

Delanco Watermen

A Traditional Lifestyle

By Peter Fritz



Produced by
Delanco Historic Preservation Advisory Board
770 Coopertown Road, Delanco NJ 08075
www.delancotownship.com

Delanco, New Jersey in 1876

A village in the Township of Beverly



Steamboats came in 1824 and the Camden & Amboy Railway in 1834. In 1848, landowner Richard Fenimore chartered a planned community he named Delaranco. His farm faced the Rancocas Creek and contained a steam-powered sawmill and lumber yard. The Thomas Fletcher family established a vineyard and winery. Delaware riverfront was acquired by the Delaware Land Company to develop summer homes for Philadelphia industrialists. These groups merged to become the village of Delanco about 1852. Early residents were farmers, boatbuilders, sailors and watermen. *Delanco Waterman* tells a little of their story.

The following material has been excerpted from The Delanco Story – Its Past and Present (1976).
Photos from Delanco Waterman exhibit (2015).

The narrative begins in Delanco NJ in the 1880s

Commercial Fishing was a very profitable undertaking in those days, particularly shad fishing. By 1880, the principal occupation of a great number of Delanco's laboring populace was fisherman.

Large quantities of fish were caught and taken to the thriving seaport of Philadelphia. They were shipped from the wharves of both the [Rancocas] Creek and the [Delaware] River. In the spring of the year, the river would glow in the darkness with a myriad of lights bobbing on the shad nets.



Nets were used to catch shad. Shad roe was considered a great delicacy. Jack Casey, Buck Armstrong and Dick Gilbert are shown mending nets. This appears to be on the bank of the Rancocas Creek near Orchard Ave.

Sturgeon was also a plentiful fish – and big. If a fisherman were caught with a sturgeon under four feet in length, he was fined \$50, according to a story in the Burlington County Herald.



Delanco's waters once teemed with fish such as this primitive looking Sturgeon. Other species included Striped Bass and Shad.

The shad ran from February to April. About 10 or 12 men would go out and a catch of 75 fish was considered a good day's work. One day a crew was fishing on the Pennsylvania side of the river near Tacony when the men felt a strong pull on the nets – so strong, in fact, they feared the boat might capsize. When they got the nets hauled in, they found a good-sized seal had been caught in the net.

Gottfried Shaffer, one of the fishermen, was known as "108". The origin of his nickname is laid to the fact that one day there was an unusually good catch. When they counted the haul, there were 108 shad. Shaffer ran all through the town shouting out the total. Ever after, he was called "One-oh-eight".

In a Riverside Press article in 1922, the newspaper reported that "shad fishing is now almost obsolete, not more than one or two nets going out from here of an evening." Shad, which had been taken by the hundreds, were by then down to catches of two or three. The reason? The dumping of oil into the river and pollution from other sources.

Some of the early fishermen were Sam DeNight, John DeNight, John Demerest, Fred Demerest, Luke Demerest, Christian Faunce, William Faunce, Andrew Himes, Joseph Smith, Sam Borel, John Armstrong, Tommy Fitzpatrick, Joseph Shipp, Charles Shipp, George Shipp, Alec Horn, Danny Borden, Sam Phillips, Van Buren Hansbury, George Hansbury and Al Quigg,



Sturgeon could grow to great lengths, like this monster boated by Beany Demerest and George Hansbury in this photo from 1918.

Tommy Fitzpatrick was also known for his boat-building skills and for his duck decoys. He lived at the foot of Willow Street in a houseboat. His widow [Katie] resided in Riverside as the Bicentennial year [1976] opened.

Van Buren Hansbury ran an oyster and fish market at Burlington and Franklin Streets behind his home. His son, John, carried on the business in a store on Ash Street, near Bacon's Central Store.

Duck and goose hunting was also a serious pastime in Delanco.

