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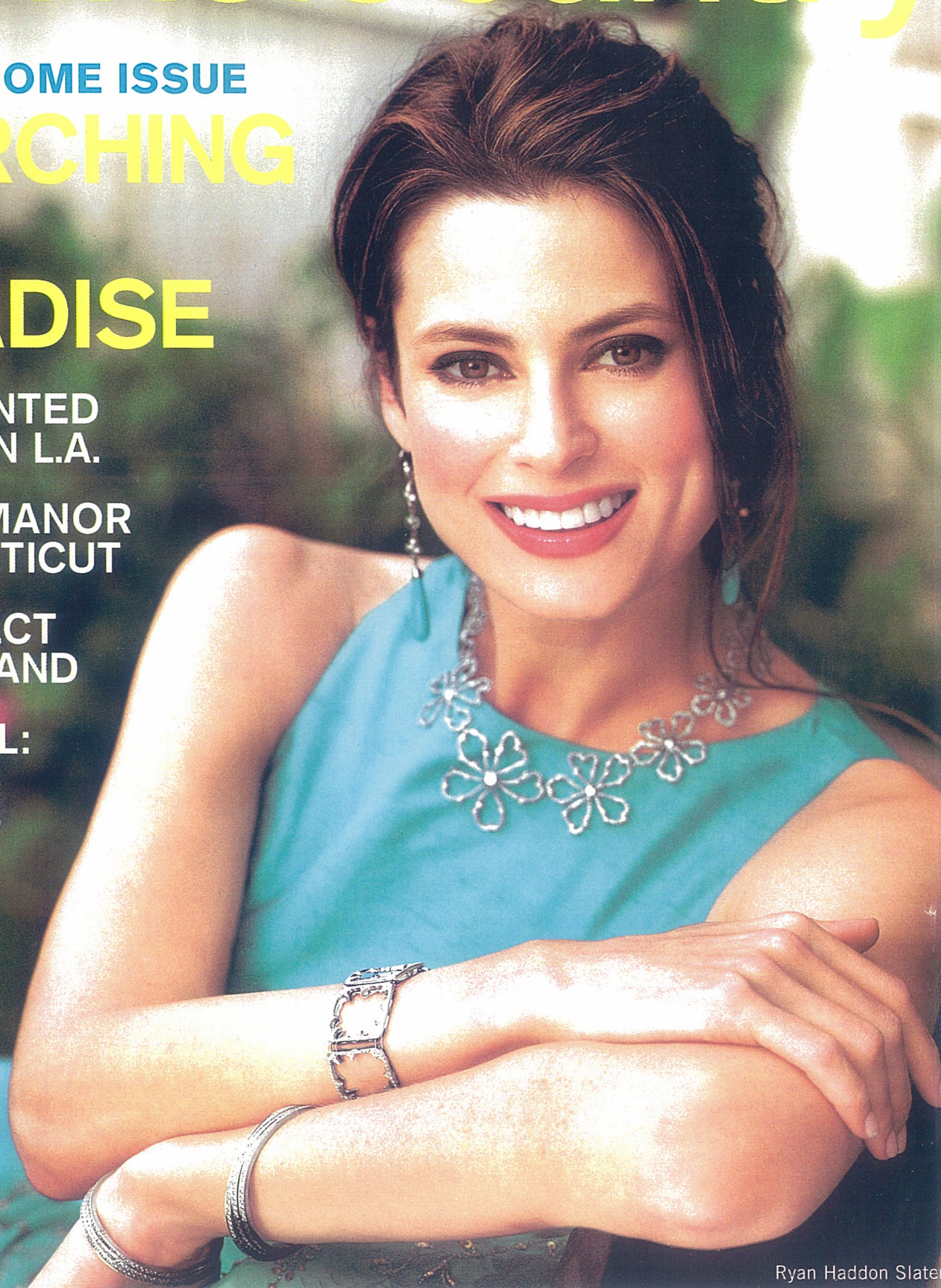
**A GRAND MANOR
