Fort Halifax, the French and Indian War-era fort named for the town of Halifax, Pennsylvania, was built in 1756 and dismantled the very next year. The fort’s precise location has been unknown; however, preserved British military correspondence and drawings from the period suggest that it was built along the Susquehanna River somewhere downstream of the confluence of Armstrong Creek, more or less directly across from Sheaffer Island (Stage Game Land No. 254).

Over two hundred fifty years later, in the spring of 2011, a search in earnest began for the fort, suspected to have been somewhere on the Halifax Township park property of the same name. The quest came as a consequence of archaeologist Joe Baker, who works for the Cultural Resources Section of PennDOT, exchanging favors with the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources – his side of the bargain being to help Halifax Township begin looking for the fort.

Joe’s actual work for the Township began in July when he teamed up with professional archaeologist, Dane Snyder, a Halifax native who has long been interested in locating the original site of the fort. Facilitated by Dauphin County Parks and Recreation Director, Carl Dickson, Joe and Dane had several preliminary planning meetings and ultimately enlisted the assistance of another archaeologist, Angie Jaillet-Wentling of Indiana University’s Archaeology Department. Angie, in turn, recruited four student volunteers for the project. To round out the team and involve local people, Joe offered to utilize several lay volunteers, and drew three more people into the team for a total of ten.

In the field, the first step was a ground penetrating radar (GPR) survey, which was conducted during the week of August 8th. At that time, team members set three permanent concrete monuments as reference points for all future work and took radar readings at ¼ meter grid intervals over the entire area selected for their survey – the large open field at the northwestern corner of the park property. Back in their offices, the archaeologists analyzed the GPR survey in the context of existing LIDAR (satellite) topographical survey mapping for the field. Joe reported back to the Township Supervisors that preliminary results of both surveys indicated the presence of substantial sub-surface and topographical anomalies on-site – in laymen’s terms, as Joe stated, “that’s technobabble for ‘there appears to be something there’.”

Joe then proposed to the Township that he and his team conduct a very limited excavation (“dig” in archaeology lingo) in order to “ground truth” the remote sensing technologies. He suggested October 8th and 9th, the Columbus Day weekend, for his work, and the Board
of Supervisors gave their approval to go ahead with the excavation as suggested.

Back at Fort Halifax Park on the morning of October 8th, the full team set to work. On the basis of the GPR/LIDAR analysis, six different 1-meter square "units" were identified as the most likely to yield physical evidence of the fort’s location. Using the permanent reference-point markers placed in August, the team measured and physically staked-out the six specific 1-meter square sites for digging.

The process of excavation in each of the six "unit" sites followed the same pattern over the next two days. The coordinates for each unit were carefully recorded and, working with two separate teams of volunteers, the archaeologists begin the slow and tedious process of excavating. At each unit they first carefully lifted out the turf, followed by about the next 8-inches of plowed soil ("Stratum 1"), until they reached the subsoil level ("Stratum 2") of un-

disturbed ground. As this work proceeded, all soil and rock was carefully removed from the 1-meter square excavation site -- often using small mason’s trowels to carefully scrape away successive layers of soil. Soil removed from the excavation was carefully sifted and hand manipulated as they searched for artifacts. Artifacts recovered consisted primarily of pre-historic (pre-contact with Europeans) Indian pot shards, FCR (fire-cracked rock) fragments, and later-period settlement artifacts including hand-forged cut nails and early 1800s glazed pot shards. When Stratum 2 was reached, the experienced eyes of the archaeologists closely examined successive layers in the soil for color and/or texture changes, stopping the excavation essentially when the subsoil revealed no prior disturbance -- generally around 10-inches below the current surface of the field.

As the workers discovered questionable objects, the archaeologists confirmed or rejected each piece based on their knowledge and experience. The artifacts unearthed were placed in small baggies that were carefully labeled...
with the pertinent information identifying the particular unit from which the respective artifacts were recovered.

Artifacts collected would be taken back to the laboratory to be cleaned, analyzed and cataloged. Joe explained that after this processing, artifacts would be returned to Halifax Township – “After all,” he said, “they belong to you.” Joe also noted that after possibly making these artifacts available for public display, the Township might choose to donate them to the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. He described a typical arrangement whereby donated artifacts could be borrowed back (for up to 99 years) for special events or when the Township decided they had space and conditions appropriate for storage.

After excavation reached the depth of undisturbed subsoil, each unit was closed (filled in). The team excavated three units on Saturday and three on Sunday. All units were closed at the end of the work on Sunday.

Following completion of the field work late Sunday afternoon, Joe, Dane and Angie held an informal public meeting at 5:30 PM in the Township Meeting Room. In attendance were Ken Bechtel, Chairman of the Halifax Township Board of Supervisors, as well as Supervisors Ken Hoover, Linda Ruff-Stopf, and Gary Shultz and a number of interested Halifax residents. At the meeting, the archeologists explained the work that had been undertaken and proffered
their findings and professional observations. They also conducted a Q&A period following their presentation to field questions from folks attending and offered up for display a number of the actual artifacts unearthed – the rest having been taken back to IUP with the students earlier in the day. In his presentation, Joe shared his speculation that the team may have been close to an exciting find – the type of rocks revealed at the bottom of the last two units excavated at the furthest western units suggested the possible presence of an earthen wall constructed around the perimeter of fort. However, without further digging such conjecture is only a tantalizing theory.

The entire effort to date has been accomplished totally using volunteer services and equipment.

In regard to future excavation of the site, Joe recommended that the Township might want to consider establishing a long-term relationship with one of the nearby state universities with an archaeology department, Millersville University likely being the best possibility. If this type of relationship were established, the school could conduct summer study programs and possibly lease existing structures on the Fort Halifax Park property to house equipment, students and faculty. In time, on-going excavations would likely generate increased interest at the school and locally, as well, and could possibly lead to an answer to the outstanding question: “Where exactly was the site of Fort Halifax, and what if any remains currently exist?”

October 2011 Preliminary Excavation Team Members

Joe Baker, Head Archaeologist
Dane Snyder, Archaeologist
Angie Jaiet-Wentling, Archaeologist

Laura Kaufman, IUP Student Volunteer
Emily Poeppel, IUP Student Volunteer
Eric Ptak, IUP Student Volunteer
Jordan Galentine, IUP Student Volunteer

Christine Kula, Lay Volunteer
Norma Shearer, Lay Volunteer
Frank Wilmarth, Lay Volunteer