

**Archaeology at Fort Halifax Park**  
**Series Article: Part 2**  
**By: Joe Baker and Amanda Rasmussen**

**Native America**

No one is certain when the first people appeared in Pennsylvania or the rest of North America. New discoveries over the last few decades, some as close as Southwestern Pa and Virginia, have been pushing the dates well back into the late Ice Age or Pleistocene. We are certain they were here by 10,000-14,000 years before the present (BP) based on the distinctive fluted projectile points they left behind. Fluted points, associated with radiocarbon with the people known to archaeologists as Paleoindians, are characterized by the use of very high quality flint, and by the presence of large flat flake scars or flutes on the opposing faces of the point. Two of Pennsylvania's most important fluted point sites are within a few miles of Fort Halifax; the famous Shoop Site near Enterline in Dauphin County and the Wallis site in Perry County. The Wallis site is in a very comparable floodplain and terrace landscape, across the Susquehanna from Fort Halifax.



*Fluted Points from the Wallis Site in Perry County*

Most of the record of humanity along the Susquehanna is contained in the first six or so millennia of the Holocene (ca. 8,500 BP to 2,000 BP), a period known to archaeologists as the Archaic tradition. Usually broken into Early (8,500-6,000 BP), Middle (6,500-5,000 BP) and Late/Transitional (5,000-3,000 BP), the Archaic tradition is characterized by slow increases in human populations who supported themselves by hunting and gathering. Over the many centuries of the Archaic Tradition, these populations became larger and more densely distributed. Their hunting and gathering routines became more efficient and better planned. Their home territories became more sharply defined, and their movements within these territories became more carefully scheduled. Archaic people understood and exploited nearly every environmental community around them with great efficiency using a simple but effective technology, for many centuries. Within the Armstrong Creek watershed where Fort Halifax is located, 25 Archaic tradition archaeological sites have been recorded with the Pennsylvania Archaeological Site Survey (PASS), providing ample evidence of the long duration and ubiquity of Archaic land use in the area. Amanda Rasmussen's thesis work at Fort Halifax Park recovered many Archaic period artifacts from the property.



*Archaic Period Projectile Points from the Susquehanna Valley*

Archaeologists have traditionally termed the large-scale cultural changes that occurred in the last three millennia before the arrival of the Europeans as the Woodland tradition. Woodland artifacts have been found at Fort Halifax Park in archaeological projects in 2011 and in 2013.

Like the Archaic, the Woodland is subdivided into Early (ca. 3,000-2500 BP), Middle (2,500-1200 BP) and Late (ca. 1200-450 BP). The Woodland period saw increasing population densities, increasing sedentism, and increasing reliance on domesticated plants. It also brought technological innovations like ceramics and archery. There were changes in social organization and community and political relationships perhaps best evidenced by the defensive fortifications that surrounded some Late Woodland communities. Late Woodland people in the Susquehanna Valley were certainly in contact with other contemporary groups in the Ohio Valley. As a result, domesticated plants like corn and beans that originated in Mexico, found their way, via the Mississippi and Ohio valleys to the Susquehanna.

So did ideas. Burial mounds are typically associated with the Adena and Hopewell people of the Mississippi and Ohio valleys. The idea of mound building appears to have originated with the pyramid builders of what is now Mexico and Guatemala. Small burial mounds are also a feature of the Late Woodland Clemson Island culture on the Susquehanna. Clemson Island itself is situated in the river immediately west of Fort Halifax Park, and the island had a burial mound excavated by the Pennsylvania Historical Commission (now the PHMC) in the 1920's.



*Clemson Island Pottery Shard*

By the time John Smith sailed up the Chesapeake to the Susquehanna River in 1607, the people he called Susquehannocks were living in large communities of a thousand or more people, farming and hunting to support themselves, and maintaining a variety of complex relationships with other tribal groups that ranged from trade alliances to warfare. Recent discoveries near Lemoyne in Cumberland County and in Maryland and West Virginia have demonstrated that Susquehannock settlements were not just restricted to the lower river where Smith encountered them but occurred in other parts of the Chesapeake Bay watershed as well. Their presence at what's now Fort Halifax Park is hinted at by the recovery of a single fragment of shell-tempered Susquehannock pottery in 2011.



