

The Indigenous Peoples of North America (commonly referred to as Native Americans in the United States and First Nations in Canada) and archaeologists have had an interesting relationship since the practice of archaeology first began in the late 1800s. Although in recent decades the relationship may generally be viewed as good, it hasn't always been so.

In many cases archaeologists could reasonably be considered agents of colonialism, furthering the colonialist agenda, serving the interests of governments and the settler community (i.e., those of European descent). Although many archaeologists had good working relationships with Indigenous Peoples, until the latter decades of the twentieth century the power balance was clearly in favor of archaeologists. It was common practice for archaeologists to excavate sites, send artifacts to museums, write reports for governments and other archaeologists, and offer nothing to the Indigenous Peoples. The number of skeletons removed by archaeologists numbers in the hundreds of thousands and the number of artifacts, many of them sacred, is in the millions.

Power relationships began to change when Indigenous empowerment in North America took hold in the 1960s. Along with others, archaeologists were entangled in a negative perception of anthropology by Indigenous Peoples. This was led, in part, by Indigenous scholar Vine Deloria Jr., who in 1969 wrote *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*. From that book comes a well-known excerpt: "Into each life it is said, some rain must fall. Some people have bad horoscopes; others take tips on the stock market.... But Indians have been cursed above all other peoples in history. Indians have anthropologists" (Deloria 1969, 78). It was Deloria's contention that instead

of preying upon Native Americans, anthropologists should help them.

Political and social events of the 1960s and 70s effectively changed the power imbalance to a much more equal one, and in many cases it is clear that it is Indigenous Peoples who now hold the majority of the power. In many localities, for example, archaeologists are not permitted to work, or will not work, without permission of the local Indigenous groups.

Many archaeologists work collaboratively with Indigenous Peoples, and projects are often initiated by Indigenous groups. Many of the more than 1,100 Indigenous groups in Canada and the United States have their own archaeology programs, and many Indigenous people have become archaeologists themselves, sometimes bringing their own Indigenous perspectives to the field.

In some ways the current relationships between Indigenous Peoples and archaeologists have been supported by the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) that took effect in 1990. Basically, the Act says that Indigenous groups in the United States must be consulted prior to archaeological work on tribal or federal lands, and the hundreds of thousands of human skeletons and more than a million artifacts taken from burial sites and kept in museums and universities must be returned to the descendant Indigenous community.

Today there are about 6.5 million people in North America who claim Indigenous ancestry. There are probably about 15,000 people making a career as archaeologists. To some, these 15,000 still hold an unfair power balance, essentially controlling Indigenous Peoples' pasts by using scientific frameworks and vocabulary that is largely accepted by governments, media, and the public.