

Presented to people who have lived in the Barnegat Bay tradition.

This award has been named in honor of the last of the Great Old Time Barnegat Bay Carvers, Hurley Conklin.

This year's recipients:

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Hurley Conklin Award Winners

Mark Ford by Pat Johnson

Mark Ford says at age 60 he's too young to win the Hurley Conklin Award but he has accepted reluctantly. Ford was born on November 4, 1964 and grew up on Dock Road in Parkertown, part of Little Egg Harbor Township. He was perfectly situated to become a Barnegat Bay style decoy carver; carver Mutt Cramer lived across the street and carver Rob Daley lived nearby on Route 9. Cramer taught him how to use a band saw and Daley was always around to show the adolescent Ford his work. "Daley added artistic flair to a decoy that was different from the norm. He was a real artist."

Ford said Daley would use a top pattern but would just start hacking away with a band saw to make the body and then would use his carving tools to shape the birds. "He could rough cut a dozen bodies in a day and then decide what they would be in the following days," said Ford. "He would ask me – 'What does that look like?' And I'd say, 'Looks like a broadbill or a black duck,' and he'd say, 'Ok, that's what it will be.'"

Can genetics be part of a craftsmen's story? "Frank Lamson and my great Uncle Calvin Hickman were all decoy carvers and boat builders. My Great

Uncle Lamson taught Hurley Conklin to carve," said Ford.

Ford's early life living on Dock Road was where he witnessed the baymen's way of life—clamming, fishing, boat building and decoy making--all were ordinary pursuits by extraordinary men. Through the years Ford met most of the local carvers and baymen and heard lots of their stories, which he treasures.

Ford relates, "My first memory of carving, I was 9 or 10, I was sitting on the steps to the basement of my aunt's house and watching my cousins carve blocks of wood. They were sitting around in a circle with a couple of friends, Gary and Chris Johnson. I remember thinking, 'I want to do that.'"



Mark Ford, 2025. Photo Credit: Pat Johnson

When Ford was in the 11th grade at Pinelands Regional High School he took a carving class with local carver John Holloway. "Holloway was good but a bit of a curmudgeon," said Ford.

His real opportunity to hone his craft came by the side door at Rodger West's Clam House on South Green Street in Tuckerton. His best friend in High School was Dave West. West told Ford that his grandpa needed help at the clam house. "There was a boat shop attached to the clam house and I was allowed to use it to make decoys. It was a great place to carve, people would stop by to see the progress and to hang out. There was always something going on in the boat shop. I built a gunning garvey in it and it won first place at the Old Time Barnegat Bay Decoy and Gunning Show in 1988, my first award."

"Around that time a gentleman said to my Dad, 'That kid is really a good carver. He's going to win awards

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someday.' My Dad said, 'You won't have to wait too long...' and in 1989, I won Best of Show at the Old Time Barnegat Bay Decoy and Gunning Show for my Broadbill, in 2004 for my Brant and 2012 for my Red-breasted merganser."

In 1992, he made a rig of 12 black ducks for the Old Time Barnegat Bay Decoy and Gunning Show. That year his rig came in 4th. But he was determined. "I said to myself, 'I'm not stopping until I get that trophy.' And I won it in 2010."



Stages of Fords Decoys. Photo Credit: Pat Johnson

Ford grew up to be a carpenter with his father and is particularly good at finish work. Today he owns his own carpentry business, Home Repairs and Improvement. He and his wife Frances live in a 200-year-old farmhouse that was a 'handyman's nightmare' in New Gretna that they have restored. His workshop is a converted chicken coop, heated in winter by a wood stove and in summer by the catch-as-catch can breezes. He also restored boats for 40 years.

He can sometimes work 17 hours straight in the shop if he is painting decoys for a show, he said. His work ethic has won him numerous ribbons. Last year alone he won a dozen awards at the Old Time Barnegat Bay Decoy and Gunning Show including a first for his bufflehead in the Contemporary Antique Duck category. In 2011, the New Jersey Decoy Collectors Association honored him with the Decoy Carver of the Year award. He gave a decoy to the club and they sold 960 raffle tickets.

Ford said he never was 'a ribbon chaser,' still, a large stack of award ribbons is pinned unceremoniously in a dusty corner of his workshop. "I usually give the ribbons away with the winning decoy if I sell it," said Ford. "I've always appreciated and enjoyed the friendly competition at the Old Time Barnegat Bay Decoy Show. I have a lot of good memories of friends and fellow carvers," he added.

Ford collects decoys as well as makes them. In his collection are many John Updyke decoys. "Updyke was from Wading River and that's where my Mother's family is from, the Maxwells," said Ford. "There was a town called Maxwell on the other side of the Wading River."

The Fords came from Green and Lower Banks and are prominently mentioned in *Jersey Genesis*, the book about the Mullica River folk by Henry Carlton Beck.

"My Uncle Kenny Maxwell (2000) was a Hurley Conklin Award winner and a self-made man. I told him once, "You are like George Bailey, you're the richest man in town. You raised four kids on a baymen's common sense approach to life and they were all successful."

Carver Dick McKindless (1992) was also one of the early Hurley Conklin winners. "Out of all the people in Parkertown he and Mutt Cramer were the best teachers," said Ford. "They were carvers and boat builders and you better listen to them because they knew how to do it."

Some decoy carvers won't give up their secrets—they jealously guard techniques and paint recipes—but Ford is of a different stripe. Like his heroes, Cramer and McKindlass, he is generous with his time and talent.

He teaches the Youth Carving class at the Tuckerton Seaport with Gene Marshall and his friend and fellow carver Malcolm Robinson. It was Robinson who started the youth carving club.

"I feel obligated to share –It's really a pleasure to show these kids at the Seaport to carve. I don't want to carry any secrets," said Ford.

"I've been so fortunate to know Howard Ware, Dick McKindlass, Mutt Cramer, Rocky Wycoff and talk to Harland Price – all those old-timers--that lifestyle is gone." But thanks to Ford and others that keep the traditions alive the stories continue.

"It's a lovely hobby," said Ford. "There's nothing like the feeling of a sharp knife and a nice piece of cedar. And I'm still learning as I go."