Rock Ford Plantation, the home of Revolutionary War Gen. Edward Hand, is generally recognized as the most intact 18th century building in Lancaster County.

So one might assume that this most authentic old house would be surrounded by buried artifacts left behind by its occupants.

That assumption would be true. But until now no one had spent much time researching these artifacts to see what they might tell about how Hand lived on this 33-acre property, which has become part of Lancaster County Central Park.

For the past two months, Timothy Trussell and his Millersville University archaeology students have been excavating the grounds near the house. They have recovered thousands of artifacts.

"It's like finding a treasure trove," says Trussell as he winds up his work this week. "We've found a lot of cream ware from 1762 to 1780. We've found buttons from men's coats. We've found hand-blown bottles."

But, wait, there's more. Much more.

In the late 1950s, archaeologists from Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia extensively excavated all areas immediately adjacent to the home. They recovered some 100,000 artifacts.

Those materials have been stored at Rock Ford for more than half a century. No one has ever cataloged them. No one really knows what's there.

Over the next year and a half, Trussell and his students plan to assess both sets of artifacts with hopes of better understanding Rock Ford's occupants through study of their material culture.
"This is a three-part project," Trussell explains. "The field part, our excavation, is the smallest part. Then we also have this enormous collection from the 1950s. Cataloging those materials will take months. Then we will digitize all of this and put it on the Internet."

For the most part, the field study has been blessed by dry, warm weather, allowing Trussell and the students to dig 21 test holes on the south and west sides of the house.

About six weeks ago, they settled on their main excavation – the site of a former cold cellar, designed for food storage, immediately west of the Rock Ford gardens. The archaeologists have removed tons of earth from a 20- by 15-foot hole they have dug to a depth of 4 ½ feet.

Trussell says he has been surprised by the number of artifacts found. They include ceramics from England as well as Philadelphia red-ware. Curiously, since Hand was Irish, no Irish-made materials have been uncovered.

The most unusual item so far? A fragment of Staffordshire slip-ware, which was not made after the 1750s and '60s. Trussell says the piece must have been transported to the site by the Hands when they moved here in 1794.

Student Pilar Diaz's most surprising find was a flake of jasper – a fragment removed from stone to form a projectile point by an American Indian who lived here long before the Hands arrived.

"I was just screaming," the senior anthropology major says of her find. "I've never seen anything like that before."

Senior archaeology major Tanner Sanderson says his biggest surprise was finding "how quickly we've been able to take what we've learned in the classroom and put it into practice."

"Reality is a better teacher than the classroom," Trussell agrees. But he adds that the archaeologists will "make our best discoveries in the lab. You begin to notice patterns and have insights during analysis of the artifacts."

A Rock Ford grant is funding Trussell's work in field and lab and on the Web. Trussell has had a longtime association with Rock Ford. He has lectured here. His wife, Cindy, is Rock Ford's volunteer coordinator.