivity to matters environmental. John Balzar’s op-ed piece in the Los Angeles Times, “George W: Garbage In,

5. Denis P. Galvin to Secretary, 27 August 2001, National Park Service Records.
6. In 1980, Congress enacted the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act (CERCLA), which authorized the Environmental Protection Agency to identify toxic and hazardous waste sites and to develop a National Priority List of the most dangerous of them. It also authorized EPA to take emergency action to control immediate hazards, it stated that anyone who had used the sites was potentially liable for the cost of cleanup, and it established a multibillion-dollar federal trust fund—called Superfund—to pay for emergency measures and to clean up sites where responsible parties could not be identified. See Richard N.L. Andrews, Managing the Environment, Managing Ourselves: A History of American Environmental Policy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 248–49.
Garbage Out,” asserted: “In American politics, there are crystalline moments...Jimmy Carter fights off a ‘killer rabbit.’ Jerry Ford stumbles. Michael Dukakis rides in a tank. The elder George Bush puzzles over a modern cash register. To that, we can now add: George W. Bush designates a dump in Fresno as a national historic landmark.”\textsuperscript{11}

If the FSL designation was not treated as political fodder, it was ridiculed in the media. In the \textit{San Jose Mercury News}, Paul Rogers wrote: “Other presidents have honored Pearl Harbor, Mount Vernon, Alcatraz and Martin Luther King’s birthplace as national historic landmarks. Now, the Bush administration has added its own hallowed place: a garbage dump in Fresno.”\textsuperscript{12} Donald E. Coleman of the \textit{Fresno Bee} proclaimed, “Cancel the parades. Reroute the tours. Shut down the T-shirt concessions. The dump has been dumped.”\textsuperscript{13} An otherwise sympathetic journalist at the \textit{Los Angeles Times}, Peter H. King, noted, “Humorists of all stripes could not contain themselves, treating the notion that a dump might be historic as the funniest thing since poor Dan Quayle tried to spell ‘potato.’”\textsuperscript{14} For the most part, those in the print and electronic media did a very poor job reporting the story as anything other than an oddity, let alone presenting the designation in context.

The Interior Department insisted that its staff not respond publicly to the flap over the landfill and the unprecedented—or at least rare—decision to hold back the landmark status. It was clear, however, that some in the NPS did not view the designation as completely derailed and defended the initial public announcement. NPS spokesperson David Barna noted, “It has caused some laughter but some sites are significant because of the mundane things we do today. The Romans would laugh if they knew that their aqueducts, which just carried water, were a part of their civilization that is prized today.”\textsuperscript{15} It also was made public that the Park Service’s advisory board had voted 10-1 to place the landfill on the landmark list. The lone dissenter, ecologist Sylvia Earle, stated, “Being designated as a historic landmark connotes a certain distinction that implies honor. It just doesn’t measure up.” But another board member, Parker Westbrook, noted, “Maybe the Fresno landfill is an American eyesore, but it represents a moment in American history. And thus in my view, it qualifies to be a landmark.”\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{12} Rogers, “Leaky Trash Site Chosen as National Treasure.”
\textsuperscript{14} King, “Dump as Landmark Isn’t a Waste.”
Fresno officials were placed in an awkward position, facing public ostracism and snide comments about the designation and the city’s willingness to accept this strange claim to fame. They had not initiated the landmark process, but had signed on in support of the application. Some immediate reactions seemed to distance the city from the designation. City Council member Brian Calhoun was quoted as saying, “Are you kidding?” Assistant City Attorney David Hale quipped, “This is a new one for me.”

Ultimately the mayor, the director of public utilities, and others openly defended the landmark status of the FSL. They stated that the remediation process begun after the Superfund designation was nearing completion, and the site would soon include a 115-acre sports and recreation complex with soccer fields, a baseball diamond, as well as green space. Fresno Mayor Alan Autry concluded, “We are proud to have been singled out. And I’m not going to turn [the status] down just because it may sound funny.”

