



“Not Charity, but a Chance”:
Philanthropic Capitalism and the Rise
of American Thrift Stores, 1894–1930

JENNIFER LE ZOTTE

ON 3 May 1884, the *Saturday Evening Post* carried a short story entitled “The Blue Silk.” The tale’s protagonist—the comely, young, buxom blonde Louisa—yearns to accept an invitation to a grand party, but her curmudgeonly father refuses to pay for her “ball frippery.” Against the advice of her cousin, who argues that only “second-hand gentility” would resort to such means, Louisa gathers together what little money she has and buys a beautiful, pale blue gown from “the Jewess behind the counter” of a resale shop.¹ At the party, the gown’s train tears; then Louisa overhears the hostess wondering aloud how it is that Louisa would be wearing Emily Lourele’s dress! Evidently, the author thought public humiliation not lesson enough, for Louisa later learns that the store where she had purchased the gown has since closed, all of its workers having been stricken with small-pox, initially brought in with the stock that is currently being carted away for disposal. Louisa’s household soon succumbs to the illness, she most severely. In the course of its ravages, Louisa loses, along with her social reputation, her fine looks.

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¹Percy Herbert, “The Blue Silk,” *Saturday Evening Post*, 3 May 1884, pp. 63, 42.

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In 1902 the Reverend Edgar J. Helms, founder of what would come to be known as Goodwill Industries, set out to collect used goods from Boston's wealthier residents and redistribute them to the city's more needy inhabitants. At the time, he and his congregation at the Methodist Morgan Memorial Chapel had to overcome concerns such as those raised in the *Post's* cautionary account. Pre-owned clothes, perhaps the most intimate of consumer items, were especially suspect. "We have been taught to look askance on discarded clothing," Helms bemoaned. "'It's junk,' some have said. They have taught us to abhor it."² Given that goods were abundantly available through catalogs, specialty shops, and department stores, most citizens thought potentially unhygienic secondhand wearables suitable for donating to the poorest of the poor but hardly fit for public sale.

Despite such resistance, Goodwill Industries spread out from Boston, across New England, and beyond. By 1935, it had established ninety-six "thrift stores" in American cities as well as a dozen abroad. Gathering no-longer-wanted articles in designated Goodwill Bags, millions of "altruistic housewives" were complicit in Goodwill's success.³ Salvation Army thrift stores expanded throughout the first part of the century as well, especially in the affluent 1920s, which suggests that the commercial viability of the secondhand trade did not rely on recessions. At the time of the 1929 stock market crash, thrift store income provided approximately half the annual budget for the Salvation Army's large shelter and jobs program.⁴ In the early decades of the twentieth century, business in secondhand was booming.

Industrial capitalism and urbanization set the stage for secondhand commerce, but thrift stores (sometimes referred to

²Quoted in Earl Christmas, *House of Goodwill: A Story of Morgan Memorial* (Boston: Morgan Memorial Press, 1924), p. 55.

³In an industry manual, Rev. Edgar J. Helms thanks the thousands of "altruistic housewives" who make Goodwill a success (*The Goodwill Industries: A Manual, A History of the Movement, Departmental Methods of Work, Religious and Cultural Activities, Administration and Organization* [Boston: Morgan Memorial Goodwill Press, 1935], dedication).

⁴Edward H. McKinley, *Somebody's Brother: A History of the Salvation Army Men's Social Service Department* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), p. 86.

as “family service stores” or “social service stores”) were not direct offshoots of firsthand commercial endeavors. Instead, by deliberately adapting Progressive Era reforms to a workable business model attuned to a new consumer society, the founders of thrift stores brought unprecedented profitability to their Christian-based community outreach and linked charity to capitalism decades before the “nonprofit sector” had been so designated.⁵ Thrift store innovators also established one of the earliest and longest-running chain businesses in America.⁶ And yet scholars have generally failed to acknowledge the importance of secondhand stores in Americans’ commercial and social lives, even when addressing the institutions responsible for thrift stores’ creation. The Salvation Army, for example—an evangelical mission group with eccentric paramilitary uniforms, raucous parades and marching bands, and progressive gender politics—has been the subject of many excellent studies.⁷ Still, the Salvation Army’s thrift stores, which underwrite a substantial portion of its activities, have been understudied, as have the secondhand businesses of Goodwill Industries, of the Catholic Society of St. Vincent De Paul, and of Deseret Industries, organized by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.⁸

⁵McKinley, *Somebody’s Brother*, p. 158, and Judith Sealander, “Curing Evils at Their Source: The Arrival of Scientific Giving,” in *Charity, Philanthropy, and Civility in American History*, ed. Lawrence J. Friedman and Mark D. McGarvie (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 222.

⁶The definition of a chain store is that it have at least ten units and a central headquarters. The only chain store established before the Salvation Army that still exists today is the Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company, or A&P, a supermarket and liquor store chain. A&P filed for bankruptcy in 2010 and became a private company in 2012. For more on A&P, see Mark Levinson, *The Great A&P and the Struggle for Small Business in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2011).

⁷Studies of the Salvation Army range from the hagiographic to the critical. In addition to his *Somebody’s Brother*, which discusses the Army’s Men’s Social Service Department, which ran the first thrift stores, Edward H. McKinley has written *Marching to Glory: The History of the Salvation Army in the United States of America, 1880–1980* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980).

⁸I focus on the Salvation Army and Goodwill Industries as the earliest and fastest expanding examples of chain thrift stores. By midcentury, however, Catholic counterparts followed much the same trajectory and applied many of the same business tactics in sales and employment. For an anecdotal account of St. Vincent de Paul’s thrift store work, see Jane Knuth, *Thrift Store Saints: Meeting Jesus 25 Cents at a Time* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2010). Deseret Industries was a post–World War II expansion of the

The engines of industrial capitalism and advertising, historians have widely agreed, drove the decisions of firsthand consumers at the turn of the last century, especially those of the less affluent.⁹ But such a generalization is incomplete if the secondhand retail trade, including its original purveyors and core constituency—immigrants—are not taken into account. Moreover, whereas many works on turn-of-the-century social reform focus on the fast-growing mid-Atlantic states, Boston-born Goodwill Industries should be central to any such study, for that organization links New England's historic focus on community solidarity—and its attendant nativism—to the period's new ideals of giving.

Charitable Salvaging: "Saving the Waste in Men and Things"

As early as the colonial era, writers, politicians, and other vocal critics denounced the sale of used goods. Auctions, vendues, and peripatetic peddling, they insisted, generated a false excitement to induce a purchase. The goods themselves were assumed to be undependable, unclean, and—as the *Post* story maintained generations later—even injurious.¹⁰ Pawnshops, a

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints' welfare aid. See Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), pp. 272–74.

