

The Canvasback

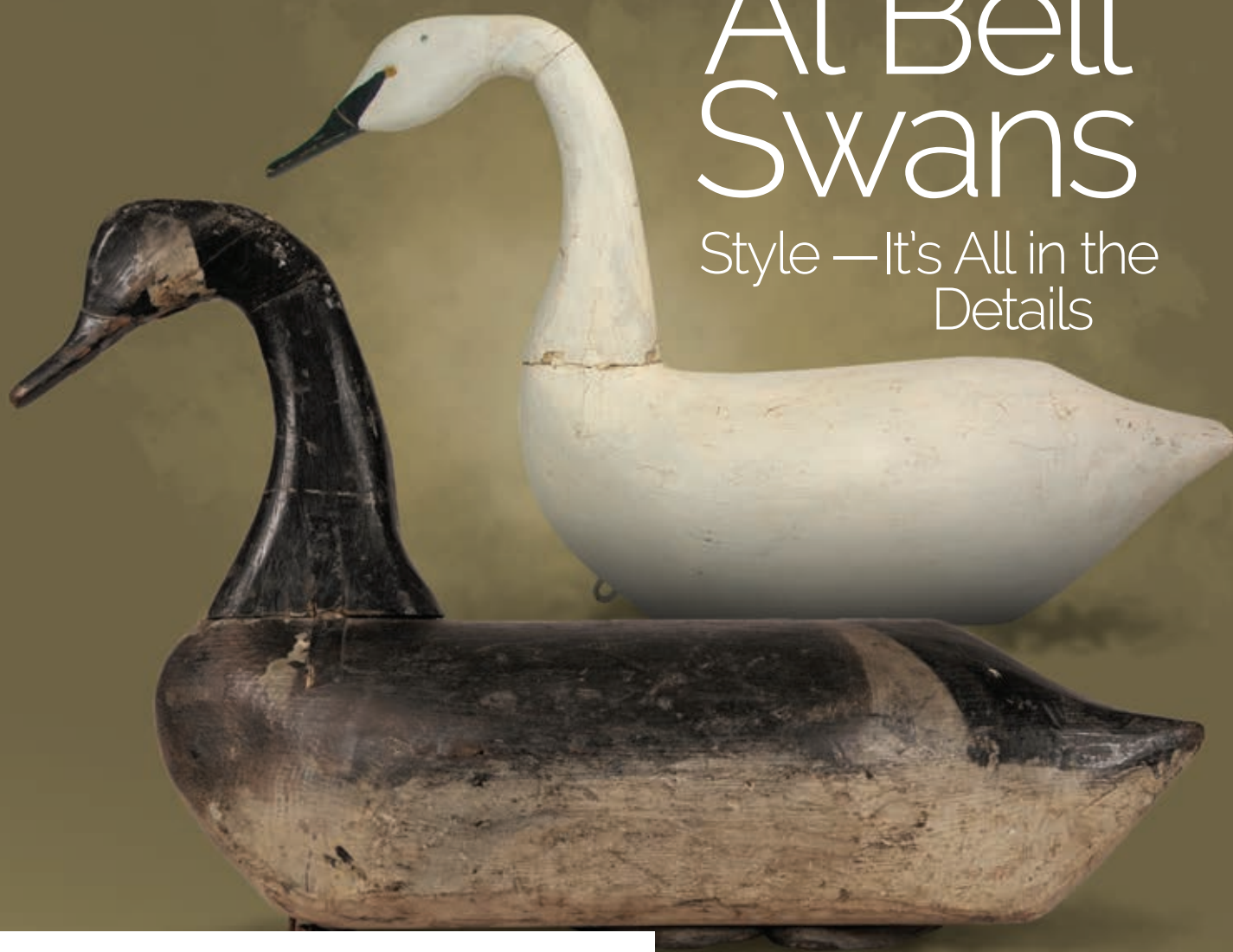
HAVRE DE GRACE DECOY MUSEUM

Winter 2016
Vol. 26 No. 1

\$3.00

The Al Bell Swans

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can•vas•back (kan'ves bak'), *n., pl. -backs*, (esp. collectively) — **back**.

1. a north american wild duck, the male of which has a whitish back and a reddish-brown head and neck. **2.** a style of decoy made famous by carvers of the Susquehanna Flats region. **3.** a quarterly publication of the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum.



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FUNDED IN PART BY
Maryland State Arts Council •
City of Havre de Grace • Harford County

The Havre de Grace Decoy Museum is funded by an operating grant from the Maryland State Arts Council, an agency dedicated to cultivating a vibrant cultural community where the arts thrive. Funding for the Maryland State Arts Council is also provided by the National Endowment for the arts, a federal agency.

The Museum was incorporated in 1981 as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization which exists to document and interpret waterfowl decoys as this art form applies to the social and economic life of the upper Chesapeake Bay region. Contributions made to the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum Tax may be deductible.



ON THE COVER

C. John Sullivan, Jr. explores the provenance of some swan decoys that had long been attributed by collectors to the Cockey family of Kent Island, Maryland. By comparing specific aspects of the carving style and assembly methods of the swans with other decoys of known provenance, John has concluded that the "Cockey swans" were made by carver Al Bell in Baltimore. ■

IN THIS ISSUE

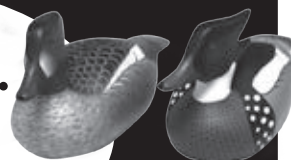
In this issue we also pay tribute to one of the founders of the Decoy Museum and our longest-serving director, Madelyn Mitchell Shank, and her husband of 62 years, Ellsworth B. Shank—both of whom were passionate supporters of the Decoy Museum and the City of Havre de Grace. We feel lost without them. ■



Join the Conversation.

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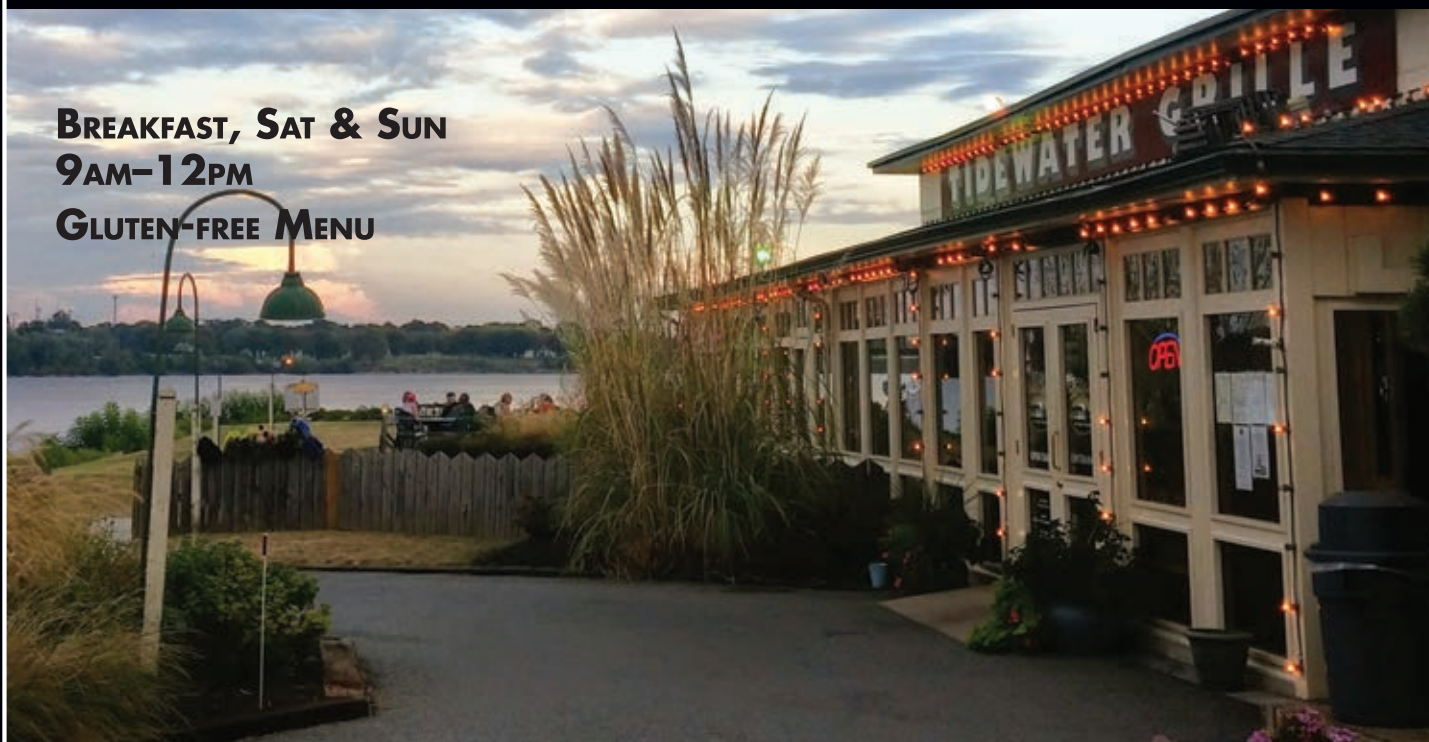
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EDITOR

James W. Carroll, Jr.

