

# He Has the Answer to 'What's in a Name?'

For the Past 40 Years Dr. Fremont Rider of Wesleyan Has Been Collecting Genealogical Records of American Families

BY CATHERINE HOOD

ANY time you want to know exactly who you are, take a trip to Middletown, and the chances are, Dr. Fremont Rider, librarian at Wesleyan University, can tell you.

This man has a singular awareness that everyone living in this country today is not only the heir of our Washingtons and Lincolns about whom historians have reported so thoroughly, but also of every individual American dating from the settlement of Jamestown until now. For 40 years he has been collecting records of these people who have gone before us, and 15 years ago he became chairman of a nation-wide committee of librarians who began indexing them, as The American Genealogical Index, so that you and I could use them. He has now provided a home for the library and files of this project—the Godfrey Memorial Library which was formally dedicated recently at Middletown and will be opened to the public use before the end of the year.

This library was designed and built by Fremont Rider as a memorial to his wife, Grace Godfrey Rider, who died last year and to her brother General Stuart C. Godfrey, Commander in Chief of the Airborne Engineers, who was killed in an airplane crash at the end of World War II. In the building of it Dr. Rider has rendered the public a service more easily measured than the extent of his service in creating the Index it will house.

PRIOR to 1940, a vast treasury of genealogical, historical and biographical material was entirely unindexed. Now more than four million alphabetically arranged cards, each a miniature biography, covering nearly 15 million separate references, are in the files at Godfrey Memorial and these are the manuscript for The American Genealogical Index being published in book form at the rate of five volumes a year. The 40 volumes published so far have been subscribed to by libraries in the United States, Canada, Hawaii, and England.

Besides Dr. Rider himself, two full time and four part time indexers write the manuscript cards. Members of the Index committee cooperate in gathering the material used from throughout the country. James Brewster, director of the Connecticut State Library and Arthur Adams, librarian at Trinity College, are on this committee, its other members being in California, Colorado, Virginia, and Washington, D. C.

When the present series of volumes is finished, a new series will be started immediately to include the additional names constantly being added to the manuscript card file and it will run to several hundred volumes.

CHAIRMAN RIDER and his indexers say they find this formidable project most interesting as a key to the human hearts that have made this country. It opens the way to learning who we are on that inside from which comes our strength.

The indexer who wrote the card

Keith  
James  
1590  
Sco., Ms, minister  
Keith Fam.  
31-5

knows that the Keiths' immigrant ancestor, Rev. James Keith of Massachusetts, born in Scotland, 1590, was a man of uncommon determination tempered with grace, for the family history to which this reference refers, pages 31-5, tells how he took chase after his daughter when he learned that she had eloped with a young man named Ephraim of whom he disapproved. He caught up with the couple too late to prevent the marriage and in the custom of the day preached his sermon for the next Sunday from the text,

"Ephraim is joined to the idols; let him alone." Several months later, reconciled, he preached from Jeremiah, "Is Ephraim my dear son? is he a pleasant child? for since I spake against him, I do earnestly remember him still."

An indexer half way down a century in the Jones family history feels acquainted with John and Mary Jones and their life when he learns that several Jones children died in a single winter month and can imagine the Jones's suffering through a period of starvation or an epidemic disease that winter. Or when he knows exactly what the Jones's source of tragedy was if the telling words follow the children's names: "Killed by the Indians," "drowned," "burned to death."

WHEN the many odd first names of the Jones family make an indexer laugh, then, too, he gains a sense of acquaintanceship with them.

There was actually one poor child named Encyclopedia Britannica Jones. An entire family of children bore as first names: Asia, Africa, Europe, America, Australia. The Bill family living in Lyme, Connecticut, named two sons Kansas Nebraska Bill and Missouri Compromise Bill.

In one genealogy were found: Relief Bond, Olive Branch, Will See and Carrie Easter Moon, and the ideal names for comic characters in fiction were the very real Ploomy Dean Peak and Jane Coogle Olp.

A Mississippi River steamboat engineer married Nancy Stimwinder. Harry R. Longanecker (say it out loud) never married at all. Loving Daily married Grace South Dally—who really was (excusing the play on words) since they lived in Alabama.

According to Dr. Rider, sentiment lies behind the naming of Middletown's Revolutionary War hero, Colonel Return Jonathan Meigs. Colonel Meigs's great-grandfather, Jonathan Meigs had proposed to his girl over and over in vain. Finally he told her he would not ask her again.

As he walked down the path to the gate she called after him softly, "Return, Jonathan!" They christened their first child Return Jonathan Meigs in commemoration of this episode and the name was carried down in the family for several generations.

Indexers have noticed that the greatest single clue to who we are runs through all records in a strong unbroken line: the paramountcy of God in the lives of the founders and descending builders of this country.

ALL the old wills open: "In the name of God, Amen," and the author's first bequest is always to God—"I will and bequeath my soul to God that gave it." Second, "I give and bequeath my body to the earth from whence it came." Only after soul and body are duly disposed of do the writers give directions concerning material wealth, usually referred to as "possessions God has lent me." Often these are amusing and revealing.

Ebenezer Hathaway of Freetown, Massachusetts, in his will approved in 1768, so painstakingly took care of his wife he fell just short of providing her with the very air she would breathe. At that he saw to it that it was warm air during cold weather.

