

The Davison Rare Book Room at Fifty

December 6, 2002, marks the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Davison Rare Book Room in Olin Library. The room, and a substantial portion of its contents, were the gifts of George Willets Davison, Class of 1892, and his wife, Harriet Baldwin Davison, a daughter of one of Connecticut's oldest and most distinguished families. The Davisons, who lost both of their young sons at very early ages, were said to think of Wesleyan as their surviving child, and accordingly provided for its welfare and enhancement.

The Davison Rare Book Room, paneled in walnut, with locking, glass fronted bookcases surrounded by columns,

is a showcase for its treasures. Designed by architect Arthur Loomis Harmon of Shreve, Lamb, and Harmon, with the close involvement of George Davison, the room evokes an 18th-century English gentleman's library. Davison wrote of the meaning and pleasure that he encountered through handling his books, and he wanted to pass that edifying joy on to Wesleyan students of the future. He insisted that his books be available to students and faculty. Today, the Davison Rare Book Room is indeed a regular site for class instruction.

George W. Davison was born March 25, 1872, in Rockville Centre on Long Island. Always a high achiever, he matriculated at Wesleyan at age 16. A clas-

sics major, he excelled in academics as well as athletics, and he was involved in a number of extracurricular activities. He served as president of his class in 1890, lettered in football, managed the Glee Club, was a member of the *Olla Podrida* board, and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. Coeducation was in its first heyday at Wesleyan, and although he didn't marry a Wesleyan student, he met women who were his intellectual equals. He often spoke of admiring Harriet Baldwin from the window of his room on High Street as the young woman walked to Miss Patten's school, now known as Downey House. Harriet Baldwin attended Wellesley College as a member of the Class of 1896, but left early to marry Davison in 1895.

In 1894, Davison received a law degree from New York University. After practicing law in Brooklyn for 18 years, he became a banker, beginning as vice president of the Central Trust Company (now part of JP Morgan Chase), and quickly rising to become its president. His success made possible his primary avocations: print collecting and book collecting.

As a book collector, Davison was greatly influenced by his Wesleyan English professor, Caleb T. Winchester, whose junior English seminar was cited as an educational highlight by several members of the Class of 1892. Davison worked closely with book dealer Philip Brooks, who acted as his agent in many sales. The books in the Davison collection reflect the canon of English and American literature, as well as Davison's own favorites. Filled with

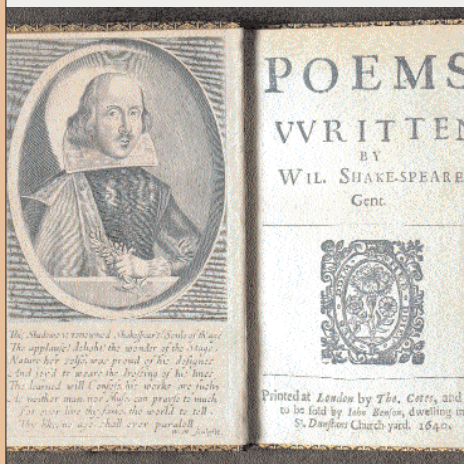
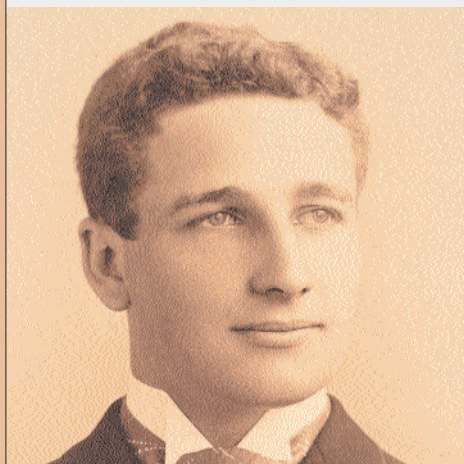
treasures, the collection also includes well over 100 incunables (books printed in the early years after the invention of moveable type, ca. 1455 to 1500), as well as all four Shakespeare folios and a copy of the 1640 edition of Shakespeare's poems, in addition to a superb collection of Shakespearean sources. In an era when book collecting was primarily a male pursuit, Harriet Davison joined her spouse in his quest. Her own interests centered on gardening books and, in a show of affection for her husband, images of St. George. The Davisons bequeathed more than 2,000 books to Wesleyan.

Other Davison gifts to the University were many and important. George Davison was, of course, the benefactor of the core of the superb collection of prints housed in the Davison Art Center. The Alsop House, with its splendid *trompe l'oeil* paintings, was purchased by the Davisons in 1948, and restored as a home for Wesleyan's art gallery, which opened in 1952. Davison served as a member of the Board of Trustees from 1912 to his death in 1953, including 15 years as chair. The Davisons were also responsible for the gift of the Barnes house, which they

renovated in 1934 as the Davison Health Center, in memory of their sons.

Celebrations of the Davison Rare Book Room are planned for this fall and include an event at Homecoming.

—Suzy Taraba '77, University Archivist



Top left and clockwise: George Willets Davison, 1892; The Davison Rare Book Room; Harriet Baldwin Davison, ca. 1911; Shakespeare's *Poems*, published in London, 1640.

THE WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES WELCOMES ALUMNI, FACULTY, STUDENTS, AND VISITING SCHOLARS RESEARCHING GEORGE W. DAVISON OR ANY OF THE SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF WESLEYAN. WE ARE ALSO INTERESTED IN ADDING TO WESLEYAN'S HISTORICAL RECORD AND PROVIDING A HOME FOR YOUR MEMORIES OF THE DAVISON RARE BOOK ROOM.