CONTRIBUTORS

Bonnie Castillo
Eleanor Coale
Margaret Jones
C. John Sullivan, Jr.
Jim Trimble

PHOTOGRAPHY

Heppner Imaging
Adam Rybczynski

DESIGN

iDesign Graphics

PRINTING

Stockson Printing Company

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From the President

Dear Museum Member,

This issue honors one of my dearest friends and a great lady whose enormous contributions to the founding and growth of the Decoy Museum can not be expressed in a few words. We are all diminished by her passing on October 12th, and it weighs heavily on my heart. We all loved Madelyn Mitchell Shank, and her spirit will always be with us.



Photo by Leo Heppner

Under the leadership of Kerri Kneisley, our new Executive Director, we are hard at work preparing for the 35th Annual Havre de Grace Decoy and Wildlife Art Festival—as always, on the first weekend of May. We are grateful to the Havre de Grace City Council and our new Mayor Bill Martin for their support of the Decoy Museum's key fundraising event.

Shannon Dimmig and young brothers Daniel and Jonathon Irons have agreed to be our Honorary Co-Chairs for 2016. Decoy making has evolved from the creation of utilitarian and everyday hunting necessities by the watermen who used them. Decoy makers and other artists are now producing stunning creations by employing modern techniques and methods of artistic expression. Either way, it is all about sculpture, painting, and the artist's interpretation of waterfowl and other birds.

A canvasback drake by Shannon and fellow carver Bill Veasey was chosen by Ducks Unlimited as the winner of this year's Maryland Decoy of the Year competition and is a companion to the 2015-2016 Maryland duck stamp. Jonathan and Daniel are not yet old enough to drive, but they too have turned out many award-winning masterpieces. You won't want to miss these three amazing folk artists.

The winter's big fundraising event is the R. Madison Mitchell Endowment Trust banquet on Friday, March 11th at the Bayou Restaurant. Mr. Mitchell established the Endowment Trust to carry out his vision for the Decoy Museum. The annual banquet is its primary source of funds, and this will be its 23rd year.

The Endowment Trust is independent of the Museum, but its sole mission is to aid the Decoy Museum's acquisition, interpretation, and preservation of decoys and related waterfowl artifacts. The banquet is a fun evening for all and a great opportunity to meet and greet other Museum supporters, decoy collectors, and waterfowlers.

The fall raffle and the Annual Appeal were both successful. Please give us a call if you have a decoy or other piece of waterfowl art to donate to the Museum for future raffles and other fund raising efforts. Please also consider including the Endowment Trust in your estate plans.

We will continue to be relentless in seeking new members and in reminding and encouraging our members to renew and upgrade. We are grateful for your loyalty, so please be active, attend our events, and introduce your friends and family—your support keeps us strong. We are here for you and because of you.

Save the dates! The Endowment Trust banquet (**Friday, March 11th**) and the Decoy Festival (**the weekend of May 6th – 8th**). Thanks, and see you soon!

Sincerely,

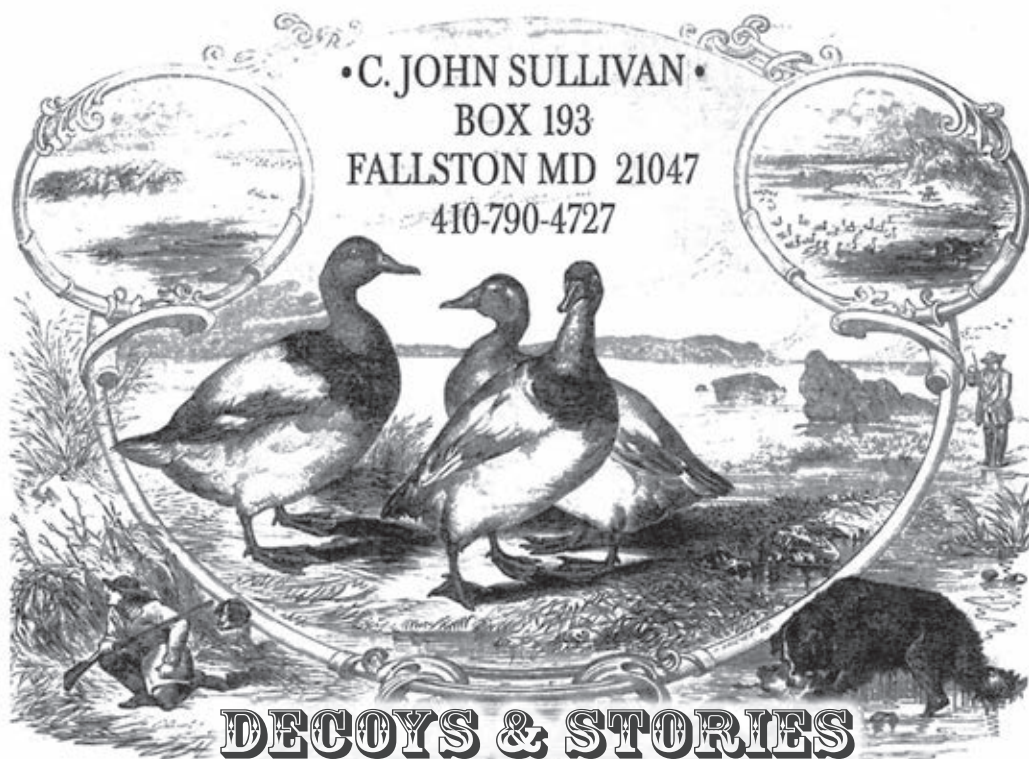
A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Pat Vincenti". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized "P" and "V".

Pat Vincenti

Matthew Bachman and David Murray Perform at Benefit for Decoy Museum

Thanks to Harford County's own Matthew Bachman, pianist, and David Murray, trombonist, for performing a beautiful recital on Sunday, January 17th at St. Matthew Lutheran Church in Bel Air to benefit the Decoy Museum. Matt is the grandson of Margaret and the late Harry Hopkins of Churchville – longtime Decoy Museum supporters. Both are former students of Decoy Museum Curator Ginny Sanders who have gone on to earn advanced degrees in music.

Their well-chosen selections put emphasis on “water” as a theme. Everyone stuck around afterwards to mingle and enjoy some coffee and home-baked cookies. For those who joined us, it was great to see you and to share something very special. ■



J. Evans McKinney Old Decoy Contest 2016 COMPETITION

The 14th annual J. Evans McKinney Old Decoy Contest will be held on Saturday, May 7th at the Middle School Gym in conjunction with the 2016 Havre de Grace Decoy & Wildlife Art Festival. Entries will be accepted at the stage area from 10:00 a.m. until judging at noon. Joe Engers, Editor and Publisher of Decoy Magazine will head up a three-member judge's panel.

A blue ribbon will be awarded for each of the ten competition category winners, and the panel will select a Best-in-Show winner. Winners are requested to display their decoys and ribbons at the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum for the three months following the Festival.

Competition Categories

1. Best Cecil County Black Duck
2. Best Harford County Black Duck
3. Best Holly Family Diving Duck
4. Best Dye Family Diving Duck
5. Best Graham / Graham Family Diving Duck
6. Best Jobes Family Canvasback
(age requirements waived)
7. Best Queen Anne / Kent County Canvasback
8. Best Crisfield Black Duck
9. Best Virginia Shorebird
10. Best Unknown



Rules: Last year's winning birds are ineligible for entry, regardless of category. There are no restrictions as to those who can participate or number of categories entered; however, participants are restricted to no more than three birds per category and each decoy will be limited to one category only. Participants must make a good faith effort to ensure that their decoy entries were made prior to 1950. Matched pairs entered in other than a Matched Pair category will be considered as one entry. Competition decoys will be kept in a highly visible roped-off secure area and will not be handled by the public. Once the judges have made their selections, at approximately 1:00 p.m. the public will be invited to view the roped-off and secure tables. Competition issues will be resolved at the sole discretion of the Contest Chairman and/or the Chief Judge. Questions? Please contact contest chairman Jim Trimble (703-768-7264 or potomacduck@cox.net).

