

History Comes Alive at Henricus Historical Park

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Originally published in the November-December 2016 issue of [VaHomeschoolers Voice](#).

Certain history topics truly led themselves to field tripping in Virginia. Every time we roll around to the founding of Jamestown and the colony of Virginia in our curriculum, I feel the pull to visit all the wonderful sites the state has to offer. Inevitably, as we move into the Civil War era, I'll sense that pull again. It makes me feel lucky that we have so many resources available. And yet, I'm always discovering incredible new places to visit that I wish I had known about sooner.

The last time we studied the founding of Jamestown, we spent a solid day at each of the Jamestown sites and had a great time immersing ourselves in the time period. But, even though I had heard of Henricus Historical Park, I never knew exactly what it was or that it was even connected to that period in time.

[Henricus Historical Park](#) is located in Chesterfield County, on the James River, and is surrounded by the Dutch Gap Conservation Area. We've often biked and birded in this area and, as we have loaded up our bikes at the end of a long day of activity, my son has asked to visit the fort. I have always promised we would go on a separate visit, when we weren't quite so exhausted from a day of biking; one weekend in July, I finally held true to that promise.

The Citie of Henricus, as it is called, is the site of the second successful English settlement in the New World—a settlement of 300 settlers who left Jamestown in 1611 in the hopes of founding a healthier and stronger settlement. It is a smaller, county-run historical park, but I think it's a gem worthy of being discovered by fellow homeschoolers. Definitely one I wished I had known about the first time we cycled through history, because it added so much depth to our understanding.

When we visited on a summer Sunday, the park was fairly empty. Only a few couples roamed around, which gave us virtually one-on-one interactions with the historical interpreters who gave us their full, undivided attention. We started out in the Native American village, where a costumed interpreter worked on crafts and answered questions about what she was working on. We moved along to the village, where we received a wonderful tour of the newly constructed chapel from another fully costumed guide who spared no details in his storytelling of the "citie" and the construction of the chapel. He filled us in on upcoming events that might be of interest to homeschoolers and also answered our many questions with gusto.

We then moved on to our favorite part, the farm, where plants and animals from the era are grown and a full-time interpreter cultivates and cares for everything. We spent at least an hour there as he told us all about the crops, explained the importance of tobacco, and elaborated upon the different breeds of animals. The highlight was his giving my son a bag to wear and taking him into the chicken coop to collect eggs, all the while explaining about the special breed of chicken they had and why it was important. This detailed conversation was especially exciting for my son, as he is fascinated with birds. After egg collecting, we examined the rest of the buildings, which included a reconstruction of the first English hospital in the New World.

Because Henricus is less well known than its counterpart down the river, it experiences smaller crowds and provides more opportunities for interaction with the interpreters. It is this level of engagement that really sets it above and apart from other historical sites and makes it worth visiting. While we preferred our self-guided tour, homeschool days that cater to a variety of ages also occur throughout the year. There are also family fun days and holiday events that are a great way to tie learning and history together. Publick Day, which is held in September, celebrates the founding of the “citie” and is an immensely popular event featuring interpreters, historical reenactments, and many demonstrations.

The best part of the visit might be the natural surroundings. Be sure to pack your lunch and take a break from touring to eat on the bluff overlooking the James River. You’ll get a sense of why the site was chosen for a settlement hundreds of years ago! If you really want to make a day of it, pack your walking shoes and head over to the other side of the parking lot to explore the trails at [Dutch Gap Conservation Area](#). If you have hikers or walkers in your family, there are 4.5 miles of looping trails surrounded by wetlands, meadows, and river. If you have any budding naturalists or birders in the family, they will love the variety of birds and other wildlife they might see (depending on the time of year), from prothonotary warblers near the river to kestrels in the meadows to migrating waterfowl on the marshes.

Between Henricus Historical Park and Dutch Gap Conservation Area, both nestled on the James River, you are sure to find something that will satisfy everyone in your family!

Mary Sandkam lives in Richmond with her husband and son, who is in 7th grade and has been homeschooled from the beginning. She is pretty sure “fieldtripping” is a homeschool subject.