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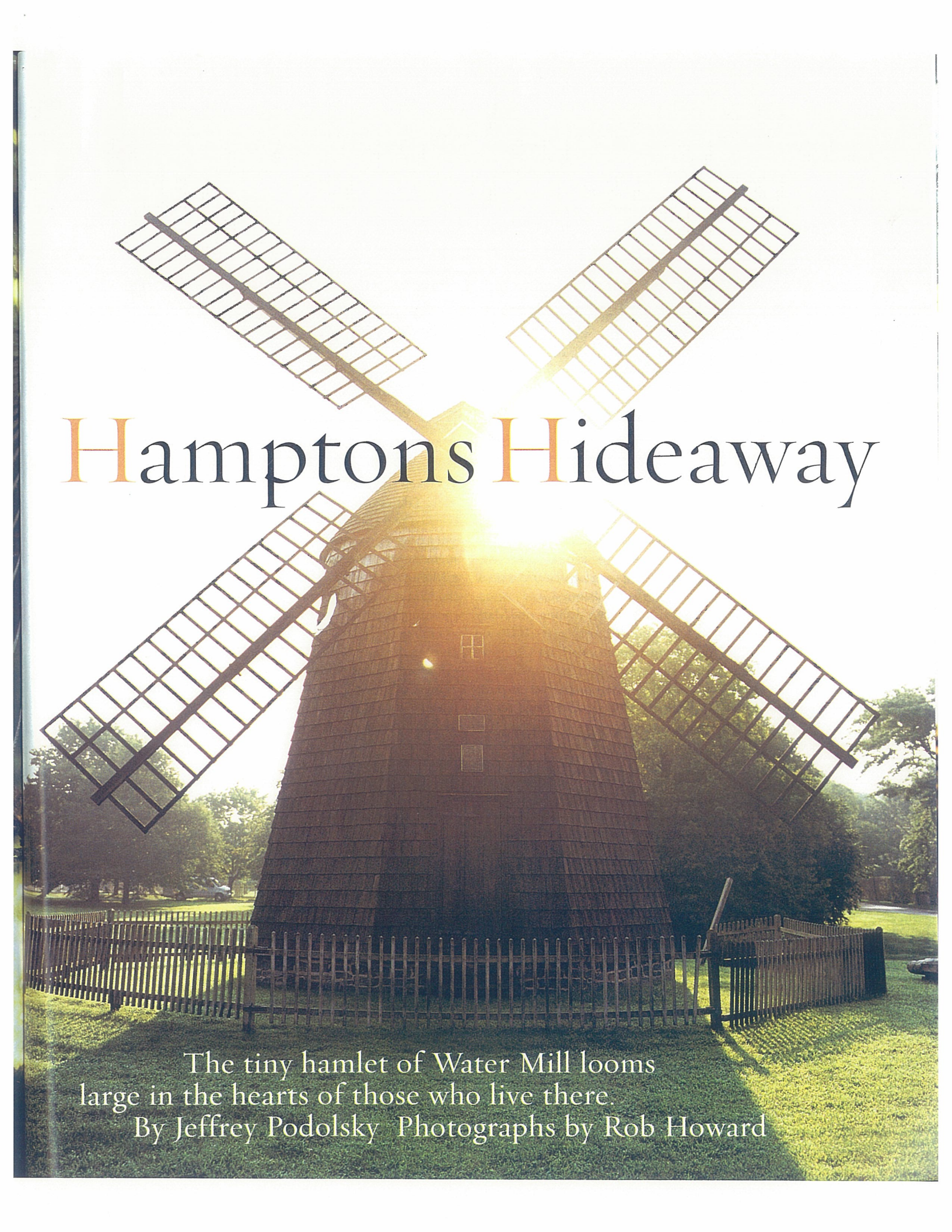
**WATER MILL:
THE QUIET
HAMPTONS**