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Everyone is Welcome to Join in the Fun!

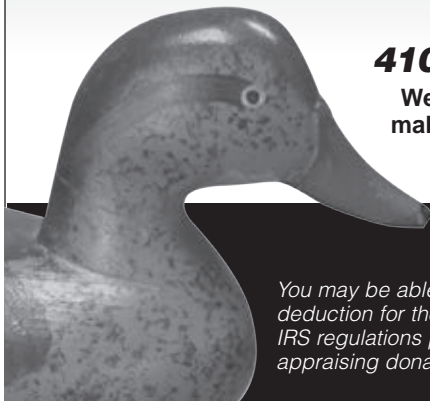
Downsizing? Changing your collection?

If you have decoys, wildlife art, and waterfowling memorabilia packed away in closets, attics, garages, and basements that you just do not know what to do with — please consider donating these items to the Museum.

The Decoy Museum can turn your unwanted items into much-needed operating revenue. In-kind gifts will be gratefully received by the Museum and will help preserve history for generations to come.

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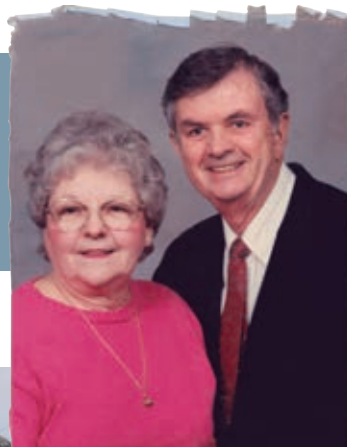
...OUR NORTH, OUR SOUTH, OUR EAST AND WEST...*

BY JAMES W. CARROLL, JR.

*Funeral Blues by W.H. Auden

MADELYN MITCHELL SHANK

February 10, 1928
October 12, 2015



ELLSWORTH B. SHANK

August 18, 1927
November 15, 2015

Photo: Heppner Imaging



Photo: Adam Rybczynski



Madelyn Mitchell Shank, one of the Decoy Museum's founders and guiding lights died on Monday, October 12th at the age of 87. We cannot overstate our feelings of sadness and loss. There will never be another Madelyn, and our hearts are broken. Undoubtedly, it was the brokenness of his own heart that precipitated the death of Madelyn's husband of 62 years, Ellsworth B. Shank, a little more than a month later on November 15th.

In addition to their devotion to their family, both Madelyn and Ells were passionate supporters of the City of Havre de Grace. They took a keen interest in their hometown and were well known for their

encyclopedia knowledge of its history. It seemed that they knew everyone and everyone knew them, and they earned a well-deserved reputation for getting things done. Their enthusiasm for the City was infectious, and they were always able to find eager volunteers to help on their undertakings. "Friend raising" was one of the things they did best.

Madelyn was born and raised in Havre de Grace, the daughter of renowned decoy carver and funeral home owner R. Madison Mitchell and Helen Maslin. After graduating in 1945 from Havre de Grace High School, she earned a degree in 1948 from the Eckels College of Mortuary Science in Philadelphia and became one

of the first women in Maryland to hold a mortician's license.

She began her career working for her father who established the Mitchell Funeral Home in 1924. It later became Mitchell-Smith Funeral Home and is now the Zellman Funeral Home. Madelyn subsequently worked for the Crouch Funeral Home in North East and served part time at the Zellman Funeral Home.

Madelyn enjoyed "helping families arrange for funerals", said her son, E. Mitchell "Mitch" Shank, a former member of both the Havre de Grace City Council and Harford County Council. Fred Zellman said, "Madelyn was unique. She was very efficient and detail-oriented, and



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she had a memory like no one I've ever known. She knew how to handle our families and was always great on the follow-through. She was the kind of person who didn't wait for the world to come to her; she went out and greeted it."

Her father had his decoy shop behind the Mitchell home and funeral business on Washington Street. R. Madison Mitchell was arguably the Upper Bay's most prolific and best-known practitioner of the folk art of decoy making with a reputation that extended far beyond the Upper Bay region.

In 1982 the Havre de Grace Decoy and Wildlife Art Festival was started, and the Decoy Museum opened its doors in 1986. Toward the end of his life, Mr. Mitchell began the R. Madison Mitchell Endowment Trust to provide a permanent, long-range source of annual income to aid the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum's interpretation, preservation, and acquisition of decoys and related waterfowl items. Madelyn was a driving force behind all three and was a permanent founding member of the Boards of both the Endowment and the Museum.

She was always a strong presence and was determined to preserve her father's legacy, both at the Museum and in the City of Havre de Grace, generally. She was proud that the Endowment Trust greatly exceeded her father's modest expectations; Mr. Mitchell's original goal was to raise \$50,000 in order to begin to give back to the Museum. He thought that would take about seven years—but it only took three. To date, the Trust has raised over \$1 million to benefit the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum.

"The significance of the Museum was important to her and her family, and she had a strong love for everything this Museum stands for," said Kerri S. Kneisley, the Museum's executive director.

Madelyn is remembered as a very proper lady who was never seen in slacks. The difference was stark in the Decoy Museum

Board meetings. The men often looked like they had come straight from a duck blind, but Madelyn always looked like she had come from (or was on her way to) a reception at the White House. As feisty, opinionated, and blunt as she was, a scolding never seemed outside the realm of possibility, especially where the image of her beloved Decoy Museum was concerned.

Patrick Vincenti is the president of the Decoy Museum, a Harford County

knowledgeable about Havre de Grace history," Vincenti said, noting that she was the prime mover in nurturing the Museum as it grew. "She was an integral part of the Museum and most of the other nonprofits in town. She was always a very strong supporter of volunteerism. She didn't just talk the talk, she walked the walk," Vincenti said. "She was very giving of her time, energy, and treasure. You could depend on her for anything."



SHE WAS VERY GIVING OF HER TIME, ENERGY, AND TREASURE.
YOU COULD DEPEND ON HER FOR ANYTHING.

Councilman, and a Havre de Grace native who with his family has long been a leader in the City's waterfowl carving profession. He first met Madelyn in the 1970s, while visiting her father in his decoy shop. Since those early days, he has worked closely with the Mitchell family, and served with Madelyn on both the Endowment and the Museum Boards. Her place of honor in the boardroom was at the end of the table opposite Pat, and their great respect and affection for each other was palpable.

"She was one of my dearest friends and just a great lady. She was very, very

Current Havre de Grace Mayor Bill Martin said he met Madelyn about a decade ago while on the Board for the Lock House. "She was always very nice to me," Martin said, explaining it wasn't until a bit later that he "realized what an amazing woman she was ... the impact her family had on the City, and history of the City, is immeasurable." He called the Shanks "an amazing family" that represents "everything that is quintessential Havre de Grace."

Maryland Planning Secretary David R. Craig, Havre de Grace's former mayor and

former Harford County Executive also recalled first meeting Madelyn through her activities with the Lock House. Like Martin, Craig said Madelyn “really played a key role in getting that started.”

“She was just a true Havre de Grace girl,” Craig said, adding that Madelyn was “involved with so many” things. “She was always just very good about moving forward ... always very friendly, very social, always willing to talk to you, to give advice on things.”

In 1975, Madelyn and Craig’s mother served together on the committee that raised money to erect a statue of the Marquis de Lafayette at the intersection of Union Avenue and Warren Street. According to local legend, General Lafayette, a Revolutionary War hero, gave the City its name because it reminded him of Le Havre in his native France. This was done to recognize the approaching US bicentennial in 1976 and Havre de Grace’s very significant ties to the Revolution.

