

COVER STORY

Connecting the Dots

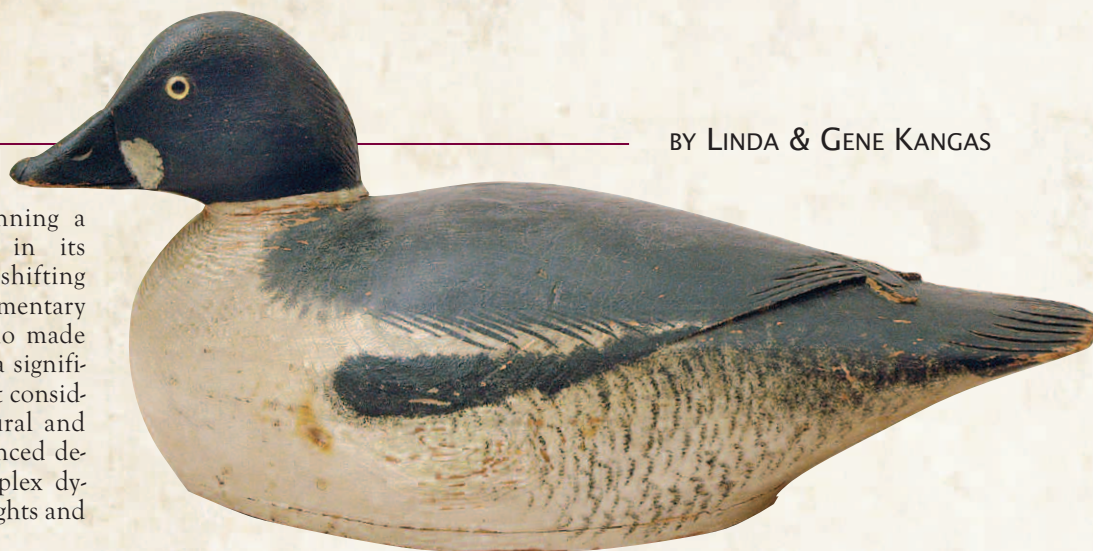
Exploring the provenance of Elmer Crowell's decoys

BY LINDA & GENE KANGAS

Decoy collecting is beginning a noteworthy transition in its youthful history. It is shifting from reliance upon rudimentary information such as who made something, where and when, to a significantly more inclusive context that considers the amalgam of social, cultural and economic conditions that influenced design. Understanding those complex dynamics provides illuminating insights and explains elusive "why" factors.

Decoys were often branded with initials that offer clues to a larger story. Two decades ago uncovering comprehensive narratives were challenging; today Internet technology greatly facilitates discovery of obscure dusty data. Dormant facts can be revived. Connecting the diversity of dots helps integrate decoys into the spectrum of North American history.

For example, in 2006 a Mason factory merganser branded "JWW" was auc-



Circa 1905-1910 Crowell hollow goldeneye branded JWW for John Willard Ware.

tioned. Three years later the identical letters appeared on an Elmer Crowell goldeneye also sold at auction. Who was "JWW" and what is known about him? A collector's notation is written on the goldeneye: "John Ware Willard, Grafton, Mass.," which is the location of The Willard House and Clock Museum. Simon Willard was one

of America's earliest celebrated clockmakers. When asked about John Ware Willard, the museum indicated he had never lived in Grafton. Was the decoy's inscription true?

Verifying that question was essential. Investigating "JWW" led to well-connected people whose life paths intertwined. Presumably, one or more introduced Willard to favorite



Three generations of Willards (L to R); S. Willard 1605-1676, Simon Willard (1753-1848) and John Ware Willard (1859-1914).



