

When a vehicle is damaged in an accident, or as a result of bad weather such as a severe flood, an insurance company can simply declare it to be totaled. If the cost of the repairs exceed 75% of the retail value of the vehicle, then it makes no sense for the insurance company to pay for the repairs, and the vehicle is declared salvage. If a car has been totaled by an insurance company, it may be sent to a salvage or junk yard.

Often, however, these wrecked cars are actually resold at auction. Mechanics then buy these salvaged vehicles and superficially repair the visible dents and scratches, but the underlying structural damage may still exist and pose a safety hazard to future owners.

Vehicles that have been reassembled from salvaged parts will sometimes be stamped "salvage" or "reconditioned" on the title. These "brands" placed on the title are there to protect future owners from purchasing a car without knowledge of its history.

It's important to note that titles that once contained brands such as salvage, reconditioned, or flood damaged can be cleaned and cleared simply by transferring the title to another state that is not so careful about preserving the branded status.

To avoid unwittingly buying a vehicle that has been salvaged, be sure to ask to see the title. Have the vehicle inspected by a mechanic that you choose, and get a vehicle history report. Using the vehicle's identification number, these reports trace the car's history, odometer readings, and states where the car has been titled. The small fee is a good investment when you're buying a used car of unknown origin.

Rejecting the Salvage Stigma

What appears to your eye to be a clean car in good condition can actually end up being a car that has been severely damaged and then cosmetically repaired. At the same time, there are two sides to this story.

Sometimes a car with a salvage-branded title can be professionally rebuilt to the highest standards, and you could buy this gem for thousands of dollars less than a similar car that had never been damaged. As long as you have the vehicle thoroughly inspected, you might be able to really stretch your dollar by purchasing a rebuilt-salvage car. Then, with the title in hand, you can register it like any other car.

How to Salvage a Vehicle

If your vehicle has been badly damaged in a serious accident or by severe weather and you will be getting rid of it, then you will need to apply for a salvage certificate of title from the DMV. If this process is not handled by your auto insurance company, then you can call the DMV at (202) 727-5000 for more information about obtaining a salvage title. You must apply for a salvage certificate of title before the vehicle is repaired and within 30 days of the vehicle being damaged.

If you own a vehicle that simply can't be repaired to a road-safe condition, you need to instead apply for a nonrepairable vehicle certificate before selling or disposing of the vehicle and within 30 days of the damage.

Once a vehicle has a nonrepairable certificate issued, it may not be titled or registered in the District of Columbia. Not only that, but ownership of such a vehicle may only be transferred once. Essentially, this means that once it goes to the junk yard, it never leaves.

Resurrecting a Salvage Vehicle

Sometimes cars that have been seriously damaged can be rebuilt and legally redeemed from salvage status. In this case, you will get a rebuilt salvage title once the car has successfully passed inspection. The rebuilt salvage brand will remain on the title permanently, no matter how many times the vehicle changes ownership. However, you can register the car and drive it on public roads as if nothing ever happened to it.