

Chauncey Wheeler

(1862-1937)

Alexandria Bay, N.Y.



Welcome to THE TULCAN
 Chaucery Wheeler standing on the far right, his second wife Mary on the far left holding the hatch of their children, Margaret and Henry, c. 1888. During this period, Wheeler was operating the hotel, an operation he later abandoned, moved to a place in New York City neighborhood. The children were found about the time they were four named the "M&W". The upper part of the "M&W" is visible behind Wheeler, with his father Paul before shown standing in the ground.

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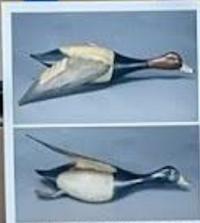
Chaucery Wheeler
 (1862-1937)
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These ducks by Chaucery Wheeler of the type made for the best ducks! See Photo Below.



Praying Ducks: Diver ducks with their heads drooping behind them in a preening or nesting position.
 These ducks have often earned their name by being so natural in position. One of the most used to help attract this type of duck is the "M&W" which is a different position and all white. Diver with their heads in the preening position.

Chauncey Wheeler
(1862-1937)
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Decorative Mallards by Chauncey Wheeler, finished on the top and mounted on the bottom. Both were sold at a Sotheby's and Sotheby's auction held July 29th, 2011.

Chauncey Wheeler (1862-1937)
Chauncey Wheeler is undoubtedly the best known taxidermy artist, and his carriage is easily the best collection throughout North America. He was born in a small log cabin on Vandewater Island, but in 1863 his parents moved a house across the ice from Crispin's Point to 23, railroad Street, Alexandria Bay. Wheeler lived in that house the rest of his life.
After attending school for a short time, Wheeler became a "river boat". He obtained No. 36, Lawrence River pilot's license and operated packs and boats for a number of months thereafter; at the same time, he carried hunting decoys. It has been estimated that Wheeler made approximately 6,000 decoys over his lifetime. His last rig was made in 1935, shortly before he became ill, and two years before his death.
Although he is best known for his hunting decoys, some of the most prized carvings by him were decorative duck heads in flight. Most were the finest carvings with the top one or two substituted wings. Many of these decorations were given as gifts to family or friends on special occasions.

Carving decoys was basically an off-season activity, when taxidermy and work on the St. Lawrence River were finished. Wheeler was one of the best known taxidermy artists for the local area, and Wheeler's shop on the River behind his house was a popular gathering spot. Chauncey Wheeler hosted a number of other people who made their own decoys. One of the most notable was Frank Campbell, Campbell had moved to his home in a hunting accident in 1877. Unwarranted about the future, he was encouraged by Wheeler to begin carving decoys. Both men used riverbank feathers painting on some of their decoys, and it has been stated that Wheeler taught that painting style to Campbell.
Another notable pupil was the best known of the young taxidermy artists, who brought a rig of special order from George T. Van Alstede. Later Wheeler taught to make the last rig of decoys, and began his own taxidermy shop through the road. For several years, before, after, and before were sent back and forth. Wheeler was a very friendly man, and after reading the correspondence from Sotheby's, turned the taxidermy in the wood shop.



Chauncey Wheeler as a well-dressed young man, c. 1880s.



Chauncey Wheeler (1862-1937)

Chauncey Wheeler is undoubtedly the best known carver of hunting decoys from the Thousand Islands area, and his carvings are eagerly sought by collectors throughout North America. He was born in a small log cabin on Wellesley Island, but in 1863 his parents moved a house across the ice from Crossman's Point to 23 Holland Street, Alexandria Bay. Wheeler lived in that house the rest of his life.

After attending school for a short time, Wheeler became a "river man". He obtained his St. Lawrence River pilot's license and operated yachts and houseboats for a number of wealthy businessmen. In his spare time, he carved hunting decoys. It has been estimated that Wheeler made approximately 4,000 decoys over his lifetime. His last rig was made in 1935, shortly before he became ill, and two years before his death.

Although he is best known for his hunting decoys, some of the most prized carvings by him were decoratives depicting ducks in flight. Most were life-sized carvings with either one or two outstretched wings. Many of these decoratives were given as gifts to family or friends on special occasions.



Decorative half flyers by Chauncey Wheeler; redhead on the top and broadbill on the bottom. Both were sold at a Guyette and Schmidt auction held July 19&20, 2011.



Chauncey Wheeler as a well-dressed young man, c. 1880s.



