

UNDERSTANDING GEDCOM

WHAT IS IT? AND WHAT DO I DO WITH IT?

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UNDERSTANDING GEDCOM

UNDERSTANDING GEDCOM AND POSTING YOUR FAMILY HISTORY ON THE INTERNET

by Ted Steele & Ilene Murray

One of the basic tenets of marketing is that you must advertise in order to reach your audience. That same concept applies to the idea of locating unknown cousins who are also researching your family lines. The idea here is that you want to make it as easy as possible for *them* to find *you*. So, you need to advertise your family in places where these unknown cousins will find you, and the Internet provides the vehicle to make that happen.

Most genealogical researchers today use the Internet as one of their primary tools in tracing their family history. Every day, many thousands of researchers search the Web for clues about their ancestors. This is the reason that you want your family names on the Internet, so that these researchers will see those names and will then contact you to request information and share their own data. The good news is that you don't need a lot of technical know-how to make that happen. You do need to have entered your family history into a computer-based genealogy program, however.

In brief, there are two steps that you must take to post your family history on the Internet:

1. Use your genealogy program to create a GEDCOM file of your family history data.
2. Copy that GEDCOM file to an Internet website.

This booklet will explain in detail how to do this. We will also discuss other ways in which you can use the Internet to advertise your family so that other researchers can find you.

WHAT IS A GEDCOM FILE?

Today, there are many genealogy software programs on the market that researchers can choose from. A sample of the more popular programs includes (in alphabetical order):

- Family Tree Maker (FTM) [(for Windows and Mac) v. 2017]
- Legacy Family Tree (for Windows) [v. 9]
- Reunion (for Mac) [v. 12]
- RootsMagic (for Windows and Mac) [v.7]

When you enter your family history data into one of these programs, it stores your data in a complex database structure, *which only that program can read*.¹ Thus, Legacy Family Tree cannot read the database created by RootsMagic, and Family Tree Maker cannot read the database created by Reunion.

¹ This is a generally true statement. However, several genealogy software programs are now including the ability to read the databases of certain other programs directly. Consult your program's documentation for specifics.

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One of the earliest genealogy programs was called Personal Ancestral File (PAF), which was developed by the Family History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). Because these developers recognized that it would be important for genealogists to share their family data with one another, and they also recognized that different people would use different programs to record their family histories, they had the foresight to develop a way to copy family data from one program to another. The idea was to create a simple *format* for writing the data in a basic text file—so simple that all genealogical software developers could include in their programs the ability to read or write a file in this format.

They called this format GEDCOM—an acronym for Genealogical Data Communications. “GEDCOM was developed by the Family History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to provide a flexible uniform format for exchanging computerized genealogical data. . . . GEDCOM is provided to foster the sharing of genealogical information and the development of a wide range of inter-operable software products to assist genealogists, historians, and other researchers.”²

The beauty of GEDCOM lies in its simplicity. It is a format which describes, in detail, how the family history data is to be written to a simple text file—just as if you were to type it on a piece of paper. No database technology, nothing fancy, just plain text. That very simplicity, however, has led to some criticism of GEDCOM because some feel it cannot reflect all of the nuances of today’s programs. As a result, there are other methods now being proposed for genealogical data transfer,³ but virtually all genealogy software programs and all websites that allow you to post family trees continue to use GEDCOM.

Any time you want to transfer genealogical data between programs you will need to do it using a GEDCOM file. For example,

- (1) Sending your family information from a Mac to a PC (or vice versa)
- (2) Moving your family information from Family Tree Maker (or any other program) to RootsMagic (or any other program)
- (3) Posting your family information on the Internet

If you are simply updating to a new version of the same software program, you do not need to convert your file to GEDCOM, as most programs can read their older databases. But if you are changing programs or going from a very old version of a program to a newer one, you may need to use GEDCOM to transfer your data to the new program.

Figure 1 on the next page illustrates a small portion of a GEDCOM file.⁴

² *The GEDCOM Standard*, Draft Release 5.3, Family History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 4 November 1993, p. 3.

³ The National Genealogical Society, through their GENTECH Division, has been at the forefront of the development of a new data model for genealogical information exchange.

⁴ When looking at a GEDCOM file, it is important to remember that this file is not supposed to make sense to a human being. It is intended only to be read by a computer program. This figure illustrates the “heading” data in the file (what program created the file, when it was created, the name of the file, and the name of the person who created it) and illustrates how the GEDCOM format codes some of the information on one person, in this case John F. Kennedy.

0 HEAD	1 _UID 7C50265402E
1 SOUR RootsMagic	1 CHAN
2 NAME RootsMagic	2 DATE 15 JAN 2015
2 VERS 7.0	1 BIRT
2 CORP RootsMagic, Inc.	2 DATE 6 SEP 1888
3 ADDR PO Box 495	2 PLAC East Boston, Suffolk Co, MA
4 CONT Springville, UT 84663	2 SOUR @S69@
4 CONT USA	1 CHR
3 PHON 1-800-ROOTSMAGIC	2 DATE 9 SEP 1888
3 WWW www.RootsMagic.com	2 PLAC East Boston, Suffolk Co, MA
1 DEST RootsMagic	2 SOUR @S14@
1 DATE 7 OCT 2010	1 BUR
1 FILE Kennedy.ged	2 DATE NOV 1969
1 GEDC	2 PLAC Brookline, Norfolk Co, MA
2 VERS 5.5.1	2 SOUR @S13@
2 FORM LINEAGE-LINKED	1 DEAT
1 CHAR UTF-8	2 DATE 18 NOV 1969
0 @I1@ INDI	2 PLAC Hyannisport, Barnstable Co, MA
1 NAME Joseph Patrick	2 SOUR @S15@
/Kennedy/	1 OCCU Ambassador
2 GIVN Joseph Patrick	1 REFN KENNJP88
2 SURN Kennedy	1 FAMS @F1@
1 SEX M	1 FAMC @F34@

Figure 1: Sample of a GEDCOM File

PART I: HOW DO I CREATE A GEDCOM FILE?