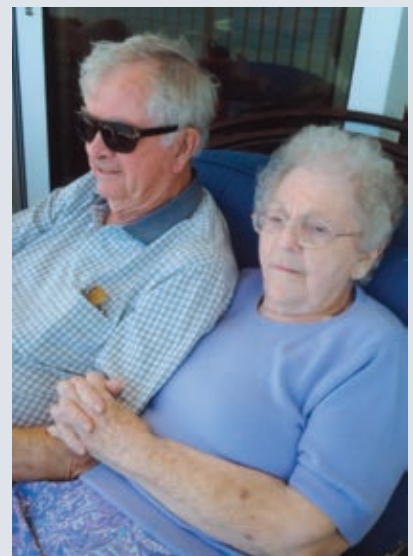
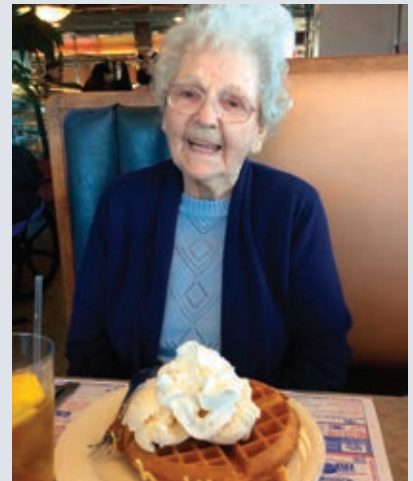
Madelyn’s other accomplishments were legion:

- She was a life member and served on the Board of Directors of the Susquehanna Museum at the Lock House. The Lock House museum marks the southern terminus of the 45-mile Susquehanna & Tidewater Canal, completed in 1840, which connected Havre de Grace to Wrightsville, PA, until ceasing operation around 1900. Notably, her maternal grandfather was the last official lockkeeper.
- She was a founder, co-chair, and volunteer coordinator for more than 30 years of the Candlelight Tour of Historic Houses in Havre de Grace, an annual event that raises money for the Lock House.
- She helped found the City’s Soroptimist International group and was a charter member.
- She was a member for more than 80 years of the First Presbyterian Church, where she was a deacon and elder. She was one of the first women to serve on the church’s ruling body.
- In 2011, she was inducted into the Havre de Grace High School Hall of Fame,
- In June 2015, she and her younger brother, R. Madison “Mitch” Mitchell Jr. were honored by the Harford County Council as Harford County Living Treasures. At that time she told The Aegis newspaper that “you might say it is funny for someone to say they enjoyed working at a funeral home. I think one of the best things that ever happened to me was working with my father at the funeral home.”

Madelyn was also a dedicated note writer who was always thoughtful in expressing her appreciation, condolences, or whatever was appropriate for the occasion.

Ells, 88, was born in Penryn, PA, to Ellsworth Decker Shank and Mary Eliza Biesmesderfer Shank. After serving in the Navy and completing college at Franklin & Marshall and graduate school at Columbia University, he came to work at Aberdeen Proving Ground in June 1949 as a statistician and mathematician. He started at the Ballistics Research Lab, worked with air defense systems, as an analytical statistician, and as an operations research analyst in weapons effectiveness.

In the early 1950s, Madelyn helped out in the stationery shop of one of her relatives. A friend of Ells had noticed the attractive and appealing young lady in the shop





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and encouraged Ells to find an excuse to drop by and check her out. Ells did so and reported back to his friend favorably. When confronted by the friend as to why he did not take the next step and ask her out, Ells—later known for his keen sense of thrift—pointed out that it was just before Christmas and if he waited until after the holidays, he could avoid buying her a gift.

They married in 1953, and the marriage was one that enriched family, friends, and community for over six decades. Their union produced two sons (E. Mitchell “Mitch” Shank, his wife Jessica Hartmann Shank, the late John Andrew “Andy” Shank, and his former wife Mary Kamberger), three grandchildren (Jeriah David Shank, his wife Shawna Lynn Shank, Catherine “Michi” Shank and R. J. Smith, and the late John Andrew “Drew” Shank), and three great-grandchildren (Hannah Lynn Shank, Kaylee Lynn Shank, and the late Brenna Lynn Shank).

After retiring, Ells’ priority became the Lock House, where he had been a member since 1976, serving as Curator and on the Board of Directors. His special projects included restoration of the southern terminus of the Canal, reconstruction of the pivot bridge, the canal basin, and the tow-path, stabilizing the canal chamber locks,



and efforts to restore the canal to working condition.

Ells also was a member, deacon, elder, trustee, Sunday school teacher and Superintendent at the First Presbyterian Church of Havre de Grace. His great passion was history, and he amassed a substantial library of books about Havre de Grace. He established the Ellsworth B. Shank Lecture Series at the Lock House.

His family restored the 1787 home of Elizabeth Rodgers, mother of Navy hero Commodore John Rogers. The house is thought to be the oldest to have survived the burning of Havre de Grace by the British in 1813.

Ells was active in the 1976 US Bicentennial celebration and served on the Board of Directors for Havre de Grace’s Bicentennial Committee in 1985. He was designated as a Harford County Living Treasure in 2002.

While Madelyn was a prolific writer of personal notes, Ells was a prolific scribe of the history that he loved. Whereas Madelyn’s penmanship was beautiful, Ells could often not decipher his own cursive writing.



People remember his fun-loving nature and sense of humor, like giving the dogs Christmas cards with notes directing the dogs to get specific human family members to read them aloud to the dogs.

They enjoyed traveling and Madelyn loved collecting antiques. The Shanks traveled extensively as a family, and Ells and Madelyn made certain that their children and grandchildren had all of the wonderful and life-altering experiences that such travel has to offer. Son Mitch said they both believed that “books were good” but that nothing could compare to the actual first-hand experience. Their preferred mode of family travel was a vehicle that Madelyn insistently referred to as a “motor home”. A stern correction would be forthcoming to anyone who slipped and called it a “camper”—too *déclassé*.

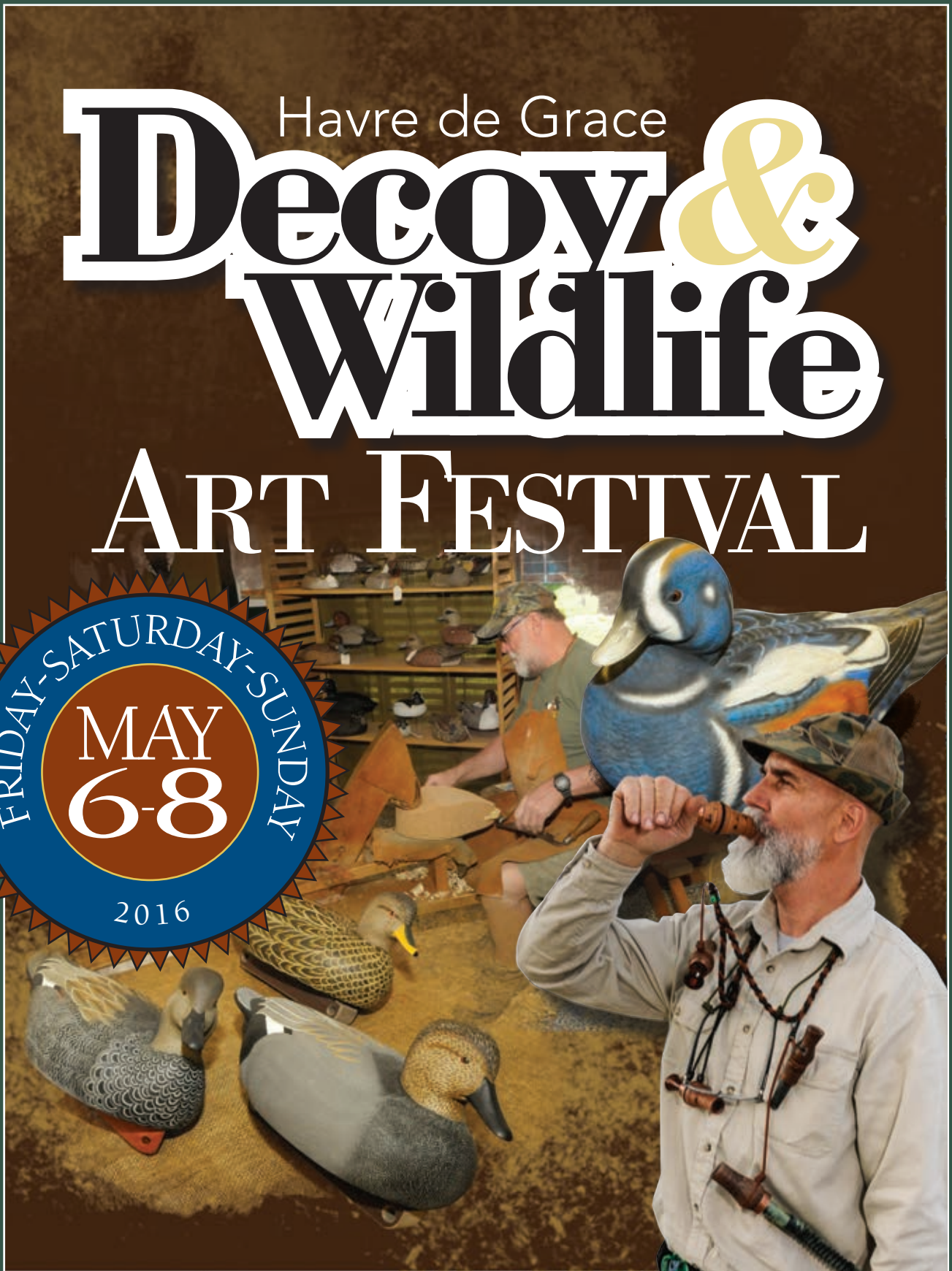
Ells and Madelyn were wonderful people, and we were blessed to have shared part of their lives. We will find our way again, but right now we feel lost without them.

