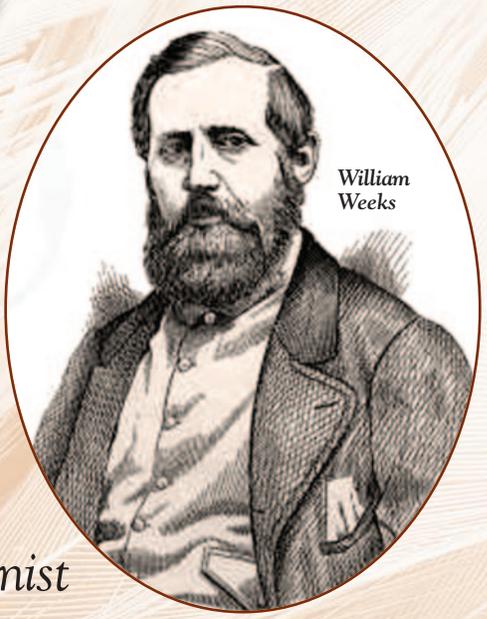


William Jones Weeks



William Weeks

Lifelong naturalist, fitness fanatic and opportunist

BY GENE KANGAS, ART PROFESSOR EMERITUS

When browsing through decoy books, it's possible to encounter an unfamiliar maker's name. In some cases, it might be the only time that name exists in any decoy book.

Dr. George Ross Starr mentioned such a person on page 221 of "Decoys of the Atlantic Flyway." He wrote, "The oldest Long Island decoy I have seen is the small decoy (13" long) ... listed by Captain Corwin as a bluewing teal... This decoy is the creation of a wonderful gentleman of Yaphank (Long Island) named William J. Weeks. Mr. Weeks was a wealthy man who had a consuming interest in everything about him. Primarily, he was a naturalist, but with special leaning towards farming

and bee culture. Needless to say, he was also a hunter and, in fact, a good all-around athlete."

Doc Starr, however, didn't see the link between the Weeks teal and the gull pictured on the dust jacket of his book. This brief mention of Weeks is intriguing, but, if you didn't carefully read Starr's book, it's doubtful that you've ever heard of him or even remember that you read it. Yet, he had an intriguing life story and might have made a major contribution to American folk art that, until now, has been overlooked.

There is much to learn about William Jones Weeks. During his lifetime, for example, he held a surprising number of positions: inventor, entrepreneur, civil engineer, farmer, beekeeper, horticulturist, taxidermist, surveyor, Superintendent of Schools, Superintendent of Suffolk

County Almshouse, researcher, writer, carpenter, shoemaker, furrier, architect, dentist, map maker, Justice of the Peace, School Trustee, treasurer of the Suffolk County Agricultural Society, formed the Temperance Society, treasurer of St. Andrew's Church and president of the Yaphank Bicycle Club. He was a true Renaissance Man.

William was the only child of James Huggins Weeks (1798-1879) and Susan Maria Jones Weeks (1802-1888). He was born in 1821 in Oyster Bay on Long Island. By 1828, the family moved to the hamlet of Yaphank in Suffolk County. It was a small, intimate community where everyone knew everybody.

Yaphank is derived from a Native American word that translates to "bank of a river." Father James purchased 9,000 acres or roughly 14 square miles and became a prosperous businessman. The land allowed James and son William to farm and harvest lumber and firewood that was shipped by rail and sold in New York City. Connections helped James become the fifth president of the Long Island Railroad from 1847-1850. James built a home in Yaphank that he and his wife referred to as "The Lilacs." In 1853, James and Susan funded the construction of St. Andrew's Church, in memory of their first granddaughter, Susan Maria Weeks (b.1848).

Young William grew up with an immense backyard playground to explore. He particu-



William Weeks' "Teal," Decoys of the Atlantic Flyway.



Gull #1, pictured on the cover of "Decoys of the Atlantic Flyway" by Starr.

larly loved to walk outdoors and commune with nature. Starting after age two, William embarked on a life-long holistic health quest. Going forward, he only drank water and steadfastly avoided alcohol, tea, coffee and tobacco. He became known as the "cold water man."

Weeks was described as being medium height, compactly built, fully developed, and powerful. A biography, written in 1875, recalled, "His countenance is dominant but intellectual. He has a pleasing way of talking and is unpretending in language and appearance. He walks with a hurried eager gait; and seen upon the street, would be taken for a mechanic or someone with a job on hand and a limited time to perform it."