⁹See, e.g., Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of Consumer Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976); T. J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); and Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). Some recent scholars, however, have credited working-class buyers with cultural and economic influence over vital changes in dress, media, and entertainment in this period. See, e.g., Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

¹⁰Most colonists had access to foreign-made laces, fineries, ribbons, and delicate housewares only after these products had passed through portside hands. To participate in the growing transnational consumer culture, they relied on auctions and vendue sales, which resembled a mix of modern-day flea markets and auctions. In *The Way to Wealth* (1758; repr. New York: New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, 1848), Benjamin Franklin warned that the hucksters plying their trade at such venues stirred consumers' emotions to effect a ready sale (p. 8). See also Joanna Cohen, "The Right to Purchase Is as Free as the Right to Sell": Defining Consumers

hybrid of lending agency and secondhand shop that matured alongside the taxed and measured commerce of the nineteenth century, were even more directly associated with vice and profligacy,¹¹ an attitude that was fueled by anti-Semitism. Because Jews in America as well as in Europe were often barred from professional vocations and forced into low-status jobs at the margins of the economy, such as the secondhand trade, a large percentage of pawnshop owners were Jewish. The old clothes trade (or “old clo’,” as the peddler’s call had it) was also dominated by Jews. Early in the nineteenth century, an enormous percentage of the world’s increasingly internationalized trade in used clothing cycled through East London’s sophisticated Old Clothes Exchange. By the end of the century, New York’s Chatham Street had become a well-known destination for used-clothes dealers catering to the working class, with no small proportion of their wares having been procured from London’s East Side.¹²

Between 1880 and 1920, the secondhand trade burgeoned along with an unprecedented influx of immigrants. Before the 1880s, the majority of America’s newcomers were from

as Citizens in the Auction-house Conflicts of the Early Republic,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 20.1 (Spring 2010): 25–62, and T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 140–41.

¹¹Historian Wendy Woloson argues that pawnshops were as central to the emergence of capitalism, especially in the final decades of the nineteenth century, as was firsthand wholesale and retail commerce. Consumers could leverage nicer wares against immediate needs; urban women, particularly, used pawnshops to supplement insufficient wages, allowing them to participate in the broader capitalist market. But although pawnshops may have offered a necessary service to the working poor as well as the wholly profligate, they were generally considered disreputable. See Woloson’s *In Hock: Pauning in America from Independence through the Great Depression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 5–6.

¹²According to Adam Mendelsohn, Chatham Street became so firmly associated with the old clothing trade that similar zones as far away as China were referred to as a city’s “Chatham Street.” See Mendelsohn, “‘It’s the Economy, Shmendrick’: A New Turn in Jewish Studies?” *AJS Perspectives* (Fall 2009): 14–17. For more on Europe’s secondhand trade, see Madeleine Ginsburg, “Rags to Riches: The Second Hand Clothes Trade, 1700–1978,” *Costume: The Journal of the Costume Society* 14 (1980): 125, and Woloson, *In Hock*, pp. 16–17. On the economic history of Jews in modern Europe, see Derek Jonathan Penslar and Anthony W. Lee, *Shylock’s Children: Economics and Jewish Identity in Modern Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 16, 20.

Germany, Ireland, and Great Britain, but after 1900, the numbers of incoming Irish and Germans fell, while Italians, Russians, Poles, Greeks, Austro-Hungarians, and Jews of various nationalities dominated the statistics as the absolute number of immigrants also rose. By 1910, almost 15 percent of all Americans were foreign born, with immigrants and their children comprising approximately three-quarters of the populations of Boston, New York, Chicago, and Detroit.¹³

Meanwhile, as improved industrial processes produced more new things and as, consequently, their prices dropped, more usable cast-offs were to be had. Pawnshops proliferated as did scrap businesses. Seeing need among new immigrants and the working class as well as opportunity with the abundance of used goods, the Salvation Army and Goodwill Industries seized the moment. Although they would have to combat the secondhand trade's ill repute among potential customers as well as among the middle-class, native-born citizens they targeted for support, the Protestant social activists enjoyed a distinct advantage over independent Jewish entrepreneurs as they appealed to like-minded secular reformers and fellow Christians.

Thrift store proponents could also capitalize on another turn-of-the-century development that was serving to distance secondhand exchange from its negative associations while simultaneously affiliating it with benevolence. In 1900, an author for one of New York's premier weekly journals, *The Outlook*, announced that a new kind of charity event, the rummage sale, was "sweeping over the United States like a cyclone, carrying all before [it]." A combination of an "Old Curiosity Shop" and "Rag Fair," it would soon outrank all other charity events, the writer predicted,¹⁴ for it could benefit numerous causes, such as church, settlement home, community, and even political

¹³Niles Carpenter, *Immigrants and Their Children* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1927), and David M. Reimers, "Immigrants and Thrift," in *Thrift and Thriving in America: Capitalism and Moral Order from the Puritans to the Present*, ed. Joshua J. Yates and James Davison Hunter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 350.

¹⁴"The Spectator," *Outlook*, 1 December 1900, anthologized in Alfred Emanuel Smith, ed., *New Outlook*, vol. 66 (New York: Outlook Publishing Company, Inc., 1900), p. 781.

interests. Selling donated and gleaned goods to the public as well as distributing them to the needy thus became a popular tool among activists of various stripes, especially those with limited access to conventional political influence.¹⁵

Rummage sales had their origins in charity fairs, which as early as 1820 were blending benevolence and commerce. Originally organized around agricultural products or handmade items and comestibles, the largely female-run charity fairs did not feature secondhand goods until industrial production had become efficient and widespread. Once consumers could regularly and economically replace their household and personal items with new goods, they began donating their used materials to charitable organizations, which then circulated them through established networks.¹⁶ Engaging with a marginal trade that had been assumed to be the province of the foreign, the criminal, and the destitute, the largely middle-class and usually native-born women who ran rummage sales—conducted in public, outdoor venues—brought respectability to resale and helped pave the way for innovations such as Goodwill Industries.

Before rummage sales swept the United States, however, the Salvation Army was pioneering charitable salvage work overseas.¹⁷ Founded in 1865 by former Methodist minister William Booth as the East London Christian Mission, the Army provided food, shelter, and work for indigents who, in turn, repaired donated materials at large factory workhouses. Sober and diligent individuals were sent to rural “colonies,” where

¹⁵Female African American activists used turn-of-the-century rummage sales to gain attention for their causes as well as to raise money. See Linda Gordon, “Black and White Visions of Welfare: Women’s Welfare Activism, 1890–1945,” *Journal of American History* 78.2 (September 1991): 559–90.

