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## **SAIL250® VIRGINIA SPEAKER SERIES CONTINUES. EXPLORE VIRGINIA'S MARITIME HISTORY FROM THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD TO WWII**

Free public programs in January and April 2026 will examine the Commonwealth's maritime legacy and its role in American history

**Norfolk, Va.** — Sail250® Virginia will continue its Speaker Series in 2026 with two compelling programs exploring the vital role Virginia's maritime history played in shaping America's story. Both events are free and open to the public, but reservations are required due to limited seating at The Slover in downtown Norfolk.

### **Underground Railroad Panel Discussion**

**Thursday, January 8, 2026 • 7 PM- 9:30 PM**

**Reserve tickets here -** <https://sail250virginia.com/rsvp/UndergroundRailroad>

A panel discussion moderated by Dr. Cassandra Newby-Alexander, the Vice Chair of the Sail250® Virginia Executive Board of Directors, will examine the often-overlooked maritime dimensions of the Underground Railroad, exploring how Virginia's waterways served as critical pathways to freedom for enslaved people seeking liberation.

Dr. Newby-Alexander, Endowed Professor of Virginia Black History and Culture at Norfolk State University, will be joined by two other distinguished scholars – Dr. Cheryl LaRoche, associate research professor in Historic Preservation at the University of Maryland, and Dr. Timothy Walker, professor of history at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth.

Dr. LaRoche is the author of *Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad: The Geography of Resistance* and the forthcoming *Apostle of Liberation: AME Bishop Paul Quinn and the Underground Railroad*. Her multidisciplinary work has earned recognition from the Maryland Historical Trust and the Society of Historical Archaeology.

Dr. Walker, editor of *Sailing to Freedom: Maritime Dimensions of the Underground Railroad*, brings expertise in Atlantic World maritime history and has collaborated with the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution on historical climate research using 19th-century whaling vessel logs.

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### **An Evening with Ian Toll**

**Tuesday, April 14, 2026 • 7:00 PM-9:30 PM**

**Reserve tickets here - <https://sail250virginia.com/rsvp/iantoll>**

Renowned nautical historian and bestselling author Ian Toll will discuss the importance of the U.S. Navy in World War II and the role of Naval Station Norfolk in supporting the war effort. Toll is best known for his Pacific War Trilogy and *Six Frigates: The Epic History of the Founding of the U.S. Navy*, which won the Samuel Eliot Morison Award for Naval Literature.

His Pacific War Trilogy — *Pacific Crucible*, *The Conquering Tide*, and *Twilight of the Gods* — includes two *New York Times* bestsellers and has been praised by critics and military historians alike. Toll has lectured at the U.S. Naval Academy, the Pentagon, and the Naval War College, and has contributed to major publications, including the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*.

"These programs offer exceptional opportunities for our community to engage with leading scholars and understand how maritime history has shaped Virginia and our nation," said Paula Barclay Cook, Sail250® Virginia education manager. "From the courageous journeys along the Underground Railroad's water routes to the naval operations that changed the course of world history, these stories remain deeply relevant today."

Both events are free and open to the public, but reservations are required due to limited seating. The Slover is located at 235 E Plume St, Norfolk, VA 23510.

The Speaker Series is part of Sail250® Virginia's comprehensive education initiative leading up to the June 2026 festival, which will welcome over 60 tall ships and historic vessels from more than 20 countries to Norfolk and 11 other Virginia affiliate harbors.

To register and for more information about the Speaker Series and other educational programs, visit [sail250virginia.com/historyeducation](https://sail250virginia.com/historyeducation).

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### **About Sail250® Virginia**

Sail250® Virginia is part of the nationwide observance of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Scheduled for June 2026, the event will showcase Virginia's role as a maritime gateway to the world, bringing together tall ships, international navies, and visitors from around the globe.  
[sail250virginia.com](https://sail250virginia.com)

Sail250® Virginia is sponsored by: Virginia is for Lovers, The City of Norfolk, Sentara, TowneBank, W.F. Magann Corporation, Crofton Industries, E. G. Middleton, Inc., Dominion Enterprises, McLeskey, VIGOR Marine | MHI Norfolk, The Port of Virginia, Dominion Energy, Hampton Roads Shipping Association, Fairlead, Light Tech, Inc., Colliers, Virginia Pilot Association, ICON, Virginia 250 Commission, Colonna's Shipyard, Inc., Perry Family Foundation, Visit Norfolk, BAE Systems, Coastal Precast Systems, Elizabeth River Concrete, S. B.

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