

Form and Function

Stately survivors from the Wooden Age, the historic windmills of eastern Long Island, N.Y., still turn heads

By Mary Beth Klatt | From *Preservation* | September/October 2009



East Hampton's Hook Mill was constructed in 1806 and remained operational until 1907.

Credit: [Tom McWilliam](#)

[Visit Long Island's Windmills](#)

On a single day each fall, officials in East Hampton, N.Y., tie canvas sails onto the grid-like vanes of the weathered Hook Mill, which stands on the north village green. Then locals cross their fingers and hope that steady breezes will blow in from the southwest and set the sails sweeping, as they did for the first time in 1806.

Sometimes nature complies and the sails move, stopping traffic and transforming this shingled tower into a sentinel from another century. "You stand inside the mill, the sails go by slowly and powerfully . . . the building is creaking, and it's all happening due to the force of the wind," says Robert Hefner, an East Hampton resident and the author of *The Windmills of Long Island*. "It is fantastic."

For decades, a group of villages on Long Island have worked diligently to preserve the 11 mills here—the largest collection of wooden windmills in the United States. Thanks to their efforts, seven have been added to the [National Register of Historic Places](#). "They tell the story of technology in the Wooden Age," says Hefner. "They're irreplaceable."

Long Island's windmills were called smock mills because settlers thought the skirted towers resembled baker's aprons. Two renowned builders, Nathaniel Dominy and Samuel

Schellinger, designed and constructed most of the mills from white oak. Inside, millstones ground grain (one type of millstone imported from France ground baker's flour, and a different stone brought in from New England ground cornmeal and animal feed). Soon, communities sprang up around the essential facilities, and a sort of flour hierarchy developed: Unlike local farmers, magistrates or ministers could grind their grain for free, according to Richard Barons, executive director of the East Hampton Historical Society.

By the mid-1800s, however, factories and the nation's expanding rail network started to put local windmills out of business. In the ensuing years, islanders developed a sense of nostalgia for the towers, and wealthy landowners began moving them onto their estates. Several mills survived multiple journeys: The Wainscott Mill, built in 1813, was moved four times before it finally arrived at Georgica Pond, where it's now owned by the Georgica Association.

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