Chauncey Wheeler standing on the far right; his second wife Mary on the far left holding the hands of their children, Marguerite and Marie, c.1909. During this period, Wheeler was operating the Halcyon, an opulent bi-level houseboat, owned by a group the New York City businessmen. The Halcyon was towed about the River by a power boat named the "MAG". The upper part of the "MAG" is visible behind Wheeler, with its captain Fred Adams shown standing on the gunnel.



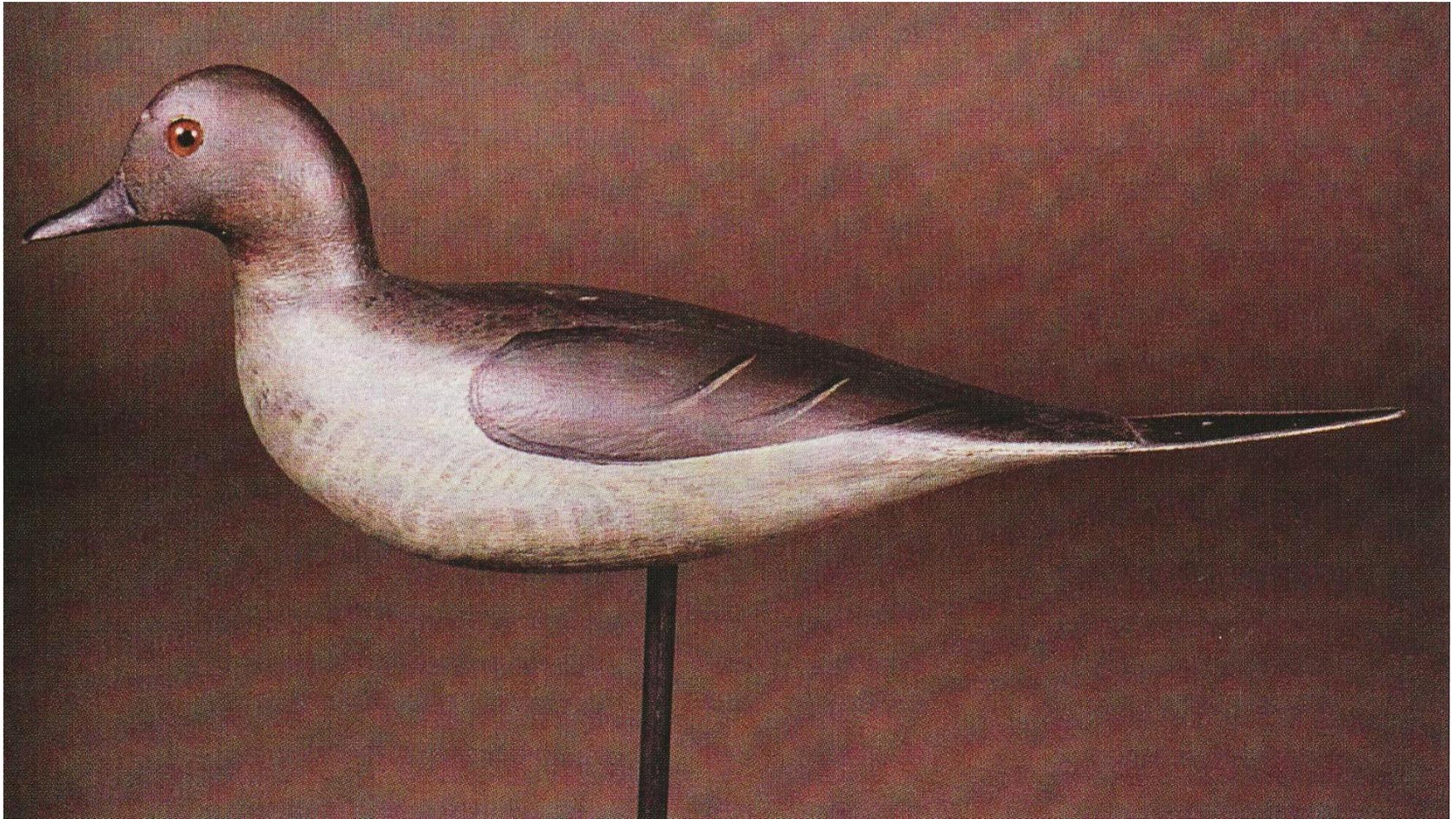
Chauncey Wheeler on the right, his good friend Bob Dingman in the center, and an Alexandria Bay businessman named John Fuller on the left, c. 1927.



Chauncey Wheeler on an extended 1925 hunting trip to Georgia with employer and friend, Harold Hayden.

