

Archaeology at Fort Halifax Park
Series Article: Part 3
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An Attractive Location

Riverside property has always been desirable. Water provides life, and people find themselves pulled to these locations. The small town of Halifax, Pennsylvania, located along the Susquehanna River just north of Harrisburg, is no exception. From an early Native American village to a peaceful community park, the site of Fort Halifax Park has been repurposed repeatedly throughout history.

Synthesizing the Data from 2011-2013

Three archaeological investigations took place on the park property to try and locate Fort Halifax from 2011-2013. In 2011, the first investigation produced a topographic map of a portion of the park property and used ground penetrating radar that identified **anomalies** (disturbances below the ground surface). The 2011 project also saw some limited excavation to try to identify those anomalies. The investigation in 2012 further explored those anomalies with additional excavations and limited use of a backhoe. The 2012 project identified the basic sequence of **landforms** (floodplain, ice-age terraces, etc.), and included an analysis of historic maps and records of what is now the park property. Both investigations encountered Native American artifacts, a Native American cooking hearth (2012), and some Historic below-ground **features** (foundations and a trash dump or midden), that were not associated with the fort.

In 2013, a portion of the north half of the park property was plowed and disked (see Figure 1). This exposed bare soil and hidden artifacts. With the help of volunteers, including a group of professional archaeologists, a **surface collection** was conducted only along the southern and western-most portion of the field due to time constraints. Surface collection of artifacts is conducted within square cells or blocks of a standard size (usually 5 meters or about 15 feet). This allows for accurate mapping of the horizontal distribution of artifacts. Since plowing tends to move artifacts vertically, but not very far horizontally (at least in places where the ground doesn't slope very much), concentrations of artifacts in a surface collection often signal features or significant portions of a site below the plowed layer.

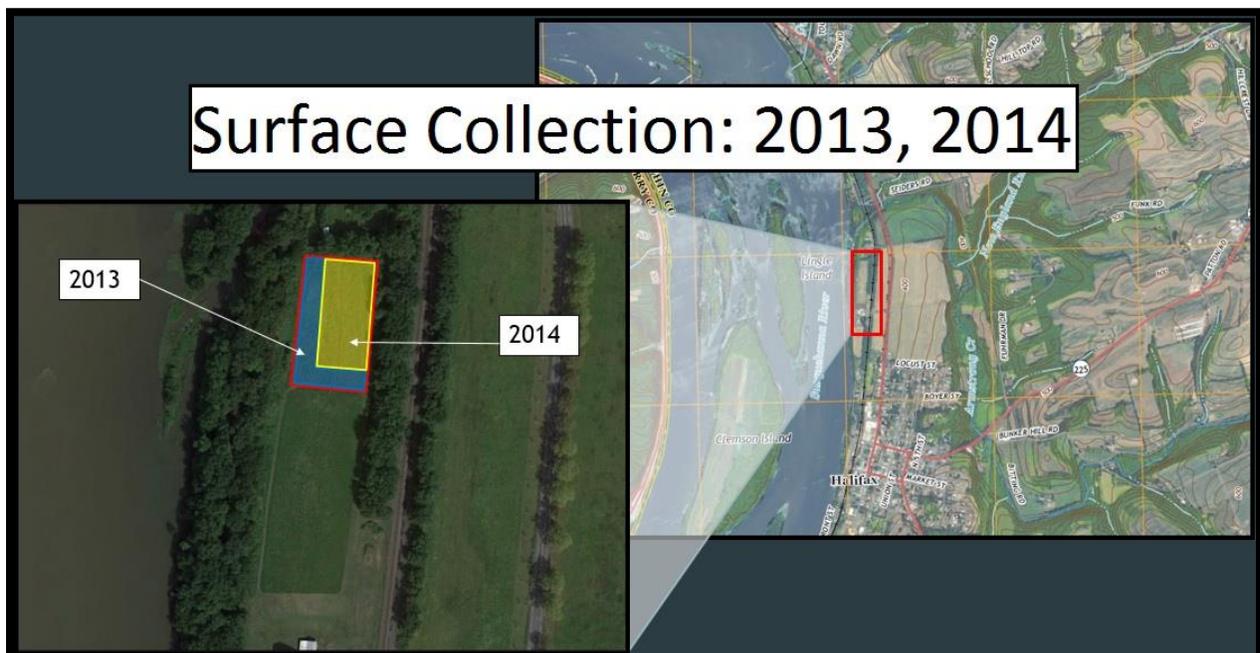


Figure 1: 2013 and 2014 Surface Collection at Fort Halifax Park within the Study Area.

Excavations in 2014

As an early part of Amanda Rasmussen's 2015 thesis, the remainder of the field was surveyed the following year (September 2014) to complete the previous year's surface collection. The recovered artifacts from 2011-2014 were then analyzed and categorized based on their age, function, and location within the study area.



Figure 2. White salt-glazed stoneware and 5/64-inch kaolin pipe stems recovered from Fort Halifax Park.

Given the limited number of artifacts associated with the colonial period, concentrations within the park property were easy to detect (see Figure 2). Other factors were also taken into consideration such as the location of the geophysical anomalies (2011-2012), historic documentation, results of previous excavations at the park, and **geomorphological** factors (terrace, floodplain, etc.) indicating the depth of deposits ([see Article 1 of this series](#)). All the known variables were considered in planning the late 2014 (November) excavation of the study area.

