

A Natural Wonder

New home for museum brings a scientific and economic bonanza

STORY BY *Kay Brookshire*

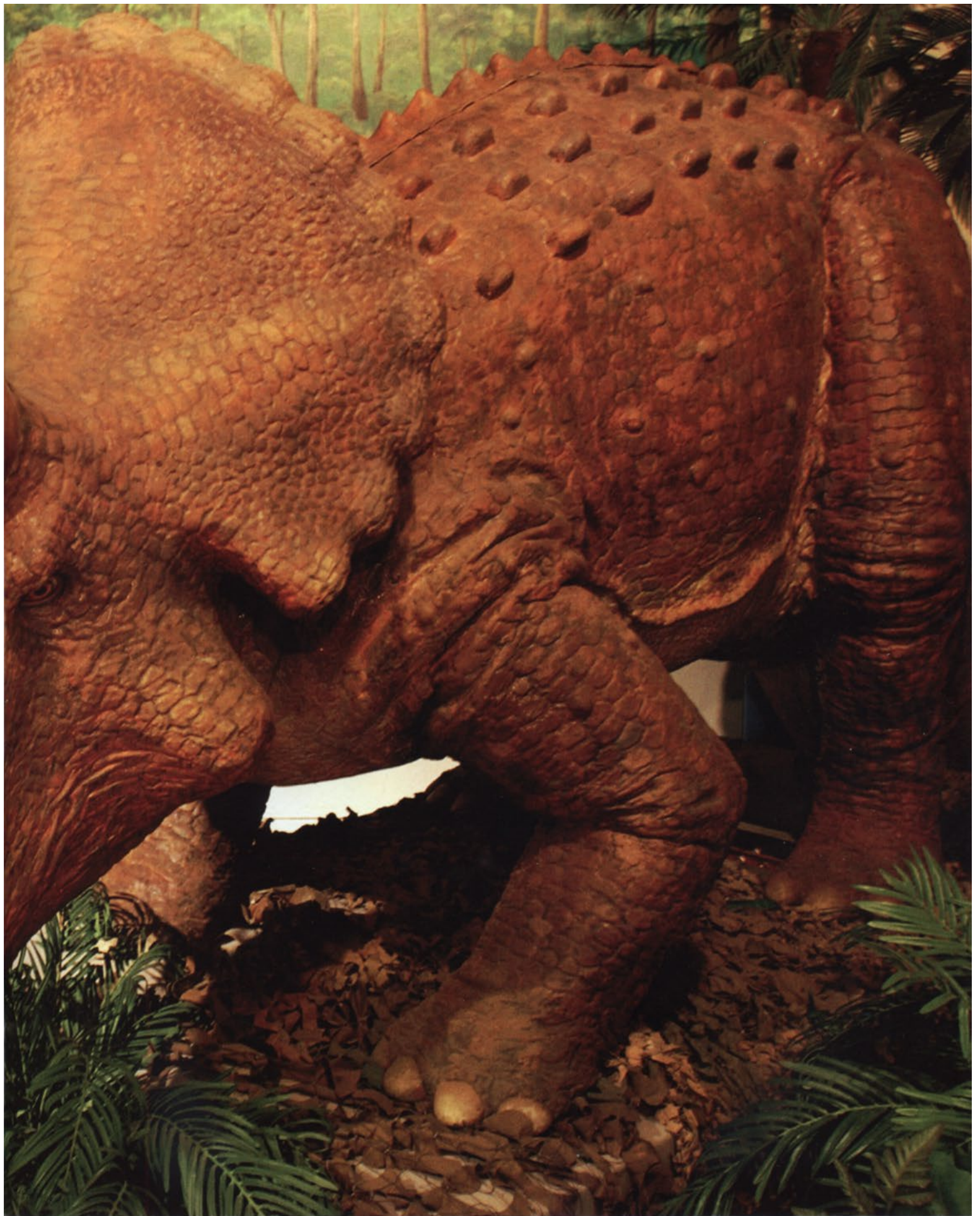
PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Brian McCord*

With the bones of a 30-foot whale suspended overhead and a carnivorous Allosaurus dominating its Great Hall, the new Virginia Museum of Natural History will welcome visitors with a “wow” factor sure to capture their imaginations.