The Designation

Among the most ill-informed assumptions that appeared in the media during the brief controversy over the FSL was the following: That the National Park Service under the Bill Clinton administration hired a historian “to go out and find the right dump” to honor as a major engineering innovation, which was ultimately designated as a historic landmark by the Bush administration. The Chicago Tribune news service referred to the action as a “misstep” that Park Service officials took “to honor the history of trash heaps.” This essentially shoddy reporting and commenting left the impression that the National Park Service had a fairly narrow and inexplicable plan to accomplish something that defied reason. In 1999, Robie Lange of the National Historic Landmarks Survey and I sought to broaden the scope of the landmarks program by preparing an application on a historically significant sanitation site to complement other types of engineering and public works sites—bridges, dams, and so forth—that already had achieved landmark status. We considered sanitation technology no less significant than many other public works projects, and we used my recently completed book, The Sanitary City: Urban Infrastructure in America from Colonial Times to the Present (2000) as a theme study to help select an...
appropriate site.\textsuperscript{21} Indeed, the FSL was only one of a number of structures we considered, including water supplies, waste treatment plants, and a variety of public health facilities.

Our effort to further broaden the scope of the landmarks program was hardly novel. The definition of what constitutes cultural resources and what deserves preservation has been going on for decades. The passage of the Antiquities Act in 1906 established legal recognition of the importance of historic preservation, and the Historic Sites Survey began the process of documenting the nation’s most important historic places in 1935. In 1960, historic properties determined as nationally significant by the secretary of interior were designated as National Historic Landmarks. The National Historic Preservation Act, passed in 1966, significantly expanded the federal role in historic preservation.\textsuperscript{22} Since the 1960s, the types of properties that received the National Historic Landmarks designation have evolved from the houses of the famous to petroglyphs, churches and missions, banks, libraries, cable cars, a football stadium, forts, battlefields, railroad stations, observatories, irrigation sites, bath houses, battleships and tugboats, mining districts, a wild duck refuge, blast furnaces, dams, Japanese-American internment camps, missile sites, and a neutral buoyancy space simulator.\textsuperscript{23} In this context, a sanitary landfill as a historic landmark does not seem entirely far-fetched.

We ultimately chose the FSL because it appeared to have the requisite physical integrity and national historical significance demanded by the National Historical Landmarks program. According to the guidelines, NHLs

are cultural properties designated by the Secretary of the Interior as nationally significant. Acknowledged as among our nation’s most significant historic places, these buildings, sites, districts, structures, and objects possess exceptional value or quality in illustrating or interpreting the heritage of the United States in history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture. NHL designation is the federal government’s official recognition of the national significance of historic properties.\textsuperscript{24}

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\item \textsuperscript{21} Oftentimes theme studies are undertaken by the NPS or contracted by them. In this case, The Sanitary City spoke directly to the issues, and thus by default acted as a theme study. As stated in the National Register Bulletin: How to Prepare National Historic Landmark Nominations (Washington, D.C.: National Historic Landmark Survey, 1998), “Theme studies are the most effective way of identifying and nominating properties because they provide a comparative analysis of properties associated with a specific area of American history…Theme studies provide a national historic context for specific topics in American history or prehistory.” See p. 14.
\item \textsuperscript{23} See National Landmarks, America’s Treasures for a complete list.
\item \textsuperscript{24} National Register Bulletin: How to Prepare National Historic Landmark Nominations, 6. For more information on the National Historic Landmarks program, criteria for selection, and the impact of landmark status on private property, see the program’s web page at www.cr.nps.gov.
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After documentary research in several libraries and archives, discussions with experts in the field and with local authorities, and site visits to Fresno, we were convinced that the sanitary landfill met several of the criteria established under the National Historic Landmarks program. Aside from excellent physical integrity, it clearly embodied—among other things—one of the program’s major criteria:

the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type specimen exceptionally valuable for a study of a period, style or method of construction, or that represent a significant, distinctive and exceptional entity whose components may lack individual distinction.25

In essence, landmarks are designated not to celebrate or to promote such properties, but to inform the public about them with respect to the heritage of the United States. The Fresno Sanitary Landfill, despite its seeming mundane qualities as a historic structure, fit the spirit and the letter of the landmarks program. In a larger context, solid waste management, as an expert noted, “has become one of the largest economic, ecological, and intellectual challenges faced in the United States today.”26