From the beginning, William attended elite schools, where he proved to be an excellent, inquisitive student. By age 17, he was a practicing surveyor. In 1840, William joined the freshman class of Yale College. Although he competed in numerous sports, walking remained his passion. He created his own adjustable wood



1844 Yale student lamp.

and metal "study lamp" in his senior year at Yale in 1844.

"January, 1842 was Yale's annual two

weeks' winter vacation. Instead of a visit home, William determined to walk to Boston. The distance from New Haven was more than 140 miles. There was considerable depth of snow (with unplowed country roads). He began with a companion. Before reaching Hartford, his partner became discouraged and abandoned the undertaking. Thence, William continued the journey alone. After several days of steady walking, he reached his destination, saw Boston, Charlestown, and the Bunker Hill Monument. He returned by way of Providence, accomplishing 35 miles on the last day's walk in nine hours, including 20 minutes' rest."

William graduated with honors and a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1844. A second 1875 account reported, "Previously in the spring of 1843, he introduced rowing as an exercise for students. He purchased a 19-foot Whitehall Rowboat in New York and induced six classmates to join him in forming a boat club. It was the first boat owned by Yale students and was the origin of the Yale Navy. The boat was named 'Pioneer' and its crew 'Pioneers.'"

William enjoyed raising and studying bees, but it was more than a hobby; it was an obsession. He wrote about bees almost daily in his diary. His discovery of how bees constructed hexagonal cells was published in Scientific American, May 1860. Honey became a healthy family staple. Many of William's activities and interests were passed onto his children. Like him, they cut wood, exercised, hunted and studied nature.

Sections of the vast family lands were transformed into cherry, peach, pear, plum and apple orchards. The Weeks family owned their own cider presses, had a superb cranberry bog and a huge garden that provided wholesome food. Harvests included asparagus, beans, peas, watermelon, cabbage, squash, pumpkins, blackberries, beets, parsnips, cucumbers,

SMITH'S BOAT WORKS.

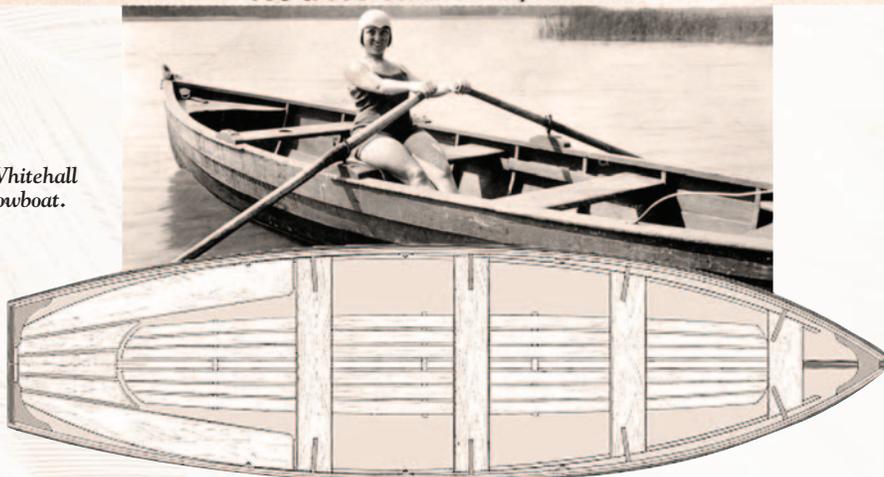
The Whitehall, Best of All!
Lightest Cedar,
Easiest Rowing,
Safest and Roomiest.
World-wide Fame.



Most Durable.
No Leaking.
No Tacks.
Copper Riveted.
Handsome Finish.
3 Gold Medals.

159 & 160 South Street, New York.

Whitehall rowboat.





"Dutch Roll."
or
 Outside edge, forward.

Feb'y 9th 1893.

W. J. Weeks

William Weeks ice skating 1893.



On the Bicycle
 W. J. Weeks
 At Home
 Yaphank N.Y.
 Nov. 28, 1895

William Weeks bicycle riding 1896.

tomatoes, lettuce, corn, strawberries, prize-winning grapes and potatoes. Chicken provided meat and eggs.

