

Samuel Joseph Denney

References:

- Decoy Collectors Guide. 1968 Annual. Article by Harold Evans. p. 48.
Decoys of the Thousand Islands by Stewart and Lunman. 1992. p. 214.
Decoy Magazine. Jan/Feb 1993. Article by Lowe and Eckert. p. 8.
Great Book of Wildfowl Decoys. 1990. Section by Hallbauer and Bauer. p. 94.
American Bird Decoys by Mackey. 1965. p. 107.
Decoy Magazine. Winter 1982. Article by Herbert Prakelt. p.13.
Decoys: A North American Survey by G&L Kangas. 1983. p. 156.

Born: September 25, 1874 Died: May 23, 1953 (78 years old)

- Life-long resident of Clayton, NY. Descended from French Canadian lumbermen.
- Some question about spelling of last name. Spelled Denney in Decoys of the Thousands Islands, Denny in most of the other articles.
- Married Salina Amo on February, 7,1896. They had seven sons and eight daughters.
- His father was a fishing and hunting guide, and Sam followed in his footsteps. Also painted houses and boats, and worked at cutting stove wood and ice.
- Sam was a talented musician who taught himself to play the violin and read music. Gave lessons to others, and played at local events.
- Maintained a large garden, and smoked and salted fish for the winter.
- Made his first decoys around 1900, and continued making decoys commercially until 1952.

Known Working Decoys (decoys that have been weighted):

black duck

mallard (only a few known)

broadbill/bluebill

canvasback

redhead

common goldeneye

bufflehead

Canada goose (1 known)

Barrow's goldeneye (1 reported, but in my opinion an immature drake common goldeneye)

teal (a few reported, but none never observed, species ?)

pintail (none seen, but orders reportedly shipped to California, and Abercrombie and Fitch)

no known examples of working decoys for brant, mergansers, scoters, oldsquaw, gadwall, wigeon, shoveler, or wood duck.

Decorative Decoys and other folk art:

A few decorative decoys (similar to working decoys but painting is more detailed, and bodies have not been weighted).

Miniature Decoys: Les Corbin collection contains 24 miniatures (pairs of mallards, buffleheads, Barrows' goldeneye, common goldeneye, redhead, canvasback, broadbill, hooded merganser, gadwall, and green-winged teal, plus 2 black ducks [different styles], and 2 Canada geese [both with wrong bill color]. Other known miniatures include mallard pair, broadbill pair, bufflehead drake, and hen goldeneye. Additional miniature mallards and geese reported.

1-2 dozen paintings. Some signed Sam or S. Denise (the original French spelling of his name). Several of the paintings show the family house (a log cabin) located near the east end of the French Creek causeway. Some are signed on the back, saying copied by Sam Denney.

Working Decoy Construction:

- 👉 Most decoys made of solid cedar.
- 👉 No solid wood bodies known that were made from two or more pieces (not including bodies with small wooden pieces used for repairs). No known bodies made of balsa wood.
- 👉 A few hollow decoys known: one hen goldeneye, one drake goldeneye (not a rig mate to the hen), plus a decorative hen mallard. All known examples fitted with a board (approx. 3/4 inch thick) that covers the entire bottom.
- 👉 A few cork bodied decoys known: a Canada goose, plus a decorative drake mallard. Known examples have wooden bottom boards, wooden tail inserts, and bodies covered/filled with a thick finish coating.
- 👉 Cork also used to fill large drilled holes, probably done to lighten the decoys. Most are large diameter holes drilled into the bottom, but one broadbill known with holes drilled from side to side.
- 👉 Bodies commonly (30-40%) have original repairs to defects in the wood. Most repaired with a “putty” mixture, a few with inserted wooden pieces, nails, etc.
- 👉 All known decoys have flat bottoms. No known examples with keels that were originally applied by Denney.
- 👉 Decoy bodies held in a vise for shaping using a device (block?) secured with lag screws. Plugs used to fill the lag screw holes are visible on almost all decoys. Most have two filled 1/2 inch holes along the midline on 2-5/8 inch centers. Second hole commonly covered by the ballast weight. Distance between plugs can vary slightly (not unreasonable considering that someone is drilling out lag screw holes), and smaller diameter plugs are occasionally used (but still on 2-5/8 inch centers). Plugs made from either dowels or corks.
- 👉 A second set of plug holes evident in the backs of some (5-10%) decoys. Evidently the body was attached at the top to assist in shaping under the tail. This second set of plugs does not usually line-up with those on the bottom.
- 👉 Decoy Collectors Guide article by Evans, states that decoys from 1900-1918 were held in a device with only one lag screw, and therefore have only one plugged hole. I have never seen an example of one of these.
- 👉 Rig of decoys (redheads and broadbills) purchased by Roy Jap after WW II had no plug holes evident from a holding device. These were decoys produced late in Denney’s career, and were generally cruder and less pleasing in their style and proportions. Decoys with bottom boards (hollow or cork bodies) also have no plugged holes.
- 👉 Raised neck base carved from the decoy body. Quite prominent on most decoys.
- 👉 Heads and necks carved as one complete piece (no two part heads or necks known).
- 👉 Head heights and attitudes are variable. Some have the head in a forward or swimming attitude, and low head decoys are fairly common. Nearly all heads face straight ahead. No known examples with obvious, angled head positions that were original. One preening black duck, and two preening mallards known.
- 👉 Heads attached with a screw from the bottom. Screw holes plugged with corks or dowels, and commonly the same size and material as the body plugs. Slightly larger diameter head screw plugs used on 20-30% of decoys.
- 👉 A long finishing nail commonly (80%) angled in from the back of the neck into the neck base to