Sanitary Landfilling and the Fresno Site

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a variety of methods used for disposing municipal waste drew criticism from engineers, sanitarians, and sometimes the public itself. Indiscriminately dumping waste in water and on land created a nuisance and often a health hazard. Feeding organic waste to pigs and other animals had limited appeal. Burning waste converted one form of pollution into another—from refuse to smoke. The practice of using waste for fill was promising, and had been practiced for many years as a supplementary means of dealing with ashes and rubbish, and sometimes garbage. The use of organic wastes alone to fill ravines or to level roads was regarded as highly objectionable, because the material would putrefy and then smell. Landfilling, however, never supplanted dumping on vacant land as a primary disposal method in this period, but remained an alternative for dealing with inorganic materials.

The “sanitary landfill” was the breakthrough which ultimately elevated the practice of filling to the status of primary disposal option in the United States until the end of the century. The sanitary landfill differed from open dumping because the waste was meant to be rendered inert or sufficiently buried as not to pose a health hazard or a nuisance. It came into widespread use after World War II, stimulated in

large measure by the success of the Fresno Sanitary Landfill and the work of its originator Jean Vincenz.\textsuperscript{27}

In fact, the sanitary landfill became the universally accepted disposal option in the United States after World War II. In the 1950s the Sanitary Engineering Division of the American Society of Civil Engineers prepared a manual on sanitary landfilling which became a standard guide. It defined sanitary landfilling as

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a method of disposing of refuse on land without creating nuisances or hazards to public health or safety, by utilizing the principles of engineering to confine the refuse to the smallest practical area, to reduce it to the smallest practical volume, and to cover it with a layer of earth at the conclusion of each day’s operation, or at such more frequent intervals as may be necessary.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

During the 1950s and 1960s, the prevailing wisdom among those involved in solid waste management was that sanitary landfilling was the most economical form of disposal, and at the same time offered a method that produced reclaimed land.

By the 1970s, however, solid waste professionals and others began to doubt the adequacy of the sanitary landfill exclusively to serve the future disposal needs of cities. The major point of discussion was the problem in acquiring adequate space. Ironically, the thing that made sanitary landfills attractive as a disposal option—availability of cheap and abundant land—was the very argument turned on its head in the 1970s to criticize it. Siting new landfills became problematic in some parts of the country, especially in the Northeast. Many communities simply did not set aside land specifically designated for waste disposal facilities. Availability of land was only the most obvious point of contention, however. Landfill siting is treacherous business because of citizen resistance and increasingly rigid environmental standards. A great deal has been made of the NIMBY syndrome—Not In My Back Yard—which reveals growing skepticism with the environmental soundness of landfills, especially those that were unlined (with the potential to leach toxic materials into groundwater) or that made no provisions for monitoring methane gases building up in the landfill. Equally important, NIMBY received wider press coverage because of attempts to site landfills beyond the inner city along the urban fringe, where the population is not characteristically poor.\textsuperscript{29}

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Despite its growing problems in the 1970s and after, the sanitary landfill was clearly a pioneering disposal option in the United States, possibly the most significant and universally adopted disposal technology yet developed. While the number of MSW landfill sites decreased substantially by the end of the twentieth century (from about 8,000 in 1988 to 2,314 in 1998), approximately 55 percent of solid wastes were still deposited in landfills.\(^{30}\)

The significance of the sanitary landfill as the primary waste-disposal option in modern America led directly to an in-depth evaluation of its origins. The Fresno Sanitary Landfill was clearly the archetype of this innovative technology. It is located three miles southwest of the City of Fresno in the eastern San Joaquin Valley of California.\(^{31}\) The total area of city-owned property where the landfill is situated encompasses an area of more than 290 acres, but the landfill itself covers an area of approximately 145 acres.\(^{32}\) The FSL is rectangular in shape with a length of about 4,200 feet and a width of about 1,250 feet. Refuse has been placed to a height of from 45 to 60 feet above the surrounding grade within trenches dug at the landfill site of about 20 to 24 feet in width each. The first trench was filled with wastes from arriving trucks, leveled by shovels, and then compacted. A second trench was dug, and its dirt used as an earthen cover for the adjacent trench filled with refuse. The dirt was then compacted on top of the refuse, and the process began again.\(^{33}\)

