

# John Clayton

*Building relationships to build a collection*



New Jersey native John Clayton, who now resides in Bozeman on Maryland's Eastern Shore, insists that "building relationships" was paramount in his success at building his decoy collection because other collectors will "share their expertise," a key ingredient in making the right choices, particularly for a new collector just arrived on the scene. "I'm still a baby," he suggests, referring to his relative newness in the hobby, as it wasn't until 1992 that he bought his first "real decoy." He also realized that relationships are a two way street, and by 1998, less than 10 years after joining the New Jersey Decoy Collectors Association, he became its president, a position he held for five years ("I got roped into it," he jokes.), and has served as the president of the East Coast Decoy Collectors for over a dozen years. Since 2003 John has been a Board Member of the Ward Museum in Salisbury, Maryland, generously volunteering hours of his time.

**BOZEMAN, MARYLAND**



Running yellowlegs with scratch feather paint by Ira Hudson of Chincoteague, Virginia, ca. 1920.

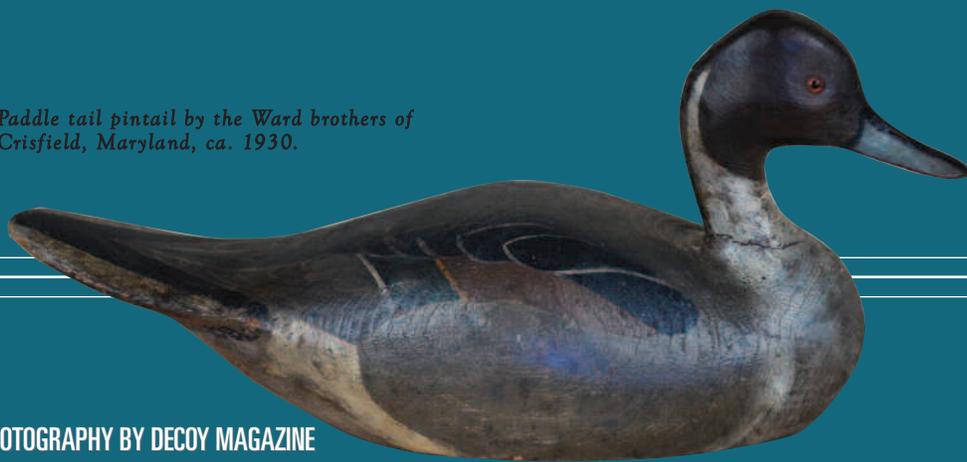


Hollow red-breasted merganser by Charles H. Huff of East Long Branch, New Jersey, ca. 1900.



Hollow three-piece "Blair School" wood duck with pegged construction, ca. 1870.

*Paddle tail pintail by the Ward brothers of Crisfield, Maryland, ca. 1930.*



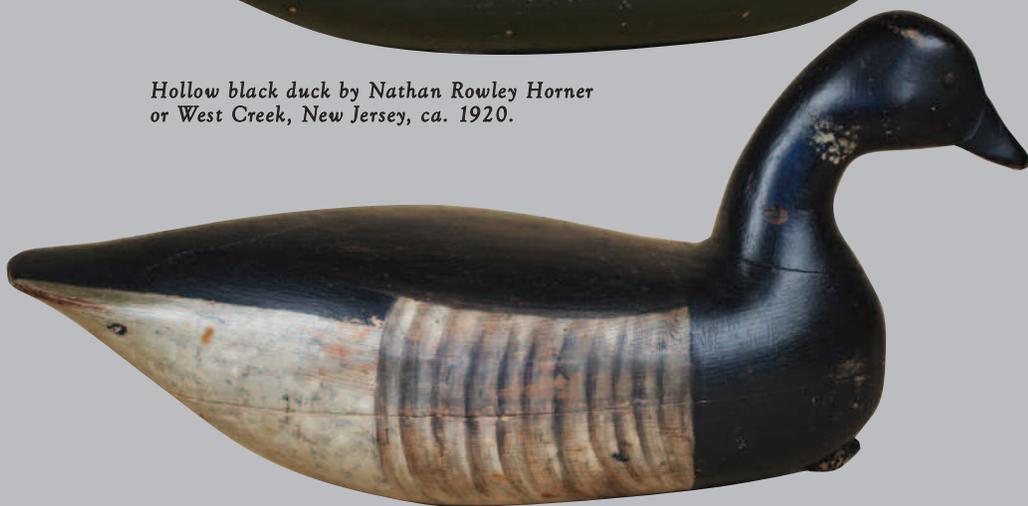
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DECOY MAGAZINE