¹⁶Beverly Gordon, *Bazaars and Fair Ladies: The History of the American Fundraising Fair* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998), pp. 11–12. See also F. K. Prochaska, “Charity Bazaars in Nineteenth-Century England,” *Journal of British Studies* 16.2 (Spring 1977): 62–84. Though Prochaska’s study focuses on England, similar patterns emerged a little later in the U.S., as Beverly Gordon verifies. Rummage sales also foreshadowed flea markets, which were not yet popular in the United States.

¹⁷Like America’s charity fairs, England’s charity bazaars predated rummage sales. See Peter J. Gurney, “‘The Sublime of the Bazaar’: A Moment in the Making of a Consumer Culture in Mid-Nineteenth Century England,” *Journal of Social History* 40.2 (Winter 2006): 386–405.

they were groomed to spread the Christian message abroad,¹⁸ and profits from workers' renovated products helped fund these worldwide missionary pursuits.

The Army sent a small troop of "soldiers" to New York in 1880, and from there Salvation Army outposts soon spread across the United States. Launched in 1897, America's first Army "salvage brigade" operated out of the basement of a New York men's shelter. In exchange for lodging and food, twenty residents with four pushcarts roamed through local neighborhoods asking for scrap paper—which at first accounted for the bulk of the profits—as well as cast-off household goods and clothing, which they sold to salvage yards or directly to industries.¹⁹ At this point, the U.S. Salvation Army's operation differed little from scrap metal and junk dealerships of the time, many of which were run by Jewish entrepreneurs, who were disproportionately represented among the numerous immigrants who founded such businesses between 1865 and the end of World War I.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the popular press routinely portrayed Jewish tradesmen as swindlers. At the same time, junk dealers were viewed as a public nuisance, even a moral menace, a group comprised of "foreigners, and classes of collectors who [were] constantly going beyond the limit of the law" and who were, moreover, "low on the scale of ethics and intelligence."²⁰ Beyond such ethnic prejudices, Americans'

¹⁸See Diane Winston, *Red-Hot and Righteous: The Urban Religion of the Salvation Army* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 118–19; for more detail, see Norman Murdoch, *Origins of the Salvation Army* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), pp. 146–68.

¹⁹A similar program, a Salvation Army "workshop" attached to a shelter called the San Francisco Lighthouse, was launched in that city as early as 1893. Men collected makeshift materials from restaurants, saloons, and even dumps. A "Curiosity Shop" featuring used clothing provided goods and employment. See McKinley, *Somebody's Brother*, pp. 24–25, and Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), pp. 141–53, 156–59.

²⁰J. P. Alexander, "Sales of Materials," *Electric Railway Journal* 23 (January 1915): 192–93; Harry H. Grigg and George E. Haynes, *Junk Dealing and Juvenile Delinquency*, text by Albert E. Webster (Chicago: Juvenile Protective Association, (1919[?])), p. 50; and Carl Zimring, "Dirty Work: How Hygiene and Xenophobia Marginalized the American Waste Trades, 1870–1930," *Environmental History* 9.1 (January 2004): 87, 89.

increasing understanding of hygiene intensified fears of contagion, which further discredited the practice of collecting discarded goods and reselling salvaged “junk.”²¹ As new legislation sought to curb the activities of urban scrap dealers, Christian-run salvage ventures that relied on donations (and, thus, were exempt from pushcart regulations aimed at vendors) benefited from these restrictions in places such as New York, Chicago, and Boston.

In addition to sponsoring its own salvage brigades in America, the Salvation Army inspired the creation of other programs that financed their charitable outreach through the sale of salvaged consumer goods. In 1894, Rev. S. G. Smith of The People’s Church in St. Paul, Minnesota (which was not affiliated with the Salvation Army), organized what was perhaps the first American thrift store, a small salvage bureau patterned after similar Salvation Army shops in London. In the 1890s, an economic crisis had sunk many people “in want, through no moral or intellectual defects.” What they most needed was work, and “in the least conspicuous manner,” according to Smith, who credited General Booth with the insight. Other such programs sprang up across the country. Most were attached to settlement homes and churches and at least loosely tied to the Social Gospel movement.²²

Also inspired by General Booth, California’s West Oakland Settlement began sponsoring a two-day-a-week salvage bureau in about 1899. Well-to-do, native-born, Protestant women volunteered time and donated funds to offset the ill effects of an area sporting more dirty factories and saloons than playgrounds and reading rooms, “an unsavory spot in moral and material aspects,” whose inhabitants, mostly immigrants, lacked the positive attributes of “industry, perseverance, patience, dexterity,

²¹Zimring describes eastern European immigrants’ involvement in the U.S. waste trades in “Dirty Work,” pp. 80–101. Also see his *Cash for Your Trash: Scrap Recycling in America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000), pp. 5, 46–50, and Woloson, *In Hock*, pp. 21–54. Louis Harap covers literary depictions of Jews in America in her *The Image of the Jew in American Literature: From Early Republic to Mass Immigration* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003).

²²See Eva V. Carlin, “A Salvage Bureau,” *Overland Monthly*, September 1900, pp. 246–57.

economy, cleanliness and thrift.” The women organized activities and programs, from gardening to children’s games, in aesthetically pleasant, well-ordered settings that were designed to instill white, American, middle-class habits and preferences among the settlement’s “low-browed” and “ill-favored” residents.²³ The settlement, whose residents represented more than twenty-one nationalities, mostly Italian and Portuguese, was integrated, but racial condescension and stereotypes were pervasive.²⁴ The addition of a small, part-time thrift store tied the settlement’s plan to reform its residents by Americanizing them with a strategy to reform the secondhand trade by Christianizing it.

Rev. Helms followed a similar logic when, in 1895, he became pastor of Morgan Methodist Chapel (organized in 1869), located at Shawmut Avenue and Corning Street in Boston’s South End.²⁵ He and his wife changed the church’s name to Morgan Memorial and reached out to the community—populated largely by Italian, Hungarian, Czech, and Polish newcomers—with childcare, direct almsgiving, and various Americanization programs, such as language training and fresh-air camps for children. The volunteers who delivered the programs—mostly middle-class, Anglo-American women—were motivated by values in keeping with their Puritan heritage and nativist assumptions.²⁶

To enhance their community outreach, church members began collecting clothing for women and children in need. Because the demand for discarded garments among the impoverished was robust, as was the supply of same from the more fortunate, church leaders decided to charge a nominal fee for the goods. As money accumulated, the church hired

²³Carlin, “A Salvage Bureau,” p. 247, and Marta Gutman, “Inside the Institution: The Art and Craft of Settlement Work at the Oakland New Century Club, 1895–1923,” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 8 (2000): 248–79.

²⁴Gutman, “Settlement Work at the Oakland New Century Club,” p. 256.

²⁵Subcommittee on Memorial History, *Fifty Years of Boston: a memorial volume issued in commemoration of the tercentenary of 1930* (Boston: Tercentenary Committee, 1932), p. 600.

