



RICK HARTFORD / THE HARTFORD COURANT

TOM KEMP of East Hampton came to the Godfrey Library two years ago to improve its online collection and is now director of the library. He is standing in front of paintings of Brig. Gen. Stuart Chapin Godfrey and Godfrey's sister, Grace Godfrey Rider, for whom the library was named.

A Treasure-Trove Of History

Godfrey Library Offers Links To The Past: Official Records, Newspaper Archives, Internet

By **JOSH KOVNER**
COURANT STAFF WRITER

MIDDLETOWN — The Godfrey Library, that treasure trove of genealogy on a grassy rise off Newfield Street, is a

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place where family secrets are not safe.

Not with one of the world's largest online collections of census documents, birth, death and marriage records, rare family funeral sermons, probate records, obituaries, military burial records, major newspaper archives, immigration documents and family history books.

"People are finding cousins they just dimly knew; discovering branches of the family tree they weren't aware of. It's re-connecting people to their roots — and it's never been easier. People are astonished and, often, incredibly grateful," said Tom Kemp, the library's director.

Kemp is a former Navy man, genealogist and developer of online research tools who came to the library two years ago as assistant director to beef up Godfrey's online collection. He took the helm in July, when director Nancy J. Doane retired.

Kemp is presiding over a further expansion of the library's already formidable online collection and the installation of new computer terminals. Two million newspaper pages are being added monthly and thousands of family and local histories are being scanned into the collection.

"There are hook-ups for 200 people. Of course, we can't fit that many in here, but the potential is there. And we have wireless fidelity, so you can come in with your laptop," said Kemp.

Recently, the library obtained the earliest known burial records of the U.S. Army, listing deaths from the 1800s.

"This is great stuff. We're acquiring a unique collection," said Kemp.

The Godfrey has been at 134 Newfield St. since 1951, founded by Arthur Fremont Rider, former library director of Wesleyan University, and was named in memory of his first wife, Grace Godfrey Rider and her brother, Brig. Gen. Stuart Chapin Godfrey.

It is supported entirely by memberships, donations and the local history books and bibliographies it publishes. The Godfrey is open daily. Kemp takes calls after-hours, until 9 p.m.; he gets about a dozen calls nightly. All of the services at the library are free; members can gain access to the Godfrey's online



THE GODFREY LIBRARY in Middletown has a unique and extensive online collection of documents connecting people across generations and around the globe.

resources from their home computers for an annual fee of \$35. Its Web address is www.Godfrey.org.

Kemp said the Connecticut State Library and the New York Public Library have fantastic genealogical sections — but the Godfrey has a larger online collection.

Walk into the Godfrey's distinctive white building and volunteer Charles S. Beebe of Mystic just might greet you by saying, "Hi, Charlie Beebe. Came here in 1650. The five Beebe brothers. One died on the way over. They think they landed in Cape Ann. Then they just branched

out from there."

As he talks, Beebe traces the shape of an ever-widening triangle with his hands.

And therein lies the hook. Staff member Sharon Dahlmeyer of Durham calls it an addiction.

Dahlmeyer, Beebe, Kemp, staff member Nancy Thurrott of Middletown — they've all used the Godfrey's resources to identify thousands of their own ancestors. And they get a kick out of helping others: professional historians, genealo-

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gists, people who simply want to know whence they came.

Before she was hired last February, Dahlmeyer was a regular patron at the Godfrey, researching her family history. It started when her daughter came home with a school assignment to find her roots. Dahlmeyer discovered that the family included Indian fighters, Massachusetts Gov. John Winthrop and Sir Francis Drake.

Finally, Thurrott asked Dahlmeyer if she wanted a job at the Godfrey.

"I said, 'You want to pay me for this?'"

Sometimes, people have a very practical reason for coming in.

"One woman had to prove she was Welsh. She was going for a scholarship and I guess you had to be Welsh," Kemp said. "Before she got her coat off, we found the 1930 census record confirming that her grandmother was born in Wales. Her son came in from parking the car.

She took the printout and said, 'Come on, we're done here.'"