

Your Neighbors

Yes, entertainment on east side

You don't need to be a history buff to enjoy this delightful museum

For east Charlotteans, it's a common problem: Finding an entertaining place to visit that offers family fun and doesn't require a long drive to another part of town.

One that doesn't put too big a dent in the family budget as well. Indeed, the choices are limited.



Kevin Caston

For shopping, most residents of east Charlotte drive past woeful Eastland Mall to Concord Mills, Carolina Place, or some other mall miles away. Even to catch a movie in a comfortable environment means heading to a theater outside the neighborhood.

It's no secret east Charlotte, once a thriving part of the city, is in flux. Aside from a few trendy restaurants in the Plaza-Midwood area and an ever-increasing number of ethnically diverse businesses lining Central Avenue, it offers few attractions.

Scores of shops and restaurants have closed in recent years, particularly along Independence Boulevard, where hollowed businesses stand as a wistful reminder of a vibrant past. Plans and promises of revitalization have stalled. Developers are hesitant to pour money into the area because of uncertainty surrounding future road-widening plans.

Plans to replace Eastland Mall with a town center are bogged down in bureaucracy.

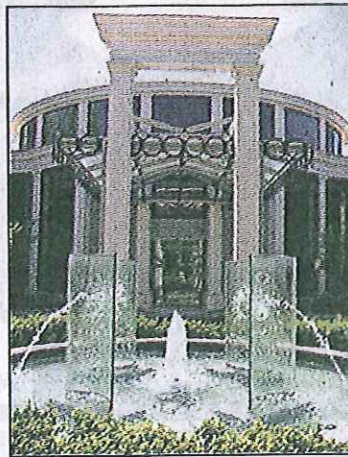
Thankfully, there is a gem in east Charlotte. Even though I'd seen the sign at Eastway and Shamrock drives for the Charlotte Museum of History dozens of times, I never once thought about checking it out. That is, until I was tapped to write about east Charlotte as a community columnist for the Observer and was searching for an interesting topic for my first column. To my surprise, I stumbled upon one of the city's most engaging places.

The museum sits on an eight-acre wooded campus at 3500 Shamrock Drive. Directly behind it on the same property stands the Hezekiah Alexander Home-site, the oldest house in Mecklenburg County. Both venues are rich with history, and each will invoke a "wow!" response in kids and adults alike. You don't have to be a history buff to enjoy the American Indian Garden Path or learn about Charlotte's role in the Revolution and Civil wars.

One interesting tidbit I discovered is that it is possible that Charlotte probably declared its independence from England a year before the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 in Philadelphia. And to think people actually complain about how Charlotte isn't as progressive as some northern cities.

Three centuries of Charlotte come to life by way of exhibits featuring fascinating artifacts and outfits from a bygone era.

A census graph charts the population of the city and its growth, from just a few hundred early settlers to the hundreds of thou-



COURTESY OF CHARLOTTE MUSEUM OF HISTORY

The Charlotte Museum of History sits on eight acres of wooded area off Shamrock Drive.

sands of people who call Charlotte home today. Even the city's slave population during the 1700s and 1800s is recorded.

For an authentic feel for how at least one Charlotte family lived during the 18th century, tour the Hezekiah Alexander House. Built in 1774, the two-story house is furnished in such a way that it seems like the patriot and prominent North Carolinian Hezekiah Alexander, his wife, and 10 children who resided there in the 18th century, still live

Want to go?

The museum is at 3500 Shamrock Drive, between Eastway Drive and Sharon Amity Road.

Open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday to Saturday and 1-5 p.m. Sunday. (Closed Mondays until June.)

Cost: \$6, adults; \$5, students and senior citizens; \$3, ages 6-12. Children under 6 free.

Details: www.charlottemuseum.org.

in the home.

It might take two or three visits to take in all the history on display. Guided tours are given. Don't be surprised to see museum staffers walking around dressed like someone from the 19th century. It's all part of bringing history to life.

A hands-on exhibit called Toy Time allows kids to play with the kinds of wooden toys that the great-great-grandparents probably played with.

Kevin Caston lives in east Charlotte and writes about the area. Have an item for him? Write: kcaston@charlotteobserver.com