

Yorktown's Windmill

For over 100 years, one of Yorktown's most prominent landmarks was a tall, wooden "smock" windmill that stood at the edge of the steep bluff near here. A rotating cap with sails sat atop the tower and could be turned with a long tail pole to face the wind. The original mill was built by William Buckner about 1711 and ground grain for nearby residents. The windmill shown in several later 18th-century views of the town may have replaced Buckner's first structure.

It is likely that the windmill was damaged during the 1781 siege of Yorktown. In 1801 it was referred to as the "Old Tower Windmill" suggesting it may not have been in operation. By 1840, the octagonal tower, missing its sails, was obviously in ruins as shown in the sketch above.

The use of wind to power mills for grinding grain dates to ancient times. A bluff-top site like this one was perfect for employing wind power to rotate the heavy grinding millstone, easing the task of producing flour and meal from wheat and corn. In Virginia, tidal and millpond water impoundments also provided power for gristmills.



Illustration courtesy of the Mariners' Museum, Newport News, Virginia