William won three awards for his cranberries at the 1876 Centennial Exposition

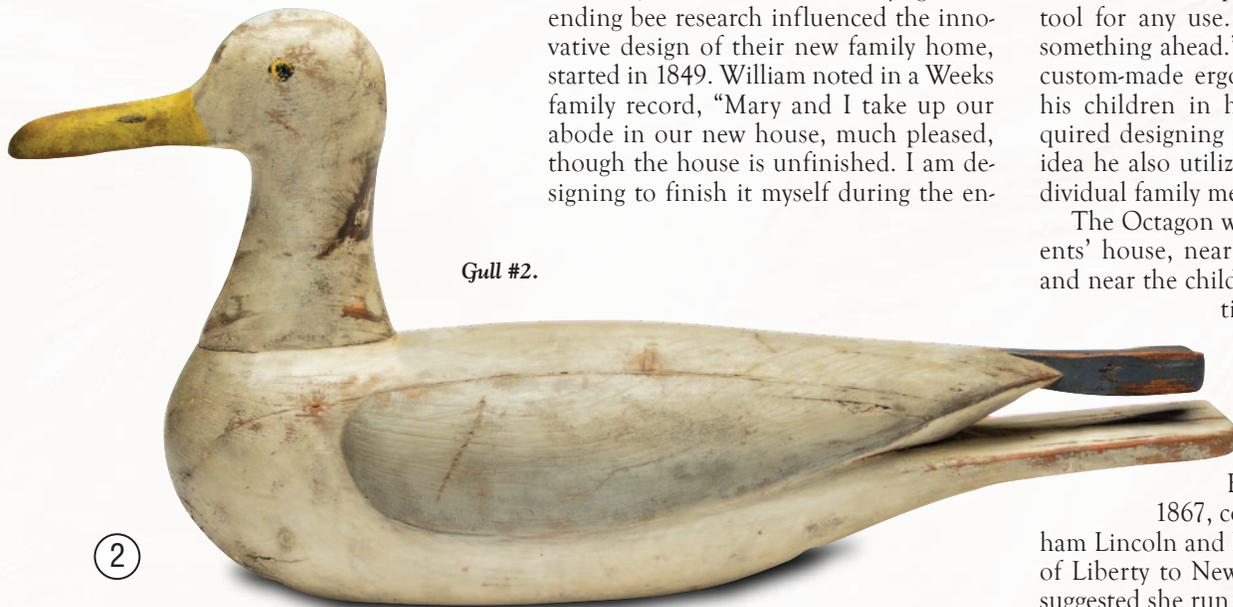
in Philadelphia. The father and son joint venture enabled the family to become affluent and self-sufficient. Excess crops and/or products were regularly shared with those in need.

William married Mary Crowell Weeks (1826-1883) in 1848. The couple had 12 children; several died at an early age. Unending bee research influenced the innovative design of their new family home, started in 1849. William noted in a Weeks family record, "Mary and I take up our abode in our new house, much pleased, though the house is unfinished. I am designing to finish it myself during the en-

suing winter." The novel structure became known as the "Octagon House."

William never lacked for something to do. "With family cares, bees, garden and a full workshop, his attention and labors were always employed and diversified. He was skilled in the use of mechanics' tools, and his workshop was replete with every tool for any use. He always envisioned something ahead." For example, William custom-made ergonomic baby shoes for his children in his workshop. That required designing patterns, which was an idea he also utilized to make hats for individual family members.

The Octagon was not far from his parents' house, near St. Andrew's Church, and near the childhood home of influential celebrity fashion guru, editor and author Mary Louise Booth (1831-1889). She was born in Yaphank, helped start Harper's Bazaar magazine in 1867, corresponded with Abraham Lincoln and helped bring the Statue of Liberty to New York. In 1872, it was suggested she run for Vice President.



Gull #2.

2



Gull #3.

The pre-1850 residences of Weeks and Booth were located along Main Street, bordered by lakes, rivers, streams and ponds. Fishing, boating and waterfowl were available in all directions. William often modified the Octagon due to his growing family.

William dedicated his life to physical health. He was a fitness fanatic who exercised year-round, even in his later years. He cut and split wood nearly every day. In winter, he loved skating and exhibited elegant penmanship by etching the alphabet into the ice with his footwork. When inspired, he inscribed the Lord's Prayer or Ten Commandments into the slick surface with calligraphic flare. He wrote in an extravagant style on a photo of him ice skating, "Dutch Roll, outside edge forward, Feb. 9, 1893."



Taxidermy owl and wood duck, 1863, Yaphank

As late as August 2, 1896, a local newspaper reported, "A new bicycle club has just been formed, the Yaphank Bicycle Club. Their intention was to construct a three mile bicycle path." Its leader and president was the champion septuagenarian cyclist, W.J. Weeks." He passed away one year later at the age of 76.