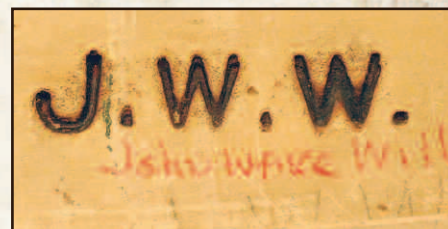
Mason Premier merganser hen, circa 1900-1905, branded JWW

Willard Family

Families venerated ancestors by carrying their names forward. For instance, there was more than one Simon Willard. Major Simon Willard (1605-1676) was born in England and was the first of many Willards in America. Major Willard was a founder of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and of Concord, Massachusetts. "Near this spot Major Simon Willard and his associates bought from the Indians '6 myles of land square' for the plantation of Concord." Reverend Samuel Willard (1640-1707) was Major Willard's son and pastor of Boston's Old South Church, where he baptized Benjamin Franklin.

Simon Willard (1753-1848) was born in Grafton and became a famous clock maker. He visited Presidents Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and Martin Van Buren and members of Congress. One Willard clock is in the Supreme Court chambers and another in Statuary Hall in

the Capitol. Simon was widely considered a clock making genius. Silversmith Paul Revere Jr. (1734-1818) of Boston was a business associate who engraved and printed labels and fashioned various components for Willard's timepieces. Willard clocks were traditional gifts for Boston's upper crust and were focal points in New England's prominent churches, banks, offices, railroad depots and public buildings because of accuracy and reliability. Ship-

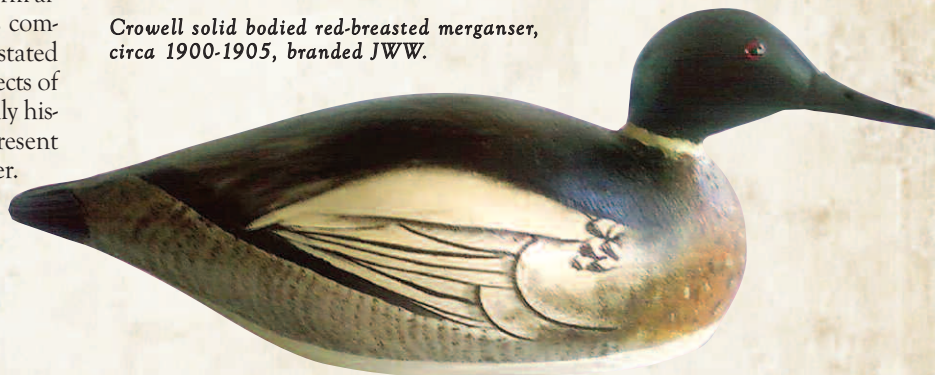


JWW brand on Crowell Goldeneye.

hunting camps and to Crowell. Collectively, they inspired Crowell to achieve decoy and decorative excellence. Several Willards researched include John Ware Willard (1859-1914) and his father Zabdiel Adams Willard (1826-1918). Some Crowell decoy owners of their era were Dr. John Henry Cunningham Jr. (1877-1960), Harry Vinton Long (1857-1949), Dr. John Charles Phillips Jr. (1876-938), Stanley W. Smith, Esq. (1869-1941) and Parker Williams "Buck" Whittemore, Esq. (1872-1959).

Genealogical details revealed long-term affiliations subtly woven into history's complex matrix. Until now such understated associations have not been integral aspects of most decoy studies. The following family histories and ancestral relationships present thought-provoking scenarios to consider.

Crowell solid bodied red-breasted merganser, circa 1900-1905, branded JWW.



Early matched pair of Crowell hollow goldeneyes branded JWW.



A 1901 photograph of hunting buddies (L-R): Stanley W. Smith, Joseph Taylor and John W. Willard.

ping merchants and sea captains bought chronometers from Willard's store.

Zabdiel Adams Willard, the grandson of Simon Willard and father of John Ware Willard, was a watchmaker who moved his family to Brookline, a Boston suburb, in the 1860s. Zabdiel benefited from lax federal mining laws that provided access to metals, minerals and land titles for modest fees, giving him control of substantial acres of public land. "Z.A. Willard invented many processes, furnaces, and machines for the reduction of ores of gold and silver, worked mines in Colorado and California, acted as a physician in mining camps, as well as chemist and assayer."

Zabdiel was mentioned in "20,000 Rich New Englanders," published in 1888.