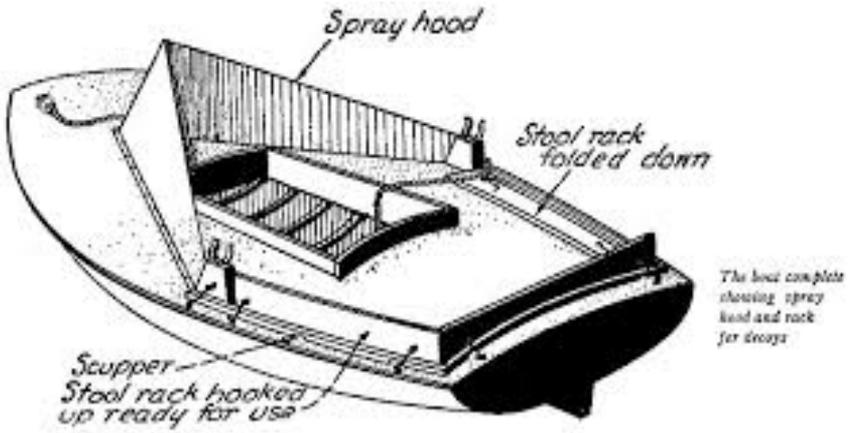
There were several gun clubs in operation along the Rancocas Creek, including one about a mile upstream at Delta Grove. This was a private club owned by the Drexel family of Philadelphia. Katharine Drexel (Now St. Katharine Drexel) often visited the property and strolled the fields.



Two hunters in camouflage with two geese. A good day.



One of Delanco's gun clubs located on the Rancocas Creek in the late 1800s. This one was located at the foot of Buttonwood Street. The sheds seen in the foreground were leased by waterman to store boats and equipment. The house in the background was owned by Andress J. Ridgway, who later founded A. Ridgway & Son Shoe Factory.



A well-built sneakbox was as purposefully built as a modern space capsule. Built small to ride low in the water, it had a tiny cockpit and cowling to ward off rough water and provide cover for the hunter.

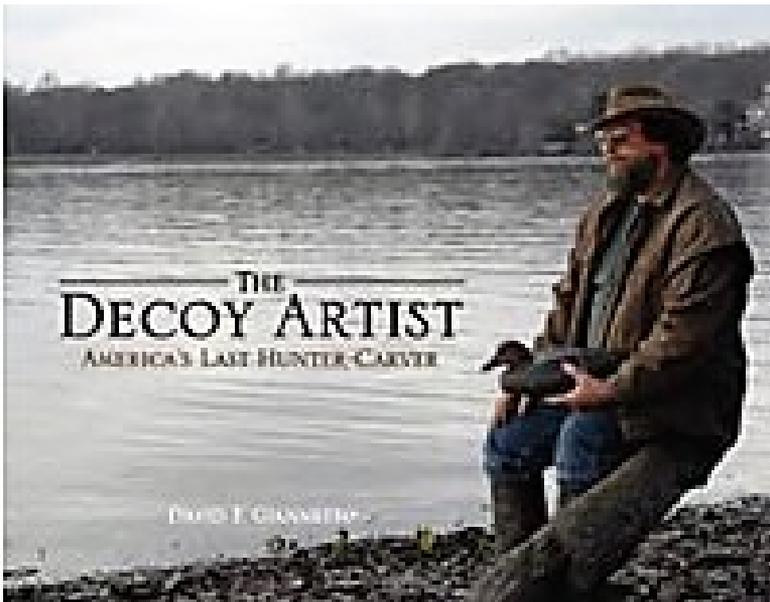


Sneakboxes were carefully camouflaged so as not to spook the migratory waterfowl. This photo also shows a set of decoys arranged to attract prey near the boat.



Some hunters preferred to operate from blinds built near the water. In this one, the hunter uses a duck call to attract prey. His retriever stands ready to leap into the water to bring the fowl back to the blind.

