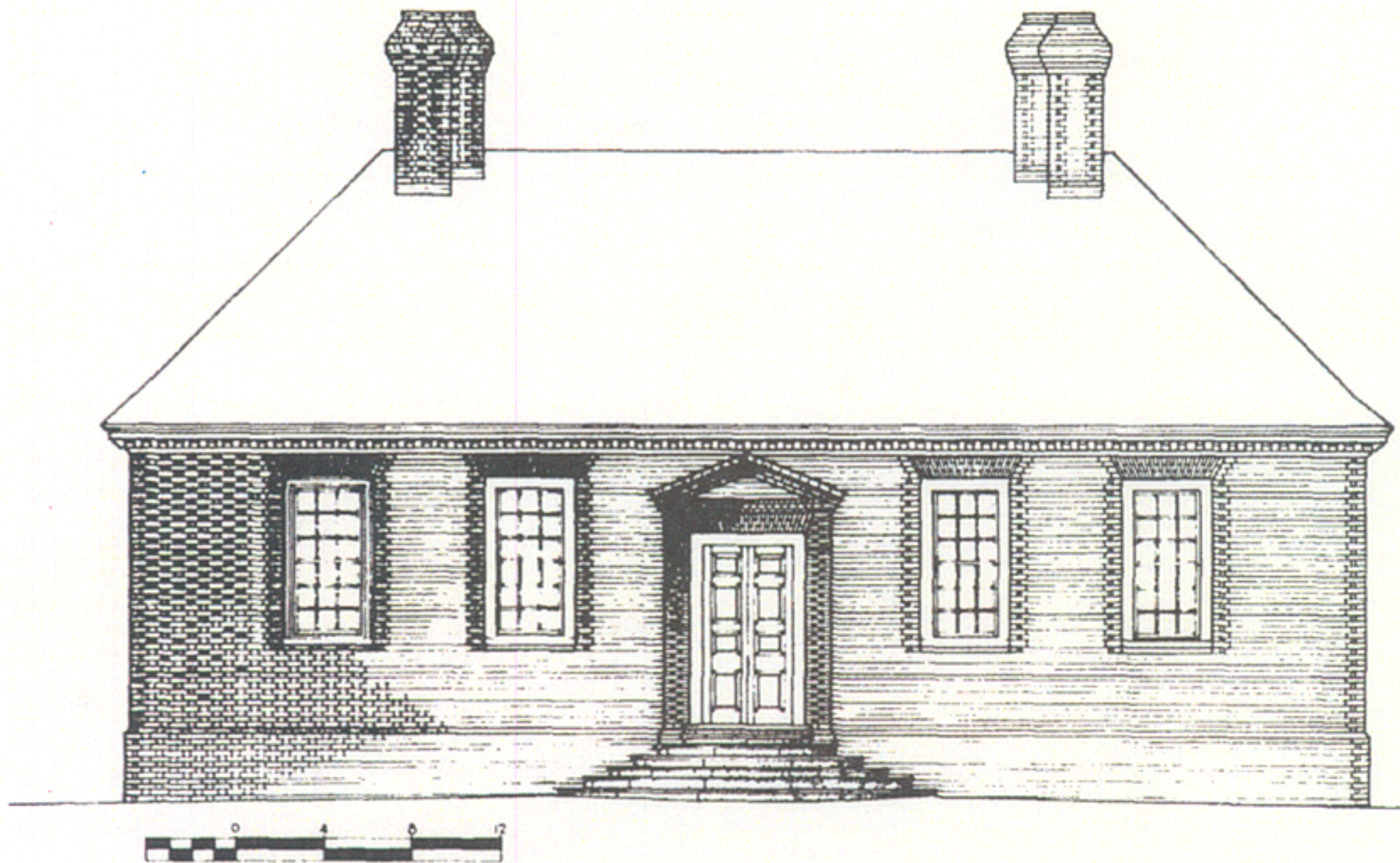


A GUIDE TO THE

*Virginia Public  
Records Act*



**LIBRARY OF VIRGINIA**

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### YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES FOR PUBLIC RECORDS

Government executives create and maintain public records as part of their official responsibilities. These materials may be in paper, electronic, or other formats. This pamphlet will assist you from the outset of your state service in:

- Identifying public records that must be incorporated into agency files and maintained under the control of the Commonwealth
- Distinguishing public records from extra or convenience copies of records
- Identifying personal files that contain information not used to conduct agency business and that may be removed at your discretion
- Maintaining personal files separate from public records under the control of the agency

As specified in the *Code of Virginia* (§ 42.1-88), any custodian of public records shall, at the expiration of his term of office, appointment, or employment, deliver to his successor—or, if there be none, to the Library of Virginia—all books, writings, letters, documents, public records, or other information kept or received in the transaction of official business. Any person who shall refuse or neglect to deliver public records for a period of ten days after a request is made in writing by the successor or the Librarian of Virginia shall be guilty of a Class 3 misdemeanor.

### WHAT ARE PUBLIC RECORDS?

**A** Public records are recorded information documenting a transaction or activity by or with any public officer, agency, or employee of state government or its political subdivisions. Regardless of physical form or characteristics, the recorded information is a public record if it is produced, collected, received, or retained in pursuance of law or in connection with the transaction of public business.




The medium on which such information is recorded may be, but is not limited to, paper; film; tapes; Mylar; linen; silk; vellum; or magnetic, optical, or solid state devices that can store electronic signals. The general types of records may be, but are not limited to, books, papers, letters, documents, printouts, photographs, films, tapes, microfiche, microfilm, photostats, sound recordings, maps, drawings, or any representations held in computer memory.