Between its opening in 1937 and its close in 1987, the FSL accepted municipal solid waste (MSW) from the City of Fresno. The MSW likely included organic materials such as food waste, tree trimmings, paper and packaging materials, metal containers, glass, rubber, wood, leather, plastics, and some household cleaning chemicals.\(^{34}\) The average total waste stream at

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\(^{31}\) The initial sanitary landfill in Fresno—an experimental fill—was opened on October 15, 1934, at the City Sewer Farm, approximately three miles west of the nominated property. A 90-acre parcel three miles from city hall was purchased in 1937, which established the Fresno Sanitary Landfill at its present site.


the FSL consisted of approximately 16,500 tons of MSW per month. The total waste quantity in-place is between 4.7 and 8.0 million tons or 7.9 million cubic yards.\textsuperscript{35}

Other than billing receipts, the city kept no records on the types of waste accepted. City trucks, however, were seen disposing of petroleum products and solvents in the landfill. Records indicate that from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s, the FSL received battery acid, which was reportedly regularly disposed of twice a week.\textsuperscript{36} It also accepted approximately 500 pounds of waste per day from local convalescent homes and from the Fresno Dialysis Center, with the approval of the County Health Department. However, the time period is not known for this dumping practice.\textsuperscript{37}

The FSL had no liners, containment structures, leachate collection systems, or leak-detection systems upon its original construction. In subsequent investigations, at least twenty hazardous substances were found in the groundwater at the site, including volatile organic compounds (VOCs) such as vinyl chloride and trans-1, 2-dichloroethene. There also was a migration of methane off-site indicating high concentrations of methane gas production within the landfill.\textsuperscript{38} The Superfund program first evaluated the landfill as a result of a notification filed by the City of Fresno Solid Waste Management Division on May 27, 1981, and the city subsequently began the process of closing the site, which was completed in 1987. On October 4, 1989, the landfill was placed on the National Priorities List of Superfund.\textsuperscript{39}

The Fresno Sanitary Landfill is the oldest "true" sanitary landfill in the United States, and the oldest compartmentalized municipal landfill in the western United States, holding the service record of more than fifty years of continuous operation. It is the first landfill to employ the trench method of


\textsuperscript{37} Camp Dresser & McKee, Inc., Investigation and Feasibility Study for Fresno Sanitary Landfill, 2.


\textsuperscript{39} GeoSyntec Consultants, Final Remedial Action Work Plan, 1–2 to 1–3. The problem of methane gas was first identified in June, 1983, when Fresno City Public Works Department and the County Health Department conducted a preliminary investigation. An initial methane monitoring system was installed, and in November, 1984, the city installed methane migration barriers along the northern and southern boundaries of the landfill. On September 19, 1990, the EPA issued an order directing the city to apply a vacuum to the existing methane barriers and to develop a system for controlling gas over the entire site. Also in 1990, the EPA sampled soil gases for VOCs beyond the methane barriers. Methane and VOCs were detected in soil gas samples collected in 1991–1993 to maximum distances of 500 feet (methane) and 1,000 feet (VOCs) from the landfill perimeter.
disposal and the first to utilize compaction. In the strictest sense, New York City “compartmentalized” its refuse by placing it in deep holes and then covering the holes with dirt. But the layering of refuse and dirt in trenches and then compacting the dirt and refuse represented the technique adopted by the builders of modern sanitary landfills, and thus represented a “true” sanitary landfill, not simply a modification on older land-dumping methods. The FSL, according to an EPA report, “was a substantial improvement over the accepted methods of sanitary waste disposal at the time and a model for other landfills around the country.”

