



Feb. 9, 2018

State and Local Government Committee
The Ohio State House of Representatives
by electronic mail

RE: HB 139 Eliminate public records exemption if record 100 years old

Honorable members:

For nearly eight years, I researched the many ways that concerns about privacy have been used to restrict access to historical records. The result, a modest book entitled *Privacy and the Past: Research, Law, Archives, Ethics* (Rutgers University Press, 2016), documents the results. Nowhere in appellate case law, law reviews articles, the professional counseling literature, ethicists' analyses, archivists' academic journals and books, historians' publications, blogs, websites, or digitized newspaper archives did I find evidence that revealing information from 100-year-old records ever seriously harmed a living person. Individuals have objected, of course, to uncomfortable histories of controversial events and to biographies of famous relatives behaving badly. But understanding humans' frailties and flaws alongside their strengths and virtues is what makes history so illuminating.

I urge you to support HB 139 so that historians, history students, genealogists and the simply curious can investigate our common past. That past is very fragile. So much is lost that what survives speaks to more than the experiences of specific people – it illuminates the complexities of social, political, economic, spiritual and physical circumstances that shaped peoples' lives and contributed to the pathways to the present. I believe that keeping century-old records closed because a few worry that someone might be offended over revelations about the dead amounts to a subtle form of *de facto* censorship. That is not healthy for our democracy.

As a practicing historian who has supervised students' projects that take them into local records collections, including documents stored in county clerks' offices and court house basements, I can attest that there is nothing like the excitement (at least for the historically minded) of working with the authentic past. Passing HB 139 will allow more Ohioans the opportunity to connect with our heritage, warts and all.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Susan C. Lawrence".

Susan C. Lawrence, Ph.D.
Professor of History