

Constructed of limestone and marble and a fine example of early 20th century architecture with classical revival details, the 1913 Bank of Smithfield houses something much more precious than cash and mutual funds.

Home to the Isle of Wight County Museum, the building now documents and preserves the area's rich history, a tale that documents the growth of America.

Located across the James River from the first permanent English settlement at Jamestown, Isle of Wight County has grown as a result of its agriculture and commerce. From pre-historic settlement through notable events in American history such as the Revolutionary War, War of 1812 and Civil War, Isle of Wight has experienced America's story.

The Isle of Wight County Museum was founded in 1976 by volunteers dedicated to the preservation of county history. Now owned and operated by the Isle of Wight County's Division of Historic Resources, the museum's exhibits include prehistoric fossils, Native American artifacts, a re-created turn-of-the-century country store and displays interpreting the Smithfield ham industry.

One of the museum's more notable artifacts is the world's oldest, edible cured ham. While the 1902 pork product exemplifies the patented Smithfield curing process, it was, at one time, known as P.D. Gwaltney Jr.'s pet ham. Overlooked for a few decades, the ham was found hanging from a smokehouse rafter, and upon discovery in 1924, Gwaltney fashioned a brass collar for the ham and took it to trade shows and expositions to display its durability. The ham was featured in Ripley's Believe It Or Not in 1929, 1932 and 2003.

The museum offers special programs, lectures, children's programming, tours and innovative activities for families on a myriad of topics. Monthly, the museum hosts a curatorial coffee klatsch where guests are treated to a discussion about an oddity from the museum's collection. Anything from a flamethrower to a hog bristle scraper is likely to emerge for these events.

The museum also offers a walking tour via iPod. Technology tells the story of the county as listeners enjoy a scenic one-mile walk - whisking listeners back to the days of dusty roads, plank sidewalks and a bustling riverfront.

Visit the museum the next time you're near to see how the county has transformed its story into a valued educational resource and heritage tourism commodity.

Isle of Wight's history is your history.

For more information, visit www.historicisleofwight.com or call (757) 357-0115.

Visit Isle of Wight County and the Isle of Wight Museum

