

# Zimmerman, Larry J.

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Without Abstract

## Basic Biographical Information

Larry J. Zimmerman is a North American archaeologist who is known for his work in social justice as it relates to the practice of archaeology. Zimmerman received a Ph.D. from the University of Kansas in 1976 and taught at the University of South Dakota from 1974 to 1996, where he was Distinguished Regents Professor. He was Chair of the American Indian and Native Studies at the University of Iowa from 1998 to 2001 and was Head of the Archaeology Department at the Minnesota Historical Society from 2002 to 2004. Since 2004, he has served as Professor of Anthropology and Museum Studies and Public Scholar of Native American Representation at Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis, and the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art in Indianapolis, Indiana.

## Major Accomplishments

Zimmerman is highly regarded for his commitment to Native American and Indigenous issues as they relate to archaeology. In 1978, Zimmerman excavated the Crow Creek Massacre site in central South Dakota. His ability and willingness to listen to Lakota and Arikara Indian nations about their concerns over the project led him to insist on reburying the human remains that had been uncovered at the site. Three years of negotiations took place between the tribes, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the US Army Corps of Engineers before the remains were finally reburied. This project led to Zimmerman being trusted by many Native American activists but also put him in the middle of the controversy over whether repatriation and reburial could be a legitimate activity for a US archaeologist. Zimmerman's decision to speak with the descendants of the individuals buried at this archaeological site and ultimately to accede to their wishes with regard to treatment of the human remains resulted in hardships for him within the profession.

Rather than hiding these challenges, he chose to publish accounts of them, such as the [1989](#) essay, “Made Radical by My Own,” which were received as beacons by young Native scholars. Zimmerman’s publications revealed deficiencies in what was then standard American archaeology. The theoretical voids in American archaeology that Zimmerman highlighted are what many archaeologists now stand proudly behind: the need for archaeology to be socially relevant and respectful. By assigning his support to the “radical” side, Zimmerman exposed himself to the potential of ridicule and derision by his peers. Zimmerman ([1989](#): 66) stated that, “I think being yelled at by colleagues and Indians is good for the soul,” standing bravely behind his belief that being yelled at is a small price to pay for doing the right thing.

In 1988, Zimmerman served as Organizing Secretary of the World Archaeological Congress’ First Inter-Congress in Vermillion, South Dakota. This meeting is important in that it resulted in one of the first archaeological codes of ethics to note the importance of treating human remains as inextricable from their cultural contexts, the Vermillion Accords. These set forth provisions for the ethical treatment of the dead by archaeologists and rest on the principle that human skeletons mean much more than archaeological objects. This was a watershed moment, representing the first time an international community of archaeologists listened to and reflected on the concerns of Indigenous peoples in an archaeological code of ethics. The fact that professional archaeologists from all over the world chose to travel to a remote area of South Dakota reflects the importance of the meeting. The Vermillion Accords have influenced generations of archaeologists and have meant that Native Americans have been able to see that a segment of the archaeological population really does understand deeply held tribal concerns about human remains and burial sites.

More recently, Zimmerman has been involved in a project of archaeology of the homeless, conducting research in downtown Indianapolis, Indiana, USA. The homeless archaeology project provides useful information for city governments and social workers who may have lacked an understanding of what life is really like for the homeless. Similar to Zimmerman’s work with Native American communities, this research takes place alongside members of homeless communities. It is a collaborative research and also a form of social justice. These themes pervade most of Zimmerman’s work.

Zimmerman’s professional service includes work for the Society for American Archaeology, for which he served as a member of the Nominating Committee (1994) and as the chair of the Native American Scholarships Committee (1995–1997). He has also served the American Anthropological Association as elected Chair of the Committee on Ethics (2002–2005). Much of Zimmerman’s professional service has been for the World Archaeological Congress, for which he has served as Executive Secretary from 1990 to 1994 and as Vice President from 2005 to 2008.

In addition to the Vermillion Inter-Congress held in 1988, Zimmerman organized the World Archaeological Congress’ 2009 Inter-Congress on Indigenous Peoples and Museums, held in Indianapolis, Indiana, USA. This conference provided space for ongoing dialogue about topics such as repatriation, the differing national ethics of museum exhibits, and ways that Indigenous

knowledge can enhance archaeological research. It is certain that Zimmerman's reputation was one of the big draws for the meeting. In the 23 years since the Vermillion Inter-Congress, American archaeology has undergone a shift. Today, there are more than 17 Native Americans who hold doctorates in archaeology and many more with Master's degrees. In addition, the attitude and spirit of the Vermillion Inter-Congress is expressed in mainstream archaeology through the practice of what is called "Indigenous archaeology." If Zimmerman had not set the groundwork back in 1989, there certainly would never have been a 2009 conference of this nature. And, many of the subjects that were discussed might never have been raised. Zimmerman has been honored by many organizations, including the Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis, where he was named Outstanding Distinguished Resident Faculty, School of Liberal Arts in 2009. He was awarded the Mariko Mizuhara Award for Cross-Cultural Understanding in 2000 from the University of Iowa. Notably, in 2008, he received the inaugural Peter J. Ucko Memorial Award for Contributions to World Archaeology from the World Archaeological Congress at the sixth Congress in Dublin, Ireland. In a reflection of how his work has affected North American archaeology, Zimmerman was nominated for this award by four Native American archaeologists who hold doctorates. Each nominator was able to reflect on how Zimmerman's work had allowed them to progress within the discipline of archaeology. Larry Zimmerman's commitment is not to archaeology of the dead, but to archaeology for the living. In his work with Native Americans, he sees us as inextricably linked to our ancestors and does not conduct work without acknowledging this bond. In his work with the homeless, he sees the path between the data he accumulates and the process of changing the lives of the people who live on the street. His archaeology is not conducted in an academic vacuum. He realizes that archaeology is a science that can be a powerful force for good.

## Cross-References

[Contemporary Past, Archaeology of the](#)

[Ethics in Archaeology](#)

[Indigenous Archaeologies](#)

[Indigenous Archaeologies: North American Perspective](#)

[Indigenous Peoples, Working with and for](#)

[Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act \(NAGPRA\), USA](#)

[Repatriation Acts: Before NAGPRA](#)

[Repatriation Acts: The Politics of Repatriation in North America](#)

[Repatriation: Overview](#)

[Vermillion Accord on Human Remains \(1989\) \(Indigenous Archaeology\)](#)

[World Archaeological Congress \(WAC\)](#)

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### Further Reading

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