Pony Pasture

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In order to write this article, I had to battle a rush of guilt. Pony Pasture is almost too good to be shared.

After my sojourn to this idyllic hideaway, I have begun to harbor a selfish desire to keep it all to myself.

On a Friday afternoon, two friends and I threw on bathing suits, grabbed towels, and hopped on the 4:40 Pony Express. What surprised me far more than the absence of actual ponies or pastures (admit it, you were envisioning a petting zoo type thing too) was how close this picturesque riverbank spot was to campus; our ride across the Huguenot Bridge took six minutes.

As we stepped off the Pony Express, a welcoming chorus of crunchy leaves reminded us that our bathing attire's expiration date was approaching. September 22nd, the final day for the Pony Express, marks the last day of summer. However, if there is any cure for a college student suffering PSD (post summer depression), it is surely the fresh feeling of autumn that envelops adventurers as they wander among the warmly-hued trees on the Pony Pasture riverbank.

There are various theories as to how the park got its name, but a friend from Richmond told me that the moniker is derived from stories of wild horses that used to trample through the lush landscape. As my friends and I strolled down the path at sunset, this legend wasn't difficult to imagine.

From the tree-lined trail, it is only a few steps to the rocky edge of the forest, where the shady passage ends and the gentle rapids begin, flowing between time-flattened boulders that lie scattered across the shallow water. Each enormous rock is just a hop and skip away from the next. At first, my friends and I perched ourselves on the edge of the water, fawning over mallard ducks that swam right up to us, not in that aggressive Westhampton Lake mutant duck kind of way, mind you. Pony Pasture ducks are much cuter (and much less scary).

As the pretty things passed us by, warm waters beckoned us to abandon our riverbank rock seats and hop in. Savoring the risk of toting my Canon SLR above my head in the rapids, I followed my friends across the enormous stones.

Before I knew it, I found myself knee-deep in RVA.

Among us in the shallow streams were rafters, swimmers, fishers, kayakers, a six-year old red rain boot wearing explorer, and perhaps the most surprising and elusive demographic, a group of six UR freshman.

The history of Pony Pasture adds to the mystique of this riverbank sanctuary. Inhabited by Indians for thousands of years, the rapids and foliage were once crossed by Captain John Smith on his famous 1607 voyage up the Chesapeake. The area is not too far downstream from Henricus, where Pocahontas once lived among the first English settlers.

The locals that I talked to on the river seemed to share the same protective sentiment towards Pony Pasture that I have since developed. They eyed me suspiciously when I asked them questions. When I explained to a couple rafting in the water that UR had begun offering a shuttle service to the park, their faces fell just a little, perhaps betraying a sense of disappointment that the quiet, simple, family-centered oasis on the riverbank might soon be disrupted by crazy college kids.

I don’t mean to betray my generation, but I can’t blame the locals. There is a simplicity to this
refuge that a Snapchat just cannot capture. Let’s face it, when 19 year olds get involved, beautiful places can become a selfie backdrop and everything just gets so Facebooked-up.

As I watched a rain-booted six year old embark on his adventure among the rocks, I realized that the intangible magic of Pony Pasture has a lot to do with the unspoken understanding that this was a place where the real world is forbidden to enter, where a six year old or a twenty year old can come to take a break from the trying process of growing up, even just for an afternoon. The week leading up to my trip to Pony Pasture had been emotionally draining on many fronts, and there was something very peaceful and restorative about laying down in the worn curvature of an ancient boulder and watching the ducks and yellow leaves flow downstream.

My visit to Pony Pasture reminded me that an escape to nature can work wonders on the soul. No matter how rough your day has been, you can always find solace in the simple things: fresh water, fallen leaves, and really nice ducks.

For us students, rushing becomes a way of life. When was the last time, aside from bedtime or powernaps, that you were just still? Something is always buzzing, an Iphone is always ringing, headphones are always blaring, and somewhere down the hall, a Keurig is squealing.

There is something to be said for silence. We move so quickly that we often forget what it means to be still, peaceful. Though I have to admit, once my friends and I had found our perfect rock among the rapids, we got a little too still and woke up at 6:39 for our 6:40 shuttle. We might have disturbed a few of my beloved ducks as we hectically splashed through the water on our way out.

When I came to college last fall, I remember asking every upper classmen I met the same question: looking back, what do you wish you had done earlier? The answer was always the same:

Invariably, students told me that they wished they had spent more time away from the campus bubble, experiencing the city of Richmond. So don’t wait—just go get your feet wet. You won’t regret it.