Early attempts at sanitary fill were tried in Seattle, New Orleans, and Davenport, Iowa, as early as the 1910s, but they were little more than land-based dumps and did not represent systematic or large-scale disposal. The modern practice began in Great Britain in the 1920s under the name “controlled tipping.” London and cities in the vicinity, however, simply were dumping wastes between houses and covering the piles with street sweepings, rather than taking the refuse to a special location and alternately layering the waste and dirt as in modern sanitary fills. The American equivalents to the British practice appeared in the 1930s in New York City, San Francisco, and Fresno, California. In New York, as mentioned above, refuse was placed in deep holes primarily in marshes and then the holes were covered with dirt. In San Francisco, layers of refuse were deposited in tidelands to produce additional land, but actual trenches were not dug. With compaction, Fresno’s trench system was the most unique and most typical of modern landfill construction.

The man most responsible for developing, implementing, and disseminating the sanitary landfill in the United States was Jean Vincenz, who served as commissioner of public works, city engineer, and manager of utilities in Fresno, California from 1931 to 1941. Born in 1894 in Enfield, Illinois, he completed high school and attended junior college in Fresno. He received a degree in civil engineering at Stanford University in 1918 and a degree in public administration from San Diego State College in 1958. After resigning from his positions in Fresno, he became assistant chief of the

Repairs and Utilities Division of the Army Corps of Engineers headquarters in Washington, D.C. (1941–47), and then served as public works director of the San Diego County Public Works Department (1947–62). In 1960, he was named president of the American Public Works Association, an honor befitting his accomplishments in the public works field.42

When Vincenz became commissioner of public works in Fresno, he recommended not renewing the franchise of the Fresno Disposal Company, which operated an incinerator. Prior to developing his sanitary fill in Fresno, he studied British controlled tipping techniques, visited several California cities, and consulted with a New York engineer active in developing its sanitary fill. He came to believe that a true sanitary landfill required different elements than those utilized elsewhere, especially systematic construction of refuse cells, a deeper cover of dirt between layers of refuse, and compaction of both the earth cover and the waste. The trenches and the compaction process were the unique features of the sanitary landfill in Fresno, although Vincenz argued that compaction was the more important of the two. No one had ever emphasized compaction of the earth cover and the waste itself before Vincenz. To his thinking, without compaction and without a real cover, the waste would attract rats and thus could not claim to be truly “sanitary.”43

Sanitary landfills in the major cities of San Francisco and New York got more immediate attention than Vincenz’s fill in relatively obscure Fresno. San Francisco began its operations in 1932, initially as an emergency measure, and not until 1936 did it operate effectively as a primary disposal site for the city. Unlike the Fresno fill, San Francisco’s was constructed along tidal flats on the bay. The waste was utilized for reclaiming land eventually used for industrial purposes. Such modifications of the shoreline and leaching problems from the fill eventually raised major environmental concerns, but at the time, the practice was regarded as a success.44

Located at Riker’s Island, the site of a city prison, the New York landfill opened in 1936, a year later than Vincenz’s experimental fill. It was similar in design to the Fresno enterprise, only much larger, but did not have an airtight seal. Pleased with the sanitary fill project, city officials authorized

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42. “An Interview with Jean Vincenz,” 1.
other sites in the 1930s, with the expectation of reclaiming additional land. Debate broke out on the degree to which the sites were indeed “sanitary,” however, and political battles arose over the conduct of the Department of Sanitation in carrying out its disposal policy. The turmoil was not sufficient to undermine the practice in the city.45

Although there was no mass scramble to build sanitary landfills in the 1930s and early 1940s, momentum slowly shifted in that direction.46 During World War II, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers experimented with sanitary landfills. In 1941, Jean Vincenz accepted a post as assistant chief of the Repairs and Utilities Division of the Corps of Engineers. The army needed to develop a disposal method to handle the great variety and amounts of waste at camps and other installations, and, at the same time, was unwilling to utilize critical materials on the building of incinerators. Although Vincenz was skeptical about extensive adoption of sanitary fills in the army without sufficient supervision and adequate equipment, he followed his orders to implement the fills. By 1944, 111 posts were using sanitary landfills to dispose of their refuse. By the end of 1945, almost one hundred American cities had adopted the sanitary landfill. This was due in no small part to the recommendation of the U.S. Public Health Service in 1943 that sanitary fills should be viewed as emergency wartime measures to conserve labor and materials.47 Upon this foundation and the pioneering work of Vincenz, the sanitary landfill would dominate waste disposal technology in the United States for many years. Even in the wake of intense criticism, the disposal method remains a major component of current solid-waste practices.