Virtually every genealogy software program today can read and write a GEDCOM file. This booklet will illustrate how to create a GEDCOM file using (1) Family Tree Maker, (2) Legacy Family Tree, (3) Reunion, and (4) RootsMagic. If you have a different program, relax, because the same basic steps will apply to your software as well.

These are the steps to create a GEDCOM file using any genealogy software program:

1. Finalize all of the data in your program. Simply put, this means to review the information that you have to be sure that the data is as good as it can be before you create your GEDCOM file.
2. From the **File** menu in your program, select the “Export GEDCOM File” option. The exact wording of this will vary from program to program.
3. If given choices by your program, select the options that you wish to use in creating your GEDCOM file. For posting data to the Internet this will generally mean that you want to export your entire database but that you wish to “privatize” living people.
4. Give your GEDCOM file a name. A GEDCOM file automatically has a file type of “.ged.” Usually you will use your primary family surname to identify the file. So Ted’s GEDCOM file will be called “Steele.ged.” Your GEDCOM file will probably be called “yourfamilyname.ged.”
5. Remember where you save the file. For example, if you put it in a folder on your hard drive/C-drive, make a note of the folder name! This is important, because you are going to have to find it again when you want to copy it to an Internet website. You can see the folder name by looking in the box that reads “Save In.”
6. Click the “Save” or “OK” button and wait for the program to write your GEDCOM file.

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As noted on the previous page, when you create a GEDCOM file to upload to the Internet, you will want to “privatize” living people.⁵ This is a simple precaution to prevent people from using your data for the identity theft of living people and to protect their privacy. Most programs will include this option. Even if your software does not, the program that copies your data to the Internet website will also include an option to privatize living people. The result is that the name of a living person will be hidden and no information about that person (no genealogical facts) will be posted.

To create a GEDCOM file using Family Tree Maker 2017:

Open your family file. From the **File** menu, select **Export . . .**

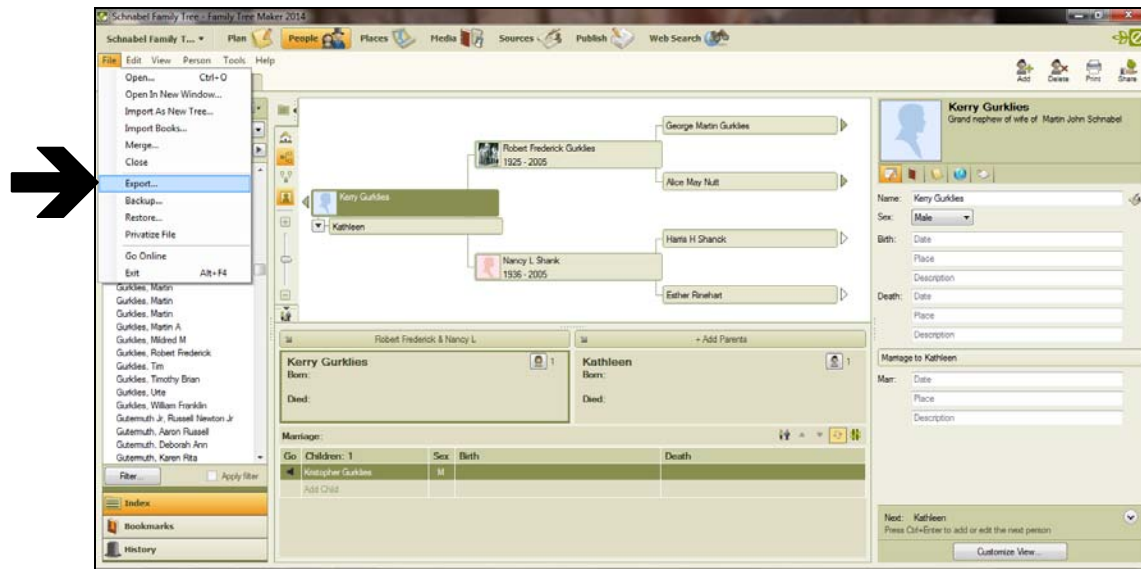


Figure 2: In FTM, select Export . . . from the File Menu.

In the “Export” dialog box, click on the drop-down list labeled “Output format” and select GEDCOM 5.5 (standard). See Figure 3. Note the option of items to include or not include.

⁵ If you are creating a GEDCOM file to send to a relative or to a known researcher, you probably do not want to privatize anybody. The person receiving your data will probably want to have all of the names and facts of everybody, including living people. So look at those GEDCOM options and use your best judgment. You may also have the option to select just certain groups of people to export. If this is your need, follow the directions of your particular software.

