

THE WILDFOWLER

AUGUST 2025

A PUBLICATION OF THE ATLANTIC WILDFOWL HERITAGE MUSEUM AND THE BACK BAY WILDFOWL GUILD

Museum Makes Front Page News Monday, July 28, 2025 Virginian-Pilot

The Atlantic Wildfowl Heritage Museum at de Witt Cottage has made front page news — and for good reason. The two historic treasures are celebrating major milestones this year: de Witt Cottage turns 130 and the museum marks its 30th anniversary.

Built in 1895 by B.P. Holland, a Norfolk Southern Railroad clerk, the cottage is the oldest remaining oceanfront home in Virginia Beach. Originally a private residence, it later became the home of the de Witt family and is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Since 1990, the Atlantic Wildfowl Heritage Museum has operated from the site, preserving both the building and the region's wildfowling heritage.



To celebrate, the museum is hosting a special exhibit featuring 270 decoys carved by renowned artist Mark McNair and his sons, Ian and Colin. The Cromwell family, longtime collectors, have generously loaned their impressive collection for display. An online auction of three decoys begins Sept. 1, and a reception will be held Sept. 20. Sponsorships are available. If you or someone you know would like to help sponsor this event, please contact the museum at director@awhm.org or call (757) 437-8432

While the museum receives a city grant, fundraising and gift shop sales are vital. “This celebration — we want to knock it out of the park,” said museum president Aimee Rhodes. Visit and experience this living piece of Virginia Beach history. You can access the full article at Pilotonline, “This Place is such a Jewel”.





Upcoming Guild Events:

de Witt Garden Club
10:00 am, at the museum
Meets every Monday
We are a hands-on Garden Club
So, bring your gloves and tools.

08/19/2025: Board Meeting
6:00 pm at the Museum

09/01/2025: Labor Day

09/01/2025 Online Auction Opens

Saturday, 09/20/2025 AWHM 30th Anniversary Celebration
de Witt Cottage 1113 Atlantic Avenue
3:00pm until 7:00pm

Save these Dates

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de Witt Cottage 1113 Atlantic Avenue
3:00pm until 7:00pm

DECOYS WANTED

WE BUY WOODEN OR CANVAS DUCKS,
GEESE, SWANS & SHOREBIRDS
WHAT IS YOUR DECOY WORTH? ... IT COULD BE WORTH THOUSANDS!



WE WILL PAY
CASH FOR ANY
OLD DECOYS AND
HUNTING ITEMS



FREE DECOY IDENTIFICATION & EVALUATIONS
OF SINGLE DECOYS OR ENTIRE COLLECTIONS
BY MARK CROMWELL 757-721-2746
Member North Carolina Decoy Collectors Assoc.



Collector's Shelf

By Larry Davenport and Mark Cromwell

William Kissam Vanderbilt (1849-1920)

Readers of these pages have become familiar with the Lighthouse Club and the lives of wealth and privilege that its members enjoyed. More recently, however, readers have been exposed to members of the Currituck Shooting Club (the Currituck Club). While the Lighthouse Club was most certainly grand, the Currituck Club was unquestionably the grandest of the dozens of waterfowl hunting clubs established on Currituck Sound. It was also the oldest, having been established in 1857. Its membership was a Who's Who of NYC Gilded Age society.

William Kissam Vanderbilt (WKV) joined the Currituck Club in 1894. (With J. P. Morgan, et al, he was also a founding member of the Jekyll Island Club.) In addition to waterfowl hunting, he had a strong interest in horses. His grandfather was Cornelius ("Commodore") Vanderbilt and his parents were William Henry and Maria Louisa (Kissam) Vanderbilt. William Henry was the primary heir to the Commodore's fortune, which at the time was the largest accumulation of wealth in the United States. The Commodore initially made his fortune in the maritime industry (hence the nickname "Commodore"), but he built the vastly greater portion of his fortune in the nascent railroad industry. William Henry inherited \$95 million from the Commodore, an amount equal to over \$2 billion in today's dollars. However, within a few years William Henry's railroad business acumen enabled him to more than double his inheritance to \$200 million (over \$4 billion today). William Henry left \$55 million of this fortune (over \$1 billion in today's dollars) to his third son and our Currituck Club member WKV.



Being born into a very wealthy family, WKV spent his early school years in Switzerland, where he found ready acceptance among European aristocrats. However, this acceptance was not experienced upon his return to the United States. We have previously read that Caroline Astor, the "Lady Astor," was the matriarch of Gilded Age society—she, alone, determined who was in and who was out. In Lady Astor's judgment, it took more than wealth to be "in," and she initially thought the Vanderbilts to be a crude, albeit wealthy, bunch. As such, she routinely excluded the Vanderbilts from her gala events. This changed with WKV.