²⁶Robert Rollin Huddleston, *The Relatedness of Goodwill Industries and the Christian Church* (Ph.D. diss., Iliff School of Theology, 1959), p. 154.

unemployed women to repair and sometimes repurpose the cloth wares. Word spread, and donations swelled. In due course, Morgan Memorial distributed old food sacks among contributing housewives so that they could more readily set aside and save their unwanted articles for future donation. At first, bags were stamped with “The Morgan Memorial Cooperative Industries and Stores, Inc.”; after 1902, they bore a new, more succinct branding: “The Goodwill Bag.”²⁷

In 1902, Helms officially launched Goodwill Industries, a secondhand goods program quite similar to the Salvation Army’s. Goodwill Industries hired poor and often physically disabled people to assist with collecting cast-off goods, repairing viable items at large factories dubbed “cooperative industries,” and selling those refurbished wares at secondhand retail stores. Materials beyond repair were sold to salvage yards. In 1910, the first Goodwill organization outside of Boston was established in Brooklyn, New York, not far from where the pushcarts of the Salvation Army salvage brigades first gathered urban discards. By the early 1920s, Goodwill had a fleet of trucks that amassed unwanted household goods and clothing from more than one hundred thousand homes. Within two decades, the modest Morgan Memorial Chapel had grown into a block-long complex, which included workers’ living quarters and a six-story industrial plant.²⁸

Comparing the material hand-me-downs that were repurposed in Goodwill’s factories with the people who processed them, Rev. Helms promoted his project with the slogan “Saving the Waste in Men and Things.”²⁹ Goodwill advertised its work as restoring the unredeemed to usefulness, making out of the discards of a profligate society productive individuals and newly desirable commodities. “The Goodwill Industries takes wasted things donated by the public and employs wasted men and women to bring both things and persons back to usefulness

²⁷Huddleston, *Goodwill Industries and the Christian Church*, pp. 173–74.

²⁸Christmas, *House of Goodwill*, pp. 45–47, and Frederick C. Moore, *The Golden Threads of Destiny* (Boston: Morgan Memorial Goodwill Press, 1952), p. 69.

²⁹Christmas, *House of Goodwill*, p. 143.

and well-being.”³⁰ In language that is strikingly similar, the American “commander” Frederick Booth-Tucker likewise characterized the Salvation Army’s industrial homes as places where “human wastage” was employed “in collecting, sorting, repairing and selling the material waste.”³¹

Although Goodwill Industries and the Salvation Army portrayed their burgeoning businesses as social welfare, critics viewed their work as irrelevant to either religious concerns or social uplift. The Salvationists were repeatedly denounced as they spread their salvaging efforts across the United States. In 1909, a Catholic priest condemned the Salvation Army’s outreach operations. “From a religious organization they have developed into a bunch of junk dealers,” he opined.³² For such detractors, trafficking in used goods was incompatible with religious goals. Methodists—the Protestant denomination with which both the Salvation Army and Goodwill Industries were at least loosely affiliated—were prohibited from profiting not just from taverns and theaters but also from pawnshops.³³ Despite the fact that providing the poor with clothing and other necessities had long been the purview of religious charity, *selling* used goods to the public was still frowned upon as a shady business dealing that sullied all who were involved in it.

Stewardship and Philanthropy: Rebranding Junk Shops as Thrift Stores

At the turn of the twentieth century, city denizens were throwing away more things than ever before. The large-scale commercial production of items that had previously been fashioned in the home changed people’s relationship with material goods; the easier it was to purchase goods, the more people thought of them as temporary acquisitions. At the same time, as urban populations swelled, the size of residential living quarters

³⁰Edgar J. Helms, *Pioneering in Modern City Missions* (Boston: Morgan Memorial Printing Dept., 1944), pp. 71–72.

³¹McKinley, *Somebody’s Brother*, p. 58.

³²“From Religion to Junk,” *Washington Post*, 23 August 1909, p. 12.

³³David M. Tucker, *The Decline of Thrift in America: Our Cultural Shift from Saving to Spending* (New York: Praeger, 1991), p. 20.

shrank, as did the areas where unused goods might be stored. As Susan Strasser has concluded, Americans living in the Gilded Age were abandoning personal practices of stewardship.³⁴ Responsibility for the stewardship of goods and resources was becoming, instead, the responsibility of governmental agencies and manufacturing interests.

Various waste management industries grew up around the conservation, reduction, and reuse of cast-off materials. For example, the Bessemer converter, which enabled steel mills to mass-produce steel more quickly and more cheaply, raised the demand for scrap iron, an inexpensive source of raw material. In turn, the demand for scrap iron and other industrial remainders and byproducts created economic opportunities for immigrants who had little start-up capital, which contributed to the growth of the above-mentioned Jewish-dominated scrap materials businesses.³⁵

Proponents of efficiency continued to advocate long-standing ideals of good stewardship, but they now adapted them to new ideals of giving. Philanthropists, often leaders of corporate capitalism as well, developed and/or supported up-to-date theories on poverty in response to unprecedented urban population growth, which had quintupled nationwide in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and continued to expand through the 1920s. The percentage of those living beneath the poverty line grew but so did the roster of the super-rich. In the late 1870s, approximately one hundred individuals counted themselves millionaires; by 1916, that number had passed forty thousand. Some were millionaires many times over, such as Andrew Carnegie, who in 1901 sold Carnegie Steel Corporation interests to U.S. Steel for \$447 million.³⁶

³⁴Strasser, *Waste and Want*, p. 13.

³⁵Zimring, *Cash for Your Trash*, pp. 18–19. Some Progressive Era federal policies, such as the establishment of the Public Lands Commission during President Theodore Roosevelt's administration, demonstrate this shift from private to public responsibility. See Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890–1920* (1959; repr. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999).

³⁶Charles W. Calhoun, ed., *The Gilded Age: Perspectives on the Origins of Modern America*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), p. 102; Sealander, "Curing Evils at Their Source," p. 218.

The majority of the uberwealthy gave away little in their lifetimes; what they did donate often went to local causes, like building schools or orphanages, which improved only the immediate community. A minority of the new upper class, however, recognized the nation's increasing wealth disparity as an incipient crisis and worried that the struggling masses would threaten the social order. The solution, as proposed by Frederick Gates, John D. Rockefeller Sr.'s chief philanthropic advisor, was scientific giving—systematic, large-scale, highly organized donations designed to better society at large.³⁷ Giving was “investing in,” as Rockefeller put it, and the goal, Carnegie insisted, was to avoid wasting time, effort, and money on the “unreclaimably poor” and to concentrate, instead, on “stimulat[ing] the best and most aspiring of the poor.”³⁸

By requiring labor in exchange for shelter—in effect vetting potential clients by testing their willingness to work—and by providing them with useful skills—or so the argument went—the Salvation Army and Goodwill Industries reflected precepts of systematic or scientific giving. In addition, by charging for donated goods, thrift stores and their related work programs bought into new standards of social welfare that valued self-help and independence. Goodwill Industries was more directly invested in scientific philanthropy than were the Salvationists, whose primary motivation was to generate support for their evangelical mission. Salvationists and Goodwill organizers alike, however, had the basic—if often unnamed—ideals of the gospel in mind, as did the era's major capitalist-philanthropists, many

³⁷For more on scientific giving, see Sealander, “Curing Evils at Their Source,” pp. 218–20.

