

# Using Gedcom Files in Genealogy 3/17

One of the biggest advantages to using the Internet for genealogy research is the ability it provides to exchange information with other researchers. One of the most common methods used for this information exchange is the GEDCOM, an acronym for GENEalogical Data COMMunication. In simple terms it is a method of formatting your family tree data into a text file which can be easily read and converted by any genealogy software program. GEDCOMS basically take your family information and put it in an outline format. Records in a GEDCOM file are arranged in groups of lines that hold information about one individual (INDI) or one family (FAM) and each line in an individual record has a level number.

A **GEDCOM specification** uses a set of TAGS to describe the information in your family file, such as INDI for individual, FAM for family, BIRT for birth and DATE for a date. Many beginners make the mistake of trying to open and read the file with a word processor. Theoretically, this can be done, but it is a very tedious task. GEDCOMS are best suited for opening with a family tree software program or a special GEDCOM viewer (see related resources). Otherwise, they basically just look like a bunch of gibberish.

The first line of every record is numbered zero (0) to show that it is the beginning of a new record. Within that record, different level numbers are subdivisions of the next level above it. For example, the birth of an individual may be given level number one (1) and further information about the birth (date, place, etc.) would be given level two (2).

**A simple example of GEDCOM records :** 0 @I2@ INDI 1 NAME Charles Phillip /Ingalls/ 1 SEX M

Tags can also serve as pointers (@I2@), which indicate a related individual, family or source within the same GEDCOM file. For example, a family record (FAM) will contain pointers to the individual records (INDI) for the husband, wife and children. If you've spent much time online researching your family tree, then it is likely that you've either downloaded a GEDCOM file from the Internet or received one from a fellow researcher via email or on a CD. So now you have this nifty family tree which may contain vital clues to your ancestors and your computer can't seem to open it. What to do?

## How To Open and Read a Genealogy GEDCOM File

### 1. Is it Really a GEDCOM?

Begin by ensuring that the file that you want to open is truly a genealogy GEDCOM file, and not a family tree file created in some proprietary format by a genealogy software program. A file is in GEDCOM format when it ends in the extension .ged. If the file ends with the extension .zip then it has been zipped (compressed) and needs to be unzipped first.

**2. Save the GEDCOM File to Your Computer** Whether you are downloading the file from the Internet or opening it as an email attachment, the first thing you should do is save the file to a folder on your hard drive. I've got a folder created under "C:\My Download Files\Gedcoms\" where I save my genealogy GEDCOM files. If you're saving it from email you may want to scan it for viruses first before saving to your hard drive (see Step 3).

**3. Scan the GEDCOM for Viruses** Once you have the file saved to your computer hard drive, it is time to scan it for viruses using your favorite antivirus software program. Even if you know the person who sent you the GEDCOM file, it is better to be safe than sorry.

**4. Make a Backup of Your Existing Genealogy Database** If you have a family tree file on your computer you should always make sure you have a recent backup before opening a new GEDCOM file. This will allow you to revert to your original file in case something goes wrong when you're opening/importing the GEDCOM file.

**5. Open the GEDCOM File with Your Genealogy Software** Do you have a genealogy software program? If so, then begin your family tree program and close any open family tree project. Then follow the program's instructions for opening/importing a GEDCOM file. Be sure to look at the GEDCOM file by itself first, rather than opening or merging it directly into your own family tree database. It is much harder to figure out how to remove unwanted people, than it is to add new people later after you have reviewed the new GEDCOM file. It's also important to note that some fields such as notes and sources may not transfer properly via GEDCOM.

**Other Ways to Open a GEDCOM File** If you don't have a genealogy software program, you can still open and read GEDCOM files. Many free and shareware programs are available which allow you to easily open and view GEDCOM files. **Do you want to share your family tree file with friends, family, or fellow researchers?** Unless they use the same genealogy software program as you, they will not be able to open and read your family file unless you send it to them in GEDCOM format. The same goes for most online pedigree databases which only accept family tree submissions in GEDCOM format. Learning to save your family tree as a GEDCOM file will make it much easier to share your family tree and connect with fellow researchers.

**How To Save Your Family Tree as a GEDCOM File** All major family tree software programs support the creation of GEDCOM files. Creating a GEDCOM file does not overwrite your existing data or change your existing file in any way. Instead, a new file is generated by a process known as "exporting." Exporting a GEDCOM file is easy to do with any family tree software by following the basic instructions given. You can also find more detailed instructions in your genealogy software's manual or help system. You should also be sure to remove private information such as birth dates and social security numbers for people in your family tree who are still living in order to protect their privacy.

**How to Share My GEDCOM File** Once you have created a GEDCOM file you can now easily share it with others via email, flash drive/CD or the Internet. **To share your GEDCOM file via email** you will need to send it as an attachment to your email. Be sure to include a short note in your email telling the recipient what to expect in the attachment so that they won't delete it as a potential virus-laden attachment. You may also want to attach brief instructions on how to open the file or point them to my instructions on How to Open a GEDCOM File. If you need help with how to send attachments via email, then try How to Send an Email Attachment. **To share your GEDCOM file via snail mail** you will need to save it to a flash drive or burn it onto a CD. **You can also share your GEDCOM file with others online** by uploading to one of the many pedigree databases which exist on the Web. The best of these promise not to sell your information for profit and allow for easy searching for matches against the names in your family tree.

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