*17<sup>th</sup> Century English Depiction of a Susquehannock Man*

### **Colonial America: The Armstrong Family and Fort Halifax**

Thanks to fur-trade related warfare and epidemic disease, communities that were recognizably Susquehannock were gone from the valley that bears their name by 1700. The effects of colonization included the dispossession of large numbers of Native Americans, some of whom were settling into villages of refugees from several tribes and bands. These refugee towns on the Susquehanna were technically under the hegemony of the Iroquois confederacy, who invited the dispossessed into the valley to fill a vacuum they feared might be filled by land hungry European immigrants. One of the better known and largest of these settlements was Shamokin at the present day site of Sunbury some 25 miles or so north of Fort Halifax. The residents of these towns maintained a sometimes-tenuous peace with their European-American neighbors and trading partners for several decades, and in fact, Native and Colonial relations were probably more peaceful in Pennsylvania than they were in any other colony. That changed when the French and British empires and their allies became entangled in a long conflict over trade and territory known as the 7 Years War.

Arguably this was the first real world war, since it included theaters in Europe, Africa, India, the Philippines, the Caribbean, and North and South America. In the British Colonies south of Canada, many refugee tribes sided with the French, and the war came to be known here as the French and Indian War (1754-1763). In the Pennsylvania Colony, the war saw relatively few large-scale engagements, and most of them were in western Pennsylvania. In the rest of the colony, north and west of the old settled region around Philadelphia and Lancaster, the war was a series of small but absolutely savage raids and reprisals between the French and their Native allies and the British colonial residents. Starting in 1753, the Colonial government and private citizens began erecting a series of forts and fortified houses along the mountain gaps of the Blue Mountain also known as Kittatinny Ridge, the southeastern-most of the Ridge and Valley Appalachians. Fort Hunter, at the water gap north of Harrisburg, is one of these forts. Other forts further north and west soon followed. The larger and more formal fortifications were garrisoned with colonial militia. The forts served both as refuges for local residents to repair to in the event of raids, and as staging areas for protective and punitive expeditions.

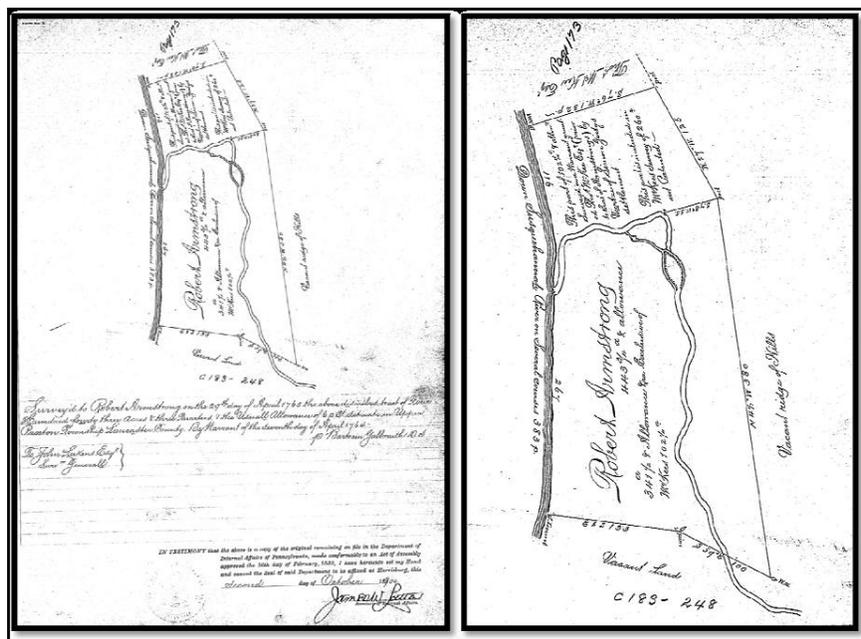
Fort Augusta was erected at the forks of the Susquehanna in the fall of 1756, to block access to the settlements of the lower valley from war parties coming down river from the branches and along the riverside trails. In the summer of the same year, Fort Halifax was established as an intermediary fortification between Forts Hunter and Augusta. Built by Colonel William Clapham with a detachment of colonial troops, the fort was occupied for a little over a year, then abandoned in the fall of 1757. The history of Fort Halifax is documented in two secondary resources and in a variety of primary resources, primarily letters, diaries and official orders found in the Colonial Records and Pennsylvania Archives. For the archaeologist, the brief but important history of Fort Halifax presents two really critical considerations; its precise location and its construction and appearance.