Some of the more famous Delanco watermen and carvers were:
Frank Astemborski, Vincent Gianetto III, and Tommy Fitzpatrick



**Thomas “Tommy” or “Fitzie” and Kathryn
Fitzpatrick**

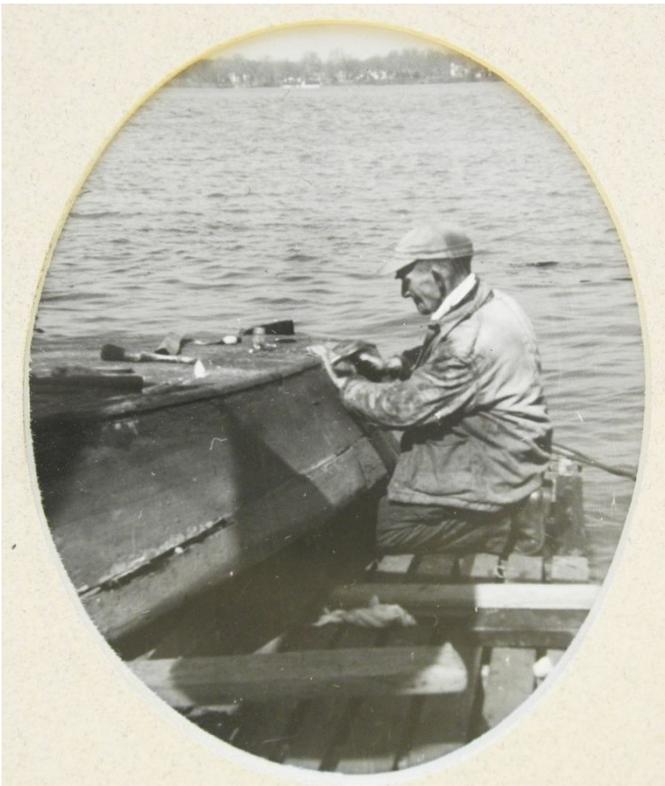


Tommy Fitzpatrick returning from a successful hunt on the Delaware River. He is shown standing in his camouflaged sneakbox.

Waterman and Decoy Carver Thomas Fitzpatrick (1887-1958)

was born in 1887 to Henry J. and Emma Fitzpatrick, Irish immigrants who came to Delanco by way of Canada. Tommy was part of a large family and spent his childhood on Pennsylvania Avenue in Delanco where his family operated a general store.

His family was very musical. His father composed music and taught violin and piano lessons in town. Tommy had a wonderful ear for music and learned to play piano and accordion. Friends introduced him to hunting, fishing, boating and he loved the outdoors and life along the river. He became a true “Delanco river rat”. As a young man, he worked as a shoemaker in Philadelphia, but his real passion soon became life on the water.



Kathryn (Katie) Rogers Whitsell was the adopted daughter of Amos and Martha Whitsell. She worked in the Ridgway Shoe factory in Delanco as a young girl. Tom and Katie married in 1916 and moved into an unusual home, a houseboat that Tom built and set on blocks on property leased from the Stocktons on the Delaware Avenue riverbank between Cedar and Willow Streets.

At first there was no specific address for the property; Mail was simply addressed to them at Delanco, NJ. The 1926 and 1929 Delanco directories listed Tom simply as a fisherman living at 428 Delaware Avenue, but he was much more than that. The Fitzpatricks lived off the land and the water. They built, repaired and rented rowboats and boat slips. They sold bait, hunted ducks, trapped, fished and caught turtles for the market.



Tommy and Katie are shown here on their front step. It is said that Tommy kept a safety line tied to the phone pole in the foreground in case of a flood – an occurrence that was not uncommon in those days.



Granddaughter, Mayor Kate Fitzpatrick recalls that their home was like a dollhouse, a small but very tidy place without running water. She remembers her grandmother, Katie as a meticulous housekeeper and a wonderful cook. Children recall sitting in their shanty listening to Tommy tell stories as he worked.

He was a small, quiet spoken man who never raised his voice or said a harsh word to anyone. He was well liked by everyone he met.

The Fitzpatricks raised their only son, Tom Henry Fitzpatrick there on the riverbank. Katie was living at that location as late as 1960. After Tom's death in 1958 at age 71, Katie sold the houseboat to a man who worked for a dredging company. The new owner simply launched the unit at high tide and towed it away on the river.



Tommy Fitzpatrick at the oars of his sturdy rowboat.



Tommy Fitzpatrick is shown here with the famous Mr. Biddle of the Andalusia Estate across the Delaware River in Philadelphia.

Tommy Fitzpatrick was a true Delanco Waterman.

