

Records cleared of historic terms

■ Kent Acott

Public servants have been accused of trying to change WA's history by redacting "offensive" words such as "Aboriginal" and "illegitimate" from reissued historic birth, death and marriage certificates.

The move has angered genealogists and historians, who say the practice could have been going on for more than five years and involved hundreds of certificates.

Some of the redacted certificates relate to events more than 100 years ago.

It is understood the questionable words were added to a certificate by a registrar, often based solely on their observations. They were not descriptions required by law.

In some cases, they were written instead of the woman's surname.

Other redacted words are understood to have been "native", "black" and "half-caste".

The Department of Justice confirmed the practice but indicated it only applied to certificates required for "evi-



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dentiary reasons" — where the certificate is used to help establish a person's identity.

Original documents — without any redactions — were still issued for all other reasons but only after recipients acknowledged they may contain outdated terms that could be offensive.

The issue was raised by Family History Society of Rockingham and Districts president Peter Godfrey in a recent letter to *The West Australian*.

"As genealogists, we believe that this has the effect of changing objective history, which is extremely important to us in our search for our elusive ancestors," he wrote.

"We would like to know why the redaction is taking place

and a complete list of words or phrases that are being considered for redaction."

University of WA emeritus professor of history Jenny Gregory has written to Attorney-General John Quigley voicing her concerns.

"The unofficial notations by local magistrates and other officials on birth, death and marriage certificates open a window to the past, showing us the social and cultural attitudes of colonial and later officials of European origin towards Aboriginal and Asian people," she said.

"Words like Aboriginal or Japanese scrawled on a certificate are not offensive.

"Words like nigger, however, are regarded as offensive today.

"They were once commonplace and reveal a great deal about past attitudes."

Colonial language expert Aileen Walsh said the words used on the certificates were an indicator of a different time and standards.

She said they should not be redacted. "I have not heard of a single person who has been offended," she said. "