

Letter to NJ Assembly legislators
February 2006

Genealogy -- searching for our roots -- is one of the most popular pastimes in the United States. We all have the right to know our roots. Through family history research we enhance our sense of identity and learn the history of our country. **NJ Assembly Bill 1390** would prevent Americans from researching their roots in New Jersey, because it would close the NJ Vital Records.

New Jersey is very important in American genealogy because so many Americans lived in New Jersey before fanning out across other parts of the country. Millions of Americans claim New Jersey roots. The State Archives in Trenton is a wonderful facility with indices and images of birth, marriage and death records on microfilm, to which people from all over the country travel to learn their family history. It is a model archives center, with excellent equipment and records access. Researchers can copy microfilm pages for 50¢ per page. New Jersey should be focusing on improving this fine facility with online indexes and increased information, rather than closing access to Americans.

In order to research family history, researchers need access to indices and reasonably-priced non-certified copies, at least after the passage of a reasonable time period. A significant fee for records access is a de-facto records closure, because researchers cannot afford to pay fees for more than a couple records. And family historians need to be able to share their family history freely and without penalty. **NJ Assembly Bill 1390** does not allow these activities.

A system where the records of information on its citizens are kept secret and locked away from the citizens is unworthy of a free and open country. Closing one set of records sets a precedent for closing other sets in the future, which moves us on a path away from free and open government. Closed records encourage an attitude of privilege in officials, which is already an unfortunate tendency of officials, rather than an attitude of service to the people. Closed records lead to abuses by unaccountable officials over time, and prevent citizens from investigating official actions.

The national genealogical community, which includes many sincere and highly educated members, has looked into identity theft and learned that it is tied primarily to loss of wallets, hacking of credit card company databases, forged paperwork and corrupt officials selling paperwork. (See enclosed report.) At this time I am not aware of a documented case of a terrorist using vital records to obtain identity information. We should not jump to feel-good sounds-good solutions for problems that don't exist, which will have unintended consequences that are detrimental to millions of citizens. On behalf of all Americans with roots in New Jersey I urge you to vote against these bills.

Sincerely,

Holly Kilpatrick