

The Edgar Allen Poe Museum: A Hidden Gem Worth Discovering

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Have you ever visited a friend in a different town or city and had them tell you, “Oh, we love having visitors! It means we get to play tourist and do all the fun things in our town we never get around to doing!” Life, especially for homeschoolers, has a tendency of getting in the way of “the fun things,” even when the fun things are field trips and museums that might fit into what you are currently studying. Even the most diligent field tripper runs into this issue! I have lived in Richmond for almost 13 years and have been visiting for over 20. I have driven by the Poe Museum more times than I can count and every time I have seen the intriguing little building, I have thought to myself, “I really need to go visit!”

This past spring, the Poe Museum was generous enough to donate to the raffle at the VaHomeschoolers Conference and Resource Fair. Spurred by their generosity, I *finally* decided to book a one-hour group tour for our co-op and go be a tourist in my own city. Organizing a group tour provided some accountability and a definite date. It also allowed us to take advantage of one of the special add-on programs they provide for students. We chose to do the “Tell-Tale Heart” mock trial where we would listen to a dramatic retelling of the short story, after which the older students would divide into groups of defense attorney, prosecutor, judge, and jury to decide if the defendant was guilty or not guilty by reason of insanity.

The museum also offers several other programs. One focuses on the poetry of “The Raven” and another on the short story “The Masque of the Red Death.” Both are recommended for kids ages 12 and up. For younger kids, they offer a Pipsqueak Poets tour, which focuses on poetry and rhyme in “The Raven” and a craft. You can add a scavenger hunt around the museum, too. They also offer walking tours around Shockoe Bottom, showing places that were important to Poe’s life and writing. This could be a fun addition for mixed-age groups that crave some movement and activity (the tours are 50 minutes long).

Planning a group field trip—collecting the money, finding a date that works—is hard work, but it all paid off when we finally met at the museum on our scheduled day. I really had no idea what to expect because when you drive by—as I’ve been doing for 20 years—and approach from the street, it is just a very narrow, very old looking building. Upon entering, I discovered it is actually the oldest house still standing in Richmond. A plaque proclaims it was probably built circa 1743, making the house even older than our country itself! It also turns out it is only one of four museum buildings that are oriented around a beautiful courtyard. The Enchanted Garden was designed in 1922 in homage to Poe’s poem “To One in Paradise” and is terminated by a shrine to Poe. Much to the delight of the kids on our tour, two friendly black cats can often be seen slinking about, too.

Our group was large enough that we split into a younger group and an older teen group. The hour-long teen tour led us through all four of the buildings and the shrine and through what is the most comprehensive—and at times bizarre—Poe collection in the world. From his walking stick, to first editions, to his socks, to an original staircase from one of his houses, the museum has it all.

Both students and adults were engaged throughout the tour by our enthusiastic guide, a Poe scholar with deep knowledge that shone throughout the tour. She shared so much information that I think all of us left the museum wanting to read all the stories that she had referenced!

Our tour finished at the shrine at the end of the Enchanted Garden. It was, appropriately enough, a rainy, dreary day, which helped set the tone for our mock trial. The black cats joined us as we listened to a dramatic retelling of “The Tell-Tale Heart.” The “defendant” did an impressive job reciting it from memory, then the teens divided into their groups and debated their verdict. (Arguments for both sides were so persuasive we ended up with a hung jury!) We then thanked our guides for the fascinating tour and met back in the main building, where I made sure to tell them that we were members of VaHomeschoolers and to thank the staff for their support at the conference.

The Poe Museum received high marks from all of the kids—from fourth grade through 10th grade!—and adults who attended the trip that day. It is a quirky little gem just waiting to be discovered. Do not wait for that perfect time; go be a tourist, whether at the Poe Museum in Richmond, or at that place in *your* hometown that you keep putting off visiting!

Mary Sandkam lives in Richmond with her husband and son, who is in middle school and has always been homeschooled. Her family has been enjoying reading Edgar Allen Poe stories and poems over dinner. One of her favorites is “Annabel Lee.”