John Ware Willard grew up in Brookline and Boston and studied engineering at M.I.T. His "History of Simon Willard, Inventor and Clockmaker" was published in 1911. He worked for Zabdiel as a mining engineer in the Southwest from 1885 to 1898 and then returned to Boston. His business office was in central Boston. John donated his collection of Navajo blankets to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and endowed the museum with an Oriental art acquisition fund. The Mason merganser and Crowell golden-eye decoys in his hunting rig, branded

"JWW," were used on Cape Cod and possibly Wenham Lake.

Boston

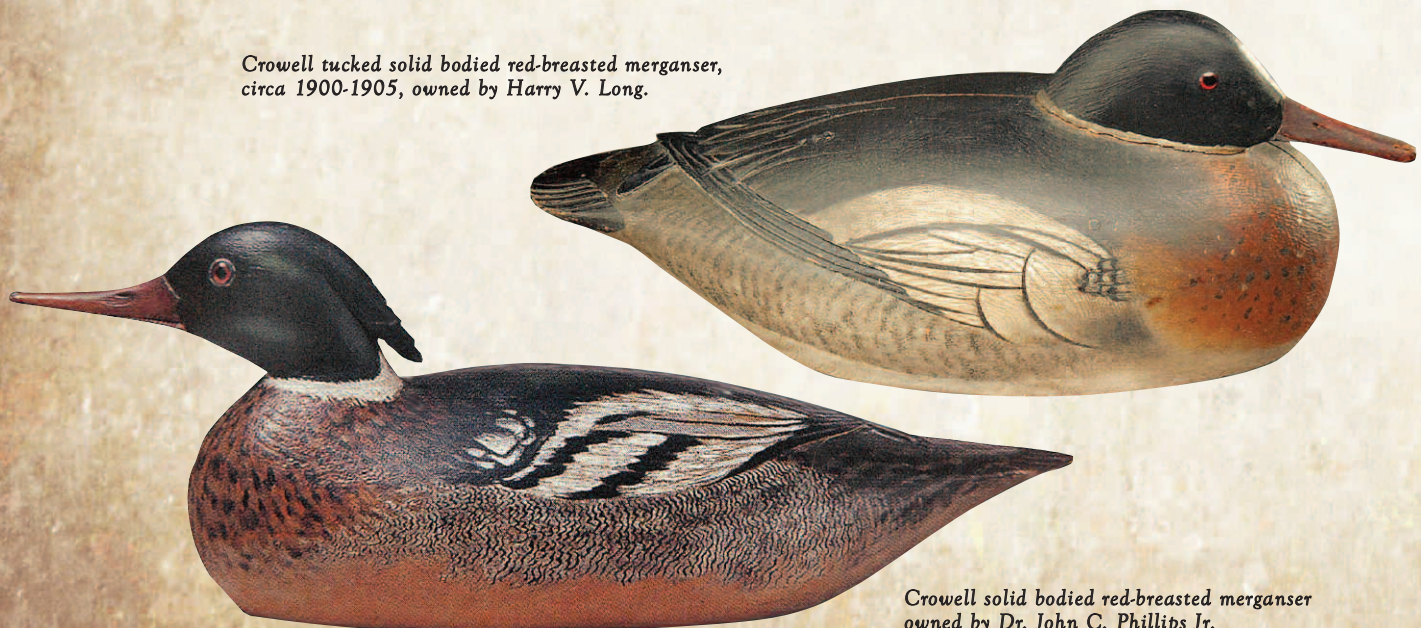
Boston is the capital and largest city in Massachusetts and one of American's oldest. It is where wealthy individuals linked to Crowell kept business offices and homes. For example, Dr. John Cunningham Jr. was a surgeon in Boston's City Hospital; Dr. Phillips also worked there. John Cunningham Sr. was a railroad mogul, bank president and president of a manufacturing company with offices on Boston's Congress Street, where Zabdiel Willard also kept an office. Harry Long lived in Boston and Cohasset. His father, George Washington Long, co-founded the Boston Stock Exchange in 1834, also located on Congress Street. Harry specialized in mining stocks and was an expert in that field.