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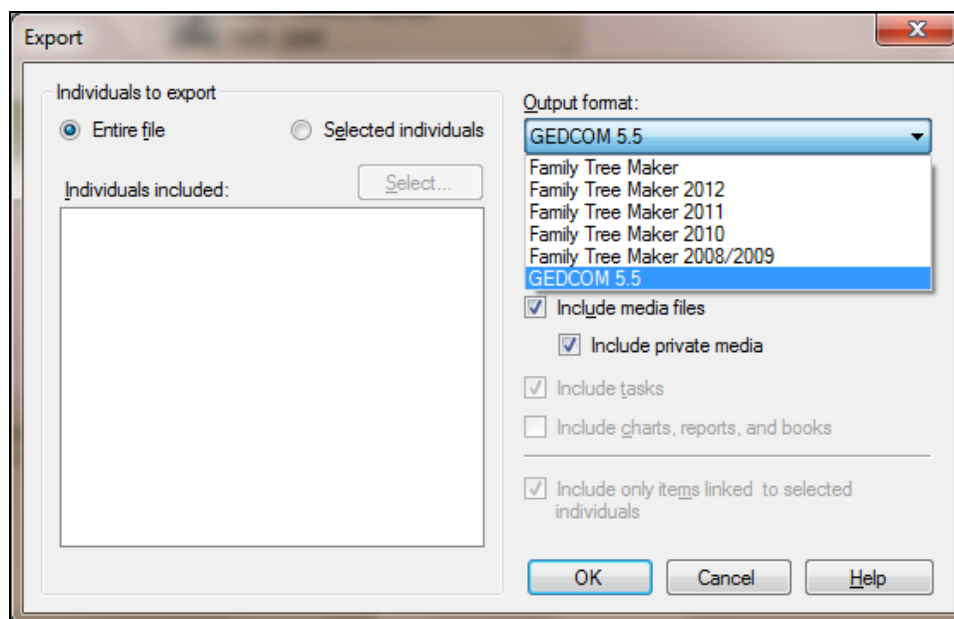


Figure 3: Drop-down list of file types. Select GEDCOM 5.5.

The “Export to . . .” window will appear. FTM presents few GEDCOM output options. Clicking on “Save” will write your GEDCOM file to the selected folder.

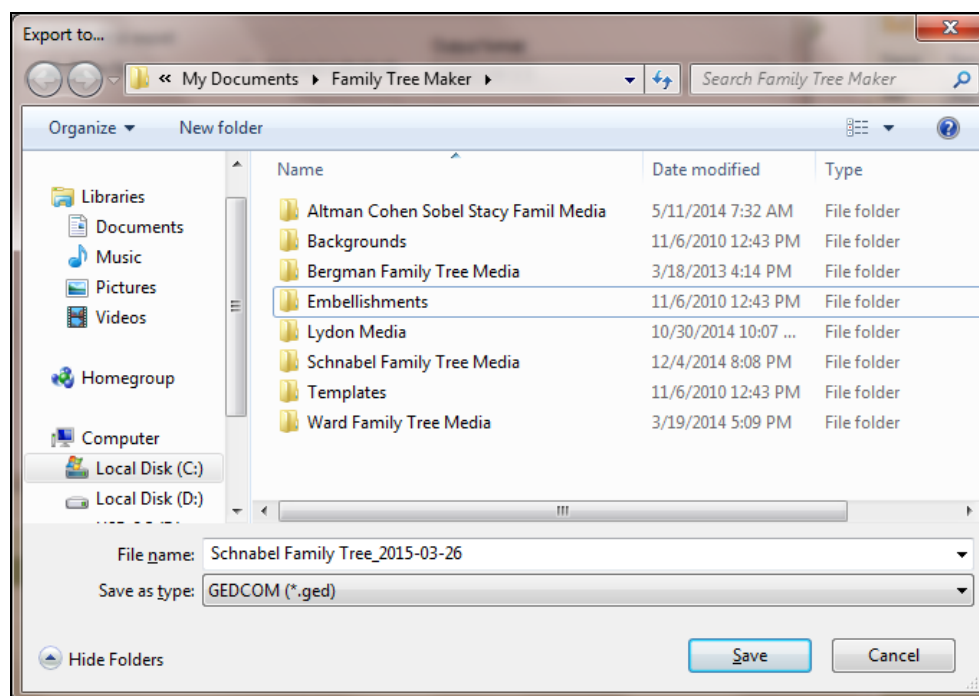


Figure 4: FTM’s Export to . . . dialog box.

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To create a GEDCOM file using Legacy Family Tree 9.0:

Open your family file. From the **File** menu, select Export > GEDCOM File...