Carving decoys was typically an off-season activity, when tourism and work on the St. Lawrence River were reduced. Winter was also one of the best social opportunities for the local men, and Wheeler's shop on the River behind his house was a popular gathering spot. Chauncey Wheeler helped a number of other people with making their own decoys. One of the most notable was Frank Coombs. Coombs had injured his left hand in a hunting accident in 1917. Uncertain about his future, he was encouraged by Wheeler to begin carving decoys. Both men used reverse feather stipple painting on some of their decoys, and it has been stated that Wheeler taught that painting style to Coombs.

Another notable pupil was the band leader John Philip Sousa. Sousa was an avid sportsman and clay target shooter, who bought a rig of special-order dove decoys from Wheeler. Later Sousa sought to make his own rig of decoys, and began corresponding with Wheeler through the mail. For several years, letters, diagrams and pictures were sent back and forth. Wheeler was a very private man, and after reading the correspondence from Sousa, burned the contents in his wood stove.



Dove decoy by Chauncey Wheeler of the type made for the band leader John Philip Sousa.

Information presented in Decoys of the Thousand Islands written by Jim Stewart and Larry Lunman, and Chance written by Harold Reiser, state that Chauncey Wheeler made his first decoy in 1870 or 1871 at age eight, and his last decoys in 1935. His most productive years carving decoys were from 1890 to 1930, with an estimated life-time output of approximately 4000. All of Chauncey Wheeler's decoys were hand-made items, and over the years he produced a number of variations in style for the more common species of waterfowl, and even more variations in size.

In my experience, the carving of the heads of Wheeler decoys remained remarkably consistent over the years of production. All of his heads, with the exceptions of the shorebirds, dove, long-tailed ducks, and brant, had a prominent eye groove, and with the exception of the shorebirds, all had an inletted V-notch at the top of the bill. By varying the neck lengths and the position of the heads on the body and the angle of the bill, he was able to produce many variations in attitude and appearance.

Bodies of most Wheeler decoys can be organized into two basic styles. In one style the lower sides were beveled or slanted inwards before ending in a flat bottom; beveled sided decoy bodies. In the second style, the sides rounded gradually from the top of the body to the bottom edge, again ending in a flat bottom; round sided decoys. Maximum width of the body block occurs at the very bottom of the body in those decoys with rounded sides, and part way down the sides, usually about half-way down, for those decoys with beveled sides.

The one obvious exception to these two body styles are Wheeler brant decoys. The A-style, B-style, and C-style brant all have beveled lower sides. However the A-style brant have a flat bottom while the B-style and C-style brant have rounded bottoms.

Photographs of the Chauncey Wheeler decoys featured in the TIDCA display at the 2025 Clayton Decoy Show are shown in the following pages, with some brief notations about their style and size.

Two Chauncey Wheeler black ducks with beveled (slanted) lower sides. Maximum body width about halfway down the body.



Black duck with beveled lower sides and a medium height head. Painted lines on the tail.

