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American Ancestors | New England Historic Genealogical Society Issues Statement in Opposition to Massachusetts Governor's Budget Proposals Limiting Access to Public Records

Ryan J. Woods, EVP and COO of the Nation's Oldest and Largest Genealogical Organization, Addresses the Institution's Opposition in a Letter to the Chairman of the Massachusetts House Committee on Ways and Means

February 13, 2020—*Boston, Massachusetts*—American Ancestors and New England Historic Genealogical Society (NEHGS) released the contents of a letter dated today from Ryan J. Woods, Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of the organization, to Aaron Michlewitz, Chairman of the House Committee on Ways and Means.

A complete transcript follows:

February 13, 2020

The Honorable Aaron Michlewitz, Chairman
House Committee on Ways and Means
State House – Room 243
Boston, MA 02133

Re: ~~Opposition to Outside Sections 12, 13, 36- 46, inclusive, and 62~~ of House, No. 2, "An Act Making Appropriations for the Fiscal Year 2021 for the Maintenance of the Departments, Boards, Commissions, Institutions, and Certain Activities of the Commonwealth, for Interest, Sinking Fund and Serial Bond Requirements, and for Certain Permanent Improvements."

Dear Chairman Michlewitz:

On behalf of the members, patrons, and scholars of American Ancestors and the New England Historic Genealogical Society (NEHGS), I write to add our voice to the chorus of academics, journalists, and concerned citizens who oppose Governor Baker's proposal to severely and unnecessarily limit access to public record information that has been available, unfettered, since 1641. Rather than "update the laws governing the registration of births, deaths, and marriages and the disclosure of corresponding records to align with national best practices for the protection of personally identifiable data and confidential health information," as the Governor writes in his budget summary, the Outside Sections listed above would place undue burdens on citizens of the Commonwealth, scholars, and family historians alike.

Moreover, these restrictions would not, in reality, end access to the information they seek to protect; commercial enterprises already have access to much of it and make it available for a fee. The restrictions would instead limit public access to primary sources of information that are used each day by our organization and others to teach families about their own history and to add to the collective historical knowledge of our Commonwealth and the diverse groups of people who now call it home.

By way of introduction, American Ancestors and New England Historic Genealogical Society (NEHGS) is the nation's founding genealogical organization and the most respected name in family history. Our headquarters and primary research library is located at 99-101 Newbury Street in Boston. Established in 1845, we are the country's leading comprehensive resource for family history research and the largest nonprofit of its kind in the world. With more than 100 professional full-time staff, 300,000 members, 1.4 billion digital records, and the nation's most extensive collection of original family history research materials, we provide expert services to help families explore their past and understand their unique and important place in history. As a member-based nonprofit corporation, we are dedicated to advancing the study of family history in America and beyond by educating, inspiring, and connecting people through scholarship, collections, and expertise.

The study of family history builds bridges between people, it connects what happened then to who we are now, and we endeavor to enable everyone and anyone to experience the joy and discovery of their past, and to advance the understanding of two cherished facets of all of our lives: family and community. In order to meet this public mission to educate, inspire, and connect people, we rely heavily on traditionally public documents and data—much of which would be obscured by the Governor's proposal. However, beyond our own interest in maintaining access to these records, the Governor's proposal does not have the effect he intends. Therefore, during its deliberations over the 2021 General Appropriations Act, I respectfully ask you and your committee to consider the following:

Governments (including our own) and commercial businesses have already sold or otherwise made available our birth and residential information to data aggregators. Such information is widely available on the Internet (in most cases for a fee). The Governor's language

would do nothing to remove this information or penalize its distribution.

The Commonwealth's Registry of Vital Records and Statistics has already sold or otherwise made this data available to the Social Security Administration as well as to commercial online family history sites.

FBI crime statistics show that record closure periods have no relationship to whether consumer identity theft takes place.

There are many ways to protect personal privacy and prevent identity theft. Restricting access to vital records that are already in the public domain and have been for centuries is not an effective way to meet the stated goals. Our institution strongly urges you and the House Committee on Ways and Means not to include the above referenced Outside Sections in its recommendations for the House of Representatives' 2021 General Appropriations Act.

Thank you for your consideration of our institution's position on this matter. As always, please contact me if I may provide any additional information or assistance.

Very truly yours,

(Signed)

Ryan J. Woods
Executive Vice President & Chief Operating Officer
American Ancestors and New England Historic Genealogical Society

About American Ancestors and New England Historic Genealogical Society

American Ancestors, also known as New England Historic Genealogical Society (NEHGS), with its national headquarters located in Boston's Back Bay, is the oldest and largest genealogical organization in America. It serves more than 300,000 members and millions of online users engaged in family history nationally and around the world. It is home to a world-class research library and archive and an expert staff. American Ancestors offers an award-winning genealogical research website at AmericanAncestors.org with more than 1.4 billion records and maintains a publishing division which produces original genealogical research, scholarship, and educational materials, including *Mayflower Descendant*, a biannual journal of Pilgrim genealogy and history.

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