Each agency or locality is responsible for determining whether the materials it creates meet this definition of a public record. Agencies must create and maintain records containing a full accounting of their organization, functions, policies, and activities. Agency records must also contain the information needed to protect the rights of the government and of the citizens of Virginia directly affected by government activities.

Paper records may be originals or copies, such as file copies of outgoing correspondence or copies forwarded for action. Multiple copies of the same document may each be a record if each serves a separate administrative purpose and if they are kept in separate filing or recordkeeping systems. Extra copies, such as distribution copies, stock copies, and copies maintained for convenience or reference, are not public records. If electronically created records are maintained in paper recordkeeping systems, the information necessary for a complete record must be printed. Contact your agency's records officer for further guidance.

Many factors contribute to the determination that documentary materials are public records. If the answer to any of the following questions is "yes," the document is a public record.

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- Did the agency require creation or submission and maintenance of the document?
  - Was the document used to conduct or facilitate agency business?
  - If the document is a draft or preliminary document created for background or a similar purpose, does it contain unique information that explains formulation of significant program policies and decisions?



3. In a case involving a board, bureau, commission, authority, district, institution, or agency of the state government, including a public institution of higher education, or a standing or other committee of the General Assembly, to the general district court or the circuit court of the residence of the aggrieved party or of the City of Richmond.

B. In any action brought before a general district court, a corporate petitioner may appear through its officer, director or managing agent without the assistance of counsel, notwithstanding any provision of law or Rule of the Supreme Court of Virginia to the contrary.

C. Notwithstanding the provisions of § 8.01-644, the petition for mandamus or injunction shall be heard within seven days of the date when the same is made, provided the party against whom the petition is brought has received a copy of the petition at least three working days prior to filing. The hearing on any petition made outside of the regular terms of the circuit court of a locality that is included in a judicial circuit with another locality or localities shall be given precedence on the docket of such court over all cases that are not otherwise given precedence by law.

D. The petition shall allege with reasonable specificity the circumstances of the denial of the rights and privileges conferred by this chapter. A single instance of denial of the rights and privileges conferred by this chapter shall be sufficient to invoke the remedies granted herein. If the court finds the denial to be in violation of the provisions of this chapter, the petitioner shall be entitled to recover reasonable costs, including costs and reasonable fees for expert witnesses, and attorneys' fees from the public body if the petitioner substantially prevails on the merits of the case, unless special circumstances would make an award unjust. In making this determination, a court may consider, among other things, the reliance of a public body on an opinion of the Attorney General or a decision of a court that substantially supports the public body's position.

(B) E. In any action to enforce the provisions of this chapter, the public body shall bear the burden of proof to establish an exemption by a preponderance of the evidence. Any failure by a public body to follow the procedures established by this chapter shall be presumed to be a violation of this chapter.

F. Failure by any person to request and receive notice of the time and place of meetings as provided in § 2.2-3707 shall not preclude any person from enforcing his rights and privileges conferred by this chapter.

#### **§ 2.2-3714. Violations and penalties.**

(B) In a proceeding commenced against any officer, employee, or member of a public body under § 2.2-3713 for a violation of § 2.2-3704, 2.2-3705.1 through 2.2-3705.8, 2.2-3706, 2.2-3707, 2.2-3708, 2.2-3708.1, 2.2-3710, 2.2-3711 or 2.2-3712, the court, if it finds that a violation was willfully and knowingly made, shall impose upon such officer, employee, or member in his individual capacity, whether a writ of mandamus or injunctive relief is awarded or not, a civil penalty of not less than \$500 nor more than \$2,000, which amount shall be paid into the State Literary Fund. For a second or subsequent violation, such civil penalty shall be not less than \$2,000 nor more than \$5,000.



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§ 42.1-89. Petition and court order for return of public records not in authorized possession.

C The Librarian of Virginia or his designated representative such as the State Archivist or any public official who is the custodian of public records in the possession of a person or agency not authorized by the custodian or by law to possess such public records shall petition the circuit court in the city or county in which the person holding such records resides or in which the materials in issue, or any part thereof, are located for the return of such records. The court shall order such public records be delivered to the petitioner upon finding that the materials in issue are public records and that such public records are in the possession of a person not authorized by the custodian of the public records or by law to possess such public records. If the order of delivery does not receive compliance, the plaintiff shall request that the court enforce such order through its contempt power and procedures.

(1975, c. 180; 1976, c. 746; 1998, c. 427.)

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§ 42.1-90. Seizure of public records not in authorized possession.

D A. At any time after the filing of the petition set out in § 42.1-89 or contemporaneous with such filing, the person seeking the return of the public records may by ex parte petition request the judge or the court in which the action was filed to issue an order directed at the sheriff or other proper officer, as the case may be, commanding him to seize the materials which are the subject of the action and deliver the same to the court under the circumstances hereinafter set forth.

B. The judge aforesaid shall issue an order of seizure upon receipt of an affidavit from the petitioner which alleges that the material at issue may be sold, secreted, removed out of this Commonwealth or otherwise disposed of so as not to be forthcoming to answer the final judgment of the court respecting the same; or that such property may be destroyed or materially damaged or injured if permitted to remain out of the petitioner's possession.

C. The aforementioned order of seizure shall issue without notice to the respondent and without the posting of any bond or other security by the petitioner.

(1975, c. 180; 1976, c. 746.)