The family has asked that anyone wishing to make a memorial gift may please do so to The Havre de Grace Decoy Museum, 215 Giles Street, Havre de Grace, MD 21078 or The R. Madison Mitchell Endowment Trust, P. O. Box 796, Havre de Grace, MD 21078. ■

SAVE THE DATE

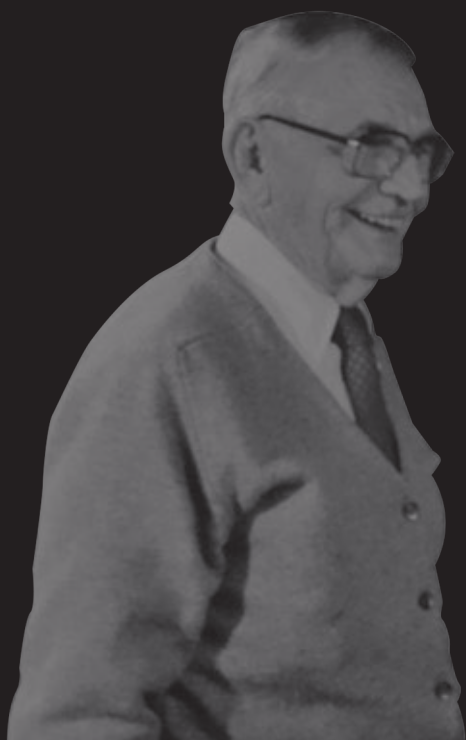
Havre de Grace

Decoy & Wildlife ART FESTIVAL





THE 23RD ANNUAL **R. Madison Mitchell** Endowment Trust Banquet



R. Madison Mitchell was not only one of the most famous and prolific decoy carvers of the past 200 years, he was also a driving force behind the creation of the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum and the Decoy and Wildlife Art Festival, now in its 35th year, where he was recognized as the first Honorary Chairman. He established the Endowment Trust before his death in 1993.

The 2016 R. Madison Mitchell Endowment Trust banquet will be held at the Bayou Restaurant on Friday, March 11th. We hope to avoid the heavy snow we had last year, but the banquet is always an early sell-out anyway with supporters from Maryland, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Virginia.

It is always a great evening that gives our supporters a chance to give back to a cause dear to everyone's heart and to have a wonderful and memorable evening in the process. Lou and Terry Ward always serve an excellent dinner that is preceded by a cocktail mingle with lots of tempting finger food. There will be a silent auc-

FRIDAY, MARCH 11TH
MR. MITCHELL'S 115TH BIRTHDAY



tion, live auction, and raffles that give all supporters a chance to walk away with something. It's a great opportunity to meet and greet other Museum supporters, decoy makers, decoy collectors, and waterfowlers.

The R. Madison Mitchell Endowment Trust, a 501(c)(3) charitable corporation, was established by Mr. Mitchell to provide a permanent, long-range source of support to the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum. The Trust exists solely to aid the Decoy Museum's acquisition, interpretation, and preservation of decoys, waterfowl artifacts, and other appropriate projects. Mr.

Mitchell's original goal was to raise \$50,000 in order to begin to give back to the Museum. He thought that would take about seven years – but it only took three years. To date, the Trust has raised over \$1 million. Mr. Mitchell would be enormously gratified by the support given to his modest ambition.

The Endowment is vital to the future of the Decoy Museum, so please make plans early to join us on Friday, March 11th and make the banquet another successful fundraiser for both the Endowment and the Museum. ■



Save the Date!

**Friday, March 11, 2016
at the Bayou Restaurant**

Route 40, Havre de Grace, Maryland

Cocktails at 6:00pm

Dinner at 7:00pm

Program at 8:00pm

Tickets are \$55.00 per person and are available at the Decoy Museum, Vincenti Decoys, or by calling (410) 734-6238 or see www.RMadisonMitchell.com. Please attend and support the Endowment Trust, which exists solely to benefit the Decoy Museum and to aid its acquisition, interpretation, and preservation of decoys, waterfowl artifacts, and other appropriate projects.

Meet Our Honorary Chairs

You won't want to miss these three amazing folk artists!

SHANNON DIMMIG

Shannon Dimmig came to work about three decades ago in the shop of renowned artist, carver, and Decoy Museum Director Bill Veasey where she attended Bill's classes on carving and painting. Even in those formative years, Bill says she did well in competitions.

Fast forward... a few years ago they reconnected, and Shannon joined him back in his shop where they became partners in carving. Shannon has excelled in competitions, and a Canvasback drake by Shannon and Bill was chosen by Ducks Unlimited as the winner of this year's Maryland Decoy of the Year competition and is a companion to the 2015-2016 Maryland duck stamp.

Bill regards her as one of the most talented airbrush artists in the country. Such is the high regard for Shannon in the community of decoy carvers and waterfowl artists that the carvers asked her to be a judge at the 2014 Decoy and Wildlife Art Festival. We believe that was the first time that a woman judged a hunting decoy class! Keep an eye out for Shannon Dimmig and her waterfowl art. ■



for the 35th Annual Havre de Grace Decoy and Wildlife Art Festival

DANIEL AND JONATHON IRONS

Brothers Daniel and Jonathan are not yet old enough to drive, but these two young carvers from Queenstown, Maryland have turned out many award-winning masterpieces.

In the Ward World Wildfowl Carving Championships in Ocean City, MD earlier this year, Daniel (13) placed first with Best of Show in the “Age 12-15 Decorative Class” with his carving of a Tawny Frogmouth, at right, an exotic bird from Australia. He also placed third with his American Kestrel. This is the third year that Daniel has won the best in show at the World Championships.

Jonathan (11) placed second in the “Age 11 and Under Decorative Class” with his Turquoise-Browed Motmot, at left, a tropical bird from Costa Rica. He also placed third with his American Kestrel. Last Year Jonathan was awarded a Best in Show with his Least Tern. Both started carving when they were 6 years old and got their start by joining the Kent Island Carvers club.

There, they met David Connolly from Centreville who taught the boys how to carve and paint.

Daniel started out carving mostly ducks and songbirds, whereas Jonathan took an early interest in songbirds in addition to tropical birds with bright colors. They have also competed and demonstrated their skill at the Waterfowl Festival in Easton, the Wildfowl Expo in Salisbury, and the Havre de Grace Decoy and Wildlife Art Festival. Daniel and Jonathan are also avid bird watchers and photographers. ■



Havre de Grace Decoy Museum *Spring Raffle*

2016



First Prize
R. Madison Mitchell
Blue-winged Teal: *Pair*



Fourth Prize
George Williams
Gadwall: *Drake*



Third Prize
Jim Pierce
Bufflehead: *Pair*

2nd Prize:
\$400



Fifth Prize
Print of R. Madison
Mitchell shop with
Canvasbacks: *circa*
1950

Winners drawn at 3:30p.m.
Sunday May 8th, during the
35th Annual Havre de Grace
Decoy & Wildlife Art Festival
at the Havre de Grace
Middle School.

TICKETS

- \$5.00 each
- \$25.00 for 6
- \$40.00 for 10

*Tickets are available at the
Museum and have been mailed
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Cash Prize of \$500

2ND PRIZE WINNER

**Mr. & Mrs. Charles
Jacobs of Havre de
Grace, MD**
Pair of Wigeons full size
by Jim Pierce

3RD PRIZE WINNER

**Leroy Shanklin
of Bel Air, MD**
Pair of Mallards half size
by Charles Jobes

4TH PRIZE WINNER

**Stephen Anderson of
Havre de Grace, MD**
Pair of Canvasbacks
donut-style by Vernon
Bryant

5TH PRIZE WINNER

**Bonita Farm of
Darlington, MD**
Framed Print of Ward
brothers and their decoys.

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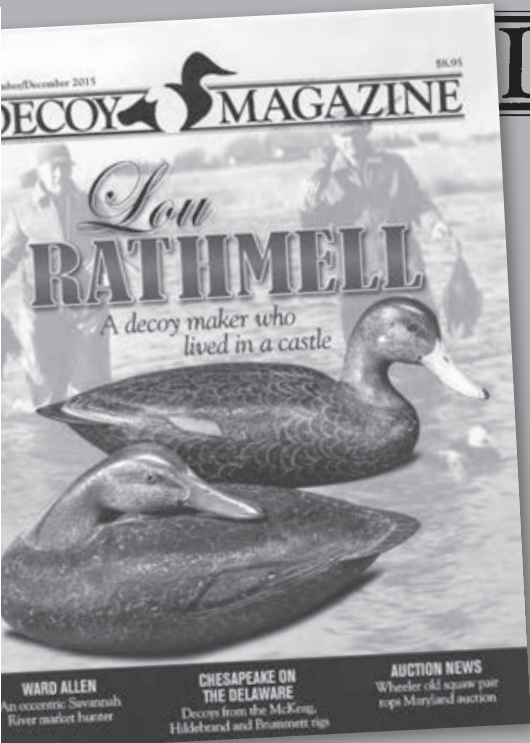
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RARE "COCKEY FAMILY" SWAN DECOYS NOW CREDITED TO THEIR RIGHTFUL MAKER

*Baltimore duck hunter and decoy carver Al Bell fashioned
those magnificent birds*



Magnificent Swan decoy by Al Bell of Baltimore, Maryland from the Keen family collection, the rig mate to the one donated to the Maryland Historical Society. For decades they had been attributed by decoy collectors to John Cockey of Kent Island, Maryland. Despite the confusion in attribution, most collectors would agree they are among the finest Swan decoys to have floated the Chesapeake Bay.