**PALAZZO
STYLE
IN ITALY**

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Ryan Haddon Slater



Hamptons Hideaway

The tiny hamlet of Water Mill looms large in the hearts of those who live there.

By Jeffrey Podolsky Photographs by Rob Howard

“All Nature wears one universal grin,” wrote Henry Fielding. He could well have been touching on Water Mill, a 350-year-old hamlet that sits sandwiched among the Hamptons, a fifty-mile stretch of villages along Long Island’s southeastern coastline. But to most Hamptonites, Water Mill wears a scowl. It is one long speed bump,

where an impatient queue of Manhattan commuters en route to Bridgehampton, East Hampton and beyond must creep through a narrow, thirty-miles-an-hour main street.

Summer weekenders may curse Water Mill’s tiny presence on Montauk Highway, but, like it or not, things do seem to proceed at a slower pace here. Water Mill has no town hall, no local newspaper, no library—not even a village church. Many people consider it merely “a drive-through,” says Charlotte Ford, who grew up in Water Mill on her father Henry Ford II’s 150-acre estate. Indeed, the unassuming, three-block-long village center doesn’t look like much. Bordering the highway, it boasts a combination of the picturesque—a village green with its landmark windmill; a white-steepled chapel-turned-community center; a former convent overlooking the water—and the practical—a mini-shopping center and a small but motley assortment of stores like the Penny Candy Shop, where June and Harvey Morris have been dishing out Mary Janes and marshmallow confections for forty years. It has no fancy clubs—nothing like Southampton’s Bathing Corporation or its Meadow Club, Bridgehampton’s Atlantic Golf Club, or East Hampton’s Maidstone Club (unless you include the ramshackle Water Mill Beach Club, with its two tennis courts, lockers and a vending machine).

“If you’re looking for a hot place, you’ll be bored in Water Mill,” says one year-round resident, actor Cliff Robertson. “If you’re looking for Hollywood invasions and dominions, look eastward to East Hampton. If you’re looking for young, bronzed models, maybe a glance toward Bridgehampton. If you’re looking for societal joy, Southampton may be an answer. But if you’re looking for dull, dreary, unobtrusive, hermetic quiet with no unbridled social aspirations—maybe Water Mill.”

Wedge between its grander neighbors, the communities of Southampton and Bridgehampton, Water Mill may be best known, if it is recognized at all, for being the only town in America to have both a working water mill and a working windmill. And that suits Water Millers just fine. “It’s one of the few places out here that doesn’t have that Hamptons label,” says resident Marlene Haresign. “We were left behind.”

Well, not quite. Wealthy New Yorkers have sought out the sweeping beaches and fertile farmland of this part of the Hamptons since the late 19th century. When the Long Island Railroad extended a line to reach Bridgehampton in 1870, its purpose was to reduce the commute for New York City’s

elite families. Water Mill became a summer colony (as did the neighboring Hamptons villages, to a much greater degree), and new settlers built grand Shingle-style estates designed by such leading architectural firms as McKim, Mead & White. Over the next hundred years, elegant, sprawling homes sprang up along Cobb Road, the Water Mill equivalent of Southampton’s Gin Lane.

Today, Water Mill, whose population of 2,300 doubles in the summer, has been engulfed by the real estate boom that has taken place all over the Hamptons during the past twenty years. Like most of its neighbors, the community has experienced a makeover at the hands of developers attracted by the gold rush of new-moneyed New Yorkers who have poured in. In parts of Water Mill, once-verdant pastures now look like a Monopoly board, with clusters of large spec homes dotting the land north of Montauk Highway and unsightly mansions sprouting faster than the corn in some spots to the south.

Unlike its much larger neighbors, however, Water Mill retains a fair share of that Hamptons feeling of old, even with the recent development. That, in part, is no doubt what has drawn such residents as Anne Hearst, Adrienne and Gianluigi (Gigi) Vittadini, Annette and Matt Lauer, and Richard Gere. The most desirable homes south of the highway (those on Cobb Road, for instance) overlook the still-pristine Mecox Bay, and the area north of the highway remains known for its wooded solitude and open farmland. It’s only a few miles away, but Water Mill can feel worlds removed from Southampton, whose village center is stocked with stores like Saks Fifth Avenue, or cosmopolitan East Hampton, which, in addition to numerous designer boutiques, is home to a constellation of such celebrities as Steven Spielberg and Jerry Seinfeld.

