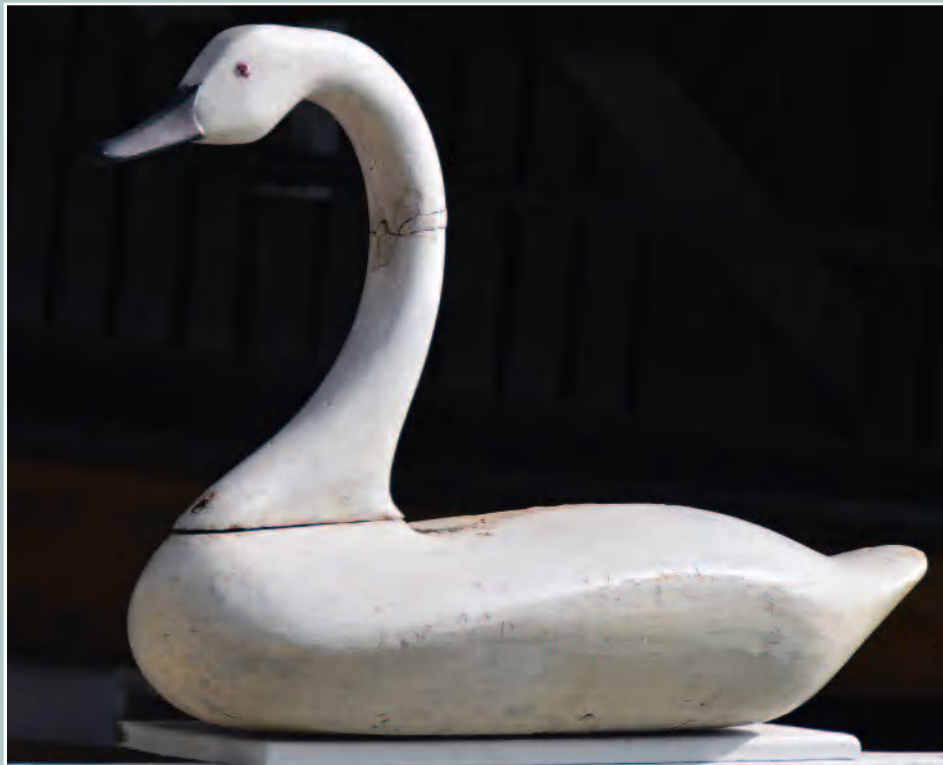


## “Chesapeake Swan Song” exhibition opens at Maritime Museum

The story of the evolving relationship between the people and swans of the Chesapeake Bay will be told through a curated collection of decoys, photographs and artifacts in a new exhibition, “Chesapeake Swan Song: From Commodity to Conservation,” that will open on April 1, 2015 at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in St. Michaels, Maryland.

Over the last 150 years the population and perception of swans has dramatically changed within the region. These magnificent waterfowl, today valued for their aesthetic beauty and rarity, were once part of the Bay’s commercial harvest. Hunted for food, feathers and sport, the Chesapeake’s plummeting swan population was protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, and have since become treasured ornaments, inspiring artists, bird watchers and photographers. They have also become a source of controversy, provoking bitter debate in the early 21st century as the State of Maryland sought to control the proliferating population of invasive mute swans.

For thousands of years, two native swan species, tundra and trumpeter, have migrated to the protected coves of the Chesapeake Bay. Their arrival signaled sustenance for the bay’s native tribes and, later, for the colonists who scratched out a living along its tributaries. In the 19th century, equipped with accurate, inexpensive firearms, hunters harvested more swans than ever before, shipping birds to Baltimore for fancy suppers. The snowy white feathers were in demand in New York and London, where they were used to decorate women’s hats. To entice the birds within range, carvers throughout the Chesapeake crafted huge swan decoys, from crude to elaborate, that mimicked swans feeding, swim-



*Sculptural swan decoy by either Jim Holly or Sam Barnes, ca. 1900.*

ming and preening.

The high demand for swans and ever-more-efficient hunting techniques took a heavy toll. The population of the trumpeter and then the tundra swan began to plummet, and their distinctive calls, once booming in concert, began to be a rare sound on the Chesapeake. It took the collaborative effort of the U.S. and Canada to protect them, and overnight it transformed the swan populations from food items to conserved species. They were no longer featured on restaurant menus and swan feather hats were no longer on stylish display.

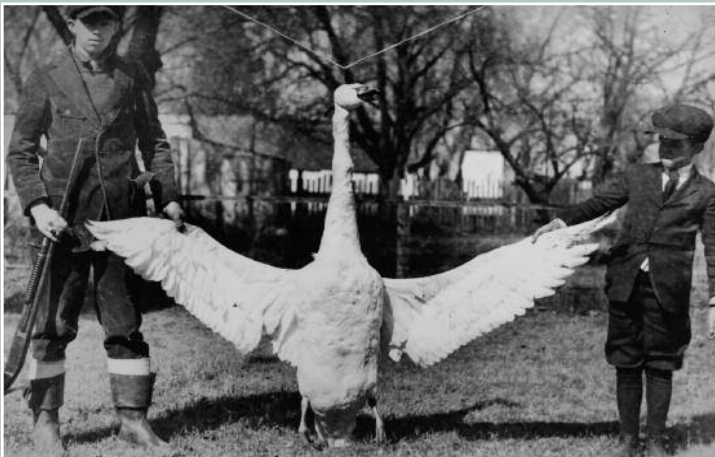
Throughout much of the 20th century, the Chesapeake’s native swan population has been protected, shot with high-tech cameras instead of guns, but an introduced species from Europe, the mute swan, sent ripples through the pond. In 1962 five pet mute swans escaped from a Talbot County estate, where they had been introduced as an elegant addition to the pastoral scenery. The Chesapeake Bay proved an all-too-welcoming environment.

The population of mute

swans mushroomed in the late 20th century, and the prolific, beautiful imposters formed year-round residential flocks, devouring bay grassed and dominating shorelines that once welcomed native swans arriving from Canada. But the public perception of all swans as treasured ornaments, invasive or not, remained entrenched. Furious public debate was sparked over the State of Maryland’s initiatives to control the mute swan population.

Swans, huge and elegant, have come to represent the evolving ideas regarding the Chesapeake environment. From a source of sustenance to a driver of mass harvest, a creature of conservation to a provocative invasive, swans convey the changing story of the Chesapeake’s hunting culture.

“Chesapeake Swan Song” explores this interwoven story of swans and people on the Chesapeake Bay through a selection of swan decoys, artifacts and ephemera from the 19th and 20th centuries. Members of the East Coast Decoy Collectors Association are invited to a private exhibition preview on Friday, April 10 beginning at 5:30 p.m., with light refreshments provided courtesy of Guyette & Deeter and Henry and Judy Stansbury. For more information contact Julie Bartlett at (410) 745-4995 or visit [www.cbmm.org](http://www.cbmm.org).



*Two boys, ca. 1910, with a swan hunted in Easton, Maryland.*