

Treasures of History in King William County

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Homeschooling family homes rarely look like a modern Norman Rockwell painting, with any chaos cutely contained. Whether you live in a house filled with nature walk finds, Lego creations abandoned mid-build, too many dirty dishes, books on every flat surface, and a dozen children of all ages, or in a quiet apartment with a couple of neat inhabitants, winter can be a difficult time to be home so much. In most families, there's at least one member who needs to get out and interact with someone else or the entire family will suffer. Winter is an excellent time to go to a museum.

Recently, we took a day trip to King William County and the Pamunkey Indian Museum and Cultural Center. It is a small tribal museum and cultural center located about 35 miles southeast of Richmond, on Pamunkey tribal land, that is open Fridays through Sundays. It feels much separated from modern life. The drive for us, coming from I-95, was past small towns and farm fields. In mid-October, the fields were more shades of brown than I had ever seen in my life. It struck me as pretty, and brown isn't even a favorite color of mine. I'd like to do that drive again and see the landscape clothed in green. And it's probably spectacular after a snowfall.

We gathered with a handful of other homeschooling families, handed the volunteer the \$6 entrance fee, and got our bearings. The museum is small, perhaps 3000 square feet, and packed full of the rich heritage of this tribe. While the exhibit space is a bit dark and the interpretive signs need updating, the content of the exhibit is thorough. Objects are grouped by their uses. Examples of the type of object used for a task, such as sewing or scraping a hide, are displayed in time periods ranging from prehistory to present day. We found the similar shapes and progression of technology interesting. Clothing, housing, and all aspects of tribal life are represented in the collection.

The true treasure we found at the museum was the volunteer. I wish I had written down her name; she was a gem. We arrived almost an hour after opening, but no one else was there when we arrived. The docent spent the next half hour with us, showing us photographs and telling the stories behind them. She is the great-granddaughter and granddaughter of Pamunkey chiefs who ruled for over 70 years, combined. She brought the photos of her ancestors and tribal members to life with stories of her childhood and cultural traditions. She told us how she regularly finds items dropped by her ancestors peeking through the soil in her yard, and the fact that they used those objects in their daily lives helps her feel connected to them and to this place.

I asked her how long the Pamunkey had been in this area. According to their tradition, they always were. This tribe has lived in this spot since there were people to tell stories and record their lives. She told us about Pocahontas and a recent re-enactment at Jamestown of the 400th anniversary of her marriage to John Rolfe. The women of the tribe sewed and spent hundreds of hours embroidering a special outfit for the ceremony that was worn by the native woman who portrayed Pocahontas. Her brother portrayed Pocahontas' brother. Our volunteer was delighted to share with us that those young adults are her children.

It wasn't all wonderful or idyllic. We learned that there are no jobs on the reservation. The male-dominated society made decisions regarding interracial marriage which had a lasting impact on the

number of people who still live on the reservation (about 80 live there, although the tribe numbers three times that many); women have only had the right to vote in tribal matters for the last two years. We learned that access to public schooling for all in Virginia is more recent than we realized. Our amazing volunteer is 50 years old and she told us that hers was the first generation to have access to public schools all the way from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Her father and her aunt went to the tribal school until seventh grade; then they were sent to boarding schools in other states. No two siblings were allowed to attend these schools together.

The tribe is currently seeking federal recognition and has received tentative approval. As of the time of this writing in November 2015, a challenge to federal recognition has been made and the tribe is currently waiting for the Bureau of Indian Affairs to rule on their application. Discussing the process with my children was an unexpected lesson in government.

Approval would mean the ability to apply for grants to improve and expand the cultural center and perhaps bring some jobs through tourism, gambling, or supporting full-time artists. Many of the women make traditional pottery, but it is crafted after their other work, in their own homes. Most Pamunkey commute to Richmond or beyond for jobs. The docent's son, for example, works as a reenactor in Colonial Williamsburg. The Pamunkey people are finding ways to both respect the past, because it is a part of who they are in a very real way, and are also moving toward a brighter future.

After we left the museum, we stopped at the King William County Courthouse, which is a historical treasure as well. The original court- house was constructed in 1725. Nearly 300 years old, it is the oldest court- house building in continuous use in the United States of America. It was definitely worth a stop just to walk on the grounds and peek in the windows. Visitors on a warm day will find the lawn and picnic table a welcome spot to spend some time learning outdoors. Some advance planning could enable students to observe legal proceedings in this courthouse that has been here since before George Washington was born.

Our road trip to King William County was an excellent history field trip.

Heather Smithson lives near Fredericksburg where she homeschools her two children. She can be found on [Pinterest](#) and [Instagram](#).