Weeks was an opportunist. He took each day as it came and made the most of it. He kept a day-to-day diary from 1849 to 1884 describing his private life. Several years were transcribed and digitized by local Longwood High School students to assist with this article, and three years are available online on the school's website. Over 30 years and thousands of entries await further scrutiny. All original diaries are in Yale University's library archives. Following are samples from Longwood's recent transcriptions.

Oct. 5, 1852 I waded the river and shot two black ducks.

Oct. 13, 1852 Went early to the river. Shot at some ducks. Went again in the afternoon and shot two wood ducks. I constructed a decoy duck. (A wood duck was mounted, signed by Weeks and dated 1863. It and a snowy owl were given to the Yaphank Historical Society.)

Oct. 14, 1852 I went early to the river but saw no ducks. Shot two fine trout. I made another decoy. Father and Mother dined with us.

Nov. 6, 1857 I started for Wm. Smith's with horse who lent me his boat. I rowed to Robert's Point where I put out some decoys. I shot one duck and returned at dusk.

Dec. 1, 1857 Walked to the store and purchased a pair of fine black ducks (for supper)

Dec. 4, 1857 Father and Mother dined with us. We had the pair of black ducks.

Feb. 4, 1858 This morning a partridge flew against Father's house and killed itself. It was probably pursued by some birds or frightened.

March 26, 1858 I went to the stream and discovered several black ducks. By carefully crawling through the swamp shot one just above the Railroad Bridge.

June 1, 1858 I visited my trap, watched for crows and other birds, shot one or two.

June 2, 1858 I went to the stream, watched the blackbirds, and shot three.



Octagon House.



19th century couture.

June 18, 1858 I strolled this morning to father's and shot two robins in the garden.

July 7, 1858 I worked in my garden. Shot at the birds which have begun at my raspberries. At dusk walked outside with my gun in hopes to see a woodcock.

Feb. 3, 1860 Prepared a pattern and cut

muskrat skins for a cap.

Sept. 7, 1860 I went to the swamp and cut down some white birches. I loaded my gun and waded downstream. I was in quest of ducks, saw but one and shot a muskrat.

Jan. 5, 1867 I walked to the stream with my gun. Split wood at dusk. James Raynor caught a fox and brought it over. I expect to forward it to the Long Island Historical Society Monday (taxidermy).

July 5, 1867 Wrote to Harper's to renew subscription (first year of publication). Went to the Post Office.

Sept. 6, 1867 This afternoon I cleaned my gun and going to look for ducks tomorrow morning.

Those limited notations reveal William's opportunistic but modest tendencies. As he roamed shorelines and waded shallows, he encountered potential food sources, taxidermy possibilities, clothing resources and unwelcome foragers. The family's vast properties required vigilance.