John Willard was an experienced Boston mining engineer. Harry Long was a member of the Massachusetts Society of Mayflower Descendants. Stanley Smith was a Mayflower descendent, historian and genealogist with an office in Boston. His father, Albert Sr., was a Boston merchant and manufacturer. The 1910 census lists Stanley as a stockbroker in Boston. The Smiths wintered in Boston and summered on Cape Cod. John Willard's legal will mentions both Stanley and his brother Albert Jr. He and Stanley conducted surveys of old graveyards together. They were friends who hunted waterfowl on Cape Cod's Little Pleasant Bay with Joseph Taylor of Orleans.

Harvard

The multiple connections with Harvard are interesting. Rev. Samuel Willard graduated from Harvard in 1659 and

Crowell tucked solid bodied red-breasted merganser, circa 1900-1905, owned by Harry V. Long.



Crowell solid bodied red-breasted merganser owned by Dr. John C. Phillips Jr.

served as its President from 1701-1707. His grandson Joseph Willard (1738-1804) was President of Harvard from 1781-1804. In 1782 Harvard adopted Joseph's idea to create a medical school. For 50 years Simon Willard installed and maintained clocks at Harvard, connecting him with five Harvard presidents.

Harry Long's father-in-law Nathaniel Bowditch received honorary Harvard degrees. Other Harvard graduates pertinent to decoy history include Dr. John Phillips (class of 1904), Dr. John Cunningham (class of 1902) and Parker Whittemore (class of 1895). Dr. Phillips served as Associate Curator of Birds at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology.

Beverly/Wenham Lake

Beverly is 18 miles north of Boston. Joseph Willard was a pastor in Beverly

from 1772-1781, prior to becoming President of Harvard. Dr. Phillips married Sarah Howard, a descendant of Major Willard. The Phillips family owned 275 acres overlooking Wenham Lake. John Phillips Sr. met Elmer Crowell (1852-1951) in the late 1800s when hunting on Cape Cod and introduced him to his son, who hired Crowell to work at the Wenham camp in 1900. At the time, Phillips was in medical school.

Harvard students John Phillips and John Cunningham spent weekends in Beverly studying, hunting and fishing. The crystal clear waters at Wenham were idyllic. "Wenham Lake was known for high quality ice. Queen Victoria demanded it for her table, and Rudyard Kipling wrote about it in India. A century and a half ago, ice harvested from Wenham Lake began an improbable journey, carried by

