

Explore Virginia history right here in Richmond



Looking for an activity that is indoor, fun, and educational? Oh, and free, too? Look no farther than the Boulevard right here in Richmond for the majestic Virginia Historical Society.

Located next door to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, this center for Virginia history is a destination in and of itself. Truly one-of-a-kind, this museum chronicles all of Virginia's history under one roof.

Yes, this museum focuses solely on our Commonwealth as it has evolved, presenting the earliest artifacts of Native Americans, the original Virginians. Then it works its

way through the Revolutionary War period and so on, all the way to the beginning of the 21st century with everything in between. What a wonderful way to encourage our children to take pride in our rich Virginia heritage.

If your brood doesn't last long before a meltdown occurs, you haven't invested any travel, time, or expense. It's a win-win "staycation" scenario. The museum wants to encourage families with young children to come and feel welcome. Jennifer Guild, VHS's media relations specialist, emphasized: "The words I least want to hear in here are 'shhh!' and 'don't touch!'"

The timing could not be better to head to the VHS. The new temporary exhibit: "An American Turning Point: The Civil War in Virginia," will open on Feb. 4, continuing until Dec. 30. This collection commemorates the 150th anniversary of the Civil War by exploring the wartime experiences of Virginia's men, women and children who struggled to survive.

As my son and I learned at the VHS, Virginia is literally at the center of it all. There were more than 200 military campaigns fought on Virginia soil, more than any other state in the Union. Moreover, General Robert E. Lee surrendered here in Appomattox, a native Virginian himself. And our own Richmond served as the Confederate capital and was burned in the process.

"The Story of Virginia, An Amer-



Children are welcome at the Virginia Historical Society. (Photos courtesy of the Virginia Historical Society)

ican Experience" is the crown jewel of the museum, a definite must-see reminiscent of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. This award-winning exhibit begins with Jamestown and winds its way through time, including a rare dugout canoe, a Conestoga-style wagon, and an electric streetcar once used on the streets of Richmond. It is refreshingly family-friendly, appealing to children and parents alike on different levels. You're not just reading about history, you are seeing it unfold through exquisite portraits of our Founding Fathers, as well as original maps, photographs, and artifacts of all kinds.

Kids will especially enjoy the interactive activities such as the Colo-

rial dress-up station, brief historical videos, question-and-answer games, and receiving a "diploma" for taking an animated computer quiz on Virginia history. Believe it or not, you can also view this vast collection online from your kitchen table, complete with a 360-degree virtual tour, as well as many other exhibits. This would be a great way to familiarize yourself and your kids with the museum beforehand, as well as a way to answer questions afterwards.

Girls who like tea parties may enjoy viewing the "Silver in Virginia" exhibition containing more than 400 pieces of vintage silver produced in the Commonwealth. Likewise, boys may be in awe of the "Virginia Manufactory of Arms" display of 19th century weapons made in Richmond and used by the Virginia militia. There are muskets, pistols, swords, and rifles galore. The "Arming the Confederacy" exhibit also showcases a wide range of weaponry. (No need to panic; these fierce-looking items are well secured behind a glass case with nothing "interactive" about it.)

The museum also contains a research library with mind-boggling resources. Where else can you personally request and examine Robert E. Lee's personal Bible or read original letters written by none other than George Washington? If that doesn't inspire an interest in Virginia history for you or your kids, nothing will! The gift shop also offers an interesting variety of history books for kids, as well as unique Virginia-related items you'll never find at Target or Walmart.

The best part of our visit to the VHS was feeling prouder than ever to be Virginians. A close second was arriving back home in less than half an hour!

The Virginia Historical Society is located at 428 North Boulevard in Richmond. For more information, call (804) 358-4901 or visit its website at www.vahistorical.org. **RPM**

Libby Carty McNamee, a writer, mother, and budding history buff, is looking forward to viewing the VHS's new Civil War exhibit and learning more about Virginia's prominent role.