"Sunday, 6<sup>th</sup> (of June 1756) ...then marched on to Armstrong's where we encamped.

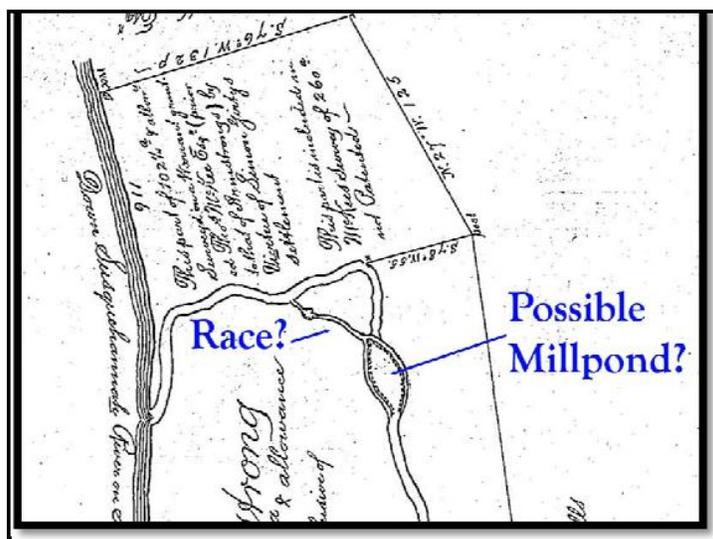
Monday, 7<sup>th</sup>. – Began to fell timber for building a Fort 160 feet square..."

Journal of Chaplain Charles Beatty, Colonel Clapham's Command

The above journal entry places the Fort at Armstrong's settlement which didn't have a warranted survey until 1765. Robert Armstrong was one of the earliest settlers in the area, and was well established on his property by the time Clapham's men arrived on site. Armstrong claimed more than thirty acres of land, most of it south of Armstrong's Creek. Clapham, in a June 11 letter to Governor Morris noted that the site he chose for the fort was suitable in part due to "...the vast Plenty of Pine Timber at Hand, its nearness to Shamokin and a Saw within a Quarter of a Mile...". The reference here to a "Saw" may be to a saw mill. If so, that argues for a location in the northern part of Armstrong's claim, near the stream that would have powered such a mill. A close inspection of Armstrong's survey warrant indicates what may be a mill pond and race in the northeast section of the property. Whether or not there was a millpond and race, and whether or not a sawmill was there in 1756 is of course, open to question.

