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Gulf Branch Nature Center Aims To Retell Story of Virginia Indians

By Brigid Schulte
Washington Post Staff Writer
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Drive too quickly up Military Road in [Arlington](#), and you're likely to miss the turn into the wooded drive for the [Gulf Branch Nature Center](#).

The center, with its collection of snakes slithering in their glass cages, fish, toads and a fluffy barred owl, has long been known to insiders as one of the hidden gems of [Arlington County](#).

Now, it has a new distinction: It is one of only two places in the area included in the Virginia Indian Heritage Trail guidebook, which became available this month and is published by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the Virginia Council on Indians. The free guide includes information on [Virginia's](#) two Indian reservations, the Mattaponi and the Pamunkey, and other tribal centers across the state, plus museums with instructive exhibits about Virginia Indians past and present.

The only other site in Northern Virginia included in the guidebook is Leesylvania State Park in [Prince William County](#).

The designation came as a surprise to Denise Chauvette, director of the Gulf Branch Nature Center. The center's exhibit on Virginia Indians is not extensive; it encompasses the center's basement. And the biggest attractions, at least for visitors younger than 10, are the Indian blankets and the leather vests to dress up in, stacks of books with such titles as "The Woman Who Fell From the Sky," a soapstone vessel they can help hollow out with a stone tool and a replica dugout canoe that stirs the imagination.

"Sweet!" said one young visitor recently, donning a vest and climbing in.

"Row! Row!" said another.

A third, wrapping himself in a blanket and sitting in the back, said: "I'm the chief. So I don't row."

For older visitors, the center has artifacts such as pottery, tools, spears and arrows, as well as displays of native plants -- milkweed, dogbane, basswood and wisteria -- that the Indians used for cooking, weaving and making bows.

The center's walls are lined with panels detailing Native American history in the area, from the Paleo-Indian period about 13,000 years ago through the Archaic period to the Woodland period, which began about 3,000 years ago and ended about the time [Capt. John Smith](#) sailed from the [Jamestown settlement](#) up to the [Potomac River](#) to the mouth of Gulf Branch, the stream that runs past the nature center, in July 1608.

Some of the center's artifacts came from archeological digs in the Arlington area in the 1970s, Chauvette said.

"A lot of our information about Indians who lived in the Arlington area is from the records of Europeans as they began to move into the area, so we have to take it with a little bit of a grain of salt. We're viewing native culture through European eyes," she said. "That's why archeology is so important."

Archeologists have found more than 10 Native American sites in Arlington: eight along the Potomac River, excavated to make way for the [George Washington Parkway](#), and three in the upper valley of Four Mile Run.

In his explorations of the area, Smith recorded a village he called Nameroughquena with longhouses made of woven grass mats, located on the banks of the Potomac where present-day bridges connect Route 1 and Interstate 395 to Virginia. Smith said these Algonquian-speaking Indians called themselves the Nacotchtank, which others simplified to Necostin.

The nature center exhibit aims to tell the true story of Virginia Indians.

"When I was growing up, I thought all Indians lived in tepees, wore headdresses and rode horses. And that only covers a small portion of time and geographic area," Chauvette said, referring to western tribes of the 19th century. "So it's good to clear away some of the misperceptions."

The canoe display explains how modern Arlingtonians attempted to make a native canoe using a chain saw to hollow out the trunk of a tulip poplar tree.

"It was unbelievably difficult, even with power tools," Chauvette said. "And it sank."

Indians used clamshells to carve the canoes, which could fit as many as 40 people, according to the display.

Anthropologist Karenne Wood, former chairman of the Virginia Council on Indians and editor of the heritage trail guide, said that although the Gulf Branch Nature Center is small, its display is informative. She and her team of researchers spent a few years surveying and visiting more than 100 museums and sites across Virginia to evaluate their exhibits on Native Americans. Some exhibits were outdated, she said. Some used language Indians consider offensive. In most cases, they did not include Virginia Indian history past 1750.

That's largely true of the Gulf Branch Nature Center, Chauvette admitted, which focuses on the Woodland Indian period. Chauvette said her center can't compete with places such as the [National Museum of the American Indian](#) in Washington. But she pointed to a map on one wall showing all judicially established reservation lands in the country. Two tiny yellow dots show Virginia's Mattaponi and Pamunkey reservations.

"So this does show that these people are still here," Chauvette said.

What Wood and the researchers found in abundance during their surveys were arrowheads, she said.

"Arrowheads. Arrowheads. Arrowheads," Wood said. "In display cases with no explanations or anything."

Wood is a member of the Monacan Indian Nation, descended from the Iroquoian-speaking tribes that populated Virginia's mountainous [Piedmont](#) area and often warred with the Algonquian-speaking Powhatan Indians of the Tidewater. Wood said she has one big hope for the heritage trail: that people will realize the Virginia Indians didn't just disappear once the

English arrived in 1607.

A few sites on the heritage trail include displays about Virginia Indians' life from Colonial times through the 20th century, when state law made it illegal for anyone in Virginia to declare that they were Indian, and into the 21st century, when six of eight state-recognized tribes are seeking federal recognition as sovereign nations through an act of Congress. A bill on the matter passed the House in April and awaits action in the Senate.

Kathleen S. Kilpatrick, director of Virginia's Department of Historic Resources, said her agency helped fund the heritage trail because the whole history of Virginia Indians needs to be told.

"It's particularly important at this time, during the [Jamestown](#) 400 year" anniversary, Kilpatrick said. "This effort underscores our sense that Virginia history didn't begin in 1607, and it certainly didn't end for Virginia Indians. There is a vibrant community still living today."

The effort underscores how much more work remains for museums, she said, in terms of reaching out to Virginia Indians and learning, as well as rethinking and updating exhibits and collections.

"Opening the door to improving interpretation and building those bridges will serve us well and the Virginia Indian community well in years to come," Kilpatrick said.

At the Gulf Branch Nature Center, employee Amanda Campbell commandeered a table and spread out a wealth of Virginia Indian artifacts. Children gathered around the table and touched dried corn husks, hollowed squash gourds, woven baskets, deer skins and tools.

In a talk she regularly gives to visiting elementary school students and other groups, Campbell describes how the Powhatan Indians who lived in Arlington left behind words we still use, such as raccoon and opossum. She tells the children that the natives were farmers who planted corn, beans and squash and called them "the three sisters."

She explains that the Indians dried deer meat and mixed it with fruit. "Think of it as a cross between beef jerky and a Fruit Roll-Up," she told the wide-eyed children.

She then asked the children whether they would know which plants to eat and which were poisonous if they walked in the surrounding woods. They shook their heads as one.

"Native American children knew which plants they could eat by the time they were 3 years old," she said.


Campbell explained how Indians built their yehakins, or longhouses, by bending saplings to make frames, much like today's dome tents.

"Are there any Virginia Indians left?" one child asked.

"Not too many around here," Campbell said. "But there are some. And now, they live just like you and me."

The Gulf Branch Nature Center, 3608 N. Military Rd., is open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday and 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday. For information, call 703-228-3403.

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