Few can better attest to Water Mill’s sleepy social hierarchy than New York investment banker Pete Peterson and his wife, *Sesame Street* originator Joan Ganz Cooney. Over the past twenty years, the couple has lived at two of the Hamptons’ toniest addresses, one on Georgica Pond in East Hampton and the other on the ocean in Southampton. “Some wag wrote about us that it takes a lot of social security to move from Southampton to Water Mill,” says Peterson. Their new address may have cost them a notch or two in the Hamptons’ society register (*The Blue Book of the Hamptons*), but they couldn’t care less: their new, unobtrusive five-acre estate—complete with a putting green and sand traps—has

Compared to other local communities,
Water Mill is a kinder, gentler Hampton.





Opposite: Flying Point Beach, one of the Hamptons' most spectacular stretches of sand, sea and sky. **Above:** The town's namesake mill, built in 1644 and now a museum. **Right:** Tennessee's Frances Briggs, with her Dutch Warmblood, Sea Captain.



unparalleled views of Mecox Bay and, in the distance, the Atlantic Ocean. "There is more of a sense of country here," says Cooney. "East Hampton is so overpopulated, and Southampton is far more of a Palm Beach-y kind of place, with very manicured lawns and hedges."

"It's the perfect mix of luxury and convenience," says Dr. Natalie Geary. A Manhattan pediatrician who also practices part-time in Water Mill, Geary grew up summering nearby—in her case, in a Stanford White house in the estate section of Southampton. Now, from her modest, 200-year-old yellow-shingled house bordering acres of farmland, she can still shuttle her daughters, Isabelle and Lily, in ten minutes to Southampton's Bathing Corporation to swim or to its Meadow Club to play tennis. "We can have all those things if we want, but we're not squished into some tiny little place."

In spirit, Water Mill remains, first and foremost, a farming community where a few established families have worked the land since the 17th century. It is, for instance, almost impossible to drive through Water Mill (or Southampton) without encountering a street named after a member of the Halsey family, who were among the first English settlers to come here, in 1644. In addition to giving their name to Halsey Lane, Halsey Road, Halsey Avenue and Halsey Street, Halseys have fought in every American war from the Revolution to Operation Desert Storm, and they account for more than half of those buried in three local graveyards.

Today, Peterson and Cooney live on land that once belonged to the family, who in the 1700s owned more than ten farms on Halsey Lane alone; but Ray and Peachie Halsey still own the Green Thumb, one of the area's premier farm stands and a Hamptons institution, featuring 200 varieties of organic vegetables. Ray—who owns seventy acres and rents another thirty from a cousin—is, however, one of only two remaining Water Mill farmers south of Montauk Highway. "We were ready to give up about ten years ago," he says. "There's no future for us. We're losing money. But our kids wanted to farm. So we're trying."

Paul Corwith, whose Water Mill forebears also date back to the 1640s and whose family was the original owner of the town's landmark windmill, has perhaps fared better. He and his extended family own 250 acres north of the highway—and he has no plans to trade in his tractors. "I'm just a country boy," says Corwith, seventy-two. "The old man doesn't change his stripes. How are you going to change after you've done something for seventy years?" But about ten years ago, the Corwiths did at least diversify their crop from potatoes and corn to include nursery stock such as trees, privet and other shrubs—all of which are in great demand by new landowners, who want fifteen-foot hedges in front of their estates.

"Water Mill's been sold out," says Andrew Morgan, a Philadelphian who has summered here for decades and was recently offered \$50,000 for a beech tree on his front lawn.