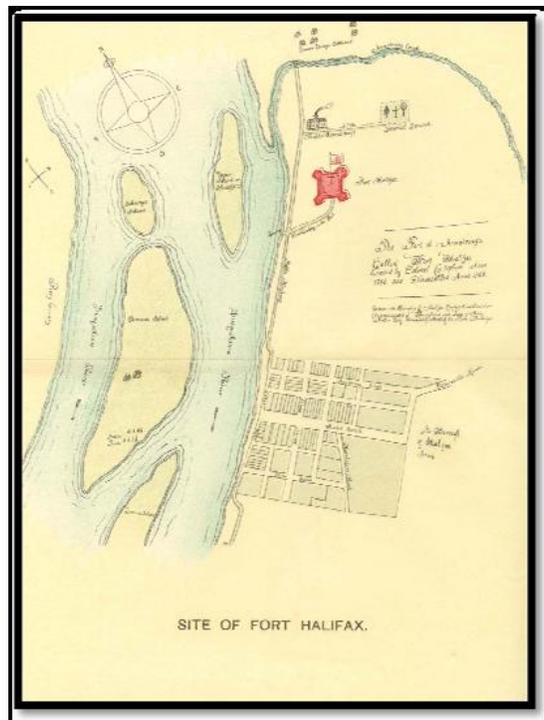


Armstrong's 1765 Surveyed Warrant



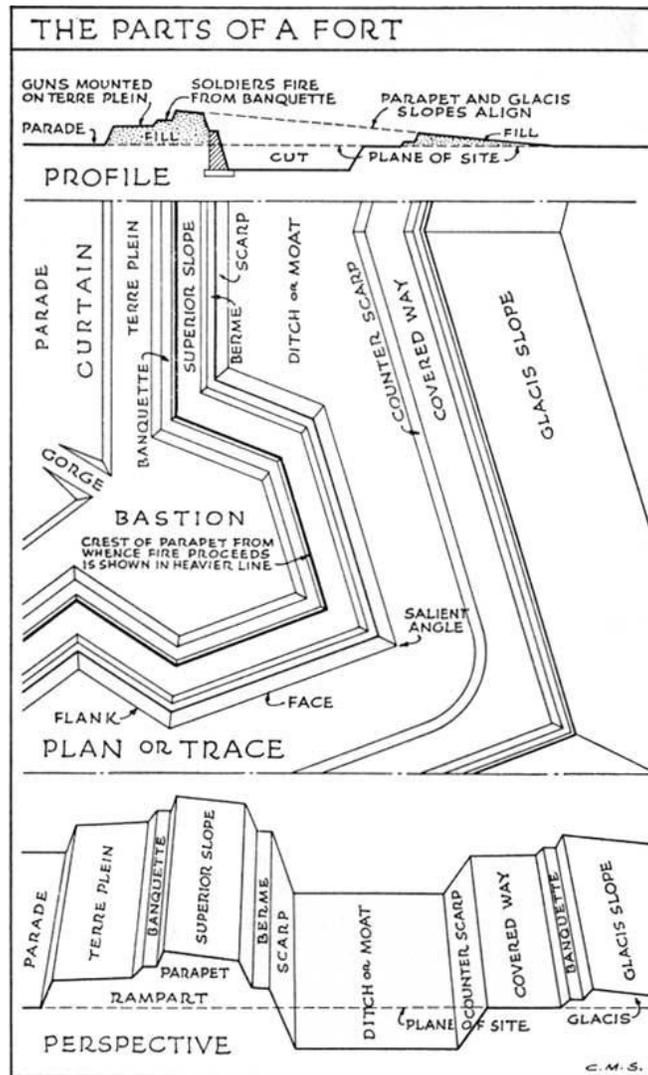
Possible Race and Millpond at Armstrong's