He directed that she have "the improvement of my great chamber with the two bedrooms therein, as also as much fire wood as is needful to keep her fire, brought to the door and cut fit for her use." Also, "my said widow shall have the privilege of passing and repassing to and from said chamber given for her use, as also of baking in my oven below with wood suitably cut therefor and



GODFREY LIBRARY in Middletown was founded by Dr. Rider to house family trees.

to sit by the fire in my lower great room if she pleases." She was also to have "the use of my chaise and a horse to draw it when she hath a mind to ride."

Thomas Wheeler extended his hand beyond the grave, or rather his parental wrath, when he put in his will of 1775: "I give and bequeath to my son Benjamin Wheeler five shillings sterling as he has highly offended me and his relations by his imprudent behaviour."

WHEN one of Dr. Rider's indexers remarked to him that work with genealogy assures one of a fine sense of proportion, as in regard to catastrophes which loom so large in one's own life but in fact have been common occurrences since time began, he replied, "Yes, I don't think anyone could study genealogy any length of time without getting a saner sense of balance toward one's own problems, and that, after all, is a pretty worthwhile thing to get."

He ought to know. He has been interested in genealogy all his life, and how sane a life he has led is well illustrated by the im-

pressive column his own history occupies in Who's Who.

Born in Trenton, New Jersey, May 25, 1885, he graduated from Syracuse University (Ph. B.) in 1905 and from New York State Library School in 1906.

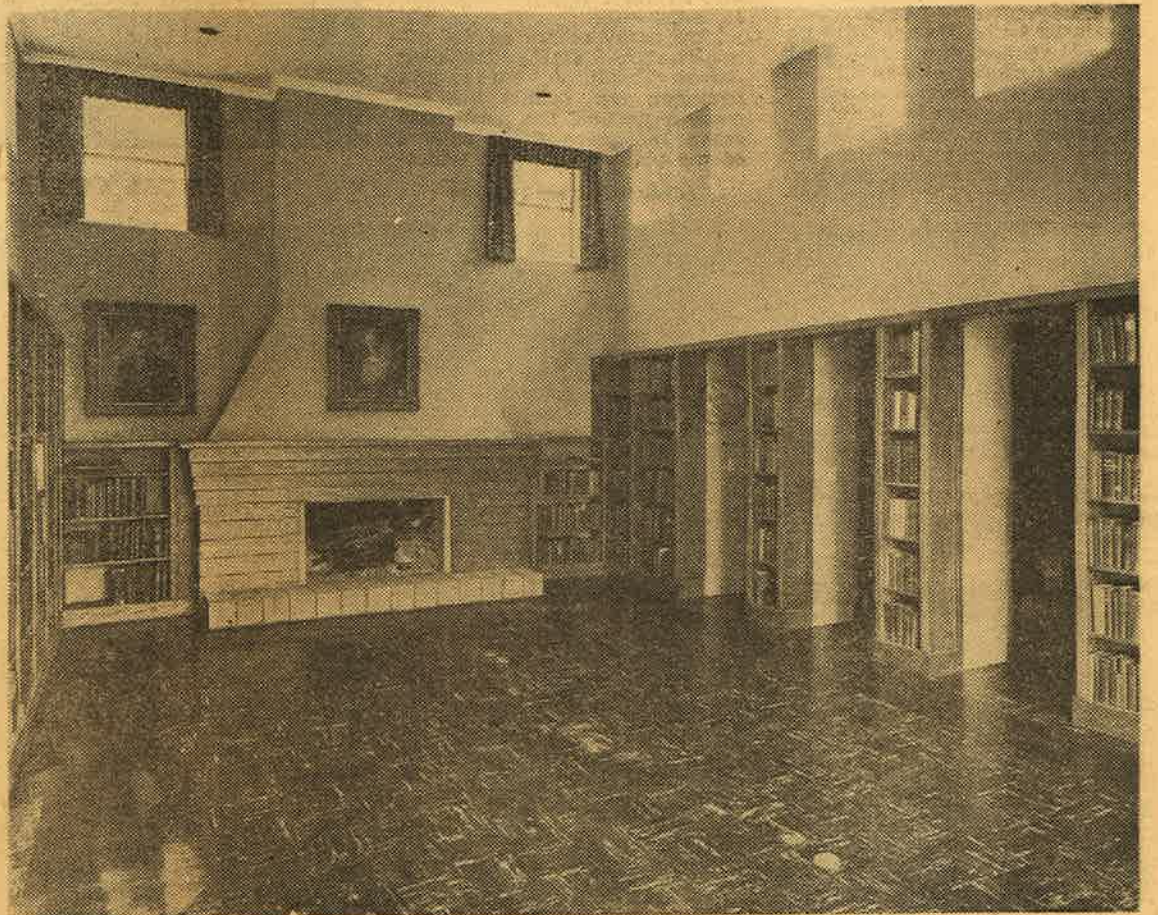
After coming to Wesleyan as Librarian in 1933, he took his M.A. there in 1934 and his L.H.D. in 1937. Editor, publisher, author, librarian and inventor, he is currently directing the publication of genealogies on microcards, and this is only one use being made of this type of publication—invented by Fremont Rider.

His secretary, Mrs. Edith Grant—who is also an indexer—says he enjoys swimming, bridge and gardening, and not the least of his hobbies is his family, an engineer son at present in Venezuela, a married daughter living on Long Island, and five grandchildren.

As creator of the American Genealogical Index, and now a permanent home for it, Fremont Rider has made an inestimable contribution toward perpetuating the work, life and spirit of a free people, past, present and future.



DR. FREMONT RIDER



INTERIOR VIEW of memorial library where vast genealogical index is kept.