BY C. JOHN SULLIVAN JR.

PHOTOS BY JEFF PELAYO AND
LEO HEPPNER



Attribution, provenance and history are all important to those of us who collect old decoys. My primary focus over the years has been on the history, as the other aspects will follow.

During the summer of 1991, while serving on the Sporting Art Committee of the Maryland Historical Society, the question arose as to the maker of the swan decoy in their collection. The curator advised the committee that the swan was attributed to Al Bell of Baltimore. There was some suggestion, later disproved, that Bell was a virtually unknown African American carver from Baltimore City who made a few decoys.

The Historical Society was preparing an exhibit, "Maryland's Finest Decoys," and the swan was illustrated on the cover of the exhibition catalog and again inside as Plate 56. Obviously, the committee paid little attention to the Society's curator, as the caption for it read: "Swan, maker unknown, Havre de Grace, circa 1910."

Several large bodied Canvasbacks in various repaint from the Keen family's Miller's Island gunning rig. With their elongated bills and carved nostrils, it was no doubt they were carved by the same hand as the Swans.



The next time a similar swan appeared was at Richard Oliver and the Ward Museum's October 12-13, 1996 auction at the Delmarva Conference Center in Delmar, Maryland. Henry Fleckenstein Jr. and I wrote the catalog descriptions for that auction in a warehouse in nearby Salisbury, sitting side by side at a table with the decoys resting before us.

Henry wrote the swan narrative, basing most of his description on a swan that had been offered at a Julia/Guyette auction in September 1987 that featured the collection of Jim Lewis. Both swans were attributed to the Cockey family of Kent Island in Queen Anne's County, Maryland. Julia/Guyette attributed their swan to Jim Cockey while Henry credited the other to John Cockey, Jim's father.

In April 2010 another of these swan decoys, this one painted as a Canada goose, was displayed in Tom Reed's room at the East Coast Decoy Collectors meet in St. Michaels, Maryland. Henry Fleckenstein took a picture of Henry Stansbury holding the decoy. Decoy dean Clark Reed, Tom's father, took the decoy home that day, and a day later it traveled back to Harford County with me. Decoy historian Joel Barber noted in his book, "Wild Fowl

Decoys," published in 1934, that many swans changed species following the outlawing of hunting them in 1918. This is one of them. The form, dimensions, neck bracing, and the large iron ring in the breast all match up with the other known examples.

And just recently, on November 9, 2011, the auction house of Guyette, Schmidt & Deeter, offered another. The description read: "Very rare and important swan decoy, John Cockey, Kent Island, Maryland, 1st quarter 20th century". On the opposite page was a portion of Jim Trimble's Decoy Magazine article from the January/February 2000 issue. Part of it read: "As evident by the variety of attribution given, most knowledgeable collectors agree that certain identification of the skillful hand that crafted these beautiful yet functional lures may forever remain a mystery."

The similarity in form between the three swans offered at auction is evident. The Historical Society's swan seems to have a somewhat fuller body and a head that appears to angle slightly downward. Yet if studied side by side, aligning the heads so that all bill tips are in the same position, the similar carving characteristics quickly become apparent. The blunt tails rise slightly upward to a raised hump approximately one-quarter of the body length for-

ward. The necks are attached to a raised shelf and metal reinforcement straps that extend from the neck to the body are inletted on each side.

The Historical Society swan also differs by the forward cut at the top of the neck and the addition of nearly one inch to the back of the head where it joins the neck. Nonetheless, the form of the head and neck are identical to the others. All known examples have an additional metal strap inletted into the back of the head and extending down the neck, adding strength to this two-piece attachment. The Historical Society swan has a massive iron ballast weight fastened with screws. A large ring to secure the anchor line remains tightly affixed to its breast, similar to other examples.

Just recently I purchased a Canada goose decoy that I've sought for the last 15 years. It's without question carved by the same maker as the swan. The head angles downward in an identical manner as the Historical Society's swan. This attitude is achieved by raising the back of the neck seat a quarter inch higher than the front. The goose displays the reinforcing metal straps in exactly the same position as the swan. The goose has two lead ballast weights, one round and the other triangular, both fastened with hand-forged nails.

From 1987 through 1996, little discussion took place among collectors regarding the obvious contradiction of the Historical Society's attribution of their swan to Baltimore carver Al Bell with the attribution of the Cockey family for the two swans sold at auction. Maybe Jim Trimble was right and the swans would "forever remain a mystery."

Then in the summer of 2009, I received a call from George B. Keen, who owned a rig of decoys used at the famous Miller's Island Ducking Club, which was located

on an island at the mouth of Back River in the Chesapeake Bay in Baltimore County, Maryland. Taking advantage of this enviable opportunity, arrangements were quickly made to visit his home. It wasn't until I entered the house that I realized that the Keen family was the donor of the Historical Society's swan. There resting on top of a china closet in the living room was the swan's rig mate.

Keen graciously allowed me to take his swan down from its high perch. I rested it on the floor and lifted one of the canvasback decoys from the Miller's Island rig. Holding the duck so that the head would

be at the same angle as the swan, there was no question that both were carved by the same hand. I've used that method of comparison for years with decoys in my own collection. Years ago when *Decoy Magazine* published my story on John B. Graham, it illustrated a wonderful pair of his canvasbacks on the cover. When holding one of my mini Graham canvasbacks at the proper distance from the cover, the similarity of profiles is instantly apparent.

Along with the history of those swans, and the original documentation of their donation, I left the Keen home that day with the decoy rig they last used

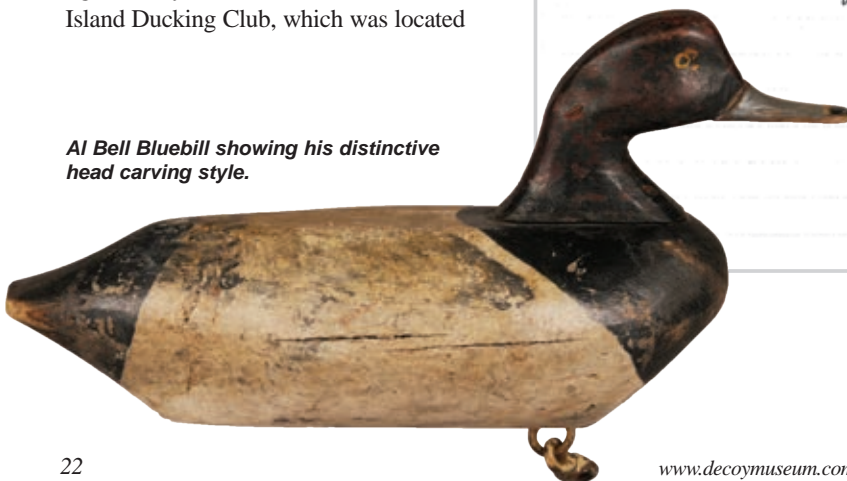
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Al Bell. A Baltimore County duck hunter and decoy carver (era - early 1900's). I believe he was a carpenter by trade. He carved hundreds of decoys for different hunting groups, such as the Keen's, Mann's, Todd's and Lambuth. There were many other groups that used his decoys. My father and his hunting group had as many as 200-300 decoys carved by Mr. Bell, mostly black heads, canvasbacks, and heads plus a few swans. When I was a child, he carved miniature decoys for me. (I still have 3 minis and a full size canvasback.. He was incorrectly identified as a black carver. I am 86 years old - as a young child my father took me on occasion to see Mr. Bell when he replaced some decoys.