A sign on the side of a truck (above) points the way to the Green Thumb, the not-to-be-missed farm stand operated by Peachie and Ray Halsey (left). For twelve generations, Ray's family has farmed its land here. Opposite: A leafy lane off Cobb Road.

Thirty years ago, Morgan knew every neighbor on his road. "Almost everywhere you look, there's a new house being built," he grouches.

Down the street from Morgan lives Alexis Gregory. Thirty years ago, the publisher of New York's Vendome Press counted among his friends and neighbors such artists (and '60s icons) as choreographer Jerome Robbins and designer Alessandro Albrizzi. Now Gregory prefers to rent out his modest French Provincial-style home for the summer (at \$90,000, a far cry from the \$50,000 it cost to build) rather than face the changing landscape. "You still don't get the prices here that you do in Southampton," he says. "People want to say they're in Southampton and feel they're part of some big social scene. It sounds chicer." Yet last year, Water Mill was the venue of choice for some of the Hamptons' most glamorous events (see "The Pleasures of Water Mill," page 165): the Villa Maria (the town's former convent, now converted to the Siena Spirituality Center) hosted both a designer show house and a Chanel-sponsored fund-raiser; art impresario Robert Wilson held his annual fund-raiser for his six-acre artists' compound; and a vast open field was the backdrop for Super Saturday, a designer-label shopping bazaar held annually to benefit ovarian cancer research.

In response to residents' concerns, the town of Southampton, which governs Water Mill, recently enacted stricter zoning and preservation laws to retain diminishing farmland;

now, when developers do manage to seduce farmers with piles of money, a percentage of the purchased land must remain farmable. Some developments and subdivisions blend into the landscape better than others. Fordune, built on the former Henry Ford estate, is a gated community that contains large but unpretentious homes on two- to three-acre lots. Despite these efforts to contain and control development, what was an unthinkable proposition to some became a reality two years ago: a mini-mall popped up just beyond the village center on Montauk Highway. It sports a branch of Citarella, a Manhattan specialty grocery store whose gourmet wares include ostrich medallions at \$14.99 a pound, and a Blockbuster Video outlet. "You have to say, 'Wait a minute,'" says Gloria Rabinowitz, a member of Water Mill Citizens Advisory Committee, which opposed the construction of the mall. "You reach a point where the rural quality changes and your beautiful vista becomes—bingo!—suburbia."

Blockbuster or no, both locals and Manhattanites insist that it is the town's rural spirit that continues to separate Water Mill from the rest of the Hamptons. "It started out as a farming community, and it's kept that same sense of community," says Ray Halsey. It also possesses "some of the best breeding ground for horses in America," says Brownlee Currey, former CEO of the newspaper *The Nashville Banner*, whose grown children bring a few horses up from Tennessee every summer to ride here.

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Left: "If you're looking for a hot place, you'll be bored in Water Mill," says actor and full-time resident Cliff Robertson—proudly. Above: Harvey and June Morris dish out sweets and smiles at their Penny Candy Shop. Below: A field of summer dreams.





Pete Peterson and Joan Ganz Cooney's home (above) overlooks the tranquil waters of Mecox Bay (below). On the beach, from left: Peterson, Cooney, Peterson's son Michael (holding Alexander) and Michael's wife, Meredith (holding Beau).



Hamptons Hideaway

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Currey's thirty-eight-acre farm north of the highway is surrounded by acres of potato and corn fields, pastures and uninhabited woods. Ponds, creeks and springs flow underneath the highway to what many consider, to paraphrase Thoreau, Water Mill's "eye" of the earth: the two-mile-square Mecox Bay. "This is why I live where I do," says Linda Lambert as she opens the

Both locals and Manhattanites insist that it is the town's rural spirit that separates Water Mill from the rest of the Hamptons. "It started out as a farming community, and it's kept that same sense of community," says Ray Halsey.

back door of her 1903 Grosvenor Atterbury home, which she shares with her husband, Ben. As Linda, a board member of the ASPCA and the Wildlife Rescue Center of the Hamptons, speaks, a swan traipses across their dock like a supermodel down a catwalk. "There are normally two hundred geese out here, millions of little duck families that live over there, white herons living right in front of us, and at dusk we have crowned night herons. They sit right on our bulkhead. There's a whole world out here that isn't like anywhere else."

