What to Erase from an old Hard Drive Before Disposing of a Computer
By Ron Mettler, April 10, 2015

Overview

There are a multitude of files on a hard drive that include private information that should be securely deleted in a manner that prevents them from being "unerased". Folders with pictures, emails, Web site links (favorites and book marks), documents, shortcuts, browser cookies, financial information, passwords etc. are examples. Two general options exist for deleting those files:

1. Erase and securely wipe an entire hard drive. This option renders the computer inoperable due to the lack of an operating system. In general a program to perform this function must be downloaded in the form of an iso file, burned to a DVD or CD, then opened by booting to the DVD or CD.
2. Delete sensitive files using Windows Explorer, then perform a secure wipe of the resulting free space with a suitable program.

Wipe an Entire Hard Drive

There are a lot of programs that can be used for this purpose. You should consider this option if you are disposing of an old hard drive and you want to assure that nothing can be recovered from the drive but you wish to leave the drive in a condition that allows it to be reused as a second drive or to install in another computer. You can use programs such as *Darik's Boot and Nuke*, DP Wiper, KillDisk. Perform a Google search to find a program and follow the instructions. Destroying an old drive physically is also an option for a drive that is not usable due to some type of failure. Use a drill press to drill 3 or more holes through the drive is an option. Another option and perhaps the best is to remove the cover of the hard drive to find the platters. Then break up the platters with a hammer and nail or pliers.

Delete Sensitive Files and Folders Leaving the Operating System (Windows)

I like to use Glary Utilities for this purpose as it allows you to select folders and files and then securely erase them.
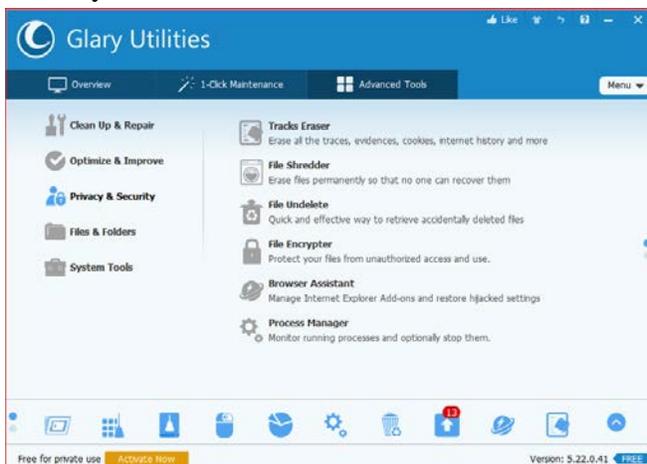
The below shows two folders to be erased:
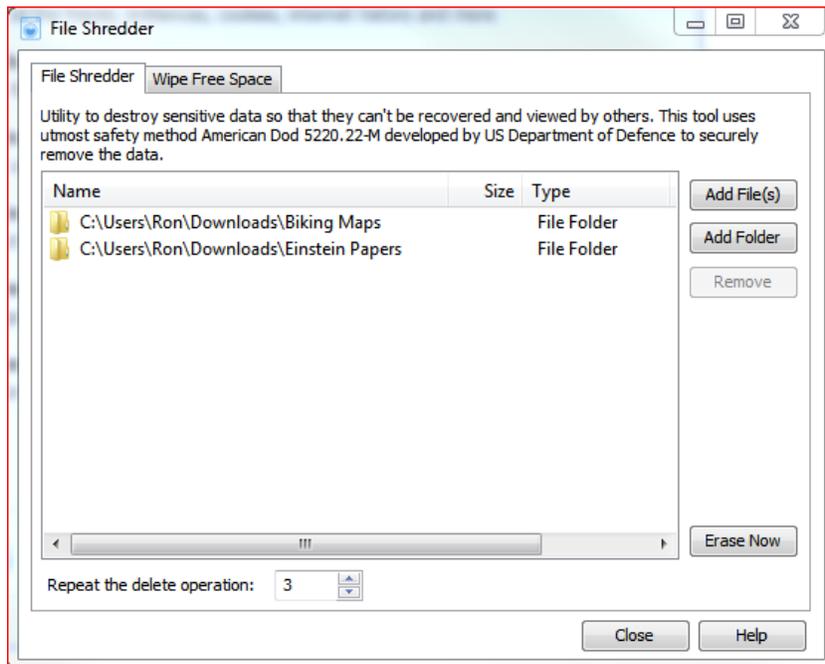
You could also use Windows Explorer to delete files and folders then use the Wipe Free Space in the above Window of Glary Utilities to overwrite the remnants of the files such that the files and folders cannot be unerased.

What to Erase
Use care in selecting files and folders to be sure you find all sensitive data. Also be sure to not delete the files needed for Windows to operate properly if you wish to continue using the drive with Windows. You need to know which Programs that you purchased and wish to reuse on a new computer so that those programs can be removed and used on a new computer.
The safe and easy to identify folders and files are found using Windows Explorer. Navigate to the Documents folder and click on the folder. Then select all folders and files under Documents by pressing Ctrl A, then press Shift Delete to delete those files and folders without transferring them to the recycle bin. Do the same thing for folders titled Pictures, Downloads, Music, Videos etc. Then navigate to the C drive, select Users, your logon name and delete everything in the following folders: Contacts, Cookies, Favorites. Identify any other folders with personal information and delete those. Go to the Recycle Bin and click on Empty Recycle Bin. If the computer has other user log on accounts do the same for those accounts. Since all of the above files could be unerased with the proper software, start Glary Utilities and use File Shredder, Wipe Free Space tab to wipe the free space that the old files still occupy.
To remove programs that you do not want to pass onto a new user, go to Control Panel, Programs and Features, and select each program one at a time and then select Uninstall.