JOHN GREW UP in Silverton, New Jersey, near Silver Bay, an area that used to be called Mosquito Cove. Not surprisingly, real estate developers eventually changed its name. Waterfowling had deep roots in his family, as his great, great grandfather was listed as a “gunner” in the 1850s census and his great grandfather was a market hunter and bayman who took out fishing parties on Barnegat Bay, reportedly guiding President Grover Cleveland on numerous duck hunting trips.

In his younger days John, an avid duck hunter, gunned over the family’s hunting rig, most of which was stolen in the 1960s, leaving only a few examples remaining. In the 1970s his father gave him four of the remaining decoys, including a couple of brant that have been attributed to Liberty Price; some collectors believe they are early examples by Joe King of Tuckerton. Little did he realize at the time they would be the start of a decoy collection.

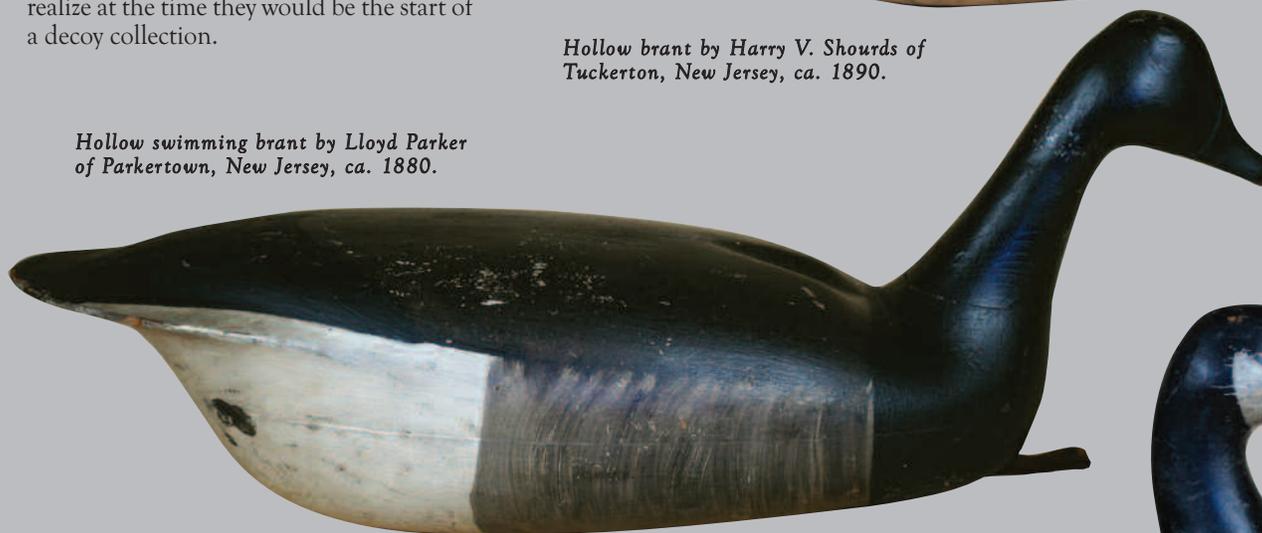


*Hollow black duck by Nathan Rowley Horner or West Creek, New Jersey, ca. 1920.*



*Hollow brant by Harry V. Shourds of Tuckerton, New Jersey, ca. 1890.*

*Hollow swimming brant by Lloyd Parker of Parkertown, New Jersey, ca. 1880.*



*Hollow Canada goose by Phineas Reeves of Long Point, Ontario, ca. 1880.*



Pair of black-bellied plovers, in spring and fall plumage, attributed to "Schutte" of Cape May, New Jersey, ca. 1890.



Pair of black-bellied plovers with bulbous heads by Bill Harris of Brigantine, New Jersey, ca. 1890.



Running peep by Obediah Verity of Seaford, Long Island, ca. 1880, and a running yellowlegs by Tom Gelston of Jamaica Bay, Long Island, ca. 1900.



Ruddy turnstone with whimsical paint patterns by an unknown New Jersey maker, ca. 1900.



