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International nonprofit club celebrates 100th anniversary in Richmond

The [International Association of Torch Clubs](#) has dedicated 100 years to expanding the knowledge of its members and is continuing that mission during this weekend’s annual convention in Richmond.

“We had very high hopes, and we’re trying to live up to those expectations,” Richmond Torch Club President and Convention Chair Bob Schmidt said. “It’s been an honor, but it’s been a lot of work and a lot of details.”

On Friday, Richmond native, public historian and author Elvatrice Parker Belsches presented “Celebrating Richmond as the Cradle of Black Capitalism,” which touched on the local and national impact of Richmond’s Black leaders, churches, schools, banks and businesses.

“It’s a blessing,” Belsches said. “It is a testament to just how valued Richmond and Virginia’s histories are.

“You can’t talk about any aspect of the human experience without talking about Virginia and Richmond.”

A key focus of Belsches' presentation was the historic Jackson Ward district, which served as a central location for Richmond's Black businesses.

Jackson Ward was the home of Maggie L. Walker, the first known Black woman to found and become the president of a chartered bank in America, and Dr. William Ferguson Reid, who in 1967 became the first African American elected to the Virginia General Assembly since the late 1800s.

Over the years, Walker hosted Black educational and business leaders such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington and Mary McLeod Bethune, which helped further spread civil rights activism in the U.S.

Belsches said the blessing and beauty of sharing Richmond's history is that the attendees can share that newly gained knowledge. "These incredible members can travel back to their locales and spread these incredible stories," she said.

The IATC is a nonprofit that was founded in 1924 in Minneapolis. The organization has [51 chapters throughout the U.S. and Canada](#), including eight in Virginia. Unlike service clubs that focus on supporting causes and raising money, Torch Clubs are geared toward sharing information on interesting topics.

Gerald Stule, who is the president of the Saratoga, New York club and the regional director for five Northeast Torch Clubs, prides himself on knowing history but said every part of the Black capitalism discussion was new to him.

"The whole idea is to expose you to topics that you wouldn't normally come across," Stule said. "You can share this experience and you're not isolated to just your own little town or community. You get to share ideas with people from all around."

Sam Segrist, president of the Lincoln, Nebraska Torch Club, and his girlfriend Jocelyn Bullock traveled to the IATC convention for the first time armed with a heavy interest in learning more about history, particularly Black history.

"Knowing that there was still this history preserved here has been great," Bullock said. "It really makes me wish I had more time in Richmond to be able to really dive in and see and learn."

As this year's host, the Richmond team worked to provide attendees with the full city experience, which included presentations about Richmond's history.

Edwin Slipek, co-founder of [ArchitectureRichmond.com](#) and adjunct instructor at Virginia Commonwealth University, presented "Richmond 101: History, Tradition, and Architecture" to convention attendees Thursday.

The convention also offered tours of landmarks such as St. John's Church, the Black History Museum, the Valentine Museum, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, the Virginia Museum of History & Culture and the State Capitol.

For Segrist and Bullock, taking in the presentations prior to going on the city tours allows them to have more context as they visit the sites.

“These presentations give us things to look for and to consider while we are physically moving throughout the city or going to a museum.” Segrist said. “The value of Torch we see is a way to make history come alive.”

Retired FBI Special Agent Mike Mason has been a member of the Richmond Torch Club for about a year and a half. On Saturday, he is presenting “Carpe Diem! Now and Forever,” which focuses on living life intentionally regardless of age.

“Don’t just seize the day when you’re 18,” Mason, 66, said. “My lust for life is no different than yours right now. When we say wish we were 21 again, what we really mean is I wish I had the knowledge I have now and can be 21 because then we’d all be dangerous.”

Mason appreciates that the Torch Club fosters an environment where people can shake hands or even get a drink together whether they agree or disagree on something.

“I love the club because you’re always learning something new,” Mason said. “I like that the philosophy of the club is that you can talk about anything, just be civil about it.”

[Related Gallery: From the Archives: Jackson Ward in the 1970s and 80s](#)