Henry B. Mann

HENRY B. MANN
225 JONES ROAD
CHESTER, MD 21619

Al Bell Bluebill showing his distinctive head carving style.



Letter written by Henry B. Mann regarding Al Bell



Protection of swans by the 1918 Migratory Bird Treaty Act resulted in many swan decoys finding a new purpose (and new paint) as Canada geese (below).

Rare Canada Goose by Al Bell with a downward angle to the head in an identical manner as the Swan decoy in the collection of the Maryland Historical Society. Just like the Swans, the Goose displays the reinforcing metal straps that support the neck (see cover).

at Miller's Island. It included several blocky large-bodied canvasbacks with great heads and elongated bills with carved nostrils. There was also a box of carved duck decoy heads—black heads (bluebills) and redheads—with carved nostrils that mimic the cuts of the swans, Canada goose, and canvasbacks.

The history—by discussion with Keen and the documentation he provided—clearly leads to the conclusion that the swans, and his entire rig, were carved by Al Bell of Baltimore. Mr. Keen related that his family originally owned six of the magnificent swans. They were stored under the front porch of the Keen home of Hamilton Avenue, which was literally around the corner from the home of the Bell family.

So who was Al Bell? Unfortunately, little is known of him. Henry Mann, a friend whose family shot at Miller's Island, recalled that Bell lived in the Hamilton

Letter written by George W. Keen to C.A. Porter Hopkins identifying the maker of the Swan decoy that he had donated earlier that year to the Maryland Historical Society.

107 Bellemore Road
Baltimore, Maryland 21201
July 21, 1964

Mr. C. A. Porter Hopkins,
Assistant to the Director,
Maryland Historical Society
201 W. Monument Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21201

Dear Mr. Hopkins:

At the time you received the swan decoy which you now have in the Maryland Historical Society, you inquired about its origin.

This decoy was made by Mr. "Al" Bell, who during retirement years lived with a daughter in northeast Baltimore. He died about 1926 at about age 85. He made decoys and decoy heads for his friends. He was a great story teller and I remember hearing a number of his stories which began with such words as "I remember 50 years ago when." His favorite duck hunting place was Sparrows Point where he gunned with William Fitzell who owned the property before the days of the Steel Company. He also referred many times to Point Breeze, later the location of River View Park and now occupied by the Western Electric Company.

He was a close friend and hunting companion of my father, Austin Jenkins Keen, and my uncle, George Washington Keen, who were club members at Seneca Point (including Brier Point) from about 1905 to 1910 and at Balliston Point from about 1911 to 1916. In about 1916 my father became a member at Guckold Point and my uncle at Hart and Miller Islands where they continued until about 1927. I think it was about 1915 that "Al" Bell presented them with five swan decoys which he had made with wood from an old barn. I obtained possession of these decoys in 1923 and have used them on occasions for duck hunting on the Eastern Shore. It is one of these decoys which I presented to the Maryland Historical Society.

Sincerely yours,

George W. Keen

GWK:dh

section of Baltimore, and described him as an early 20th century duck hunter and decoy maker. Mann wrote in 2006 that Bell “carved hundreds of decoys for different groups, such as the Keens, Manns, Todds and Lamberts. There were many other groups that used his decoys. My father and his hunting group had as many as 200-300 decoys carved by Mr. Bell, most blackheads, canvasbacks, redheads plus a few swans.”

When he was a child, Mann visited Bell, who presented young Henry with several miniature decoys. When I visited him in 2011, Mann sent me to his china closet to view his miniature collection. They had the same form as the great swans. I picked up one of the diminutive decoys and written on the underside was the name Al Bell.

George W. Keen, the father of George B. Keen and the benefactor of the swan, described Al Bell in a 1964 letter to C.A. Porter Hopkins, then assistant to the Director of the Maryland Historical Society. He described Bell as a close friend and hunting companion of his father and uncle. He also recalled that around 1915 Bell presented them with five swan decoys, which he had made with wood from an old barn.

A few other facts about Bell can be gleaned by old directories and census records. Albert A. Bell was born in Pennsylvania in approximately 1866 of

German parents. By 1915 he was living on Catalpha Avenue in the Hamilton section of Baltimore, right around the corner from the Keene family. That year he was listed in the City Directory as a commercial traveler. By 1922, his listed occupation was signalman, consistent with George W. Keen’s recollection that Bell’s career was with the railroad.

In addition to driving through the Hamilton neighborhood for almost eight years of my daily commute, I was a frequent visitor throughout my lifetime to the home of my mother’s first cousin on Catalpha Avenue, just two blocks from Bell’s home. It was a bittersweet discovery. It’s always a great joy to locate and document a little known carver, but this close proximity, though separated by time, causes me to ponder.

These three Al Bell miniatures and a Bluebill head when viewed in profile once again show the distinctive shape of his heads.



Assortment of Redhead and Bluebill heads by Al Bell.



Author John Sullivan with a Swan decoy repainted as a Canada Goose that he purchased at the St. Michael’s show in 2010.

My good friend Robert Hockaday, Jr. has owned four great little miniatures for the past 15 years. Over that time I’ve used my most persuasive arguments to convince him that four was an odd number and that he should give up at least one or two to me. My plea has fallen on deaf ears. His response is always the same: “Just tell me who made them.” And my answer was always the same: “I have no idea.”

I stayed with Bob this past November during the Waterfowl Festival in Easton, Maryland. On the opening day of the show I was able to purchase a full-sized canvasback undoubtedly carved by the same hand as the swan decoys and Bob’s miniatures. Returning to his home that evening I pulled out my new acquisition and compared them to the miniatures. All of the characteristics appear identical.

During the weekend my friend Bill Pugh displayed 30 of his Cockey family decoys in the Artifacts Display in the high school. Bill’s family was closely associated with the Cockeys, knowing them as decoy carvers and guides. Along with the decoys, his display featured Cockey family photographs, decoy patterns and other accoutrements.

Bill brought with him the January/February 2000 issue of *Decoy Magazine* containing Jim Trimble’s article on the Cockey family decoys. He had circled the two swan decoys pictured in that article and had written one word in capital letters

next to them — “NO.” He pointed to the magazine, then to his Cockey decoys, and said quite emphatically, “Not Cockey.”

Before simply accepting this proposition that the swans are not Cockey family decoys, try my method of silhouetting a known Cockey decoy against this swan. Do they share a similar profile or any identifying stylistic characteristics? Draw your own conclusion.

Just recently I opened up Henry Fleckenstein Jr.’s *“Decoys of the Mid-Atlantic Region,”* which he published in 1979. Among the many documented carvers in the book I read this notation: “(A) nother maker from Baltimore, Maryland was A. Bell who made duck and goose decoys and a few swan. Little is known of this maker at the time of the writing, but maybe someone will come forward with information and a few of his decoys when they read this book.”

It took a few years, but at least for Mr. Bell and Mr. Fleckenstein, I have hopefully done that.

I note with interest that when Joel Barber discovered the great Sam Barnes swan decoy under the grape arbor in the yard of a house on Washington Street in Havre de Grace, it was in the yard of Bennett Keen. The Al Bell swan donated to the Maryland Historical Society in 1964 had been stored under the front porch of George Washington Keen of Baltimore. Bennett and George Keen were not only first cousins, but also the source of two fabulous pieces of American folk art. ■

C. John Sullivan Jr., is a renowned authority and long-time collector of Upper Chesapeake Bay decoys, a historian of all things related to waterfowling, and has published numerous books and articles. He is a special consultant to the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum.

This article originally appeared in the September/October 2011 issue of *Decoy Magazine* and has been reprinted with their kind consent.

GONE WITH THE WINDS OF WAR

72,229 acres of some of the finest waterfowling property in the United States

In 1916, over 100 Kent Island, Maryland citizens descended upon Washington, DC, to protest the Federal Government’s intended condemnation of their island home. At this point in time, Europe was in turmoil as Germany invaded its neighboring countries. The United States had not entered the war (WWI), but preparation was in full gear. The U.S. government identified the Chesapeake Bay’s Kent Island as a suitable site for a coastal artillery range.

This delegation, made up primarily of farmers and watermen, including five members of the decoy-making Cockey family, protested this decision on the steps of the U.S. Capitol. John M. Cockey and his father James both participated.

Another suitable Chesapeake Bay site identified was the swampy marsh lowlands located between the Gunpowder and Bush Rivers, mid-way between Baltimore and Havre de Grace, Maryland. The site was sparsely inhabited and marginal farmland at best. The shoreline properties were comprised of large tracts with few owners, all wealthy and influential financiers, industrialists, and other well-to-do East Coast sports.