Golden plover with excellent paint pattern by Elmer Crowell of East Harwich, Massachusetts, ca. 1910.

In the 1970s John's father began spending the winters in Florida, where he met Charlie Birdsall who moved there in 1977. He began buying some of Charlie's hand-made decoys and giving them to John as gifts. Slowly his "collection" began to grow, primarily comprised of contemporary decoys. Eventually John found out about the decoy show in nearby Toms River, attended it and began adding to his numbers. By the late 1980s he heard about the New Jersey Decoy Collectors Association and soon became a member.

At one of his first meetings he met Bill Cordrey, the first of many relationships, and began attending some of the East Coast shows with him, such as Havre de Grace, Maryland and Cape Charles, Virginia, as well as the show in Ohio. Due to Bill's interest in Upper Chesapeake Bay decoys, John began buying them as well - still focusing on relatively contemporary birds, such as Madison Mitchell's - and started putting together his initial collection. But after buying a copy of Henry Fleckenstein's book on New Jersey decoys, and devouring its contents, he decided he wanted to focus on traditional decoys from his native state. And in 1992 he bought his first old bird, a Harry V. Shourds brant from Larry Polin, and became a full-fledged collector of vintage decoys.



*Curlew, ex-collection of Dr. James McCleery, by Harry V. Shourds, ca. 1890.*



*Pair of hollow broadbills by Harry V. Shourds, ca. 1890*

If John started out slow he made up for it in time. In 1996 he made his first trip to the National Antique Decoy Show in St. Charles, Illinois to witness the sale of the Hillman collection. "I was starting to get my feet wet," he says, as he added three decoys to his collection at the auction. And he refers to the McCleery auction, held by Sotheby's in New York City in January 2000 as his "coming out party," where on a handful of lots he competed with some of the big boys, including the winning bid on a Harry V. Shourds curlew, still one of his favorite shore birds. People take notice.

While New Jersey brant are both his first and last love, John's collection "has evolved enormously" over the years - "morphing," as he likes to call it. Even after the purchase of his Shourds brant he continued to build an Upper Bay collection, now focused on vintage decoys, which culminated in his purchase of a pair of high head canvasbacks by Charles Nelson Barnard. After much coercion by an avid Upper Bay collector - another relationship that worked both ways - he eventually sold the pair, and without the "crown jewel" he quickly sold the rest. He then shifted his interests - and finances - into shorebirds.

"My wife likes shorebirds," he says, referring to Dora, one of the founding members of the "Decoy Divas," a ladies' social group that gathers at shows and auctions, and his regular companion on most of his decoy hunting trips, which now take him to all of the major auctions throughout the year and many of the more important regional and national shows. When it comes to shorebirds, "I like to buy one or two good examples by each of the top makers," he says, and along with the many



*Hollow bluebill by Dan English of Florence, New Jersey, ca. 1900.*



*Pair of hollow oldsquaws by Mark English of Northfield, New Jersey, ca. 1880.*



*Hollow swimming brant by Benjamin Maxwell of Wading River, New Jersey, ca. 1890.*



*Hollow black duck with scratch feather paint by Rhodes Truex of Atlantic City, New Jersey, ca. 1900.*



*Hollow brant by either Liberty Price or Joe King of Tuckerton, ca. 1870. It is from the hunting rig of John Clayton's great-grandfather.*



*Hollow Canada goose by Clark Madara of Pitman, New Jersey, ca. 1920.*

New Jersey shorebirds on his shelf are choice pieces by the top East Coast carvers.

Along the way John's also added a few birds from other regions - a Phineas Reeves Canada goose is among his favorites - but after reaching out his interests "always came back to New Jersey," where most of his efforts are now focused. "It gets to the point where you ask the question, will it enhance my collection," a question more collectors should consider. "There's only so much money to spend, so refining your collection is part of the fun."

But he does have favorites, which can make the "choosing" a little easier. John's a "big fan" of Elmer Crowell shorebirds, and a wonderfully painted golden plover he owns is one of Elmer's finer accomplishments. For duck and goose decoys, he favors the work of Harry V. Shourds - for their "simplistic beauty" - and the Ward brothers - for their "expressive nature."

Since he's been on the scene for "only 20 years," John doesn't feel he can offer a lot of advice, beyond the usual suggestions, such as doing your homework, attending the shows and auctions and handling as many decoys as possible. "Enjoy the trip," he says, "and as the years go by you'll build more confidence." But most importantly, he insists, "building relationships" is the key to success.

