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# Persona Records

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Description: A persona record contains a transcription of information about a single person found in a single item from source material. Persona records have a long history stemming from the concept of nominal records used in demographic studies. Persona records are important components in genealogical systems that support recording evidence and research. Persona records a similar structure to current, conclusion-based person records, so can be added to current genealogical data models by a single modification to the person record structure.

Keywords: Persona, Person Record, Data Model, Research, Evidence, Conclusion, Nominal Record, Two-tier, N-tier

# Persona Records

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## Abstract

A persona record contains a transcription of information about a single person found in a single item from source material. Persona records have a long history stemming from the concept of nominal records used in demographic studies. Persona records are important components in genealogical systems that support recording evidence and research. Persona records a similar structure to current, conclusion-based person records, so can be added to current genealogical data models by a single modification to the person record structure.

## Nominal Records

A **nominal record** contains information about a single person that has been transcribed from a single item of information (e.g., parish register, census, land record). Starting in the late 1950s many demographic studies (e.g., marriage patterns, migration patterns, medical histories) were based on family reconstruction using nominal records. The records are called nominal because they each contain the name of a person and whatever other facts are included about the person in the item of information.

To perform family reconstruction with nominal records, studies match records from many sources, either manually or aided by computer, searching for records that can be inferred to refer to the same persons, hoping to find and match enough records to build family structures. For example, marriage records of parents can be matched with baptism records of children to piece together families.

## Persona Records

The same data concept occurs in modern genealogy where it is often called a **persona record** or just a **persona**. A persona record is a digital record that contains an extraction of information taken from a single item in a source of genealogical or family history information. A persona record has the same basic structure as a person record as found in most genealogical software programs. The difference between the two is based on the nature of their contents. A persona record comes directly from information found in source material (it holds a single item of information that is used as evidence), while a person record summarizes all information, from any number of sources, that a researcher has discovered and brought together by her belief that it collectively refers to the same individual (a person record holds a conclusion).

Few genealogical programs currently support the persona concept, as most genealogical programs are based on the practice of building trees of conclusion level

persons. However, two trends are occurring that make the persona concept more relevant to genealogical software.

First, many services (e.g., Family Search, Ancestry, Find-A-Grave) provide search functions that return persona records in various guises. The records are not called personas, but that is what they are. To use the data in these persona records, a researcher usually has to copy and merge information from the personas into their conclusion person records, while adding a source link to the data's source. This is a manual process. The different services don't provide personas in a consistent format. Most provide the data only on a web page that the researcher must copy by hand. A well defined persona standard would encourage data providers to return search and other results in a consistent data format that genealogical programs could then be able to store and use directly.

Second, some genealogists want genealogical software to handle more of the research aspects of their work. Instead of simply copying information from persona evidence records, or directly from sources into their person records, they wish to record digital copies of the evidence itself in their databases. This is easily done by adding persona support to software. With this approach, conclusion person records, instead of holding merged information extracted from many sources, hold references to the set of persona records that provide the evidence for the person's existence. This allows researchers to represent and manage the whole research process, and it allows conclusions to be easily modified when new evidence is discovered.

### **Implementation and Two-tier versus N-tier Systems**

Because a persona record can share the same structure as a conclusion person record (a collection of attributes about a person), they can be represented by the same record type in genealogical data models. The only modification required to current models is to allow person records to refer to a set of other person records. This allows what is called (e.g., by GEDCOM-X) a **two-tier system**, the top tier of person records for conclusions and the bottom for personas (the evidence). However, by allowing all person records to refer to a set of others, this opens the possibility for **N-tier systems** (also in GEDCOM-X). In these systems the top tier remains conclusions, the bottom tier remains evidence, but between the two can be represented the full structure of decisions made by the researcher when determining which evidence refers to which real persons.

Most genealogical systems are and will remain conclusion only systems, and will not use the persona concept. However a simple addition to the structure of the person record will help enable entire new suites of genealogical functionality.