In 1875, WKV married Alva Erskine Smith. To say Alva was a headstrong woman would be a great understatement. While she came from wealth, herself, her marriage into the vast Vanderbilt fortune encouraged her to seize what she deemed to be her appropriate place in NYC Gilded Age society—i.e., at the very top, supplanting even Lady Astor. While Lady Astor continued to exclude the Vanderbilts from her social schedule, Alva Vanderbilt had a plan. Using her unlimited wealth, she would first commission the renowned architect Richard Morris Hunt to build and furnish her fabulously extravagant French-style chateau mansion covering one full



city block on NYC's Fifth Avenue. (WKV and Alva also used Hunt to build Marble House, their renowned mansion in Newport, RI.) Once completed, Alva would hold her own gala event that would put Lady Astor's to shame. Alva spared no expense. The newspapers followed closely all of the preparations, which were optimally leaked to the press to heighten anticipation. Society members were excitedly clamoring for one of the 1,300 invitations. In a touch of supreme irony, one of the excited society young women was Carrie Astor, daughter of Lady Astor, who was preparing for the event as if she were sure to receive an invitation. Upon learning this through her clandestine sources, Alva Vanderbilt was able to play her trump card. Because Lady Astor had neither called on nor received Alva or any of the Vanderbilts, Alva publicly declared it impossible to invite Lady Astor's daughter. To save her daughter and her family from the impending devastating embarrassment, Lady Astor was forced to ride in her carriage to Alva's new palace and have her footman present her calling card to a Vanderbilt footman. (No member of polite society would ever appear, themselves, at another's door without a formal invitation.) While inviting Carrie Astor and her mother then became all but requisite, Alva achieved her goal of forcing Lady Astor to henceforth accept the Vanderbilts into society. While they may never have become close friends, the Vanderbilts and Astors would henceforth travel in the same social circles.

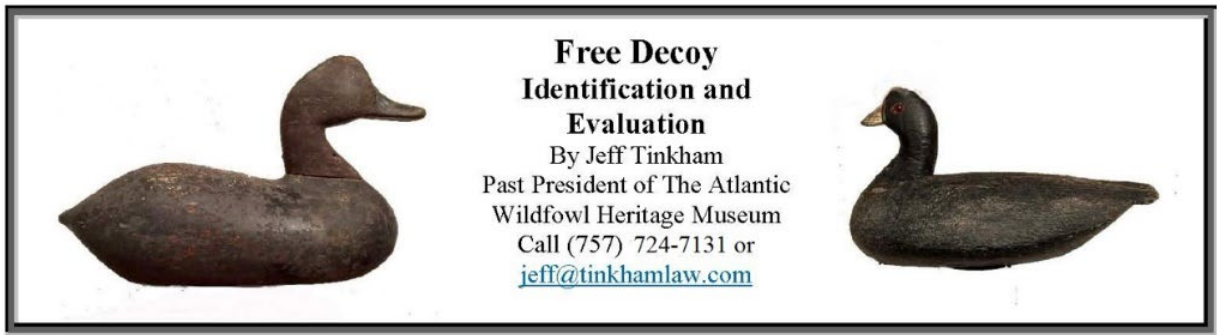
NYC was abuzz. With "the Vanderbilt Ball" impending, costumers and milliners became fully engaged preparing garments for the attendees. Alva retained two orchestras and planned a dinner event suitable for royalty. After food, floral embellishments, decorations, etc., she spent the equivalent of \$5 million in today's dollars. It was widely reported that not just NYC, but the entire country had never seen an event that would have come close to the extravagance of the Vanderbilt Ball. The effect catapulted the Vanderbilts to the top of NYC's Gilded Age society.

[Author's anecdote: *While the Vanderbilt Ball may have been the Gilded Age's most extravagant event, notoriety for the most novel—if not absurd—soiree must certainly go to the wealthy industrialist Cornelius K. G. Billings. In 1903, this president of the New York Riding Club celebrated the completion of his expansive NYC equestrian center with a horseback dinner—yes, the attendees were on horseback for the entire affair—in the upper-floor ballroom of the city's Sherry Hotel. When the guests arrived, they entered a contrived pastoral scene, with a turf-covered dance floor, split-rail fencing, a hitching post, potted trees and palms, live birds flying among the branches, and the ceiling decorated as a night sky. Mounted on horseback for the entire affair, attendees sipped champagne through straws coming from ice-filled saddle bags, while food was served on trays attached to their saddles. The horses dined, too, on buckets of oats proffered by grooms from Billings's stables. While the grooms and waiters made their best efforts to clean up the inevitable product of feeding the horses, the smell in the ballroom became overwhelming. This was obviously prior to Public Health Departments and sanitary standards for food service. Publicity following the event suggested it offered conclusive evidence of the self-indulgence and moral decay of Gilded Age society.*]

WKV and Alva had three children. History records that Alva maneuvered their only daughter, Consuelo, to marry Charles Spencer-Churchill, 9th Duke of Marlborough and a cousin of Winston Churchill. That marriage ended in divorce, as did that of WKV and Alva, themselves, in 1895. Alva remarried longtime family friend Oliver Belmont and became an internationally recognized leader in the Women's Suffrage Movement. After moving to France, WKV married the twice-widowed Anne Harriman. In France, WKV built a chateau and established a racehorse stable and breeding facility. He acquired U.S. Hall of Fame filly Maskette for use as a brood mare and then produced horses that prevailed in many important races in France. WKV died in France in 1920, with his remains returned to the Vanderbilt family mausoleum on Staten Island.