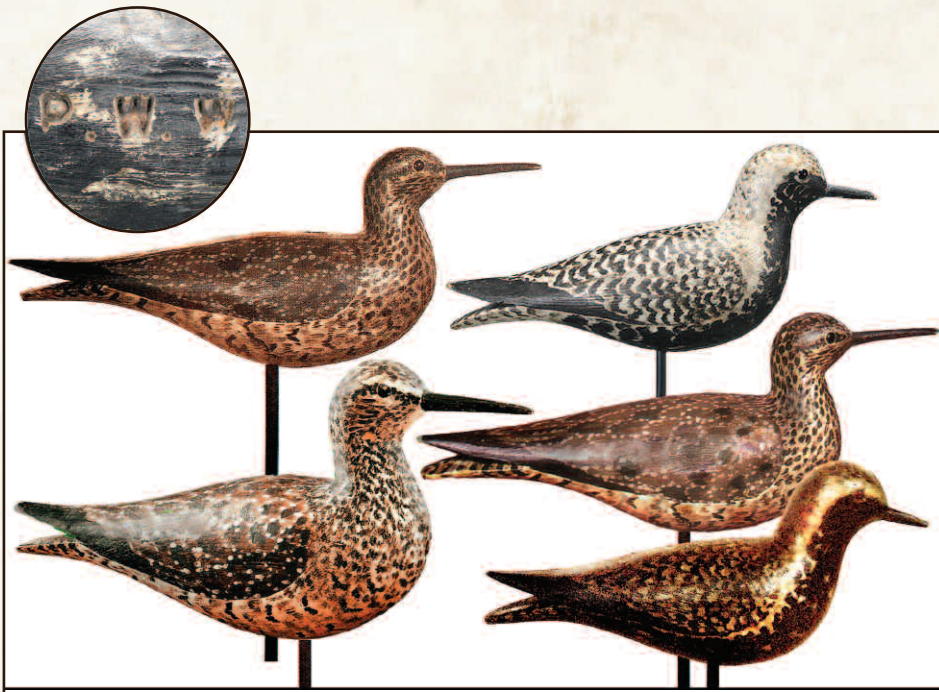


President William Howard Taft's summer "White House" in Beverly, Massachusetts.

sailing ships to equatorial islands and other world ports. During the nineteenth century, Wenham ice was prized for its purity." President William Howard Taft (1857-1930) kept his summer "White House" in Beverly.

Parker W. Whittemore had an office in Boston and a summer home in West Gloucester, not far from Beverly. He was Commodore of the Gloucester Yacht Club, an industrialist, banker, sportsman, boat builder, golfer and trap shooter. His decoys were branded "PWW." Interestingly, his brother was Willard Whittemore and his father Charles Willard Whittemore.

Beverly, the birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution, was linked to Boston and northern states by rail. Parker Whittemore was on the Board of Directors of two railroads running north out of Boston. Beverly's United Shoe Machinery Company was one of the largest and most progressive companies in North America. Crowell's contemporary, George Hinckley (1853-1929), lived in Beverly and worked at the "Shoe." Beverly was also home of America's first cotton mill. The first ship commissioned by the United States mili-



A group of Crowell shorebird decoys branded PWW for Parker Williams "Buck" Whittemore.



Dr. John C. Phillips family estate in Beverly, Massachusetts.



Crowell after a succesful goose hunt circa, 1920.

tary sailed from Beverly Harbor in 1775. The town considers itself the “Birthplace of America’s Navy.” It was a lively modern community.

Brookline

Brookline is situated across the Charles River from Harvard and M.I.T. and has long been a Boston suburb. It was a small independent community of less than 2,000 wealthy residents in 1900. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Brookline was called “the town of millionaires,” and it is where the Massachusetts State House and first American country club are located. Parker Whittemore was an accomplished tournament golfer, representing the Country Club of Brookline. Zabdiel Willard’s family, including bachelor son John, lived in the exclusive town. So did Dr. Cunningham’s family.

Cohasset

Cohasset is located a short distance from Boston where greater Boston Harbor ends and Massachusetts Bay begins. Cohasset was one of the homes of Stanley Smith’s family, according to the 1910 census, which also indicated it was Harry Long’s hometown. When Dr. Cunningham married Theresa Van den Heuval Ingersoll of Cohasset, Dr. Phillips was their best man.

Describing the Decoys

In Copley’s 2009 auction catalog of Harry Long’s Crowell collection, Stephen O’Brien wrote, “This red-breasted merganser displays a highly expressive ‘fat’

body form. With its body measuring 7 inches wide and its back 5 inches tall, this distinct over-sized merganser is believed to be a singular example of American folk art. Crowell’s decision to make the merganser on a grand scale provided him the freedom of a ‘big canvas’ on which to experiment with elaborate feather carving and paint.”

