

# TRAVEL

Magazine

## Schneider Haus: A mix of History and Tourism

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• **Anish Bhattarai**

“The Joseph Schneider Haus... the nucleus of the city of Kitchener.”

The metal signboard outside Schneider Haus sways slightly in the breeze. It feels like a welcoming hand pointing towards the house, calling visitors to take a closer look. Beyond the fence, the large white house stands proudly. The



Schneider Haus, Kitchener's first house is still standing today after 200 years. It was built in 1816 by a German Mennonite couple.

*Photo credit: Anish Bhattarai/Conestoga College.*

wide, green porch stretches out like open arms, ready to welcome visitors.

Schneider Haus, a five-minute walk away from Kitchener's Victoria Park, sits quietly at the corner of David Street and Queen Street South. Built in 1816, this house is the oldest building in Kitchener

and the birthplace of what was once the village of Berlin. It was designated a National Historic Site on May 4, 1999, under the Historic Sites and Monuments Act.

Today, Kitchener buzzes with over 250,000 residents. The city has changed over the years, with its

skyline growing taller. But the foundation of the city, Schneider Haus, remains a calm, steady reminder of the city's beginnings.

Walking up to the house, the crunch of gravel beneath your feet fills the air. The scent of the green grass blends with the aroma of aged wood almost as if the house is breathing its history into the air.

The story of the house is just as interesting. It feels as if grandmother is telling a story, an old story. It feels as if the cold December wind is brushing against the skin. Joseph and Barbara Schneider, German Mennonites from Pennsylvania, built this house and started what would grow into a thriving community.

"After Joseph and Barbara Schneider settled here, their community followed, forming the first organized settlement," says Karl Kessler, a local historian.

Back in the early 1800s, the Schneiders and their fellow Mennonites bought this land for about a dollar per acre. It was part of the Haldimand Tract.

"They held a lottery to allocate the land," explains John Jones, a museum experience specialist. "Families would buy into the scheme, and names were drawn to decide which lot they'd receive."

Some people still debate whether the transaction of land was fair. Advocates of this theory say the land was taken unfairly from Indigenous people.

"They (Indigenous people) just signed and said it's your land because they thought land was a common thing," Jones says.

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Inside the house, there's a grand hall on the first floor. Visitors can



**John Jones, museum experience specialist, shares the story of Schneider Haus. Jones migrated from UK to Canada, and is working at Schneider Haus for 6 years.**

*Photo credit: Anish Bhattacharai/Conestoga College.*

smell the strong wood polish that fills the air. With every step, the creak of the wooden floorboards echoes softly, as if the house is whispering its story.

The Schneiders and other Mennonites settled here for freedom—the freedom to speak their language and practice their religion without fear. "At the time, German Mennonites faced persecution for their Protestant beliefs," Jones adds. This search for safety and community brought them together.

Joseph Schneider didn't just build a house; he built the foundation of a town. He constructed a sawmill where a Tim Hortons now stands, and the roads he built became King and Queen Streets.

Even today, Schneider Haus is like a time machine. Visitors can run their hands over the smooth, cool stairs, imagining the Schneiders walking those same steps. The house still holds its original charm, although its barns and summer kitchen have been lost over the years.

Over time, Schneider Haus has

served many purposes, including as an office building and even a mini-golf course. That golf course, run by women, was Kitchener's first women-owned business. Eventually, the city saved the house and turned it into the museum it is today.

Today, hundreds of people visit Schneider Haus daily. "This house reminds me of my grandparent's house," visitors say. German Mennonites sound prouder when they visit the Haus. "For German Mennonites, it is a heritage," Jones says. People from as far as Eastern Europe come to visit the house. German Mennonites treat this house as their cultural heritage, and people of Kitchener treat it as the historical site, making it a blend of cultural and heritage site.

Whether it's the feel of the weathered wood, the smell of history in the air, or the stories echoing in its halls, the house offers more than a glimpse into the past. Schneider Haus is more than a building; it is a piece of living history, where every corner, every window, holds the echoes of Kitchener's journey.