Late 2014 Excavation

Following an analysis of the 2011-September 2014 investigations, two 3-meter by 3-meter blocks were placed in the location most likely and least likely to contain the Fort in the study area. The investigation had two goals. The primary goal was to understand the boundaries of the known colonial distribution. The secondary goal was to compare the surface collection results to the below ground anomalies identified on the property. Block A was placed where the highest concentration of both 18th century artifacts and untested subsurface features identified. Block B was placed where very little artifacts were recovered and where no subsurface features were detected in any prior investigation.

Results

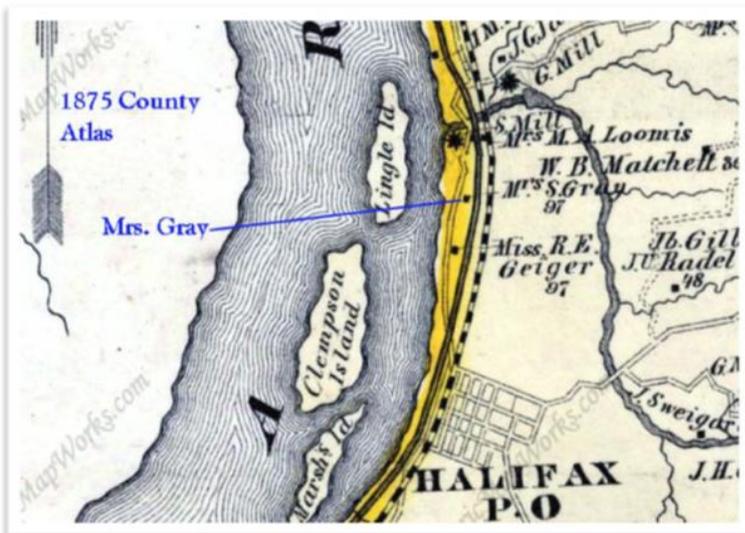
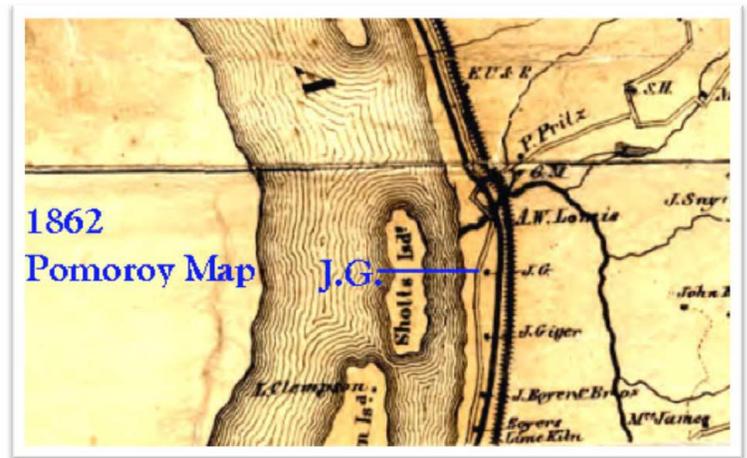
Block A



Figure 3. Block A excavation and portion of cellar feature.

Given the limited number of artifacts associated with the colonial period, concentrations within the park property were easy to detect. Of the 2,723 artifacts recovered from Block A, only 63 were associated with the Colonial era. Nineteenth century artifacts included architectural materials such as cut nails (dating from 1810-1900), window glass, brick, and mortar fragments. Many of the artifacts were recovered from a cellar feature, which was likely filled to level the cellar when a house was demolished (Figure 3).

This cellar is almost certainly part of the remains of the Gray farmstead. The 2012 project identified a no longer visible farmstead that once stood on the property and was identified on old maps as belonging to an owner identified as “J.G.” and in an 1875 atlas as the property of “Mrs. S. Gray”. The old maps showed that the Gray farm was established sometime before 1858 and was demolished by 1890.



Block B

The artifact density and distribution across all nine excavation units displayed very few historic artifacts and no historic features indicating fort activity. Most items recovered from this location were Native American, although the grand total represented a low artifact density across the park property overall.

The excavations of Blocks A and B established with certainty that the radar anomalies likely reflected the locations of Historic features sealed beneath the plowed soil. The excavations also proved that artifact density in the plowed layer was a marker for what might or might not be expected below the limits of plowing.



Figure 4. 2014 Surface collection and recovered Native American projectile point.

Putting the Story Together: Life Along the Susquehanna

Once the data was pieced together, a vivid image of life and history at Fort Halifax Park appeared.

The density of Native American artifacts and distributions throughout the surface collection study area showed several locations of heavy use (Figure 4). Subsurface hearth features and recovered net-sinkers (identified in the 2011-2012 excavations) told a story of people camping along the riverbank, hunting, gathering and fishing either seasonally or year-round, and doing so for thousands of years.

The data also suggested higher concentrations of historic artifacts in the northwest portion of the study area, ultimately where Block A was placed. While artifacts were primarily 19th century and not related to the fort as we hoped, evidence of the cellar and artifacts told the story of another family that lived on the property who woke up every day through much of the 19th century to see the Susquehanna in their back yard.

Fort Halifax is a time capsule, a place constantly in use and reuse. Today it's a quiet park, complete with walking paths, flower gardens, benches, campsites, and the inviting sounds of the river. It's no surprise people keep coming back.

To be Continued...