



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIC WOODWARD

# WINDMILLS FOREVER

## *The magical contraption gives The East End a valued symbol*

BY JOAN TYOR CARLSON

**E**astern Long Island is gaga about windmills. Maybe it's simply because the country's largest regional group of windmills—eleven of them—are on the South Fork where they are easily seen, perched on whatever rise the flat terrain offers. These sturdy wind driven grist mills recall a rich agrarian past while their powerful sails, writes Cervantes, "cutting the air as swift as a witch on a broomstick," evoke the seafaring heritage of the area.

Some of the finest craftsmen in the area built these machines including clockmaker and furniture builder Nathaniel Dominy V of East Hampton. This intricate craft flourished from 1795 to 1919 when the Hayground Windmill stopped grinding grain, shutting the last commercial windmill on Eastern Long Island.

"They are wooden machines, a union of utility and an object that is handcrafted in such a way that it is beautiful, combining form and function with beauty. Think about it. Each blade of the sails has a different pitch, like an airplane propeller. And, the craftsmanship of the wooden gearing, the exposed interior structure with its octagonal shape, tapering as narrow as possible! No wonder the finest craftsmen of the day sought to work on them," says Robert J. Hefner, widely considered the ultimate authority on windmills on Long Island and author of the classic text on them.

His windmill rollcall tells us that six of the surviving mills were



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*The Southampton College Windmill faces the bay proudly with new shingles and sails (left). The extensive renovation included replacing unsuitable modern windows installed in a previous makeover. Special scaffolding (this page) had to be custom built because of the structure's canted walls. The college expects to tackle the interior when funding is available.*

purchased by summer residents and now serve as decorative objects on estates while three were transformed into summer cottages. However, the Mill Hill Windmill, set in the epicenter of the

Southampton College campus, is both a landmark for the community and the symbol of the college and, as such, considered irreplaceable.

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# Windmills

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"It was clear that the windmill was in disrepair and the state of it was so dispiriting to all of us—students, faculty, and staff—that we gave it priority even though we had not budgeted money for repair," confides Tim Bishop, provost of the college. "Angier Biddle Duke was stepping down as chancellor and it was also his 75th birthday. At his request, the proceeds from a luncheon at the United Nations in his honor, over \$125,000, were used to fund the exterior repairs. We plan to renovate the interior as soon as we can find the funds."

"Naturally, the College consulted Robert Hefner. Bob recommended us. Perhaps because we had worked on relocating and restoring a windmill on William Simon's East Hampton estate," says Gregory Zwirko of Zwirko & Ortmann Architects, P.C. in East Hampton, the township with the mother lode of five windmills to its credit, plus one on outlying Gardiners Island. "We did a joint venture with Hefner first investigating the condition of the windmill. Then, we developed a basic plan with him and together produced a booklet on the project. We recommended three expert builders and the college chose Telemark, the low bidder.

"We did the Lyman Beecher House in East Hampton with Robert Hefner where the village was concerned with maintaining the historic presence of the house. Which is probably why we were on the short list," says Frank Dalene, vice president and secretary of Telemark Construction in Bridgehampton, a company known for their emphasis on fine Scandinavian craftsmanship.

The Mill Hill Windmill, once in the heart of Southampton Village, now sits overlooking Shinnecock Bay. It was moved to its present site in 1890 by Mrs. William Hoyt. Six years later, Arthur B. Clafin, a textile merchant bought the mill and constructed a summer home

next to it which was abandoned after the stock market crash, returned to use as the Tucker Mill Inn and, in 1963, the house was reborn as the College's administration building.

The mill, comfortably furnished like a traditional house, was a charming retreat, used to house visiting lecturers and for festive receptions. During its heyday it was a magnet that people found hard to resist. Tennessee Williams was so enraptured with it (Can it be because it once served as a child's playhouse and retained a rich fantasy life?) that he spent a summer there during its days as an inn when an extension had been added that held the bath/dressing room and an inside staircase to the

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bedroom and studio room above.

Eventually the mill needed repair. It was stripped of furnishings, its sails removed and set alongside the structure until the College could undertake the project. Roy Dalene led Telemark's team of five in the restoration. After a long search they found exact duplicates of the oak timbers used in the timber frame mortise and tenon construction. Fortunately, Telemark has a large collection of antique tools. The adze and drawknives were among the collection which were taken off the shelves and put to work during the six month project finished in 1991.

"We had to stabilize the structure and because of rot we reshingled, replaced windows, redid the cap which is now fixed. It was a real trick to pull out beams that were 14 to 20 inches thick

without disturbing the exterior of the building. You can't rely on past experience because there's not a lot of windmill work around," says Roy Dalene.

"We gave the College a fixed price that reflected our desire to do the project as a community gesture," says Frank Dalene. "It's not like a private project but we did want to have our costs covered. The specifications by Hefner and Zwirko were very thorough so we had a good idea of what to expect," says Frank.

"Telemark did an extraordinary job," says Zwirko. "To jockey giant new timbers into place and marry them to the old timbers that could be saved was a major undertaking. Roy Dalene was terrific in coordinating all this. We found it challenging as well. To replace the unsuitable windows which had been added with more traditional windows in a canted wall and make the mill watertight—these are unusual conditions."

The windshaft and sails were designed by Hefner and built by Charles S. Dayton who specializes in this exacting work. Since water gets into it, the shaft has to be replaced every 25 years or so and is one of the major expenses of windmill maintenance.

It is fitting that in 1992, Telemark and Hefner worked together again to restore another mill on the South Fork that had also been converted into a summer cottage, the Good Ground Mill at the foot of Lake Agawam, which is privately owned. This job involved replacement of the cap, done in the ogee style.

"Everybody learns on these jobs," says Roy Dalene. "The experience in the first windmill helped us with the second. We've had a lot of restoration work which is quite different from building new houses or renovating a recently built building. Now, we'd like to tackle the interior of Mill Hill. It's such a challenge." ■