**MEMORANDUM TO THE GENEALOGICAL COMMUNITY**

**FROM:** Peter E. Broadbent, Jr.

**DATE:** March 27, 2012

**RE:** Access to Virginia’s Vital Records – HB 272, SB 309 and SB 310; and SB 660

Good News! Governor Bob McDonnell has now signed into law two Virginia General Assembly bills to:

1. A. Reduce the “closed” period for records of marriages and deaths held by the Virginia Department of Health (“VDH”) from 50 years to 25 years (HB 272).
2. Make it clear that after the “closed” period ends for vital records, these records should go to the Library of Virginia like any other archival records; direct VDH to create an online vital records index which is publicly available online through a contract with a private entity at no direct cost to the Commonwealth (both Ancestry and FamilySearch have offered to do this); and specify that the index will be capable of being linked to the underlying digital documents (if those are public) by the Library of Virginia (SB 660).

These important changes in the law will become effective July 1, 2012. The change in the “closed” periods for marriage and death records should provide immediate access to more records; turning the open records over to LVA and creating an online index may take several years to implement.

Two other bills (parallel to HB 272), SB 309 and SB 310, were effectively folded into SB 660.

General Assembly members have told me that the thousands of messages they received from genealogists since the Virginia Genealogical Society (“VGS”) first contacted the Joint Commission on Health Care in March of last year made the difference in pushing through these bills.

One final thing you can do is to send a thank-you note to Governor Bob McDonnell, whose support of these bills (particularly SB 660) was critical in overcoming initial VDH opposition. You can write the Governor at:

Honorable Robert F. McDonnell
Office of the Governor
Patrick Henry Building, 3rd Floor
1111 East Broad Street
Richmond, Virginia 23219

or by filling out an email form at: <http://www.governor.virginia.gov/AboutTheGovernor/contactGovernor.cfm> and thank him for supporting and signing HB 272 and SB 660 improving genealogical and historical research.

While this year’s legislative victories should result in improved access to public records, benefitting family and professional researchers and lineage society applicants, there are still potentially more improvements which VDH can make in broadening family and researcher access to “closed” vital records, particularly births (still closed for 100 years). The Virginia Genealogical Society would like to see improved access to those “closed” records for family members and researchers, and hopes to discuss this with VDH now that the Governor has effectively opened channels of communications with that agency.

Thank you again for your support of vital records reform.

Respectfully,

Peter E. Broadbent, Jr.
Former President, VGS