Farther down the bay, screenwriter Barbara Benedek (*The Big Chill*; *Men Don't Leave*) is hunched over her Sony Vaio laptop, writing short stories. Seagulls play in the wind; haughty cormorants, relishing the sun, stand spread-eagled on pilings; and herons sit so still that one can easily understand why Audubon once wrote of them, "You might think what you see to be

the statue of a bird." Five years ago, Benedek and her husband, Peter, co-owner of United Talent Agency, left Los Angeles for the summer and rented a home on Mecox Bay; next year, they plan to build their own dream house near it. Since the 18th century, residents have dug a "cut," or opening, every spring between the bay and the Atlantic Ocean, and the cut still produces some of the best crabbing in the Hamptons. By early summer, it closes by itself, leaving a sandbar between bay and ocean for toddlers to play on. At sunset, the Benedeks' fourteen-year-old son, Harry, and other kids take to their Boogie Boards and join a loyal band of surfers who ride the gurgling waves in front of the sandbar. "We could go to a lot of places for the summer," Peter Benedek says. "But Malibu, or anywhere else you can name, doesn't hold a candle to this. And what the light and the water do with each other—the combination of ocean and bay—makes for a twilight that reminds you of a Currier and Ives print."

Andrew Morgan may pine for the days when he and his neighbors would spontaneously meet on the beach at sunset with a bottle of Champagne, and Paul Corwith may bemoan the fact that he now has to wait for fifteen cars to pass before he can cross the street to get to his mailbox. But everyone here—from local tradesmen to Madison Avenue moguls—proudly protects Water Mill's understated image. Water Mill may not have escaped the real estate frenzy of recent decades, but compared to other local communities, it's still a kinder, gentler Hampton, whose personality remains a bit backward. And Water Millers like it that way. "I just love it here," says Brownlee Currey's daughter Frances Briggs, who each morning mounts her Dutch Warmblood, Sea Captain, for their customary early-morning canter around Water Mill's rolling pastures. "It's so serene. That's what makes it so special—it's your own little private Idaho." ❧

Ode to a Grecian Isle

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might rally them to hike home if the day wasn't too hot. The reward: a stop at a local taverna for ouzo, mezes and a stunning view of the sunset.

Since Patmos's community of artists is a small one, many of the homeowners and their houseguests get together in the evenings. Even if you wanted to keep to yourself, it would be difficult. Chora, where almost everyone lives, remains a village. Windows let in the breezes and the conversations—from the street, the café and the house next door. "It's very casual and easygoing," explains Fernando. "You learn in the course of the day who is having people for drinks or dinner, and everyone is invited. You either stop by and stay, or don't." Island homeowners have long included interior designer John Stefanidis of London and Ashton Hawkins of New York, the Metropolitan Museum's former executive vice president. Last summer, novelist Susanna Moore, architect Robert Turner, decorator Richard Keith Langham, fashion designer Peter Speliopoulos and painter Julia Condon were among those who visited. "We were never fewer than twelve or fifteen people at the table," remembers Fernando. "We'd have dinner outside under the pergola and stay until midnight, talking and watching boats pass by like eerily lit ghosts on the horizon."

Fernando would love to return this summer. But even if he doesn't, he takes comfort in having found the one spot on earth where he could happily settle for a good long time. "It's a place where the houses and the routines are simple, and the feeling is very spiritual," he says. "To stay there is to take an inner trip. You go off into your own creative world and explore your self." So, while no man is an island, for this man, there is only one island.

To inquire about house rentals, call Yannis Stratas, at Apollon Travel on Patmos, who can arrange for accommodations, boat rentals, flights and ferry reservations: 011-30-2470-31-324; fax: 011-30-2470-31-819; e-mail: apollon@12net.gr. ❧

The Pleasures of Water Mill

Despite the hamlet's diminutive size, Water Mill's restaurants, shops and locales attract residents from throughout the Hamptons and beyond.