³⁸John D. Rockefeller, *Random Reminiscences of Men and Events* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1909), pp. 141–42, 145–47. Andrew Carnegie, “Wealth,” *North American Review*, June 1889, pp. 653–54, and “The Best Fields of Philanthropy,” *North American Review*, December 1889, pp. 682–98; quoted in Robert H. Bremner, *Giving: Charity and Philanthropy in Giving* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1994), p. 159. For more on Carnegie's writings, see his “*The Gospel of Wealth*” and *Other Timely Essays* (New York: New York Century Co., 1901); see also Sealander, “Curing Evils at Their Source,” pp. 228–37. For more on changes in the structure of philanthropy in America, see Robert H. Bremner, *American Philanthropy*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), and David Wagner, *What's Love Got to Do with It? A Critical Look at American Charity* (New York: New Press, 2001).

of whom—Carnegie, Gates, the Rockefellers, and others—were convinced that the impetus to give was dictated by God.³⁹

Although the new philanthropists standardized notions of scientific giving, they were not the first to insist that the reformable poor be differentiated from the permanently derelict. A moral distinction between “victims of circumstance,” such as widows and orphans, and those whose poverty was brought on by their own intemperance and idle habits was built into the English poor laws and carried to the New World, especially the New England colonies. Puritans, in particular, emphasized the importance of community charity and the value of hard work. However, for a long time, the distinction between deserving and undeserving poor mattered little because poverty was a relatively minor, contained problem. Even in Boston, screening applicants for aid was not encouraged unless the needy party was not a local inhabitant. Throughout the nineteenth century, the New England states led the charge in charity. But although they boasted the greatest number of associations promoting either charity or philanthropy, the region’s longtime Anglo-American residents regarded newcomers seeking support with greater suspicion than ever.⁴⁰

Statisticians, sociologists, educators, and graduate students in a variety of fields studied the causes and implications of poverty, and their findings further legitimated the view that direct giving perpetuated rather than alleviated poverty. In the late 1890s, Columbia University’s new social science department, working with New York’s Charity Organization Society, concluded that environmental circumstances caused 41.8 percent of poverty cases, moral failure or “shiftlessness” 12 percent, and the remainder could be attributed to a combination of causes.⁴¹ Such calculations, whose very specificity lent them credence,

³⁹Robert T. Grimm Jr., “Working with Handicaps: Americans with Disabilities, Goodwill Industries and Employment, 1920s–1970s” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 2002), pp. 24–25, and Sealander, “Curing Evils at Their Source,” pp. 226–28.

⁴⁰Robert A. Gross, “Giving in America: From Charity to Philanthropy,” in Friedman and McGarvie, *Charity, Philanthropy, and Civility*, pp. 32–44.

⁴¹John Louis Rechiutti, *Civic Engagement: Social Science and Progressive-Era Reform in New York City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), pp. 32–33.

perpetuated distinctions between the “worthy” and “unworthy” poor and encouraged the belief that poverty could be cured.

Goodwill Industries was so loathe to have its operation associated with old-fashioned, direct charity that at its 1922 annual conference, the company adopted as its national motto “Not Charity, but a Chance.”⁴² Redemption through industry was a recurring theme, one that reflected the authority of scientific philanthropy; it also allowed Goodwill Industries, and the Salvation Army as well, to justify staffing their operations with low-paid employees at the same time as they were investing in advertising and rebranding their “junk shops” as “thrift stores.”

Influential religious leaders had long stressed thrift as a core Christian virtue, but thrift is also a basic value of capitalism.⁴³ Adam Smith, for example, declared that “Parsimony, and not industry, is the immediate cause of the increase of capital.”⁴⁴ As consuming ready-made goods became an essential activity of everyday life in the late nineteenth century, the concept of thrift was forced to accommodate the impetus to buy. In the 1920s, Harvard economics professor T. N. Carver claimed that “[t]hrift does not consist in refusing to spend money or buy things.” In fact, he contended, “the thriftiest people are the people with the highest standard of living.”⁴⁵ Accordingly, the sort of educated consumer who understood the time-and-money-saving convenience of modern products promoted a brisker economic pace, spurred product innovation, and even encouraged the use of consumer credit.⁴⁶

During World War I, as it sought to raise funds for programs geared toward soldiers and their families as well as toward European aid, the U.S. government drew a strong association

⁴²Plumb, *Edgar James Helms*, p. 199. Goodwill’s oldest slogan was adopted from an article in *Carry On*, a magazine published in the interest of wounded soldiers.

⁴³Yates and Hunter, intro. to *Thrift and Thriving in America*, pp. 5–10, 13.

⁴⁴Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), ed. Edwin Cannan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 359.

⁴⁵T. N. Carver, “Thrift and the Standard of Living,” *Journal of Political Economy* 28 (November 1920): 284–325.

⁴⁶Olivier Zunz, “Mass Philanthropy as Public Thrift for an Age of Consumption,” in Yates and Hunter, *Thrift and Thriving in America*, pp. 336–38.

between “thrift,” or saving, and giving. Mass giving—that is, the cumulative contributions of small-scale donations channeled toward a broad philanthropic application—required a “culture of giving” in which middle- and working-class citizens would routinely respond to public appeals. The government’s strategy of directly soliciting all the nation’s citizens was immensely successful, producing “an unprecedented level of giving among a broad cross section of Americans, including recent immigrants.”⁴⁷ As the public adopted a philosophy of morally influenced personal economics, it contributed more to the country’s aggregate growth in charitable giving than did the handful of large-scale donors who had first prompted the shift to scientific philanthropy.

By the 1920s, charitable groups’ mass appeals garnered grander responses than ever. For example, a study showed that if 3 percent of a city’s residents had supported philanthropic causes in 1900, by the 1920s that percentage was likely to have swelled to 35.⁴⁸ The increase in participation was especially dramatic for the laboring classes, even in the heart of the Great Depression. One investigation found that in the 1930s, a full 93 percent of San Francisco streetcar workers contributed to organized charities.⁴⁹ Some did so through community chests, offshoots of the “war chests” of World War I that collected funds from the sale of Liberty Bonds and other federal instruments. Community chests gathered donations on behalf of hundreds of affiliated local charities, churches, and national charity branches, including the Salvation Army.⁵⁰ A 1935 Goodwill manual suggested that in cities where Goodwill was allied with community chests, the treasurer ought to align the branch’s fiscal year with that of the community chest, which suggests that a substantial financial gain was to be anticipated when

⁴⁷Olivier Zunz, *Philanthropy in America: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 44–46, 340.