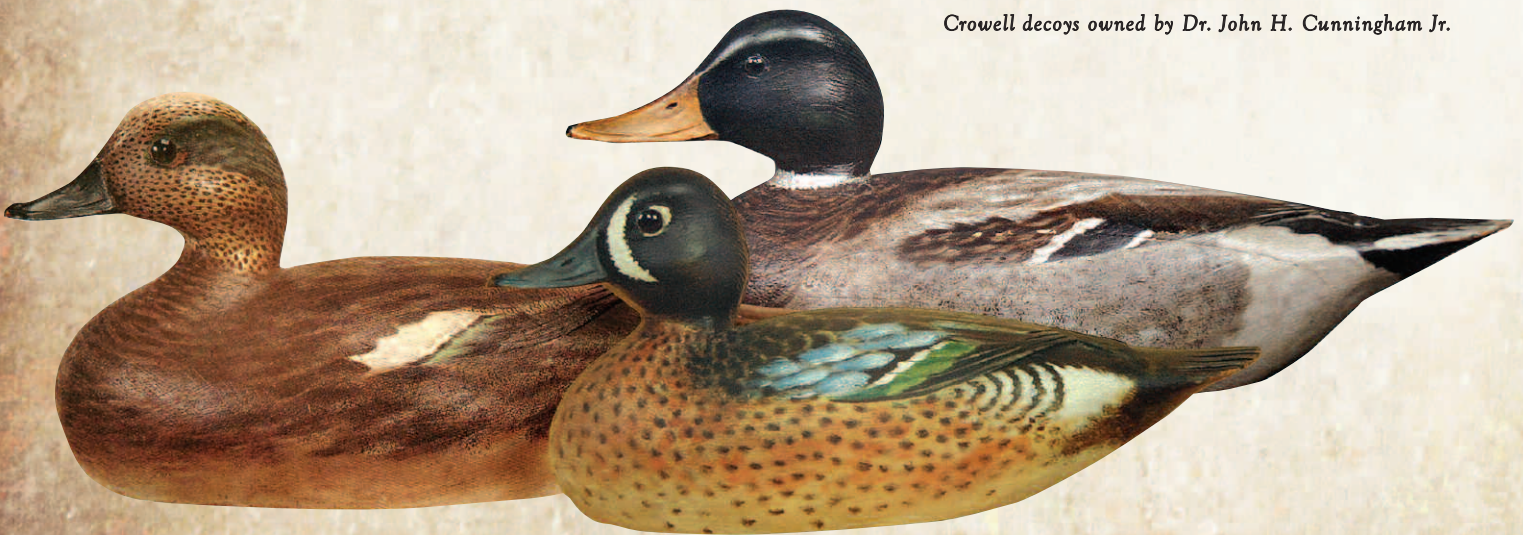
At least one “JWW” branded goldeneye features exactly the same measurements; all are hollow. Both that Crowell goldeneye and the Long merganser are pre-brand models, have singular nostril carving and portray relaxed waterfowl. Cape Cod collector John Mulak described goldeneyes from this era as “full” as opposed to “oversize.”

“They are considerably wider than later Crowell decoys and goldeneyes are one of the few hollow working species made by Crowell,” he said. “The ‘JWW’ rig only consisted of hollow goldeneyes and solid-bodied mergansers. Some mergansers were Mason’s and some were Crowell’s.”

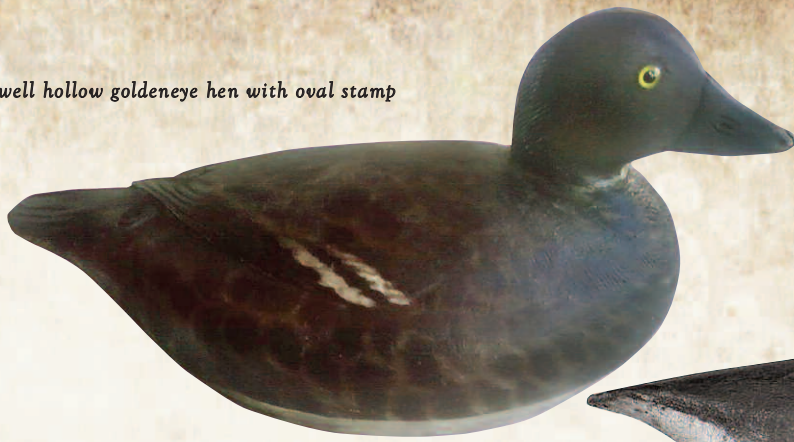
Cape Cod collector/dealer Steve Tyng agreed, and recalled seeing a historically important well-worn anonymous decoy. “In the late 1800s a Smith family member brought Crowell a sample model to copy,” he said. “The decoy was unusual with puffy cheeks.” The revelation of Crowell copying decoys conceived by others is intriguing.