An argument for the existence, use and importance of a sawmill at Armstrong's may be Clapham's description of the fort's initial phase of construction that noted "...we have already cut and squared 200 (logs) and hawled (sic) to the Spot 80 Logs each about 30 ffeet (sic) long...". Clapham arrived with roughly half a Colonial Militia regiment (5 companies) on-site on June 7<sup>th</sup>, probably enough men to square 200 large timbers in four days with broadax and adze, but not without a stupendous effort. If a sawmill was available, it seems very likely that it would be welcome. Another clue to the location of the fort is in a letter from Clapham to Morris written in August of 1756 from Fort Augusta (then also in construction) in which he notes the complete absence of roads along the river (Pa Archives 1756, Series 1, Vol 2, 739). The colonial road depicted in the 1896 location map of the fort did not exist at the time the fort was built. All supplies came to the fort site by way of bateaux poled upriver from Harris's post and Fort Hunter, so the fort had to be close to the river. The 1896 map is probably based, for the most part, on local lore regarding the fort's location. There does not appear to be a surviving period depiction of the location in the Archives or Colonial Records. While local traditions are notoriously rife with inaccuracies and embellishment, the map at least has the advantage of being over a century closer in time to Colonial Pennsylvania and the oral tradition that much closer to eye witnesses. This well known map depicts the fort in the northern part of Armstrong's property and very close to the river. These lines of evidence all lead to the likelihood that the best location to look for the remains of Fort Halifax is somewhere in the northern half of the roughly five acre field that lies north of the park's existing barnyard and west of the Wiconisco canal.



*The 1896 Map*

While the evidence for the fort's location seems definitive, the evidence for its construction and appearance are a little less clear. European military architecture arrived well developed in North America with the first colonial military units in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and new ideas were imported during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Fortifications included multiple lines of defensive works and were provided with projections called bastions that allowed defenders to fire on attacking troops who were at the fortifications walls. The basic elements of an idealized 18<sup>th</sup> century European defensive structure are depicted in the figure below. In Europe, and a few places in North America, most or all of these defensive elements were included in some fortifications.

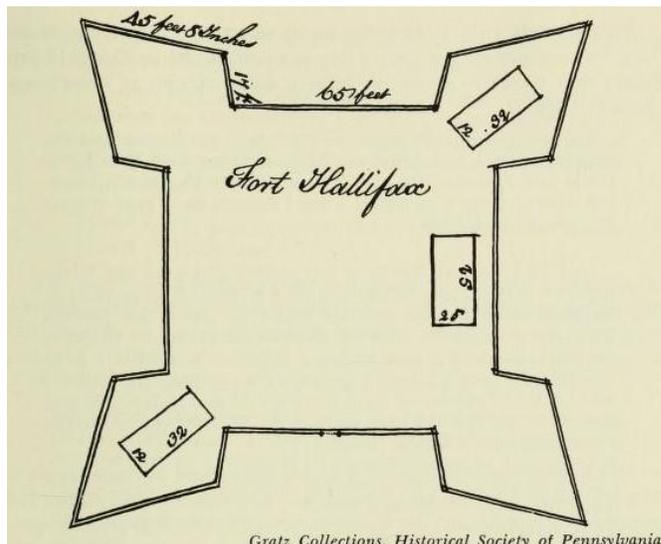


*An Idealized 18<sup>th</sup> Century Fort*

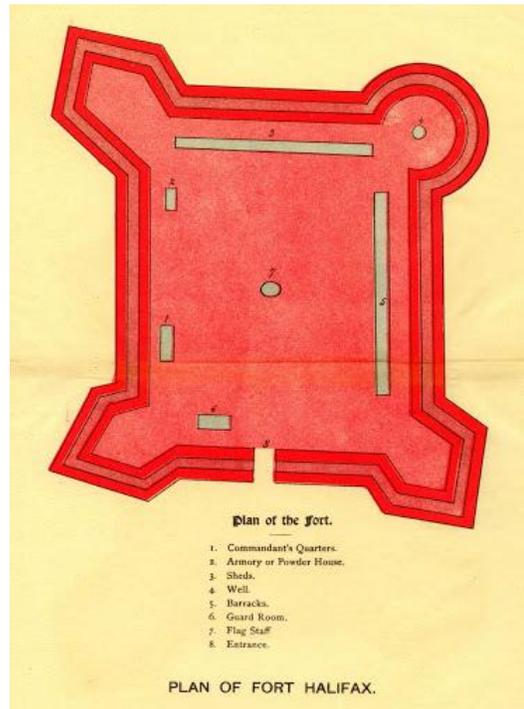
For the most part colonial fortifications adapted the European model to colonial circumstances. Labor and available time could be limited. Stone, brick, or other building materials might be unavailable or in very short supply. Formal printed plans might be available, but engineers to turn those plans into structures might not be. The enemy and/or the defenders themselves might lack artillery or cavalry. All of these considerations, and many others, could affect the construction and appearance of colonial defensive works.