⁴⁸Zunz, “Mass Philanthropy as Public Thrift,” p. 340.

⁴⁹Emily H. Huntington and Mary Gorringer Luck, *Living on a Moderate Income: The Incomes and Expenditures of Street-Car Men’s and Clerk’s Families in the San Francisco Bay Region* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1937).

⁵⁰Zunz, “Mass Philanthropy as Public Thrift,” pp. 336–38, 342–43.

the confederation divided the funds that had been donated to it.⁵¹

The thrift store concept thus accorded well with public sentiment. Even though more commercial items were available for sale and Americans' purchasing power was steadily increasing, consumers continued to associate profligacy with a weak moral character. Across categories of class and ethnicity, and despite the glamour of new and aggressive forms of advertising and marketing, American consumers still critiqued their own and others' materiality.⁵² Through thrift store programs, people could abandon viable clothing and household materials, reassured that they were helping those with fewer means. Passing down her clothing a little sooner than she might have otherwise, the "altruistic housewife" thereby exhibited a virtuous devotion to public thrift that also happily sanctioned her personal indulgence in new acquisitions. Mass philanthropy and the practices of thrift stores thus served to increase buyers' participation in firsthand consumer capitalism.

Scrubology and Soapology: Becoming 100 Percent American

A woman of middling means in the 1880s was likely to have reused cloth materials several times over. She mended her husband's shirts, remade them into her children's pinafores, and, finally, used the worn out, unwearable fabric to clean house or to stuff furniture.⁵³ The popular acceptance of the germ theory—which had shown that illnesses could be transferred by invisible substances which clung to and bred on materials,

⁵¹Helms, *The Goodwill Industries: A Manual*, p. 149.

⁵²Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875–1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), pp. xvii–xviii.

⁵³See Nancy Tomes, *The Gospel of Germs: Men, Women, and the Microbe in American Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 56–57, and Zimring, *Cash for Your Trash*, p. 40. For more on popular ideas on cleanliness, see Suellen Hoy, *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), and Richard L. Bushman and Claudia L. Bushman, "The Early History of Cleanliness in America," *Journal of American History* 74.4 (March 1988): 1213–38.

especially cloth—altered cleaning and disposal practices, and American women’s responsibilities in the home expanded to include a stricter definition of good hygiene for her family.⁵⁴ Even before the in-home reuse of materials lost favor, however, buying secondhand goods was not, in many circles, considered proper. The *Saturday Evening Post*’s cautionary tale of 1884, a summary of which opens my essay, illustrated the social, physical, and even moral dangers that one risked when buying secondhand. Such anxieties over communicable disease inspired not only sorrowful fables but also legislation aimed at curbing informal practices of secondhand exchange.

The increasing quantities of waste generated by expanding urban populations posed real health hazards in Gilded Age cities as municipalities struggled to establish effective garbage and trash disposal systems. After a devastating yellow fever epidemic struck the Mississippi Valley in the 1870s and 1880s, many cities turned their attention to preventing water contamination. In 1895, George E. Waring Jr., a former Civil War colonel and the “greatest apostle of cleanliness,” was appointed commissioner of street cleaning in New York City. To help residents understand the need for and to advocate sanitary practices, Waring launched an informational campaign. Among the useful advice he circulated was a plan for profiting from efficient refuse sales rather than consigning unwanted objects to overtaxed city dumps and incinerators.⁵⁵

New York City’s Salvationists piggy-backed their own promotional drive on the commissioner’s crusade to encourage citizen-based initiatives to enhance municipal cleanliness. Because concerns about contamination and contagion still lingered, the Salvationists published pamphlets explaining their

⁵⁴The germ theory was largely but not fully accepted in the scientific community around 1880. The public did not embrace the precepts until early in the twentieth century. See Phyllis Allen Richmond, “American Attitudes toward the Germ Theory of Disease (1860–1880),” *Journal of the History of Medicine* 9 (1954): 428–54.

⁵⁵In *Garbage in the Cities: Refuse, Reform, and the Environment* (rev. ed., Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004), Martin V. Melosi offers a history of urban environmental issues and waste management in a broad, world context with illustrative case studies (esp. pp. 41–42). See also, for the American industrial context, Strasser, *Waste and Want*, p. 125.

salvaging businesses' ultrahygienic processes for preparing goods for public sale, processes that included "huge laundries working constantly," which thoroughly sanitized donated materials.⁵⁶ Imperatives toward cleanliness permeated the social reform programs underwritten by the thrift stores that Goodwill Industries and the Salvation Army had pioneered. In the 1890s, a new social department—which would conduct the Salvation Army's thrift store program—adopted as its motto, "Soup, Soap, and Salvation!"⁵⁷ At the West Oakland Settlement, too, immigrant children were taught cleanliness, a routine carried out in settlement homes across the country. When the settlement's boys had finished practicing military drills and stamping leather, they received rousing instruction in "Scrubology" and "Soapology," to borrow General Booth's terminology.⁵⁸

Good hygiene, modern frugality, individual and community improvement, and personal industriousness were all values emphasized by the developing social sciences and by the new philanthropists. The primary targets of their attention were immigrants. Although "Americanization" is sometimes referred to as a movement, its proponents did not all subscribe to the same tactics; rather, strategies for Americanization ranged along a spectrum from multicultural acceptance to strict, xenophobic demands of absolute assimilation.⁵⁹ Programs abounded for acclimating immigrants to American ways of cooking, cleaning, speaking, dressing, and living. Early on, when operating as Morgan Memorial, Goodwill Industries had provided an array of Americanization programs, such as fresh air camps and language instruction for first-generation children, and it

⁵⁶See, e.g., "The Evolution of an Idea and a Pushcart: The Story of an Industry Which Remakes Men and Materials," Salvation Army National Archives, uncatalogued.

⁵⁷McKinley, *Somebody's Brother*, p. 34.

⁵⁸Carlin, "A Salvage Bureau," p. 248.