The Sanitary Landfill as a Symbol of the “Throw-Away” Society

A well-researched case for the significance of the Fresno Sanitary Landfill as a historic landmark is probably insufficient, in and of itself, to convince the average citizen that such a structure deserves little more than to be forgotten, ignored, or otherwise rendered meaningless. It is made all the more difficult because of the Superfund designation, which identifies the site as an even greater pariah. Ultimately, it is difficult for many people to fathom why a pile of waste—and some hazardous waste at that—needs to be

preserved alongside icons such as the Washington Monument or the Statue of Liberty. Making the justification for landmark status is tenuous at best, and maybe impossible. Nevertheless, during the brief media flurry over the landfill designation in August, 2001, some defenders of the designation challenged Secretary Norton to reverse her reversal. And in these pleas is the hope that an argument could and should be made for what the FSL ultimately represents—an icon of a rapacious consumer society—on the one hand, and a tool—albeit an imperfect tool—meant to confront environmental, economic, and social problems caused by discards, on the other.

In his September 2, 2001 column on California in the Los Angeles Times, Peter H. King addressed the critics’ notion that it was “folly” to designate the Fresno landfill as historically significant because it was also a Superfund site. “Their reasoning seemed suspect,” he argued. “Societies learn as much from their stumbles as their strides forward, and mistakes are a major part of history,” he added. A letter to the editor on the following day in the Los Angeles Times asserted: “A trashy national landmark? Absolutely! A nation that is learning from its ‘trashy’ bad habits certainly deserves a fitting monument to this accomplishment.”

We live in a country often derided as a “throw-away society” or “Effluent America.” The U.S. leads the world in its limitless consumption of goods and its per capita waste generation. As John A. Kouwenhoven observed, “Two aspects of American civilization strike almost everyone: the abundance it enjoys, and the waste it permits.” Americans discard more than 1,600 pounds per year, compared with about 1,500 for Hungarians, 1,400 for Canadians, 750 for Japanese and Israelis, and 500 for Austrians. Between 1960 and 1998, municipal solid waste in the United States increased by almost 73 percent, from 88 million tons per year to 220 million tons. The amounts of waste per capita rose from 2.68 to 4.46 pounds per day.

Beyond these gross statistics lie more elemental issues of biology and values, of personal choice and discrimination. Most fundamentally, the production of waste is a biological function carried out by all living things. It is part of daily existence, and ultimately, the cycle of life from birth to death. Waste is a product of community living as well. Human cities, just like ant hills and prairie dog towns, produce biological wastes as well as food wastes, building wastes, and so forth. But wastes also have a powerful cultural dimension.

50. Melosi, The Sanitary City, 397.
51. EPA, Solid Waste and Emergency Response, Environmental Fact Sheet.
In his widely cited study, *Rubbish Theory*, social anthropologist Michael Thompson makes clear how we impart value to things. Some objects, such as antique furniture, sustain their value to us over time. Other objects have transient value. Years ago, coffee cans were converted into containers for all manner of things, until they became too rusty and were then relegated to the trash bin. But some objects appear to have little or no value after their initial use. In the largest cultural context, Thompson notes, “People in different cultures may value different things, and they may value the same things differently, but all cultures insist upon some distinction between the valued and the valueless.” He makes the additional argument that to understand what he calls “the social control of value”—or value socially defined—“we have to study rubbish.”

To Thompson, then, the importance of rubbish, or waste, is its role in helping us to understand society itself. This may be a grand objective, but it imparts on the waste issue a historical function that few people have likely considered. Ironically, many people would give little thought to why archeologists, for example, may want to excavate Pompeii or another ancient city. They have more trouble understanding why the same archeologist may want to explore Native American shell middens—or a modern landfill. Are the objectives ultimately so different? As well-known “garbologist”/archeologist William Rathje noted,

> To an archeologist, ancient garbage pits or garbage mounds, which can usually be located within a short distance from any ruin, are always among the happiest of finds, for they contain in concentrated form the artifacts and comestibles and remnants of behavior of the people who used them. While every archeologist dreams of discovering spectacular objects, the bread-and-butter work of archaeology involves the most common and routine kinds of discards. It is not entirely fanciful to define archaeology as the discipline that tries to understand old garbage.