To that end he related an auction he attended in Baltimore in the 1990s, where a Thomas Gelston running yellowlegs was being offered for sale. Still new to decoys, he called a Long Island collector he had met, discussed the decoy with him, and it became the first shorebird he added to his collection. Another favorite of his, an early 1930s Ward pintail that he spotted at a show, was priced out of his range. The dealer told him to take it and put him on a year and a half time-payment plan, an offer he couldn't refuse.



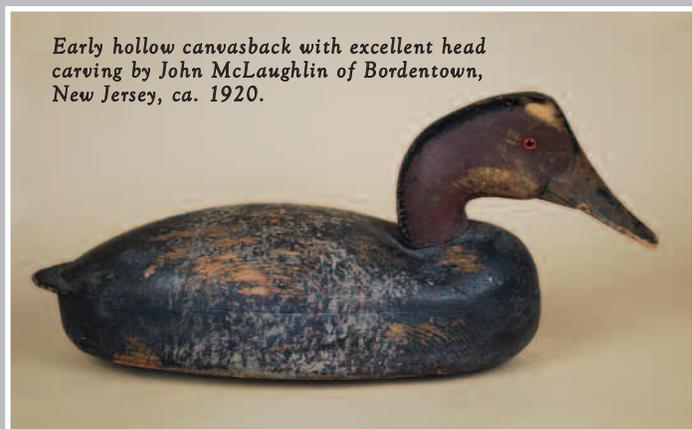
*Rare hollow mallard by Henry Kilpatrick of Barnegat, New Jersey, ca. 1920.*



*Hollow green-winged teal from his personal gunning rig by Reg Marter of Burlington, New Jersey, ca. 1940.*



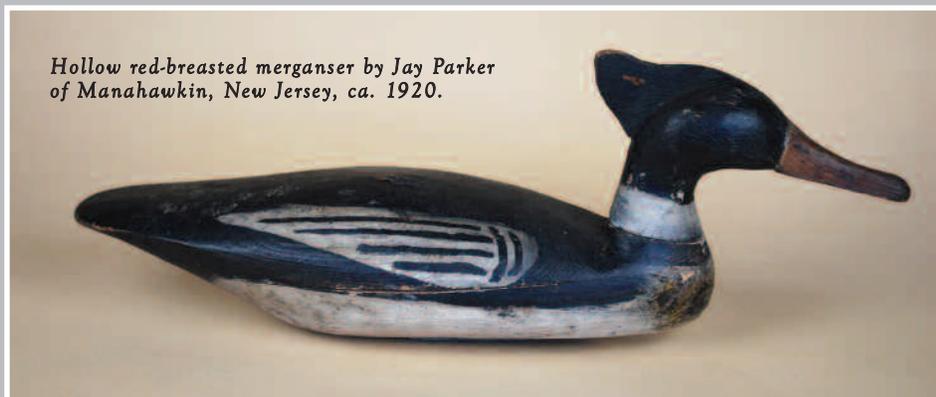
*Hollow broadbill by Eugene Birdsall of Lovelandtown, New Jersey, ca. 1900.*



*Early hollow canvasback with excellent head carving by John McLaughlin of Bordentown, New Jersey, ca. 1920.*

But the best story concerned his move to the Florida Keys, where he now spends his winters fishing. Needing to raise some serious money to finance a renovation, he sold a few decoys that were dear to his heart. "If you want to raise real money you've got to sell something good," he admits. One of the buyers told him, "If you ever want them back, just let me know." Some year's later John's red-breasted merganser by Charles Huff was back on his shelf. And today, thanks to those many relationships he's built over the years, many dealers and collectors are well aware of his interests, and many good birds continue to come his way.

Understanding that relationships grow over time, a collector, years ago, suggested he "build friendships." He also told John to "never let a duck come between friends." In his 20 years of participating in the hobby, John has made many friends in all parts of the collecting community. "Initially those friendships are based upon decoys," he reflected back over the years, "but eventually they evolve beyond that." Nonetheless, building those relationships are the start of the process.



*Hollow red-breasted merganser by Jay Parker of Manahawkin, New Jersey, ca. 1920.*



*Hollow hissing Canada goose by John McAnney of New Gretna, New Jersey, ca. 1900.*