Somehow during his extraordinary life, William Kissam Vanderbilt took the time and made the effort to leave his cushy existence to hunt waterfowl on the remote and spartan Outer Banks and Currituck Sound. In at least some small way, our lives seem richer because he did. He must obviously have traveled a path that many of us cross routinely in our lives.





FROM THE GUILD PRESIDENT

Members and Supporters,

As the days grow shorter and the sun begins to set a little earlier, we find ourselves at that bittersweet moment of the year: the end of summer. The season of warmth, relaxation, and adventure is slowly winding down, leaving behind cherished memories of lazy beach days, vibrant sunsets, and carefree laughter. As the gentle breeze carries a hint of autumn's approach, we are reminded that all good things must come to an end. Nearing the end of summer brings with it a unique blend of emotions. We reflect on the experiences we've had during these precious months, appreciating the moments of joy and the lessons learned. Whether we embarked on grand journeys or simply savored the small delights of everyday life, the summer has left an indelible mark on our hearts.

We are just over six weeks away from our highly anticipated *DeWitt Cottage Heritage & Celebrating the Decoy Legacy* event, taking place on **September 20, 2025**. This signature evening will celebrate our wildfowling heritage and honor the craftsmanship that defines our museum's mission.

I'm proud to announce that the **Mark McNair exhibit** is now complete and open to the public. This extraordinary display features **266 pieces from Mark and Margie Cromwell's personal collection**, along with select period furniture, creating a remarkable and immersive gallery experience. I warmly invite you and your family to visit the exhibit ahead of our September event.

To ensure the success of this celebration, we are offering **corporate sponsorships of \$2,500**.

Sponsorship includes:

- **Recognition** throughout the event,
- **Six complimentary tickets** to attend, and
- **An exclusive one-hour meet-and-greet** with Mark, Ian, and Colin McNair prior to the start of the event, a unique opportunity to engage with three generations of master carvers.

Your sponsorship helps us not only celebrate the rich history of decoy carving but also supports the **continuation of this timeless craft for generations to come**. Together, we can inspire new artists, preserve treasured traditions, and ensure the legacy of water fowling lives on.

Thank you for your continued commitment to the Atlantic Wildfowl Heritage Museum. I look forward to celebrating this unforgettable evening with you.

Respectfully,

Aimee Rhodes

President, Atlantic Wildfowl Heritage Museum



DEWITT COTTAGE HERITAGE



CELEBRATING THE DECOY LEGACY

130 Years overlooking the Virginia Beach Oceanfront
30 Years of the Atlantic Wildfowl Heritage Museum



There will be an online/in-person auction for a decoy being carved now by Mark and Ian McNair each to help raise money for the cottage. Mark, Ian and Colin McNair will be in attendance onsite to meet and greet and conduct demonstrations of their art!



The event is on Saturday September 20th, 2025
3-7 PM at the DeWitt Cottage in Virginia Beach

The online auction notifications will go out approximately 2 weeks prior.



Join Us

Join us at our next event!

Your presence is more than participation; it's an investment in the tapestry of our community's future.

Get Involved

If you can't wait until the next event, there are plenty of ways to get involved today:

- **Become a Member:** Explore different membership levels and find yourself fit within our growing family.
- **Donate:** Every contribution helps us advance our mission and protect our natural resources. [Make a donation](#)
- **Volunteer:** Join us behind the scenes and experience the joy of service within our community. Volunteers interested in helping with outreach and education-- [sign up here](#) or helping here at the museum -- [Sign up here](#)
- **Shop:** Visit our gift shop for unique finds, including stunningly crafted local art, jewelry, decoys and more!

Contact Us

Questions or suggestions? Reach out to us at the Atlantic Wildfowl Heritage Museum. We're more than happy to hear from you.

Visit Us In Person:

1113 Atlantic Avenue
Virginia Beach, VA 23451

Or Online at:

[Atlantic Wildfowl Heritage Museum Website](#)

Donate

With your support, we can continue to work to protect our natural resources, preserve the legacy of wildfowling, promote environmental education, history, and the arts through a variety of events and community partnerships.

Renew your membership online at www.awhm.org or, text WILDFOWL to 44321
or renew online: www.awhm.org

Memberships run for 12 consecutive months from the date annual dues are paid.



BACK BAY WILDFOWL GUILD 2025 MEMBERSHIP GUIDE

☒ Membership Level (please check one):

☐ \$35 / Individual

☐ \$200 / Silver

☐ \$50 / Family

☐ \$500 / Gold

☐ \$100 / Bronze

☐ \$1,000 / Presidents Circle

MEMBER INFORMATION (PLEASE PRINT)

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip Code: _____

Email Address: _____

Telephone Number: _____

☐ Cell ☐ Home

Please pass this newsletter on to any potential new member. Thank you for your support!

Mail this form and payment to:
Atlantic Wildfowl Heritage Museum
1113 Atlantic Avenue,
Virginia Beach, VA 23451

Questions? Email: director@awhm.org

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