Where to Eat **MIRKO'S**, tucked in the back of Water Mill Square, offers unforgettable dining in an otherwise forgettable location. Chef Mirko Zagar serves European-style dishes such as Croatian stuffed cabbage, mouthwatering rigatoni with Bolognese sauce, and mustard-seed-crustured rack of lamb. Zagar's gregarious wife, Eileen, nurtures a loyal clientele and newcomers alike. Nab a reservation well in advance. 670 Montauk Highway; 631-726-4444.

Also in Water Mill Square, just opposite the windmill, is **SUKI ZUKI**, en route to becoming *the* sushi spot in the Hamptons. Its minimalist interior, with sea-grass walls, allows chef Toyo Kamatani's offbeat yet reasonably priced creations to stand out; try the Dancing Eel Roll, Suki Zuki Roll or Robata Grilled Long Island Flounder. 688 Montauk Highway; 631-726-4600.

Located on the site of Water Mill's original 1670 stage-coach stop, **ROBERT'S** serves Italian fare and wine from local farmers, fishermen and vintners. But its oven-roasted sardines, striped bass with fresh morels and homemade pasta—not to mention its heavenly desserts—are anything but provincial. 755 Montauk Highway; 631-726-7171.

Great Causes In the late 1980s, visual artist-turned-patron Robert Wilson bought six acres of lush woodland north of the Montauk Highway and in 1992 opened **THE WATERMILL CENTER**, a renowned artists' colony. Now every July, patrons pay up to \$1,000 to attend his annual fund-raiser and to hobnob with a rare mixture of high-society-meets-bohemia guests (Prince Alexander Romanoff, Nan Kempner, Richard Meier and Alan Cumming). The chance to marvel at Wilson's amusing, otherworldly installations—mirrored wind chimes hanging from tall beech trees, and Stonehenge-like totems—makes for one of the Hamptons' most mysterious, magical evenings. July 27; for tickets, call 212-253-7484.

Each July, savvy shoppers who savor a good bargain flock to **SUPER SATURDAY**, a daylong outdoor market where hundreds of designers hawk their duds at dirt-cheap prices. Your \$350 ticket benefits the Ovarian Cancer Research Fund and allows you the chance to duke it out for \$7,000 Randolph Duke beaded gowns reduced to \$500, and \$450 Hogan sneakers reduced to \$25. In the crowd: celebs like Christie Brinkley, Christy Turlington, Kristin Davis and Kyle MacLachlan. July 27; for tickets, call 800-873-9569.

This July, Villa Maria hosts two events: twenty-three of America's top interior designers (Mariette Himes Gomez,

Jamie Drake and David Netto among them) collaborate with decorative artists and landscape designers to present the **HAMPTON DESIGNER SHOWHOUSE**. Proceeds benefit the Siena Spirituality Center's arts and education programs. June 30–July 28; for tickets, call 631-726-4740.

First Lady Laura Bush serves as honorary chairperson at the Sixth Annual Summer Benefit for the **CHILD DEVELOPMENT CENTER OF THE HAMPTONS**, which provides services to children with disabilities. July 20; for tickets, call 631-267-2734.

Where to Go For forty years, June and Harvey Morris have dished out delectable treats to generations of Hamptons children at the **PENNY CANDY SHOP**. Today they still scoop out a dizzying array of fresh penny (now three- to five-cent) candies—satellite wafers, candy cigars, root-beer barrels—from jars in a 100-year-old candy case and weigh them on their 19th-century scale. The store is also full of wholesome toys and imitation meerschaums for Dad. "It's the kids who keep us young," says June. 696 Montauk Highway; 631-726-4679.