The dinosaur and whale fossils in the Harvest Foundation Great Hall are

Triceratops and other prehistoric creatures wow visitors at the Virginia Museum of Natural History.







Signs of ancient marine life range from tiny fossil fragments to whale bones.

examples of how showmanship and science are coming together to attract visitors from Virginia and beyond.

The museum will entertain and educate, even while it supports scientists conducting world-class research and safely houses a collection of more than 22 million items.

The new home for the museum, founded in 1984, is a \$28 million facility with almost 90,000 square feet. It is scheduled to open Oct. 28, 2006, with the temporary exhibit "Chinasaurus, The Great Dinosaurs of China." The interactive exhibit exploring the huge dinosaurs in China celebrates a Sino-American collaboration between Chinese and Virginia-based paleontologists.

VMNH officials recently traveled to China to request the loan of fossils from the Yixian Formation of Liaoning Province, including one of the spectacular feathered dinosaurs. These fossils will be on display from January 26, 2007 through May 28, 2007, in conjunction with the "Chinasaurus" exhibit. This will be the first time these important fossils will be on display in the United States.

The museum's grand opening is scheduled for March 31, 2007, and will feature the museum's state-of-the-art permanent exhibits.

An affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution, the Virginia Museum of Natural History has earned recognition as one of the nation's leading museums in its field. The new building offers visitors innovative walk-through and interactive experiences and opens windows to ongoing research in the museum's archeology, paleontology and scanning-electron-microscope laboratories.

"Our goal is to make scientific research and discovery exciting for everybody, but particularly for young students who might consider careers as scientists," says Tim Gette, the museum's executive director.

The project brings a multitude of benefits to Martinsville and the region.

"This new building really hits a home run on both education and economic development angles," says George Lyle, chairman of the museum's Board of Trustees and county attorney for Henry County. "I'm convinced, once it's up and running, that the museum has potential that we haven't identified or realized yet."

As a tourist attraction, the new facility should more than triple the number of museum visitors, bringing in families, teachers, scientists and others.

"With this stunning new building offering five times the public and exhibit space of our current location, we expect museum attendance to increase from 34,000 per year today to between 87,000 and 140,000 annually," Gette says. "Once fully operational, this new museum will generate more than \$15 million in salary and business revenue annually. That's the equivalent of a small-

to medium-sized business opening in Martinsville each year."

Lyle views the new museum as a treasured educational resource that will improve quality of life. Besides increasing educational opportunities for children and lifelong learners, the new building takes advantage of improved technology to offer distance learning that can benefit the entire state, Lyle says.

Designed by Reich + Petch – the internationally acclaimed team responsible for Smithsonian's Mammal Hall – in collaboration with Blue Sky Design, the new exhibits will redefine the role of museums in the 21st century, according to Gette.

"Uncovering Virginia," one new exhibit, will recreate six dig sites representing important scientific finds in Virginia, each revealing a snapshot in time from 300 million to 500 years ago. Another, "How Nature Works: Rocks," will invite visitors to experience a volcanic eruption from the inside and tell the story of Virginia's volcanic activity.

The entryway's whale fossil, an estimated 14 million years old, is a species first discovered in eastern Virginia's Carmel Church Quarry, one of the museum's most exciting research sites. ■



Geological artifacts include Nelsonite, a type of rock that is 1 billion years old. Right: Going on display are artifacts from some of Virginia's earliest residents, including American Indians of the Dan River Complex.





Over 25 years, we have evolved our viewpoint about design to create extraordinary moments and opportunities for people to have experiences that change their understanding and perspective of the world they live in.

REICH+PETCH

1867 Yonge Street Toronto, ON Canada M4S 1Y5
TEL (416) 480 2020 FAX (416) 480 1881
www.reich-petch.com
info@reich-petch.com