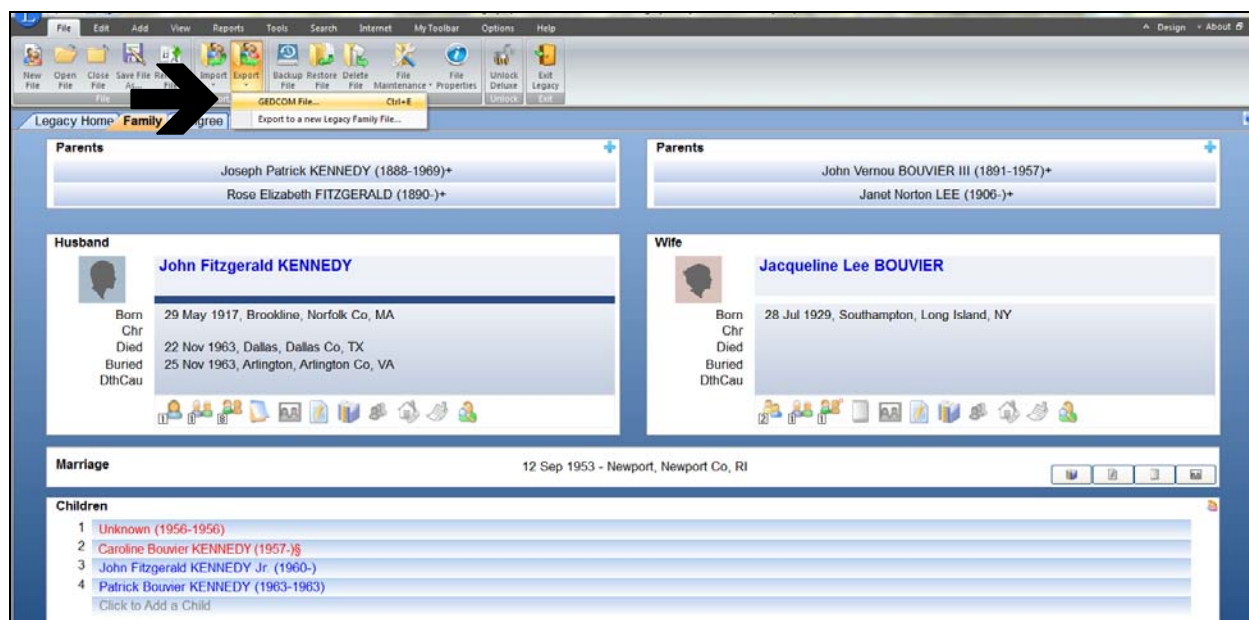


Figure 5: Export > GEDCOM File . . . from the File Menu.

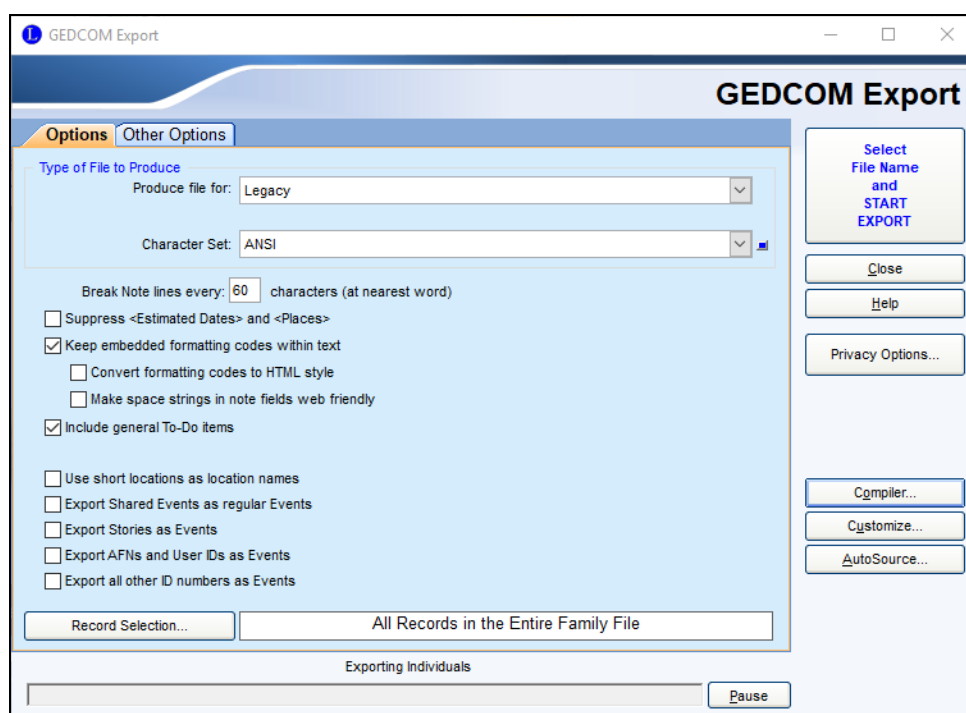


Figure 6: Legacy's GEDCOM Export options menu.

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After selecting the appropriate set of options from the GEDCOM Export window, click on “Select File Name and START EXPORT.” See Figure 6. Then (see Figure 7) give your GEDCOM file a name and select a location where you will save it.

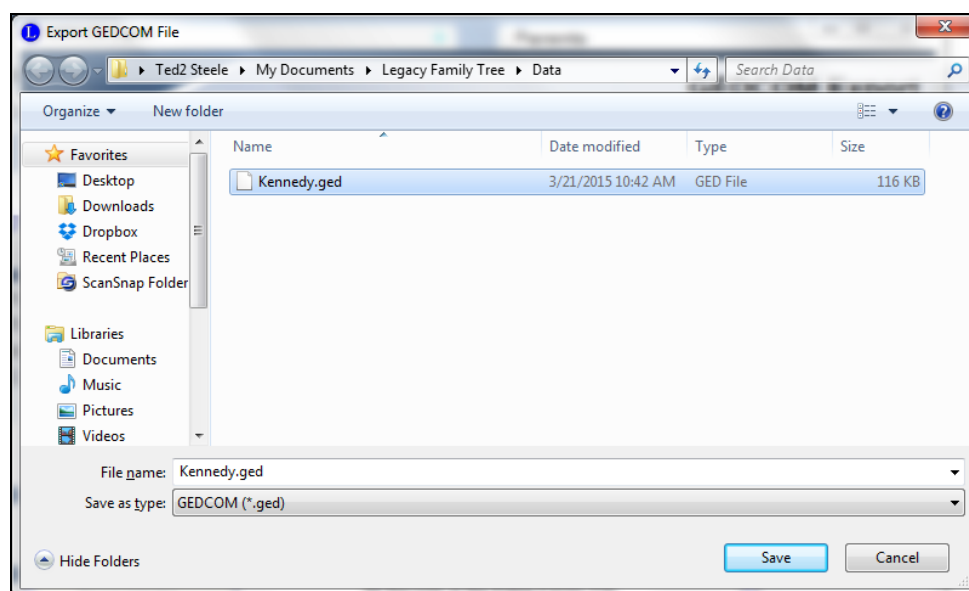


Figure 7: Legacy’s EXPORT GEDCOM File dialog box.