During the war, Tommy worked at a shipyard in Philadelphia where he became a craftsman. His true love, however, was carving decoys from whatever wood he could find. He is believed to have carved his first decoy about 1910. He carved in the English style, influenced by the lifelike carvings of John English. Tom carved mostly Black Ducks, but also Mallards and Pintails, over 2,000 decoys in his lifetime.



One of Tommy's famous Black Duck decoys, especially built for use in the rough water of the Delaware River.

Most of the birds are in a low-head or contented position; the few heads carved in alert positions are somewhat small in comparison to the bodies. For eyes, Fitzpatrick used upholstery tacks or brass tacks or old shoe buttons. He hammered in the nostrils of each bird with a screwdriver tip.

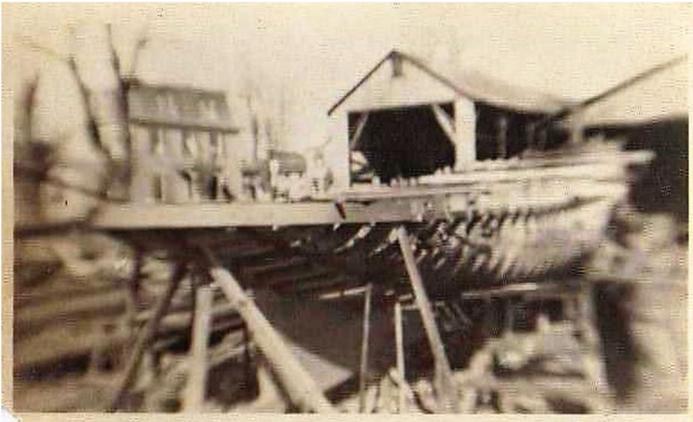
Decoys he made during the 1920's are large and sturdy with round bottoms and deep feather carving. Those crafted in the 1940's are smaller with flat bottoms to improve stability on the water.

Tommy's habit was to carve during the day, then ride his bike across the Rancocas Creek to the Riverside Inn in the evening to play his accordion, sell miniature carvings, and take orders for his working decoys. His decoys have become collector's items, currently fetching \$10,000 to \$15,000 at auction. Fine examples can be found in maritime museums and private collections in the Northeastern States.



Another graceful Black Duck in a "raised head" position.

Delanco's Boatbuilding Tradition



In the late 1800s and early 1900s, boatbuilding became a major industry on the Rancocas Creek. Several yards built pleasure craft and workboats, such as tugs and barges, first in wood, and later in steel. Delanco-built tugs saw service on the Delaware River and overseas.

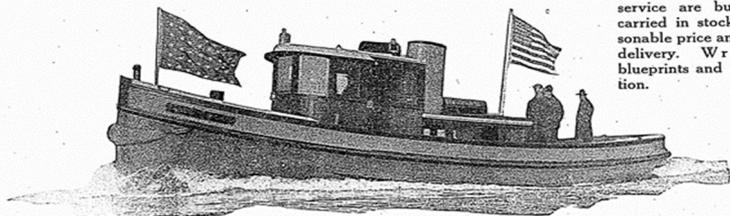
STANDARDIZED MOTOR TUGS

Designed by J. Murray Watts, N. A.

BUILT BY

DELANCO SHIPBUILDING CO., Inc.

DELANCO, N. J.



These sturdy tugs framed of oak for hard service are built and carried in stock. Reasonable price and quick delivery. Write for blueprints and description.

A STANDARDIZED WORKBOAT

To meet the ever increasing demand for practical power tugboats the Delanco Shipbuilding Co. of Delanco, N. J. is standardizing on a 50-footer from designs by J. Murray Watts.

A large number of these boats have already been built, and new ones are continually under construction. The construction of these boats is of a very rugged character.



O'BRIEN, A STANDARDIZED 50-FOOT TUGBOAT

White oak is used throughout in the keels and framing. The planking is of long lengths of white oak, and when boats are built for southern waters, the bottoms are sheathed with copper to at least a foot above the waterline to give protection against the deadly teredo worm.

Powered with heavy oil engines of from 100 to 150 horsepower, these boats will handle barges up to 200 feet in length with ease.