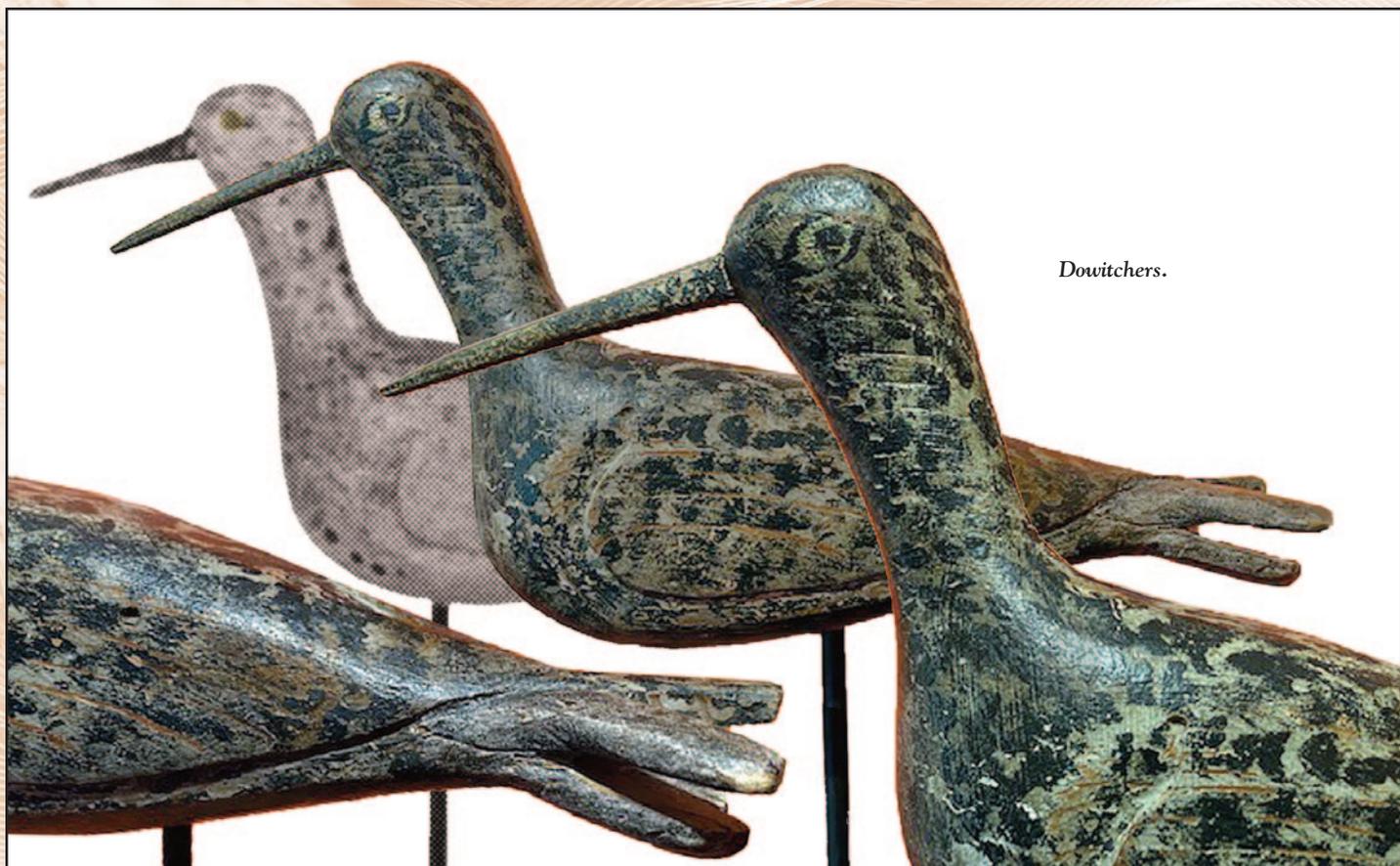
Doc Starr's book implies one of William's decoys was a teal. Yet, its generic light body and bill colors allow other in-



Mary Louise Booth.

terpretations. Its head profile and painted eyes, however, are distinctive. William mentioned a habit of creating reusable patterns.

The Weeks family's lush gardens, fruit orchards and huge cranberry bog attracted unwanted hungry animals and birds. William's granddaughter provided a valuable insight. "Wild bird and animal life abounded, but Mr. Weeks, though highly expert with a shot gun, killed in modera-



Dowitchers.

tion, only for the purposes of preservation, protection and food.”

Crops were constantly targeted by scavengers, such as hungry seagulls. William was a jump shooter, who didn't plan big hunts or need large rigs. His 1852 to 1867 diaries only mentioned him making a few decoys. Other years remain to be researched.

In the 19th century, gulls were a decorative feature of popular couture. Wings, breasts, heads, bodies and skins adorned women's hats in vast numbers. Fashion expert Mary Louise Booth emphasized it in Harper's. Gull feather sales became a financial option for baymen and waterfowlers. The largest 19th century American millinery factory specializing in feathered hats and muffs was William Wilson's, located in Wantagh, a short distance from Yaphank. After a fire destroyed the factory in 1899, over 10,000 burned gull skins were discovered! Those represent just a small fraction of the number of gulls shot for vanity.

Therefore, it is not surprising that a 100 plus year-old seagull decoy emerged out of a barn in Southampton (Starr reference); a second related example appeared in an antique shop in Manhattan shortly after that (Starr reference), and a slightly similar one turned up locally, was donated to the Southold Historical Society in 1960 and was later deaccessioned in 2016 (museum notes). Illustrations refer



19th century political cartoon – millinery business.

to them in that order: #1, #2, and #3. Did one person make all three? None were stereotypic “confidence” decoys.

The flamboyant fashion trends of the 19th century triggered the rationale for the creation of specific decoy species on Long Island. By the late 1890s, for example, 5,000,000 birds were estimated to

have been killed annually for that market. Because of such overwhelming numbers, the National Audubon Society was founded in 1905 to protect gulls, terns, egrets, herons and other waterfowl. Public reactions to “millinery murder” eventually resulted in the passage of a protective law in 1913 and, shortly after, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1918. Both shielded birds from previous excesses.