help hold the head in place.

- 👉 Almost all decoys have glass eyes (Canada goose is the one known example with a painted eye). At least several rigs made using cheaper glass eyes. These eyes commonly crack and fall out, often leaving behind the wire post.
- 👉 Eye groove or depression on virtually all decoys (Canada goose is only known exception).

Working decoy carving and finish:

- 👉 All bodies sanded smooth. No known examples with significant body carving (raised wings, raised feather carving, etc.). One black duck with fine grooves on tail to delineate tail feathers, and another black with fine grooves on some of the U-shaped body feathering.
- 👉 Bills separated from face by carved lines. In a few of the black ducks and mallards a small amount of wood has been removed behind this line so that the bill is slightly wider than the area of the face immediately behind it.
- 👉 No obvious V notch deeply carved at top of bill !! Separates Denney decoys from Wheeler/Rogers and most pseudo-Denny decoys.
- 👉 Nostrils carved or pressed into bill on almost all decoys (>95%).
- 👉 Mandible cuts (line separating upper and lower bill) on 90% of decoys.
- 👉 Additional grooves near end of bill on approximately 60-70% of decoys.
- 👉 Three mallard decoys known where a nail is outlined at the bill tip with a shallow gouged line, and one pair of broadbills with a raised carved nail. No other known original bills with nail carved or outlined at the tip. However, a nail is commonly added on with black paint.
- 👉 Gouges or grooves under bills are common. Length of these gouges is highly variable. Bill gouges can give the appearance of a nail at the bill tip.
- 👉 Recessed small stable for line attachment on bottom of almost all decoys. Recess is either an elongated gouge(70%), or a drilled conical depression (30%)
- 👉 Many decoys weighted by Denney, most with a flat-bottomed weight cast from a tablespoon or similar shaped mold. "Spoon" weights commonly attached with 2 or 3 nails.

Paint styles:

Denney used a variety of paint patterns and styles over the years. Most involved differing shades of paint with wet blending of colors, all on the same decoy. This can make determining what is original and what is touch-up very difficult. Stipple painting is uncommon (the Canada goose is again an exception). Feather painting when present is not reversed, as on most Alexandria Bay decoys. Denney used a variety of combing and scratch painting techniques, and lead pencil marks are commonly seen around speculum patches on species such as redheads and canvasbacks. Paint from the sides, breast, and tail areas is often smeared onto the bottom, giving a sloppy appearance, and one that many people would associated with a repaint.

- Blacks: All known examples have scratch painting on the heads. Bodies are often scratch painted as well, but there are several styles with brush painted body feathering. I have seen several examples of with elaborate feather painting on the bodies, but with evidence of scratch painting underneath. I assumed the more elaborate feather painting was a later repaint by Denney.
- Broadbills: Drakes all have comb painting, although the amount of comb painting is highly variable. Most combing runs side to side, but several examples with combing running from front to back. One drake known with combing on sides. Heads of drakes usually have a greenish tint. Hens often, but not always, have some combing. Hens commonly have several shades of brown body paint blended together, and often have a lighter blended area under the tail.
- Canvasbacks: Drakes usually have light colored backs and sides with little blending. Most have no combing. Only one OP hen is known, and that has a body with blended gray and brownish

paints.

- Redheads: Most drakes have grayish backs and sides, with relatively little blending. Many (most?) have no combing. A second shade of gray is often applied among the sides, which can easily give the appearance of repaint or touch-up. Hens have bodies with blended brown and gray shades, some with combing. Hens often have a prominent white face patch, similar to hen broadbills, but are easily separated from broadbills by the color of the wing speculum (gray in redheads, white in broadbills).
- Common Goldeneye: Drakes have more or less typical white and black body painting. Heads are black with a greenish tint. The one “Barrows goldeneye” pictured in the H. Evans article in Decoy Collectors Guide, is in my opinion, an immature drake common goldeneye (the only known example). Hens show a variable pattern of white, grey, and blackish/brown paint on the bodies, with obvious white wing patches.

