



Left, the gristmill in Connetquot River State Park Preserve before it was somewhat structurally sound. At right, as it looks today undergoing reconstruction.

Photos by Bob Labuski

Where there's a mill there's a way

Funds needed to complete Connetquot State Park gristmill

By LIZ FINNEGAN

OAKDALE—It's been five years since the Friends of Connetquot River State Park Preserve took on the task of overseeing the restoration of the old gristmill, which is located inside the preserve. That work is now on the homestretch, but there's still much more that needs to be done and it starts with raising the last \$100,000 needed to complete the project.

"We've been working years to get [the gristmill] structurally sound so it will last another 100 years," said Friends trustee Richard Remmer. "We've made a lot of progress, raised a lot of money, and we're at a hurdle point now."

The total cost of the project is \$700,000. Over the years, the organization has raised \$500,000 and now after receiving a N.Y.S. grant for \$100,000 they need to match that amount to get the work done.

Remmer said the brunt of the project that's been completed includes footings, foundation, sill, beam and stabilization to prepare it for the next phase that includes roof, framing, shingles, doors and

windows. Getting the mill working again will be a future project though.

The mill stands on the property with a long, celebrated history that dates back to the early 1700s. However, it is best known as the Southside Sportsman's Club, a haven for hunting and fishing for wealthy New Yorkers that was established in 1866. The ancient gristmill building though dates back to the mid-eighteenth century, and was used by local farmers to grind corn and wheat. It remained in operation until 1878, but has since been idle.

In the mid-1970s, soon after the New York State Parks system took ownership of the preserve, the building was opened up to the public for educational purposes. One of the significant aspects of the gristmill is that it's one of the few mills left in the United States that has a horizontal wheel. Tours of the building had to end because of security concerns when its age and a number of violent Long Island storms took a toll on the structure. The tours are something Remmer said Friends members hope to reinstate once

the structural work is completed. After that, they'll focus on getting it to work again. "All of the mechanical elements are still there," he noted.

Friends president Bob Labuski said the campaign to raise money for the restoration has not been easy. "The economy the way it is has made it difficult," he said.

Still, the Holbrook resident said he's hoping that more contributions will be coming in and that the Friends annual gala scheduled for October will help to garner more funds as well. Labuski said he'd also like to see the mill functioning once again. "It's down the road. But we still have the original mill stones and all of the old wooden gears and pulleys." He said that for now the main objective is to just get it to the point where it can be closed and left for the winter without concerns of inclement weather causing further structural issues.

Labuski said he has more than just a historical interest in the gristmill and the park though. His personal connection to it actually began in the 1970s when

he first stepped foot into the preserve. "I've been going in there to fish since right after it opened. But then it got very crowded so I began to take up photography, taking pictures of the wildlife and everything that happens in the park. It's such a great place.

"The park is 3,473 acres and there are still parts of it that I've never seen. It's unbelievable ... and gorgeous."

On Oct. 21, Friend's 16th annual fundraising Gala Celebration will take place at the Timber Point Country Club beginning at 7 p.m. This year the organization will be honoring Gilbert Bergen — the current manager of the preserve who has been taking care of the park for the past 65 years — with an award named in his honor: The Gil Bergen Preservationist Award. The event will feature dinner, dancing, open bar and there will also be both live and Chinese auctions. For information more information on the gala and on the progress of the gristmill, go the website: www.friendsofconnetquot.org. ■