To create a GEDCOM file using Reunion (for Macintosh) version 12:

Open your family file. Go to File/Export/GEDCOM (see Figure 8).

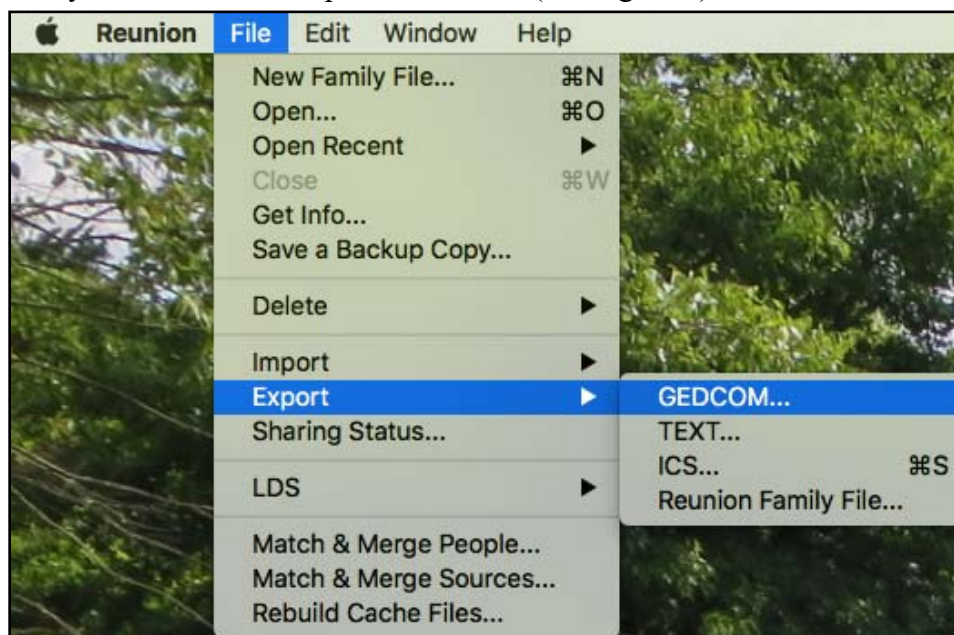


Figure 8: Reunion’s Import/Export menu.

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In the GEDCOM Export box (see Figure 9), select GEDCOM 5.5. For ease of sharing with Windows users, choose Windows as your GEDCOM character set (unless you know for sure that you are sharing with a Mac user). Here is where you can turn on a privacy filter, include or exclude sensitive data, and include or exclude your sources. You can also use the Optional Fields tab to include or exclude other information in your database.

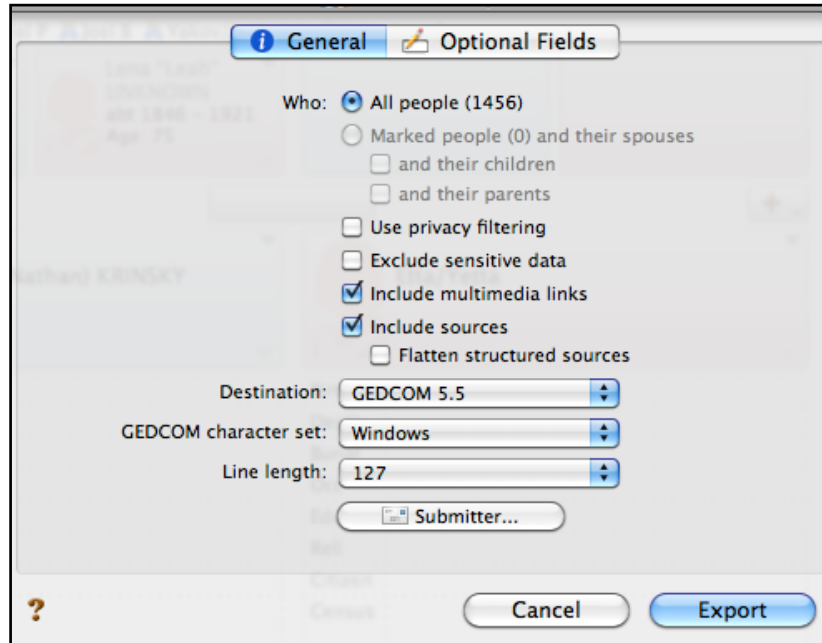


Figure 9: Reunion's GEDCOM Export dialog box.

When you are finished making your choices, click on “Export.” In the next dialog box (see Figure 10, below), choose a location and a name for your file and then save it.