Decoy Chronology:

Harold Evans states in his article in Decoy Collectors Guide that the earliest Denney decoys (1900-1918) had just one body plug filling a lag screw hole, and that there was an “intermediate style” body that was thicker (top to bottom) than his later work. Sounds good, but I have never seen a decoy with just one plug hole, and have seen the identical paint patterns and shades on both thick and thin bodied decoys (suggesting that they were made about the same time). I have a very hard time arranging most Denney decoys in any sort of chronological order. I have seen several cruder, less pleasing styles of decoys (broadbills, redheads, and blacks) that I was told were carved later in his career. This would suggest that there was some loss of carving ability later on, but this a very subjective criteria to apply. One persons cruder example might in fact be an early example, a rush order, or simply one of many different styles that Denney used.

Denney-like decoys:

Ray Andress and other Gananoque style black ducks:

Ray Andress is the best known of the Gananoque decoy carvers, and is generally credited with developing and perfecting the “Gananoque style”. Although Ray Andress decoys are very different in style from Sam Denney decoys, Andress black ducks are close enough to cause some confusion. Andress decoys typically have two body plugs on the bottom, but they are typically smaller in diameter and on different centers than the Denney body plugs. The head screw plug on Andress decoys is usually of a much larger diameter. Head carving on the Andress blacks is consistently different in several aspects. The mandible cuts on Andress decoys are composed of several, closely spaced parallel cuts, and are wider near the base of the bill. Andress decoys also have a raised nail carved on the upper tip of the bill. A number of other Gananoque carvers followed the Andress black duck patterns. Although I cannot comment on the specific carving idiosyncrasies of each, many did make black ducks that could be confused with Ray Andress, or possibly Sam Denney.

James Devalson “Valtie” Bamford:

Valtie Bamford was a commercial decoy maker on the south shore of Wolfe Island near Clayton. He made several thousand decoys in the 1920-1930s. Most are similar to Denney’s work, except they are a little cruder or less pleasing in their lines, especially the heads. A picture of the bottom of a Bamford decoy shown in Decoys of the Thousand Islands, shows no obvious body plugs.

Pseudo-Denny:

An unknown Thousand Islands carver first discussed in the Lowe and Eckert article in the Jan/Feb 1993

issue of Decoy Magazine. He made decoys in a number of different styles, some of which are easy to confuse with Denney broadbills and redheads. To confuse the situation further, some of the pseudo-Denny decoys appear to have been painted by Sam Denney (yes, I know, Evans stated that Denny would not repaint decoys by another maker). Plug holes on the bottoms of pseudo-Denny decoys are different. Most appear to be filled with a putty compound, and are at approximately a 30° angle to the midline of the decoy. The line attachment staple on pseudo-Denny decoys is often recessed into a gouge similar to Denney, but which also has a flat bottomed, flat sided, drilled portion. The mandible cuts on pseudo-Denny decoys are typically cut at a more pronounced angle along the side of the bill, and a nail is usually carved at the bill tip. The “V” at the top of the bill is often inletted (gouged out), similar to Wheeler/Rogers decoys. Most important, the body blocks have a very low, or no, neck set. The wider, flared base of the neck is instead incorporated into the head piece of pseudo-Denny decoys. For what its worth, the last decoy pictured in Evans article in Decoy Collectors Guide which is labeled as a broadbill representing Denney’s finest work, is actually a decoy by pseudo-Denny.

Unblocked Denney style decoys:

Decoys of this style seem to trace back to a rig, purchased from the widow of a Mr. Johnson, many years ago, by Bill Massey. Bill claimed that the black ducks were special order Denney’s, carved with longer bodies to ride better in the stronger currents of the lower St. Lawrence River. There were also broadbills and goldeneyes that appeared to me to be by the same maker, but I never remember Bill attributing them to Denney. As I recall, there must have been two dozen blacks, two dozen broadbill, and one dozen goldeneyes. The black ducks were the most Denney like, but varied greatly in size, style, and paint patterns. All the decoys from the Johnson rig had light colored painted bottoms, with no plug holes evident. The ballast weight was a thin, flat square of lead, set in a diamond pattern to the midline of the decoy. Most of these decoys had a larger diameter (3/4 inch) unplugged hole leading to the screw which held the head on.

(T. Eckert, March 5, 2004)