

Recycling in the United States Throughout History

Although the United States has witnessed a major increase in public participation in recycling programs in recent years, industrial and commercial recycling has always made sense economically. The time line below presents a brief glimpse of recycling throughout U.S. history.

Late 1800s to Early 1900s

- Before the days of mass production, the economic climate required people to routinely repair, reuse, and recycling their material possessions.

Scrap yards recycling old cars, car parts, and metal goods.

The paper industry used old rags as its main source of fiber until the late 19th century.

Retailers collected used cardboard boxes for recycling.

1914-1918 and 1939-1945 (WWI and WWII)

- Patriotism inspired nationwide scrap drives for paper, rubber, and other materials to help the war effort.

Many farms melted down and recycled iron or metal pieces of rusted machinery for warships, vehicles, and other military machines.

- People even saved grease from meat they cooked, which was used to make munitions.

1960s

- Interest in recycling waned as America's peacetime economy soured. Rising incomes and widespread, affordable, mass-produced goods created the "disposable" society.

1970s

- Environmental awareness rejuvenated the nation's interest in recycling.
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was established December 2, 1970.
- The first Earth Day was held in 1970, significantly increasing recycling awareness. In the years following, 3,000 volunteer recycling centers opened and more than 100 curbside collection programs were established.
- EPA and some state agencies developed guidelines, technical assistance and targets for local recycling efforts.

1980s

- The national spotlight fell on monitoring trash due to increased awareness of pollution resulting from poor waste management.
- Federal, state, and local governments become more and more involved in waste management.
- Waste management firms began to offer recycling programs in connection with proposals for new incinerators or landfills.

1990s

- Industry expanded the range of products made from recycled materials instead of virgin raw materials.
- National recycling rate reached double digits (28.2 percent in 1998).

2000s

- EPA sets national goals for reducing and recycling waste.