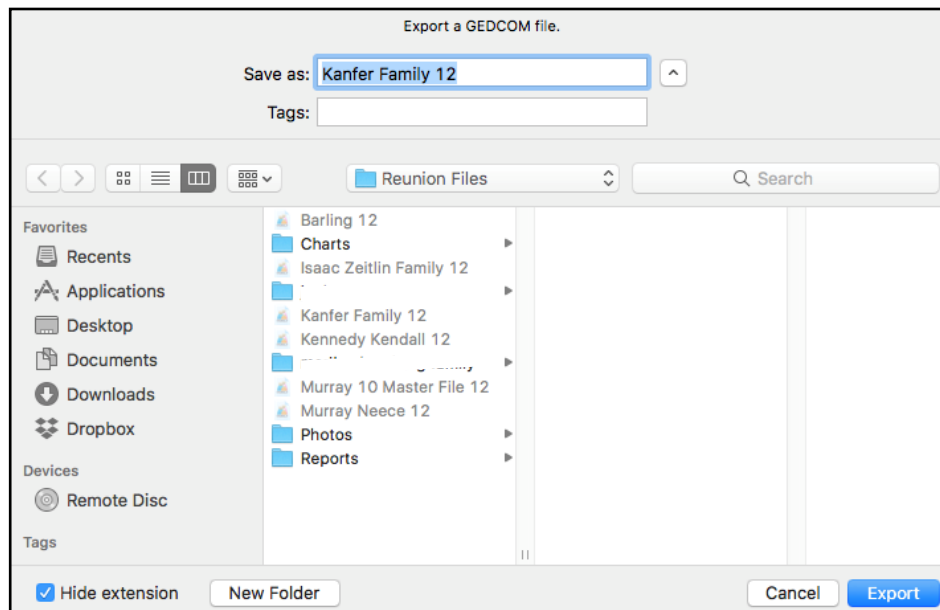


Figure 10: Reunion's File Save dialog box.

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To create a GEDCOM file using RootsMagic 7.0:

Open your family file. From the File menu, select Export ...

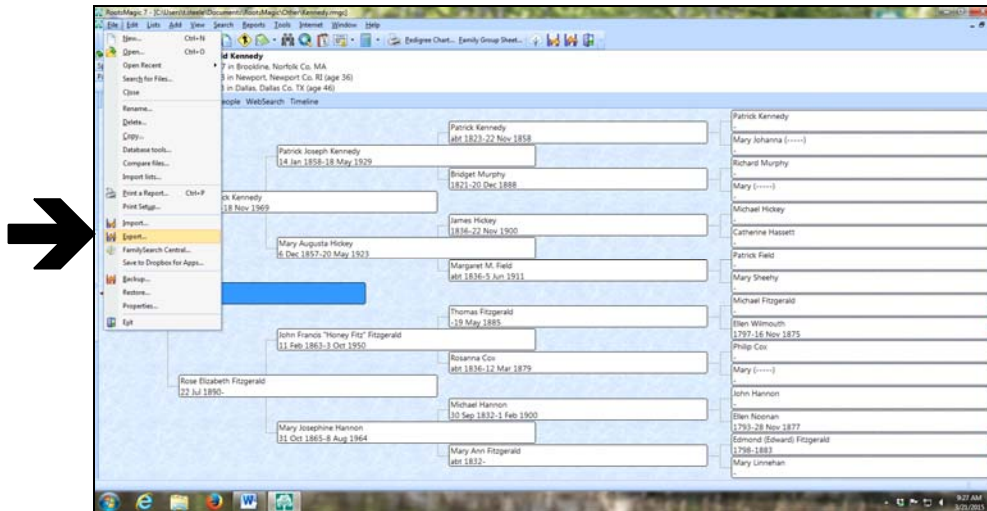


Figure 11: Export ... from the File Menu

Use the “GEDCOM Export” window (see Figure 12) to select the appropriate options for your file. When done, click on “OK.”

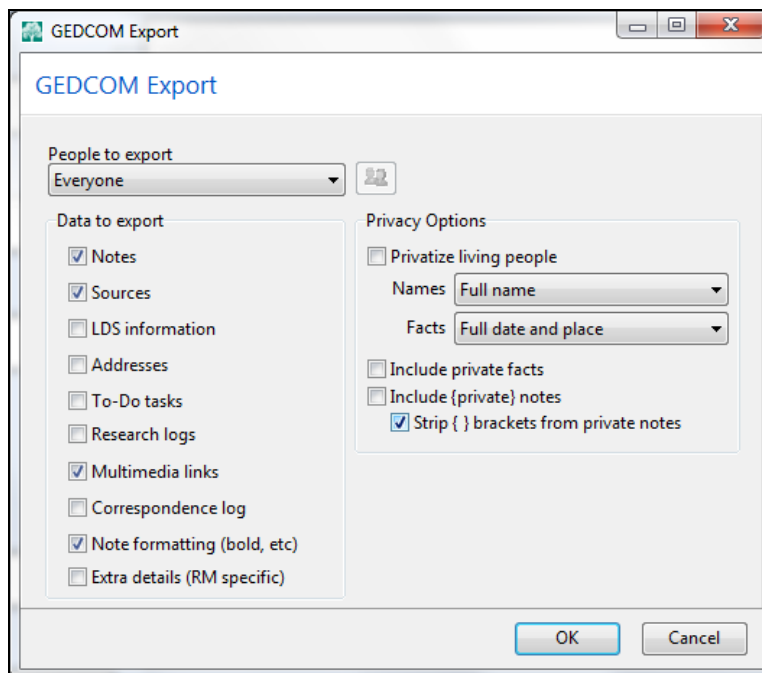


Figure 12: RootsMagic’s GEDCOM Export dialog box

In the “Save AS” window (see Figure 13) select a location for your GEDCOM file and give it a name. Then click on “Save.”

