

Archaeology has long been an accepted tool for studying prehistoric cultures.

Relatively recently the same techniques have been systematically applied to studies of the more immediate past.

This has been called "historical archaeology," a term that is commonly used in the United States to refer to any archaeological investigation into North American sites that postdate the arrival of Europeans.

Back in the 1930's and 1940's, when building restoration was popular, historical archaeology was primarily a tool of architectural reconstruction.

The role of archaeologists was to find the foundations of historic buildings and then take a back seat to architects.

The mania for reconstruction had largely subsided by 1950's.

Most people entering historical archaeology during this period came out of university anthropology departments, where they had studied prehistoric cultures.

They were, by training social scientists, not historians, and their work tended to reflect this bias.

The questions they framed and the techniques they used were designed to help them understand, as scientists, how people behaved.

But because they were treading on historical ground for which there was often extensive written documentation and because their own knowledge of these periods was usually limited, their

contributions to American history remained circumscribed.

Their reports, highly technical and sometimes poorly written, went unread.

More recently, professional archaeologists have taken over.

These researchers have sought to demonstrate that their work can be a valuable tool not only of science but also of history, providing fresh insights into the daily lives of ordinary people whose existences might not otherwise be so well documented.

This newer emphasis on archaeology as social history has shown great promise, and indeed work done in this area has led to a reinterpretation of the United States past.

In Kingston, New York, for example, evidence has uncovered that indicates that English goods were being smuggled into that city at a time when the Dutch supposedly controlled trading in the area.

And in Sacramento an excavation at site of a fashionable nineteenth-century hotel revealed that garbage had been stashed in the building's basement despite sanitation laws to the contrary.