⁵⁹For more on Americanization projects in different contexts, see the essays in George E. Pozzetta, *Americanization, Social Control, and Philanthropy* (New York and London: Taylor and Francis, 1991). For variants of Americanization, ranging from "liberal" efforts that supported native languages and some cultural customs to the more aggressive, "100 percent Americanism" during the World War I era, see Otis L. Graham Jr. and Elizabeth Koed, "Americanizing the Immigrant, Past and Future: History and Implications of a Social Movement," *Public Historian* 15 (Fall 1992): 41.

taught “American” cooking and hygiene, as did the Salvation Army.⁶⁰

Progressive Era reform groups seeking to impart American priorities also organized “thrift clubs.”⁶¹ During World War I, the concept of thrift was expanded beyond the personal realm and into the public as it was tied to notions of patriotism. Liberty Loan drives targeted immigrants, who were encouraged to save money by buying bonds. Posters asked, “Are you 100% American? Prove it!” The campaign was successful; in September 1918, 46.5 percent of all subscribers were foreign born or directly descended from a first-generation immigrant.⁶²

Thrift stores were the consumer’s analog to thrift clubs. Shopping was a significant pastime in America, increasingly intrinsic to its culture. Thrift stores extended that culture to and instilled it among impoverished newcomers. When the West Oakland Settlement Home added the salvage bureau to its operation, not all its volunteers were enthusiastic. Still associating immorality and uncleanness with used goods, they viewed the resale trade as antithetical to their goals of uplift, Americanization, and beautification. Proponents, however, thought that thrift stores would offer the poor a venue where they might participate in and develop the skills necessary to adequately negotiate the increasingly complex American marketplace. Buying was not just a necessity but an aptitude, one best developed and practiced in a setting that emulated the handsome, new department stores springing up in American cities. “Every article of clothing” sold in the thrift store, salvage bureau advocate Eva Carlin pointed out, “is neatly wrapped up and tied, so that the transactions assume the *dignity* of store purchases.”⁶³

⁶⁰Huddleston, *Goodwill Industries and the Christian Church*, pp. 159–63.

⁶¹Little attention has been devoted to “thrift clubs” specifically, but they usually functioned in coordination with charitable organizations’ other Americanization efforts. See Kenneth Kusmer, “The Functions of Organized Charity in the Progressive Era: Chicago as a Case Study,” *Journal of American History* 60.3 (December 1973): 665.

⁶²Zunz, “Mass Philanthropy as Public Thrift,” p. 340; Reimers, “Immigrants and Thrift,” p. 368; Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 77.

⁶³Gutman, “Settlement Work at the Oakland New Century Club,” p. 261 (emphasis added).

Thrift store advocates like Carlin faced an uphill battle. Not only did they have to convince reformers, settlement volunteers, and Christian critics about the viability of their proposed enterprise, but potential consumers, too, had to be persuaded to accept the value, practicality, and pleasure of buying pre-owned goods, especially clothing. Immigrants were no exception. Passing pre-worn clothing through kinship networks was common to many newcomers' countries of origin, but the practice did not easily translate into buying strangers' discards, even though recent immigrants well understood the adaptive importance of clothing. Upon arriving in the United States, the first imperative for European, particularly Jewish, immigrants was "to visit the stores and be dressed from head to foot in American clothing."⁶⁴ Language skills were necessary for many jobs, but employment and social acceptance were more readily achieved when the applicant's clothing was neat, clean, and not markedly foreign. Thrift stores, which offered inexpensive American wares, would seem to have been ideally equipped to serve the needs of the aspiring immigrant. But young immigrants, women especially, preferred department stores, novel establishments redolent of fashionable modernity and well stocked with ready-made options that enticed new wage earners, over thrift shops, which, no matter how much they gussied up their operations, offered only old clothing stigmatized by a stranger's use.⁶⁵

The role of clothing in early twentieth-century immigrants' lives, as well as newcomers' sentiments about secondhand, is illustrated in the stories of Russian, Poland-born immigrant Anzia Yeziarska.⁶⁶ New clothing was perhaps a greater priority

⁶⁴Mary Antin, *At School in the Promised Land* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1912), p. 30. For more about how Jewish women immigrants responded to American dress, see Barbara A. Schreier, *Becoming American Women: Clothing and the Jewish Immigrant Experience, 1880–1920* (Chicago: Chicago Historical Society, 1994).

⁶⁵Kathy Peiss assesses working women's relationship to ready-made clothing in turn-of-the-century New York City in *Cheap Amusements*, pp. 56–87.

⁶⁶As Katherine Stubbs observes, Yeziarska's own "sartorial alienation" stems from her experience as a garment worker and often focuses on ready-made clothing. Much secondhand clothing was likely to be cheap, ready-made discards. See Stubbs, "Reading

for Jews than for other immigrant groups because their traditional, Old World clothing set them apart at a glance as un-American and non-Protestant. In one of Yeziarska's stories, a young Jewish immigrant, Shenah, who believes that a new outfit will help her shed the appearance of foreignness and attract an American man, bemoans her plight. "Woe is me! No mother, no friend to help me lift myself out of my green-horn rags," she complains.⁶⁷ Shenah's lament speaks to a 1913 Chicago study demonstrating that a newly arrived Jewish girl's stateside relatives considered themselves obliged to buy her American clothing "almost immediately."⁶⁸ Shenah, however, with no welcoming relations in the U.S., lacks that advantage.

To acquire the money she needs to buy a cheerful dress and hat decked with imitation cherries, Shenah pawns her "last memory from Russia," a featherbed her mother had made and bequeathed to her. The pawnshop Shenah patronizes is portrayed as a clearly undesirable commercial zone. In one sentence, the space is described as "gloomy," its wares as "tawdry," and the proprietor's face as "grisly."⁶⁹ In Yeziarska's stories, virtuous actors like Shenah will reluctantly sell secondhand items to afford new ones, but they will not buy used goods. As the author notes elsewhere, a secondhand store "protrude[s] its rubbish" upon a destitute neighborhood and, thus, becomes one of its more distinctive "banners of poverty."⁷⁰ And so, while middle-class reformers may have considered new immigrants to be the ideal market for thrift stores, immigrants still viewed secondhand shops as disorderly, ugly, and steeped in immorality.⁷¹ To court their target audience effectively, thrift stores had to adapt.

Material: Contextualizing Clothing in the Work of Anzia Yeziarska," *MELUS* 23.2, Varieties of Ethnic Criticism (Summer 1998): 157-72.

⁶⁷Anzia Yeziarska, "Wings" (1920), repr. in *How I Found America: Collected Stories of Anzia Yeziarska* (New York: Persea Books, 1991), pp. 3-16.

⁶⁸Schreier, *Becoming American Women*, p. 57.

⁶⁹Yeziarska, "Wings," pp. 9, 10-11.

⁷⁰The secondhand shops as "banners of poverty" comes from Anzia Yeziarska, *Salome of the Tenements* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1923), p. 5.