In his Ph.D. thesis, Peter van Mensch made the astute observation that discard and preservation are both cultural options. Nineteenth-century Americans called discarded items “refuse,” or better yet, “rejectamenta.” Unwanted stuff is simply pushed aside, finding a home in a landfill, along a roadside, or in a stream. Indeed, waste items can become even more insidious and loathsome depending upon where they are deposited. “Where” as well as “what” places waste items in a hierarchy of value. A used tire in a junkyard appears to have some potential for reuse, but tossed into

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a ravine, it simply may become a breeding ground for mosquitoes. Context, therefore, is equally important as utility in determining the value of objects.

Aesthetic considerations are more difficult to label. “Junk carries with it the suggestion of other lives and the memories associated with its prior use, whether real or imagined,” noted an exhibit at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe. But even something as revolting and repellent as body wastes can sustain value. Think about fertilizer. Or as Astrid Lindenlauf suggested in a paper, “Psychology of Body Waste,” these materials sometimes play a crucial role in magical practices, for example. In some societies, cut hair, nails, and feces are understood to contain parts of the people they are from. Body wastes of spiritual and religious leaders have been buried in secret places to make sure no one may gain the power over these leaders by using the material in magical practices.

Robin Nagle, who teaches a course in New York City called Garbage and Gotham: The Anthropology of Trash, claims that “the trajectory of our civilization can be mapped by our waste product output.” Several archeologists have made a living doing just that, as suggested above. Landfills become “monuments to a disposable culture”; garbage becomes text. The proliferation of garbage exhibits in museums, and even garbage museums themselves, suggests that the elevation of rejectamenta to cultural artifact has taken place in a few locations, e.g., at the Children’s Garbage Museum in Stratford, Connecticut; the Hackensack Meadowlands Development Commission Environmental Center Trash Museum in Lyndhurst, New Jersey; and garbage museums operated by waste-management company Browning-Ferris Industries in Milpitas, California, and in Minneapolis-St. Paul.

These sites are not necessarily devoted to garbage research or garbage studies, but most often tout the value of recycling as an environmental investment in the future. A country that has been tarred as a “throw-away society” is producing people who want to make it a culture of reuse. Recycling has attracted national attention because it offers advantages for a variety of interests: It empowers the average citizen to participate in the complex and sometimes overwhelming world of environmental protection. It offers promise in preserving virgin materials and reducing landfill space. And it suggests possible economic incentives and savings for a variety of businesses.

A major goal of most communities and the nation in general was to increase the recycling rate, which stood at 10 percent in the late 1980s. The EPA’s 1988

55. See www.state.nm.us/MOIFAOnline/RecycledReSeen/americanpage.html.
draft report on solid waste called for a national recycling goal of 25 percent by 1992. In the late 1990s, the EPA raised the goal to at least 35 percent of MSW by 2005, and called for reducing the generation of solid waste to 4.3 pounds per capita per day. These goals may not be high compared to standards in other developed nations (Denmark, for example, recycles about 65 percent of its waste) but “the trajectory of our civilization” may be mapped in the future by what we recycle as well as by what we throw away.

**FSL: A Monument to Failure?**

Ultimately, until we can place the waste issue into a meaningful context that people will accept—not as a laughing matter, not as a mundane nuisance, not even as an unspeakable underside of life—it will be difficult to justify historical landmark status for a landfill. This does not suggest camouflaging the landfill as something it is not. Efforts in Fresno to convert their landfill into usable land—to turn “trash into treasure”—is commendable. But it also means not running from what the landfill represents historically. Jean Vincenz sought to move beyond random methods of discarding wastes, to reduce problems that had plagued open dumps (rodents and choking odors), and to introduce a rational form of disposal that minimized health risks and maximized efficiency. The experiment was so successful in achieving its goals that it was replicated throughout the country for years to come. With no liner and no method of monitoring methane gas, with changing patterns of disposal that found more and more hazardous materials finding their way into the ground, a technology that elevated “dumps” into sanitary landfills produced toxic sites with potentially serious environmental repercussions.