Crowell’s hollow goldeneyes evolved through four design phases. His first copies, all pre-brand models, have exaggerated head profiles, lack nostril carving, are devoid of wingtip and tail carving, have proportion-

Crowell decoys owned by Dr. John H. Cunningham Jr.



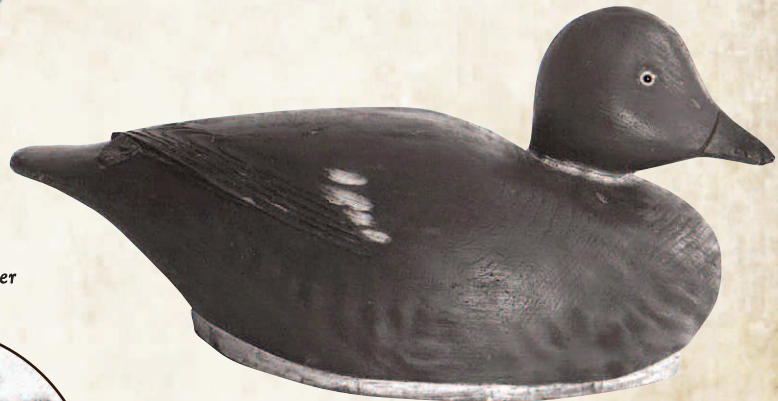
Crowell hollow goldeneye hen with oval stamp



Pre-1900 Crowell hollow goldeneye hen with no brand.



Crowell hollow goldeneye, circa 1900-1905, with Smith family S brand, surrounded by SW for Stanley Smith and AP for his brother Albert P. Smith.



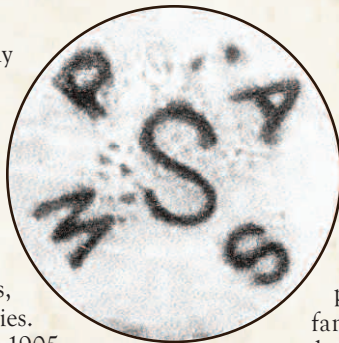
Crowell hollow goldeneye hen, circa 1900, with S brand.

ally higher backs and date roughly 1895-1900. Those only have Smith family brands. A second type, branded "S," lacks nostril carving but does have carved wingtips; they are also pre-brand.

The third group, branded either "JWW" or "S," has simple singular nostril carving, lower backs, classic head profiles and wider bodies. They were likely made from 1900-1905, based upon the styling of the companion Mason mergansers in the rig and John Willard's 1898 arrival back in Boston. The fourth style features Crowell's oval brand (1912 or later), more refined paint patterns and his recognizable double nostril incising. All goldeneye decoys have either short or no necks with slightly turned heads and attached bottom boards.

Conclusion

Research began with a quest to simply confirm that John Ware Willard owned Crowell decoys and to learn something about him. The search ultimately led to numerous individuals linked with both Willard and Crowell. "Follow the money" is a memorable quote from "All the President's Men," made to a reporter investigating Washington's infamous political



burglary. Connecting the dots formed an amazing web of powerful individuals familiar with Crowell's work.

We discovered individuals deeply integrated in the American record. They were prominent, powerful forces with unlimited resources. They associated with U.S. Presidents and controlled wealth. They could afford the best and expected it. They possessed the capability to transform the commonplace into the extraordinary. Every personal item was intentionally chosen to reflect their status and success.

Early on, some challenged Crowell to excel, eventually establishing his reputation. Similarly, other movers and shakers formed exclusive hunt clubs in prime continental locations. Their privileged fingerprints impacted North American history.

Those predictable narratives, however, remain to be written with more dots to

connect. Who were they? What did they do? Who did they know? The journey begins with unraveling the mystery of a modest looking owner's brand. Then, a decoys extended provenance can be fully explored. Decoys were not designed to exist in isolation. They are part of a much larger story.

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