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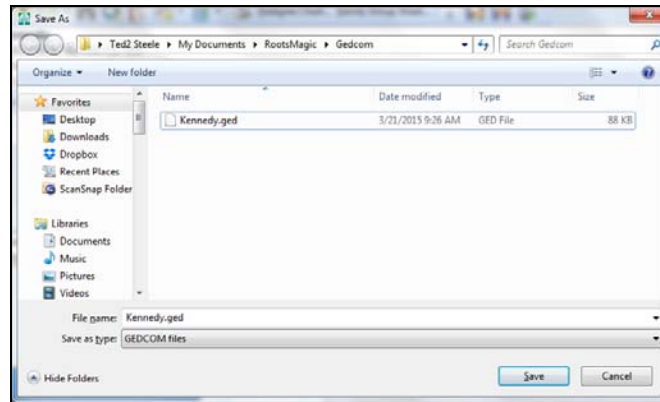


Figure 13: RootsMagic's "Save As" window

PART II: POSTING YOUR DATA ON AN INTERNET WEBSITE

Congratulations! You are now done with the first half of the job.

Now that you have your GEDCOM file, you need to decide where on the Internet you will post your family history information. There are many choices, including:

- Ancestry.com, a commercial site
- FamilySearch, the LDS genealogical site
- WikiTree, a free site "where genealogists collaborate"
- Build-your-own website

Earlier versions of this booklet illustrated how to post your data into the WorldConnect database on RootsWeb, which was a free genealogy site started in the mid-1990s. In 2000, Ancestry.com acquired RootsWeb, their contract stipulating that all data on RootsWeb would remain free to the public, including WorldConnect, RootsWeb's collection of user-submitted family trees. In 2015, WorldConnect contained more than 620 million names in family trees. Unfortunately, a disastrous data crash in 2017 corrupted the WorldConnect databases, making them unusable. Ancestry was able to restore WorldConnect but only as read-only trees. The ability to upload new data has been lost and WorldConnect remains read-only today.

You can read an article by noted genealogist, Dick Eastman, about WorldConnect on his blog at <https://blog.eogn.com/2018/01/10/rootsweb-is-currently-unavailable-and-probably-will-remain-that-way-for-some-time/>.

ANCESTRY.COM

Undoubtedly the largest collection of genealogical data on the Internet is at Ancestry.com. In addition to their vast resources of original data, Ancestry allows individuals to post their family trees on its website, using GEDCOM files to do so. Instructions on how to upload a GEDCOM file to Ancestry can be found at <https://support.ancestry.com/s/article/Uploading-and-Downloading-Trees>.

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Ancestry writes, “By default, all trees are listed as public. In public family trees, all information is viewable and searchable except for details regarding living people. Facts, photos, and sources from a public family tree may be viewed and added to other family trees on Ancestry. Only a living person’s gender is publicly displayed; all other details are hidden.” They also offer the option to make your entire family tree private, disabling the ability for the public to view any of its contents. To do so, you uncheck “Allow others to see my tree as a public member tree.”

FAMILYSEARCH

FamilySearch.org is the website provided by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Like Ancestry, it contains many original source documents. Unlike Ancestry, everything on FamilySearch is free to the public. To submit your family tree, you must first create a (free) user account on FamilySearch.org. To create an account, click on the “Free Account” button in the “Sign In” section in the upper right corner of the FamilySearch home page. (If you already have an account, your user name will appear there.) The “Create a Free FamilySearch Account” window will appear. Provide your name, birth, and gender information, indicate if you are a member of the LDS church and click “Continue.”



Create a Free FamilySearch Account

First Name Last Name

Birth Date
Month Day Year

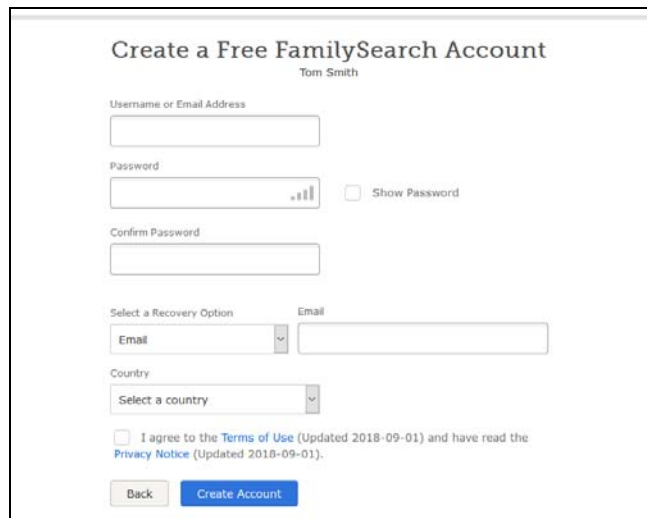
Sex
☐ Male ☐ Female

☐ I am a Member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. [i](#)

[Continue](#)

Figure 14: Create a Free FamilySearch Account window

A second “Create a Free FamilySearch Account” window will appear. Fill in the requested information and click “Create Account.”



Create a Free FamilySearch Account
Tom Smith

Username or Email Address

Password [Show Password](#)

Confirm Password

Select a Recovery Option Email

Country

☐ I agree to the [Terms of Use](#) (Updated 2018-09-01) and have read the [Privacy Notice](#) (Updated 2018-09-01).

[Back](#) [Create Account](#)

Figure 15: Create a Free FamilySearch Account window

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In the header of the FamilySearch website, click on “Search,” and then click on “Genealogies.” The “Search Genealogies” window will open. Scroll down to the heading that reads “Contribute your research to the FamilySearch.org community” and click on the “Submit Tree” button. A new window will open. Click on the “Add GEDCOM” button and the “Upload Your GEDCOM” window illustrated below will open. Click on the “Browse . . .” button to locate the GEDCOM file that you have saved on your computer. Add a name in the “Tree Name” panel and an optional description and then click on “Upload.”