Was Vincenz’s sanitary landfill a failed technology, as some have argued and as the Superfund designation suggests? Possibly. But no technology of any kind has proved perfect, and the experience in Fresno points clearly to the conclusion that technology alone is rarely the answer to our environmental problems. Yet not to recognize Vincenz’s achievement for what it was, within a period where most other choices were less palatable than the one he chose, is to demean the seriousness of the challenges he confronted.

Should we forget that the FSL was a Superfund site for the sake of our story? Of course not. That phase of the landfill’s evolution is an important issue. It should serve to remind us of the important environmental questions that everyday experiences like waste disposal evoke. In a special issue of *The Public Historian* titled “Junk It, or Junket? Tourism and Historic Preservation in the Postindustrial World,” editor Shelley Bookspan made the point

that history is not necessarily pretty, nor does it need to be in order to be important. (Her one caveat about hazardous sites as subjects for preservation was that if the harm can be mitigated, they are appropriate objects of historic preservation.) The FSL is a good example of that observation. 59

Anthropologist Donald L. Hardesty went even farther by raising the question: Does preserving hazards have any socially redeeming value? His answer was affirmative, since toxic wastes and other hazardous landscape elements, he argued, are artifacts, “material things of human origin.” And he added, “Artifacts evoke human emotions in a way that nothing else does.”60 Hardesty argued persuasively that toxic waste as a real artifact has power in its original setting. It is (1) a historical document containing information about its life history “that is independent of written accounts, oral testimony, and other pathways into the past.” It is (2) a commodity with potential economic value either in the resaling of the substances themselves or possibly through some sort of tourism. And it is (3) an idea that evokes responses as a sign or as a symbol. He concluded by suggesting that “toxic waste dumps and other hazards” vary widely in these three areas—historical document, commodity, idea—and often conflict with one another.61 Certainly, the FSL elicits its own capacities and contradictions as a historic artifact, as the controversy over designation suggests.

But is the FSL a monument to failure? No more or no less, I suspect, than other historic landmarks, such as cotton mills that produced textiles, but also exploited workers. No more than mining towns that extracted coal, but also strew tailings across the countryside and into watercourses. And no more than Japanese-American internment camps that demonstrated our worst impulses about civil liberties. National historic landmarks, as has been stated several times, are not meant to celebrate or promote the events and ideas they represent. They are meant to highlight historical significance, to identify places and monuments in time where something important happened. We may feel uncomfortable publicly acknowledging a sanitary landfill, but what we are really doing is recognizing a certain kind of achievement and raising an important public issue. We should not forget that the facility is a Superfund site. The construction of the FSL should serve to remind us of the important environmental, economic, and social

59. Shelley Bookspan, “Junk It, or Junket?” The Public Historian 23, no. 2 (Spring, 2001): 5–7. Bookspan related a class assignment she had used at UC-Santa Barbara with the Fresno landfill as the subject. She presented the students with a description of a historic resource that was designed by a famous engineer, was more than 70 years old, was the first of its kind, had its integrity intact, and is a recognizable element of its landscape. The initial response was that the resource deserved to be saved—until she later mentioned that it was the FSL. “Now,” she said, “they answered no, usually without qualification, as if the very type of resource it was—a contaminated dump—negated all of the significance factors I had recited, negated the significance of the evaluation process.”


61. Ibid., 20–28.
questions that everyday experiences like waste disposal evoke. We owe it to ourselves to bring into our understanding of history those things that at first seem ephemeral, repulsive, or trivial, but on deeper reflection speak to important issues that affect our lives more than we might imagine.

The issue of the Fresno Sanitary Landfill also suggests some troubling implications of controversial public history presentations. Not unlike the furor over the Smithsonian’s proposed Enola Gay exhibit in 1994, the FSL became an opportunity for shopping political agendas tangentially related to the questions at hand.\(^{62}\) That a public debate arose at all also can discourage the nomination of other important sites and resources that appear to be outside of mainstream tastes and sensibilities. And potentially most dispiriting of all is a persistent fear that the public may prefer antiquarian treatments of history as opposed to something more challenging.