Leave your pennies behind and bring your black AmEx to **DONNA PARKER HABITAT, LTD., ANTIQUES**. Devoted clients indulge in Parker's plentiful, eclectic selection of 18th- and 19th-century European antiques that fetch big-city prices. If a pair of carved Italian consoles (\$24,000; since sold) is not on your list, perhaps a silver water pitcher (\$350) for a hostess gift? 710 Montauk Highway; 631-726-9311.

You don't have to be an animal lover to love the Animal Rescue Fund of the Hamptons' **WATER MILL THRIFT SHOP**. An ever-changing supply of designer clothes, jewelry, books, bric-a-brac and more makes this a popular stop for locals and weekenders alike. 670 Montauk Highway; 631-726-6613.

THE WATER MILL MUSEUM first began milling grain and feed in 1644. Thanks to the Ladies Auxiliary of Water Mill, it was restored in 1976 and has been grinding away ever since. Old Mill Road; 631-726-4625.

Montauk Highway has many farm stands, but few can compare to the **GREEN THUMB**, which offers an awesome array of organic produce, including fifteen types of salad greens and six types of summer squash. Everything here, from blackberries to burdock, is grown on Ray and Peachie Halsey's family farm, the largest organic operation on Long Island. 829 Montauk Highway; 631-726-1900.

The Hamptons are home to some of the best beaches in the world, and among the finest is Water Mill's **FLYING POINT BEACH**. Its sandbar, along Mecox Bay, is ideal for little ones learning to swim, and come twilight, it's a Boogie Boarder's and surfer's heaven. Residents of Water Mill and Southampton pay \$20 for an annual parking permit; for all other area residents, the annual fee is \$150.

J.P.



Every weekend, Basia Nahoum (this page) escapes the "crazy SoHo life" she leads as a model and steals away with her husband and daughter to Water Mill. Among the things she adores there: the tall trees on her lawn, which remind her of those at her grandmother's house in Poland. Hair and makeup by Donna Fumoso for Face Stockholm. Opposite: Despite Water Mill's name, its most prominent landmark is its windmill, anchoring the village green since 1813.



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CONTRIBUTORS



While photographing Alease Fisher in Connecticut, **Maura McEvoy** ("No Place Like Home," page 182) was able to witness the successful clothing designer at play with her four boys. "She is clearly up to that job," says McEvoy. If anyone knows about life in a lively household, it's McEvoy. She and her husband, Steven Wagner, a manager at iVillage, reside in Manhattan with their five-year-old daughter, Oona, two dachshunds, three turtles and eight goldfish.

Jeffrey Podolsky's writing career has taken him as far afield as Bosnia, where he spent several weeks covering the war for *People*. His assignment for us, "Hamptons Hideaway" (page 158), was notably less dangerous. "Water Mill has this laid-back personality and rural spirit, both of which give it a reverse chic," he says. Though he has summered near Water Mill for many years, Podolsky says that until recently, he never paid it much attention. He now counts himself among the enlightened.



Art Streiber ("Worlds Away," page 140) has his grandfather to thank for getting him into photography. "When I was a sophomore in high school, he sold me my first camera for five dollars and the lens for two," he says. Although the elder Streiber never lived to see his grandson's success, Streiber believes that "somehow, somewhere," his grandfather is happily aware of it. A fifth-generation Californian, Streiber is based in Los Angeles with his wife, Glynis Costin, the West Coast bureau chief for *InStyle* magazine, and their daughters, Kayla (pictured) and Siena.

Photographer **Fernando Bengoechea** ("Ode to a Grecian Isle," page 174) says he planned to spend a week on Patmos but wound up spending a month. Among the draws that kept him there: "the intellectual atmosphere, good food, friendly people and the immensity of the landscape," he explains. Having taken up surfing as a child in Rio de Janeiro, Bengoechea admits that Patmos is lacking in one area: "The Mediterranean is beautiful... but it doesn't have any waves."



PHOTOGRAPHS, FROM TOP: WILLIAM BOYD; MILLY DE CABROL; MANDO GONZALES; RAINER FEHRINGER