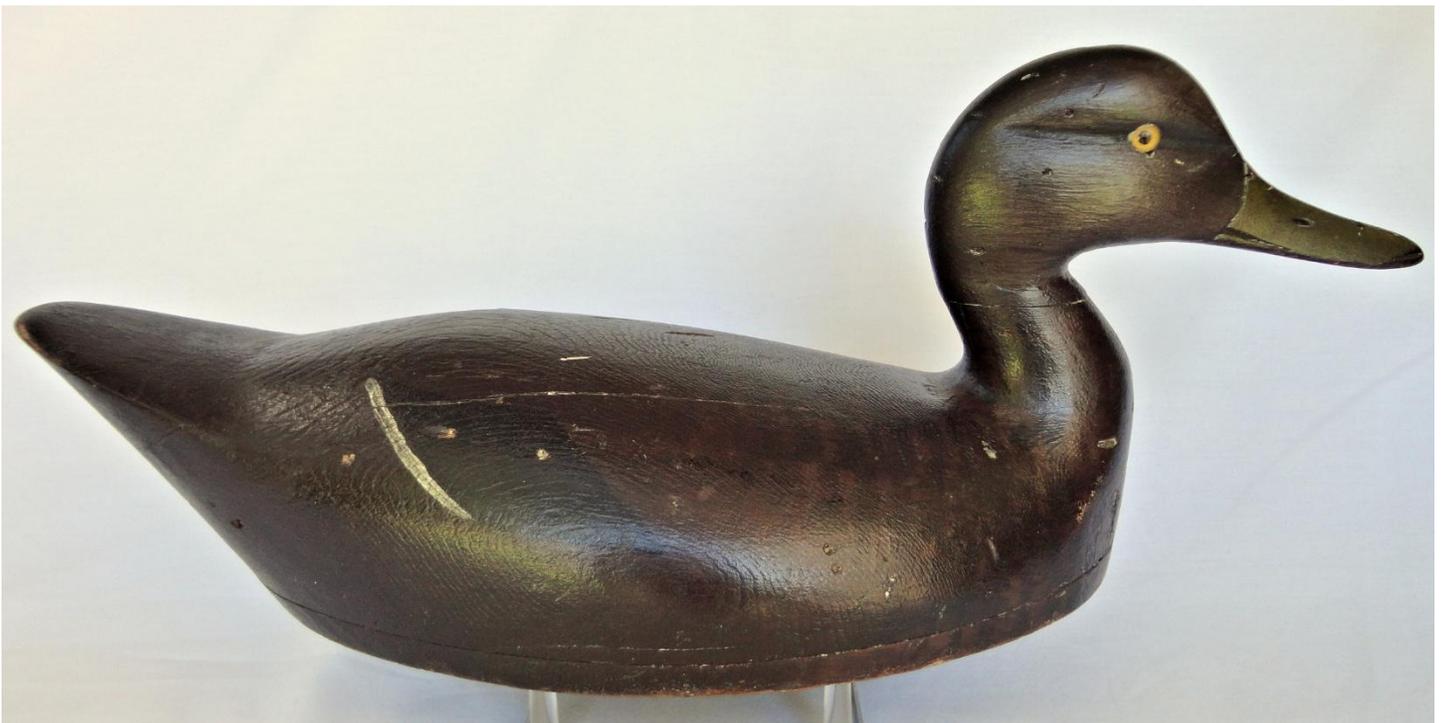


Black duck with beveled lower sides and a high graceful head with bill slanted downwards. Without any painted lines or gouges on the tail.

Two Chauncey Wheeler black ducks with low, flatter bodies and high raised neck seats. Rounded sides with maximum body width at the bottom of the bodies.



Black duck with an unusually broad tail. Gouge carving over the entire body with longer gouges (lines) on the tail.



Solid body Wheeler black duck made from two unequal body pieces; lower piece only 1/2 inch thick, upper piece 3 inches thick.



Preening black duck by Chauncey Wheeler with beveled sides displayed on Friday, July 18.



Preening black duck by Chauncey Wheeler with beveled sides displayed on Saturday, July 19.



Drake canvasback with rounded sides; wing painting and fine combing on both the back and front portions of the sides.



Over-size drake canvasback with beveled sides; typical combing on the back and horizontal combing on the sides.



Life-size drake redhead with rounded sides; ballast weight cast from a spoon-shaped mold with the initials 'RD' formed from a series of dots punched into the weight.



Drake redhead with an over-size balsa wood body but a "normal size" head that appears rather small; rounded sides. Both drake redheads have typical combing on their backs with horizontal combing on their sides.



Life-size drake broadbill decoy with beveled lower sides. Beautifully combed back with wet-on-wet blending on the sides.



Life-size hen broadbill decoy with beveled lower sides. Rather dark paint on the back and upper sides with some lighter colored stippling; white edge painted along the bottom of the body. Painted lines on the tail.



Life-size hen broadbill decoy with beveled lower sides. Somewhat lighter brown body paint with dark stipple marks. No lighter paint on the lower parts of the body.



Larger hen broadbill decoy with rounded sides (maximum body width at the bottom). Somewhat lighter brown body paint with dark stipple marks. No lighter paint on the lower parts of the body.



Larger drake broadbill with rounded sides and made without eyes. Zig-zag combing on the back, horizontal combing on the sides. Although most Wheeler decoys were originally made with eyes, other examples made without eyes are known.



Larger hen broadbill with rounded sides made with a low, puffy head style. A few other examples of this head style are known to exist. Somewhat lighter brown body paint with dark stipple marks.



Life-size high-head hen goldeneye with beveled lower sides.



Life-size hen goldeneye with rounded lower sides. Body block somewhat wider and deeper compared to other decoys of similar length.



Drake and hen goldeneyes from the W.L. Wood rig. Life-size decoys with rounded lower sides.



Drake long-tailed duck from the rig of William Francis Beal. Slightly turned head, 2-piece body, beveled sides, and branded 'W.F.B.' on the bottom. Only three long-tailed ducks by Wheeler are known to still exist, two drakes and one hen. The paint on this drake has been beautifully restored by Cameron McIntyre.



Bottom of the drake long-tailed duck showing the 'W.F.B.' brand.



A-style brant with beveled lower sides and flat bottom, turned head, 2-piece body; branded 'W.F.B.'



B-style brant with beveled lower sides but a rounded bottom; branded 'W.F.B.'