On June 12<sup>th</sup>, 1756 Governor Morris sent Colonel Clapham “two plans of forts” one a pentagonal design, the other a square, both with bastions, curtains, ditches, etc. He gave him his choice of designs for both the fort at the forks (Augusta) and the fort at Armstrong’s (Halifax). He even noted that should construction of either design “... be attended with too much difficulty, you will build it in another manner.” These plans do not survive, and construction was already underway at Halifax before they were sent. Based on the journal of Chaplain Beatty and a letter from Captain Nathaniel Miles, the post commander after July 1, the fort was square, approximately 160 on a side, with four corner bastions connected by banquettes running along parapet walls between the bastions.

There are two published depictions of the fort. One is a drawing that was taken from the Gratz Family Collections at the Pennsylvania Historical Society. Gratz was a private collector who amassed his collection of historical documents in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, mostly from dealers and other collectors, so the origin of the drawing is a bit uncertain. The Gratz Map has been attributed to Captain Edward Shippen who may have been an eye witness, but that attribution is uncertain. The other depiction from 1896 shows a round northeast bastion, and a well, not depicted in the Gratz map. It may well be the product of local tradition and has the same potential problems that the Gratz map has.



*The Gratz Map*



*The 1896 Map*

The construction of these defenses is uncertain. They could have been earthen embankments, or composed of the numerous squared pine logs mentioned in Clapham's letter, or some combination thereof. It's very likely that the defenses included a palisade of upright logs. There are at least two lines of evidence that suggest this. On August 4<sup>th</sup> of 1756, Governor Morris wrote to Colonel Clapham at Fort Augusta regarding claims some of his men had for back pay. The Governor stated that he would try to resolve these issues but wanted to wait "...till a stucado (sic) fort or one like Fort Halifax be finished." The "or" in this sentence is a bit problematic; certainly it could be interpreted as suggesting Augusta should be constructed either with a palisade or constructed like Fort Halifax. Conversely it might mean Augusta should have a palisade, citing Halifax as an example of such a fort. In any event, elements of Fort Augusta's log palisade were encountered in excavations at the site conducted by the PHMC.

Further evidence for the likelihood of a palisade comes from the archaeological excavations of other mid-18<sup>th</sup> century forts in Pennsylvania. Extensive excavations were conducted at the site of Fort Loudon in Franklin County in 1977 and in 1980-82 by the PHMC/State Museum. Like Forts Halifax and Augusta, Loudon was built in 1756 and the remains of a log palisade were encountered there. In 2011, a Penn State field school encountered evidence for a stockade at the site of Fort Shirley (1755-1756) in Huntingdon County. In both cases, a trench was excavated into the subsoil, and the posts set within that trench. Assuming a palisade was present at Fort Halifax, a similar method of construction might be expected.

All of the French and Indian War forts were eventually dismantled, usually by the local landowner, and all durable materials such as masonry, sound logs, hardware and so on would very likely have been reused. The same fate can be safely inferred for Fort Halifax, whose brief life was followed by 250 years of working agriculture by generations of landowners prior to its acquisition for a municipal park.

Assuming Armstrong and subsequent landowners restricted their activities in the former fort location to plowing, what could be expected to survive archaeologically would be subsurface evidence of a stockade and structures, shaft features like wells and privies, and durable artifacts like metal, glass and ceramic objects. Such features would of course be good candidates for rediscovery through geo-archaeological technologies like Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR) and Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) surveys, and in 2011, that work began.

*To be continued...*