Figure 16: FamilySearch Upload GEDCOM window

The name of your GEDCOM file is added to a list of your uploaded files. The word “uploading . . .” appears until the file upload is finished, and then the word “uploaded” appears.

A PDF file explaining this GEDCOM upload process in more detail is available at: broadcast.lds.org/elearning/fhd/product/en/handouts/gedcom.pdf.

WIKITREE

The WikiTree site <https://www.wikitree.com/> was created in 2008 by Chris Whitten and is hosted by Interesting.com, Inc. In February 2019, the site had more than 590,000 members and contained more than 19.6 million ancestor listings. WikiTree supports DNA results of members’ Y-chromosome (yDNA) and mitochondrial (mtDNA) tests. As of February 2019, more than five million members had DNA connections.

WikiTree’s objective is to build a shared, worldwide family tree with one profile for every person, whether living or dead. Duplicate profiles are merged and consolidated. This should be a serious consideration when deciding whether or not to upload your family tree to this site, as it will be combined with postings from others whose research may differ from your own.

To use Wiki Tree, you must first create a free user account, supplying your name and email address and creating a password. Once the account has been created, you simply open your account and upload your GEDCOM file.

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BUILD-YOUR-OWN

Most of today's genealogical programs (e.g., FamilyTreeMaker, Legacy, Reunion, or RootsMagic) include the ability to generate a website on the Internet from your family tree. These programs typically generate the resulting web pages from your family tree database, not from a GEDCOM file. Also, most of the major DNA services (e.g., Ancestry DNA, FamilyTreeDNA, 23 and Me) allow you to upload your family tree to their websites using GEDCOM.

There are also several commercial software products that allow you to generate a family tree website from a GEDCOM file. These include:

- Genealone software at <http://genealone.com/>. This software allows you to either build your family tree online or upload a GEDCOM file to create your tree. Once built, your data can be edited and altered online. As an administrator, you can allow other users to edit and alter your data, if you wish.
- GeneWeb at <https://geneweb.tuxfamily.org/wiki/GeneWeb>. This is a multi-language development tool. GeneWeb is used as the engine for several public genealogy websites, including GeneaNet.
- GeneaNet at <https://en.geneanet.org/>. This international website hosts family trees from users around the world. In April 2019, Geneanet members were sharing more than 400 million individuals in their online family trees. (One of the authors has used GeneaNet to share family history information with a researcher in France.) The site is free but also offers paid subscription services.
- The Next Generation of Genealogy Sitebuilding at <https://www.tngsitebuilding.com/>. This product (known as "TNG") is growing in popularity. It allows the creation of a family tree website from a GEDCOM file using one of many pre-defined templates. It also includes extensive extensions that allow the most sophisticated user to expand on those basic templates with additional features.
- Webtrees at <https://www.webtrees.net/index.php/en/>. This is a free website that was created in 2010 when users of PhpGedView stopped using that site "due to issues with exporting encrypted software." [<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Webtrees>] It requires a web server that has PHP and MySQL installed.

A comparison of some of these products can be found on Wikipedia at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comparison_of_web-based_genealogy_software.

BENEFITS OF POSTING TO THE INTERNET

In addition to enabling other researchers to find you, there are other benefits to uploading your data to the Internet. Probably the most significant is that it provides an excellent backup site in the event that your data on your home computer is lost due to a hardware crash, data corruption, or a catastrophic software failure. Another reason is that you can now reach all of your genealogical research from anywhere in the world that has access to the Internet. For example, if you are researching your family in an out-of-town library and you need to look up information about a particular family, it's all available to you on the Internet.

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LETTING OTHERS FIND YOU

When we teach classes on using the Internet for genealogical research, we always say that your most important Internet tool is not the Web—it is **email**. That's because you can use email to communicate with other people about ancestors with a mutual interest. When you post your family history onto a website you should also include your email address in that data. This enables other researchers to find you and to send you email messages. Both authors of this booklet have had their family histories on the Internet for several decades, which has resulted in many previously unknown genealogical friends and relatives (distant cousins) contacting us. As a result, we have received family photographs, critical documents, detailed memoirs and biographies, and many historical lineages. We have also corresponded via email with other genealogists researching our family lines. In many cases we and those cousins have been able to work together to resolve lineage problems that none of us could have solved alone.

In addition to posting your family history, however, we also recommend that you use the Internet to post queries where other researchers can find you. For example, use social media, especially **Facebook**, to help you find cousins and to post notes in the many genealogy research groups. Likewise, **Twitter**, **Pinterest**, and other similar sites have begun to be gathering places for genealogy queries. If you aren't already participating in genealogy blogs, Facebook, or Twitter, this would be a good time to check them out.

In addition, Ancestry offers a free message board system where anyone can post information about their ancestors. You can search by surname or locality. Find the message boards at <http://boards.ancestry.com/>.

When posting an item to a message board, it is important to have a clear title. An example of a poor title might be "Looking for my grandparents." A good title will generally include three elements: a name, a place, and a date. An example of a good title might be "Henry Smith, Pittsburgh, Pa., late 1860s."

SUMMARY

Remember that marketing adage that we discussed at the beginning of this article. For people to find you it's important for you to advertise. The Internet is a fabulous and generally free resource, which is used by genealogists around the world. Posting your family history information on the Internet is not difficult and bears tangible benefits. You will be well rewarded.