

Holiday treats

Written by Jennifer Zajac

Wednesday, 25 January 2012 10:20 - Last Updated Wednesday, 25 January 2012 11:05

Once again, the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday snuck up on me like a friend whom I haven't seen in a while. The vacation day came from behind, covered my eyes, and when I turned around, I said, "Oh, hey, great to see you! Let's go do something!"

A visit to the new Martin Luther King Jr. monument in Washington, D.C. seemed like an appropriate day trip until Husband said, "Really? You think that we'll be the only ones there?"

He had a point. Determined to mark the day with a fun and history-oriented activity, we met friends at Montpelier, the home of James and Dolley Madison and subsequently 10 or so other mega-wealthy owners.

Here's what we learned:

Son: "President Madison wrote the Constitution."

Husband: "Madison never set his favorite slave, Paul Jennings, free. He had to buy his freedom."

Charlie: "President Madison lived in a big house. A big, big house!"

Daughter: [Referring to reproductions of Dolley Madison's gowns] "I like her white dresses the best."

Ed: "Next time we come, we need to pack a picnic basket."

Margaret: "They had candy sticks in the olden days when you were a kid, Dad?"

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Me: Dolley's favorite flavor of ice cream was not peach, chocolate, vanilla or strawberry. According to Bethany, our tour guide, it was oyster. "Sounds shell-icious."

We strolled down to the kid-friendly archeology lab, where children of all ages can practice combing through dirt, washing artifacts and documenting each item. What an odd experience: The young ones came away thrilled with the idea of becoming archeologists. The adults felt disillusioned: Would Indiana Jones sit for hours cataloging little bits of nails and plate chips?

"I love to dig! I could dig all day!" said Son.

"I like finding stuff like that!" said young Margaret.

"Sitting at a table for hours brushing dirty objects with toothbrushes would make me miserable," I mumbled to Husband and Ed, who agreed.

Ed asked our group: "If you could go back and live in James Madison's house the way he did 200 years ago, would you do it?"

Husband: "No air conditioning and 98-degree-days during the summer? No way."

Me: "Work half the time you do now and spend your free time reading books or talking with friends? Yes way. Except the part about having slaves as servants. Apparently, even Madison felt awkward about that. You know, writing about man's right to freedom and yet owning 100 slaves..."

Later, as we raced to the visitor's center to get our kids to the restrooms, another factor made me think twice about living at Montpelier during Madison's time.

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“Where do you think the bathrooms were? They never talk about that when they give these tours,” I said.

“That’s because people really don’t want to know, Mom. No one wants to think about that,” Son replied.

We stood there silently, lost in our own thoughts for a moment, gazing at the majestic view of the Blue Ridge Mountains, feeling the cold breeze burn our cheeks and smelling that familiar boxwood bush scent.

“I can’t be the only person who’s ever wondered how far Dolley had to trudge in her long dresses to the outhouse...”

“MOM!”

“I’m not saying that I want to lead that archeological excavation for ex—”

“MO—OM! STOP IT!”

“I’m just saying that I wonder what a really nice outhouse looked like back then. I can’t imagine that the Madisons had a run-down wooden shack with a crescent moon-shaped window...”

“Seriously, Mom?!”

“Seriously, Son, I’ll stop. We’ll buy you some dessert on the way home. How about some ice cream?”

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“Yeah!”

“Oyster ice cream for everyone!”

“Nooooooooo!”

Maybe we'll serve some for the next upcoming holiday: Valentine's Day.