William Weeks' life journey embodies a convergence of multiple contributing factors. It is impossible to imagine being able to make shoes for your children, pull your mother's teeth and determine your life's philosophy at age two. Weeks did that and so much more. He made a lasting impression.

Identifiable fingerprints are left on the things we touch. Artists, artisans, craftspeople, etc. leave telltale evidence of their handiwork. Endurable signature traits help differentiate makers. Advancing age often factored into noticeable adjustments, yet specific core details persisted. Those are key fingerprints or makers' DNA to recognize.

Weeks' diaries reviewed thus far indicate that he only made a few decoys, carved one at a time, over time. The Small Weeks teal illustrated in Doc Starr's book has a distinct head profile. Projecting that pattern onto other decoys helps link them with him. In addition, similar stylized eye treatments were hand-painted on both ducks and shorebirds.

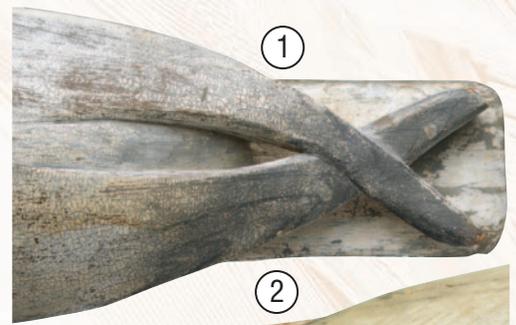
The gulls are large and in original paint. Gull #2, for example, measures an



“Gulls,” Yaphank Historical Society.



①



①



②



③



②



③

Bottom comparisons, Tail and wing tip comparisons.

impressive 26 inches long, bill tip to tail. Gulls #1 and #2 have cantilevered crossed wings that terminate before the end of the tail. The same detail is reflected in more

than one shorebird. Could there be a connection?

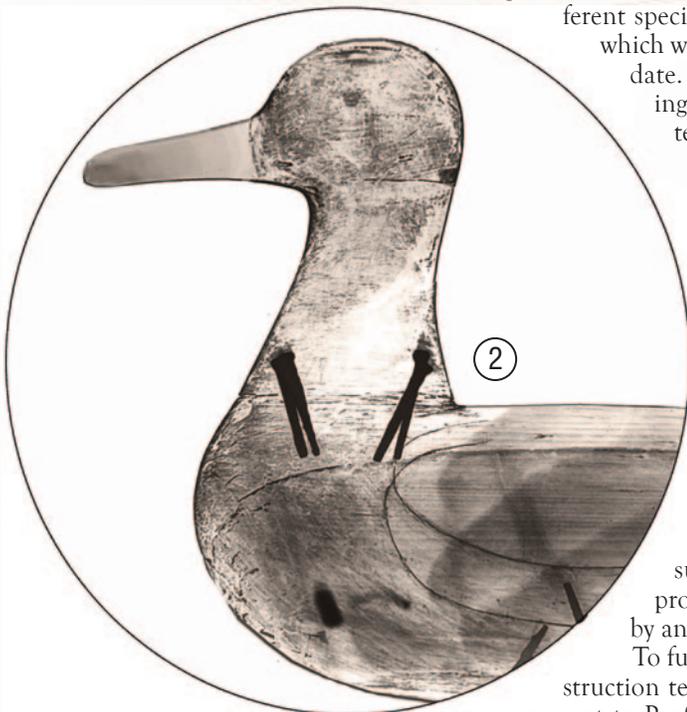
Two small “gull” decoys in the Yaphank Historical Society have been repainted several times and represent different species. They have glass eyes, which were likely added at a later date. There is no wing carving, and the overall character is less sophisticated. Is there a family connection?

Gulls #1 and #2 have flat bottoms while #3's is rounded; #3 has glass eyes and inelegantly bent wings, which extend significantly beyond the tail's end. Its original painted surface is also noticeably unlike the first two. Those traits suggest that it was either produced at a later date or by another family member.

To further investigate the construction techniques, an x-ray of #2 was sent to Prof. Tom Visser, a historic preservation expert. He indicated that “cut nails revealed in the gull's x-ray date from the early 1800s to circa 1900.” The

examined diaries agree with that assessment. At least two of Weeks' decoys originated in 1852. Time, location and a highly unusual lifestyle are self-explanatory. There remains much more to learn about the amazing saga of William Weeks. We should add “decoy maker” to his list of accomplishments. 

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X-ray of gull #2.