Located just below the Susquehanna Flats, these lowlands offered some of the finest waterfowl shooting in the United States. The established gun clubs often entertained influential government officials—U.S. Congressmen, Senators, and even a President among them. The owners applied subtle pressure on these politicians, hoping to retain control of these unique waterfowling properties.

In the fall of 1917, the Kent Island delegation was advised that they could keep their island home. The U.S. Government, whose decision was based primarily on preferable rail access, condemned and took by presidential proclamation the waterfowling properties at the head of the bay.

The Santo Domingo, Carroll’s Island, and Philadelphia Ducking Clubs were shut down to make way for the installation of the Edgewood Arsenal. In many cases, the old clubhouses, where no expense had been spared to create luxurious comfort, were used as targets by the artillery units that soon occupied the property. Future government expansion to the north eventually took the Spesutie Island Rod and Gun Club. Current day maps identify these properties as the Edgewood Arsenal and Aberdeen Proving Grounds.

— JIM TRIMBLE

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From the Desk of...

As I write this, I am just concluding my first quarter with the Decoy Museum. It has been a whirlwind time of learning for me—getting to know our dedicated staff, volunteers, and many members, meeting community stakeholders, learning the Museum's business practices, and of course, engrossing myself in the all-important culture and history we strive to advance.

There is always something exciting going on here at the Museum! In October, we hosted the 3rd Annual Susquehanna Flats Classic on the grounds between the Decoy Museum and the former Bayou Hotel. It was a chilly October day, but there were plenty of happenings to observe and hot sandwiches, hot drinks, and amazing baked goods to be enjoyed! Special thanks to Jimmy Wren, Zink Calls, and our other supporters for making this day a huge success and congratulations to all of the winners. Look for this event to be held in conjunction with the 35th Annual Decoy Festival in May.



The Museum also hosted or participated in three events on consecutive weekends in December. On Friday evening, December 4th, staff and volunteers displayed an interactive float in the Havre de Grace Winter Wonderland Parade. On December 5th, we commemorated our 29th Anniversary with an Open House. Sixty members and many other visitors enjoyed a special day here at the Museum, which was beautifully decorated for Christmas. On December 12th, one hundred and thirteen visitors toured the Museum, a designated "stop" during the 43rd Annual Candlelight Tour of Historic Havre de Grace. Visitors were treated to holiday cookies and, of course, a unique display of items for sale in our gift shop!

I am very anxious to move into the next quarter, one I am certain will be filled with much more learning and even more exciting events.

Kerri

Kerri S. Kneisley
Executive Director

Current Exhibits @ The Museum

- Potomac Decoy Collector's Association Bufflehead Exhibit.



- The new displays of both full-size and miniature Canada geese from the collection of C. John Sullivan, Jr.

- The extraordinary pair of "Daddy" Holly canvasbacks, a gift from the Michael family.

- A traditional tule decoy in the centuries-old "Lovelock style" by Paiute decoy maker Joe Allen.



- "Tools of the Market Gunner" exhibit featuring a number of punt and battery guns

- The "Gunning the Flats" exhibit

- The "What is a Decoy?" exhibit

- An exhibit of factory decoys, a gift from Dr. Mort Kramer

- "Pop" Sampson's homemade duplicating lathe for making miniature decoy bodies



- Coudon Teal carved in the 1930s, a gift from Pat Doherty.

- A beautiful decorative Eastern Blue Bird carved by master carver Barb Wachter

- A beautiful decorative canvasback family made by master carver J. Noble Mentzer

- A lifelike rockfish (striped bass) carved by master carver Lee Tate, Sr.

- The Home Run Baker rig and bushwhack boat.



Tour Reservations

Educational programs and tours of the Decoy Museum are free to Harford County school system classes, and we also welcome your home schooled children! Tours can be tailored to the curriculum and different age/grade levels.

Book your tours early, call Margaret Jones at (410) 939-3739 or email the Museum at information@decoymuseum.com.

Fall Calling Contest Winners

On Saturday, October 24th, the Decoy Museum hosted the 2015 Maryland State Duck Calling Contest. Anyone aspiring to compete in the World's Championship Duck Calling Contest in Stuttgart, Arkansas must win a duck-calling contest that is sanctioned by the World's Championship Rules Committee. Winners were:

Junior Maryland State Duck

1st: Luke Hatton
2nd: Brendon Sweger
3rd: Finley Jones

Junior Maryland State Goose

1st: Luke Hatton
2nd: Brendon Sweger
3rd: Finley Jones

Maryland State Duck

1st: Dale Hunter
2nd: Scott Peitz
3rd: Rob Robinson

Maryland State Goose

1st: Teddy Hoover
2nd: John Taylor
3rd: Justin Culver

Chesapeake Bay Open Duck

1st: Michael Pauley
2nd: Chad Scarborough
3rd: John Casey

Susquehanna Flats Open Duck

1st: Stephen Saranie
2nd: Michael Pauley
3rd: John Casey

Mason-Dixon Open Duck

1st: Jeremy Romain
2nd: Roland Cartez
3rd: Chad Scarborough

Chesapeake Bay Open Goose

1st: Teddy Hoover
2nd: John Walls
3rd: John Taylor



Home Run Baker Book

The Home Run Baker book is now in its second printing and is available for sale in the Gift Shop. This meticulously chronicled tale by John Elton Cole, Jr. ties together the rig of 263 decoys that had belonged to the early 20th century baseball great John Franklin "Home Run" Baker and the Eastern Shore heritage of both. Mr. Cole's generous financial support enabled the Decoy Museum to construct a one-of-a-kind exhibit of the "Home Run" Baker rig. John O. Mitchell, III

very graciously provided us with access to some heirloom family photos for inclusion in the book and the exhibit. C. John Sullivan, Jr. had this terrific photo enlarged and mounted. It shows John's father, John O. Mitchell, Jr., and his uncle, Home Run Baker, setting out the rig circa 1945. The print now sits in the same sneak boat depicted in the picture. John O. Mitchell has been a passionate supporter of the Museum for many years, and we thank him for this important contribution.



Mort Kramer Shorebirds

Don't miss the display of shorebirds in the library that are on loan to us from renowned collector and supporter Dr. Mort Kramer. They are housed in one of the cases that C. John Sullivan, Jr. donated last year.



SAVE THE DATES!

- **Friday, March 11th:** The 23rd annual R. Madison Mitchell Endowment Trust banquet at the Bayou Restaurant in Havre de Grace
- **The weekend of May 6th–8th:** The 35th annual Havre de Grace Decoy and Wildlife Art Festival

Got time to spare... time to share?

Get involved with the Decoy Museum.

We are grateful for the generous support
of our volunteers.

What do you like to do?

Can you lead tours, explain decoy making and the history
of the Flats, present programs for school children, greet
visitors at the information desk, assist in the gift shop, help
our curator on special projects, provide carving demonstra-
tions, plan events, maintain IT systems, do exhibit signage
and creative work, assist with fundraising and member-
ship, organize chaos???



Contact the Decoy Museum Today to Join the Flock 410-939-3739

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Thank you and welcome to the following members and businesses that recently renewed their membership or newly joined us. Your continued support and contributions are essential to the overall success of the Decoy Museum:

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| Stephen B O'Brien Jr (F) | Patti Gray (I) | |

KEY: A = Associate (includes NARM privileges) F = Family I = Individual S = Student

Get in the FORMATION!

Our members are a very close-knit and loyal community!

Help us spread the word and fulfill our mission. A Decoy Museum membership provides financial support for museum exhibits and programming, as well as offering individuals special benefits and opportunities. All members receive a membership card, free admission year round, a subscription to *The Canvasback* magazine, invitations to special events, and discounts in the Gift Shop.





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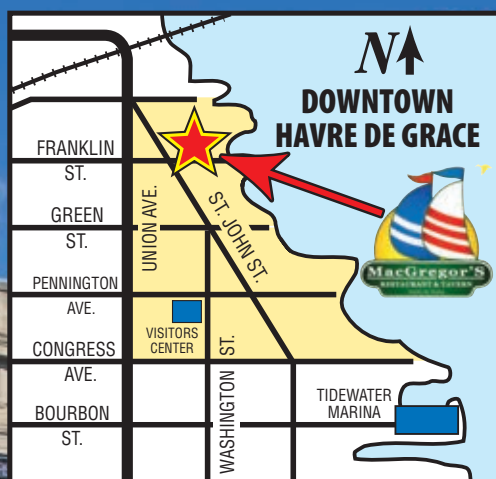
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