⁷¹Lizabeth Cohen offers examples of this working-class rejection in home decorations and furnishings in "Embellishing a Life of Labor: An Interpretation of the

The New Secondhand: Promoting Fashionable Thrift

To create a fresh image for used goods, thrift stores incorporated three elements that consumers had come to expect from their familiarity with department stores: ample product choice, attractive display, and a good deal. The *Outlook's* description of an 1899 rummage sale touched on these key aspects: "a second-hand department store was slowly evolved out of the apparent chaos, with the managers and their friends as saleswomen, and the appeal to the second great human instinct—that of bargaining—began."⁷² Department stores wooed consumers with their vast, carefully presented arrays of fashionable and ever-changing goods, smartly attired mannequins, and helpful but unobtrusive sales staff. As permanent sites, thrift stores were able to emulate firsthand retail more effectively than intermittent, open-air rummage sales. By the eve of the Great Depression, Salvation Army thrift stores had become widely accepted, affordable stand-ins for expensive department stores, even advertising their wares through conventional retail channels. Given that John Wanamaker, "the greatest merchant in America," was a longtime friend and supporter of the Salvation Army, thrift stores' success was not entirely surprising. Indeed, in the years around World War I, Salvation Army and Goodwill thrift stores matched, or even outpaced, the growth of chain stores such as Woolworth's and A&P.⁷³

But attractive displays and clever advertising were not sufficient to attract and retain a steady clientele. Because fashion trends changed rapidly, the vast majority of donated garments were out of style, not likely to be purchased by even

Material Culture of American Working-Class Homes, 1885–1915," in *American Material Culture: The Shape of Things around Us* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1984), pp. 158–81.

⁷²"The Spectator," p. 781.

⁷³See Winston, *The Urban Religion of the Salvation Army*, p. 220. For more on the influence of Wanamaker and his department stores on American consumerism, see Leach, *Fables of Abundance*, p. 32. On the rise of chain stores, see Tracey Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise: Gender, Politics, and American Grocery Stores in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), pp. 43–72.

marginalized consumers. The garment manufacturing section of Southern California's Goodwill Industries hit upon a solution, which it announced in a report of the 1920s.

Many up to date coats for girls are made of the larger velvet coats of past seasons. Sateen coat linings and skirts are used for bloomers. . . . Long and short pants and suits for boys are cut from the wide-gored skirts of styles now extinct.⁷⁴

In addition to repurposing donated clothing, the Southern California Goodwill staged fashion shows to showcase the stylishness of thrift store garments. Along with the physical items to be had at the thrift store, which were transformed from outdated to chic, the worker and the consumer were metamorphosed from indigent and ill clothed to self-sufficient and fashionable.⁷⁵ That alteration involved the same practice of stewardship that nineteenth-century women had performed when they repaired and repurposed their own household items. In the age of industrial capitalism, the stewardship of material goods was adapted to new commercial realities, and thus recodified, at the same time as new populations—both employees and consumers—were drawn into America's free market economy.

A 1902 article on the Salvation Army's Brooklyn salvage store indicated how successful the thrift movement's strategies had been as it described the remarkable range of customers the stores attracted. They included a struggling mother of nine, a huckster hoping to turn a profit by reselling a good coat, the plain down-and-out, and (the last buyer of the day) a "straight, red-lipped young girl with cool, steady, black eye, who saunters in and leans against the counter, chewing gum and surveying the stock with careful indifference." She chooses a cute pair of bronze slippers to impress the "cream of the ward" at the last Navy Street dance of the season.⁷⁶ The girl does not fit any strict definition of "need," as the article's author makes clear. As

⁷⁴Quoted in Betty Harris, *With Courage Adequate . . . With Dignity Intact: The Story of Goodwill Industries of Southern California* (Los Angeles: Goodwill Industries of Southern California, 1971), p. 29.

⁷⁵Harris, *Goodwill Industries of Southern California*, p. 34.

⁷⁶"New York's Cheapest Department Store," *New York Times*, 4 May 1902, p. C1.

businesses open to the public, the Salvation Army and Goodwill Industries had no desire to restrict buyers. Unlike Reverend Helms's early salvaging initiatives or those of settlement homes, which limited distribution to the "deserving poor," the new chain thrift stores were corporate capitalist endeavors whose inexpensive wares were available to all.

Conclusion: Valuing Business Efficiency over Spiritual Results

The success of thrift stores made savvy businessmen of old-fashioned almsgiving missionaries. By 1909, Industrial Homes was providing the Salvation Army with nearly \$2 million annually and comprised the bulk of its \$1.5 million real estate portfolio.⁷⁷ The mounting importance of maintaining this source of income was reflected in shifting institutional priorities. In 1923, for example, a handbook for evaluating officers valued the "ability to secure business efficiency from men" over "spiritual results in dealing with men."⁷⁸

The semantic rebranding of "junk shops" as "thrift stores" signaled that Christian-based social reform groups had, in effect, sanitized secondhand goods, both morally and physically. Much-maligned pawnshops underwent a similar transformation in the mid-twentieth century, when semiphilanthropic associations began to compete with independent owners. The most successful of these "benevolent" pawnshops was the Provident Loan Society in New York City, founded in 1929 and bankrolled by business elites such as Cornelius Vanderbilt and J. Pierpont Morgan.⁷⁹

Sociologist Emily Fogg Mead has written that the steady stream of advertisements and novelty goods produced at the beginning of the twentieth century served to awaken in Americans "the ability to want and choose." But in 1901, deprived of the choice and variety that the modern consumer culture

⁷⁷Strasser, *Waste and Want*, p. 143.

⁷⁸McKinley, *Somebody's Brother*, p. 87.

⁷⁹Woloson, *In Hock*, pp. 154–58.

afforded, the “lower class [wa]s still the slave of simple and undiversified habits.”⁸⁰ Thrift stores sought to replicate the “progress in consumption” that aroused and fulfilled wealthier consumers’ desires. Secondhand consumerism mimicked the tactics of mainstream marketing not only to “remake” waste products but to “remake” public perceptions of that waste as well. In the process, goods salvaging programs also remade the men and women associated with that waste. Upper- and middle-class consumers who donated their cast-offs were encouraged to think of themselves as virtuous helpmeets in the Progressive Era’s reform agenda, while poor, “ethnic,” or disabled individuals were transformed into an army of workers as well as a niche market to be tapped. A classic example of doing well while also doing good, the Salvation Army’s and Goodwill Industries’ salvaging operations changed America’s charitable giving as well as its culture of consumption by cunningly creating for the very same artifact both producers and consumers.

⁸⁰Emily Fogg Mead, “The Place of Advertising in Modern Business,” *Journal of Political Economy* 9.2 (March 1901): 227.

Jennifer Le Zotte is a Ph.D. candidate in the History Department at the University of Virginia, where she studies the intersection of consumer society and dress with gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity. Her dissertation, “From Goodwill to Grunge: Secondhand Commerce in the Twentieth-Century United States,” offers a dual examination of the supply and demand of used goods commerce and explores its influence on broader economic and social changes.