

Dr. Jeffrey Schenker: Historic Advocate Award

By Pat Johnson



Dr. Schenker, 2025.
Photo credit: Pat Johnson.

Dr. Jeffrey Schenker has earned the Virginia E. Haines Historic Advocate Award for 2025. Schenker has earned this honor by enriching the cultural fabric of Ocean County through dedication to the organizations and the people of Ocean County through his work with the Ocean County Historical Society as President and Vice-President and for his years as AP History Teacher at Toms River South and as Adjunct Professor of History with Ocean County College.

Schenker has devoted eight years in governing the Society, he was vice president for four years and will end his second term as president on June 1. That doesn't mean he will step away from the Society he loves; Schenker and Vice-President Pat Moore will both stay on as trustees as the Society steps up their role in celebrating the 250th Anniversary of the American Revolution. The Ocean County Cultural & Heritage Commission and the state have been promoting the Anniversary for several years already, this year is the anniversary of the 'shot heard around the world' and next year will be the anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Celebrations will culminate in the anniversary of the signing of the constitution in 1787. There is a speaker series at the Society's museum pertaining to the Revolutionary War and a timeline will juxtapose events in the country with those in Ocean County (when it was part of Monmouth County.)

The Society is based in the Elizabeth Sculthorp Force Victorian house, 26 Headley Avenue in Toms River, which serves as a museum and research center. The top floors of the museum reproduce what it was like to live in the 1850s. This is the second year the Society offers tours to all the third grade school children in Ocean County. Schenker said the children are fascinated with the artifacts. "For instance, I show them a writing desk and explain that was the lap top of the Victorian Age."

A newer addition to the house contains the Richard L. Strickler Research Center with books on history and genealogical materials. "One of the things we're very proud of is our professional research team. We take calls from all over the country from people with ancestors here. We have files on people, houses and places in Ocean County, cemetery records and

newspapers going back to the 1800s."

Besides the Revolutionary War exhibits, the Museum also houses an extensive Native American artifact and fossil collection, a collection that Schenker was instrumental in taking out of storage boxes. Also find exhibits on the Civil War and World Wars I and II and the roles citizens of Ocean County played in them.

Schenker said he is very proud of his initiative to establish an annual Ocean County History Day held in September, now in its fifth year. "We invite all the historical societies in the county to come and tell their story and fundraise. We have historic reenactors and museum tours." Historical societies are also invited to a holiday event held in November at Toms River High School South.

Schenker grew up in Fairlawn, New Jersey and was always interested in American history—although he graduated from Ryder College in 1979 with a business education degree. He moved to Toms River right after college to teach in Toms River High School South, where he taught for 23 years. “I fell in love with the area and I realized it was very rich in history.”

He went back to school to get certified to teach history and later completed a Masters Degree in History from Monmouth College and a Doctorate in American History from Drew University.

Schenker is currently an adjunct history professor at Ocean County College. “I think that whether somebody does or does not like history depends on if they had good teachers –history is about telling stories and personalizing it,” he said.

“I’ve always been exceedingly interested in the Revolutionary War,” said Schenker. He portrays George Washington and Toms River privateer Joshua Huddy for historical societies and senior communities free of charge. He also volunteers lectures on other historical subjects: the D-Day invasion of WWII, November armistice of WWI and the part New Jersey played in them.

This year the Ocean County Historical Society is celebrating their own milestone, their 75th anniversary. Schenker has written an article on the Society’s history in their newsletter, *The Scroll*. “During the Centennial of the birth of Ocean County, a group of

gentlemen realized it was the only county in the state that did not have a historical society. Initially the Society didn’t have a home of their own; they met in the 1850 county court house. The founding fathers collected 300 artifacts and we still have them on display.”

Schenker explained that the Scoffer family had sold the Victorian building to the county in the early 1800s and it was located on Hooper Ave. As Ocean County grew, the county had no use for the house and they gave it to the Ocean County Historical Society for \$1. It cost \$5,000 to have it jacked up and moved to its present location on land donated by the Birdsall Family. The museum opened in 1970.

“We have the charter signed by 88 of the 89 members and the first president was Dr. Hilliard from Manahawkin,” said Schenker. “Sometimes I look at the charter and am in awe that my name now will be linked with those early people. It means a lot to me.”

The Ocean County Historical Society’s Museum is open to the public Tuesday and Thursday and first and third Saturdays of the month from 1 to 3 p.m. Group tours should make appointments. The research center is open Tuesdays and Wednesdays and first and third Saturdays from 1 to 4 p.m., but call first. Both museum and research center are staffed by volunteers from their 200-plus membership.



Recreated schoolhouse room, Ocean County Historical Society.
Photo credit: Pat Johnson.