



“...inexpressibly comprehensive, grand, and picturesque. After congratulating ourselves upon the safe achievement of our morning feat, and breathing our mules a few minutes, we proceeded on

our journey. A mile brought us to a small dimple on top of the mountain, in the centre of which is a miniature lake, surrounded by green grass.”

from [What I saw in California](#) by Edwin Bryant in 1849 upon reaching Donner Summit

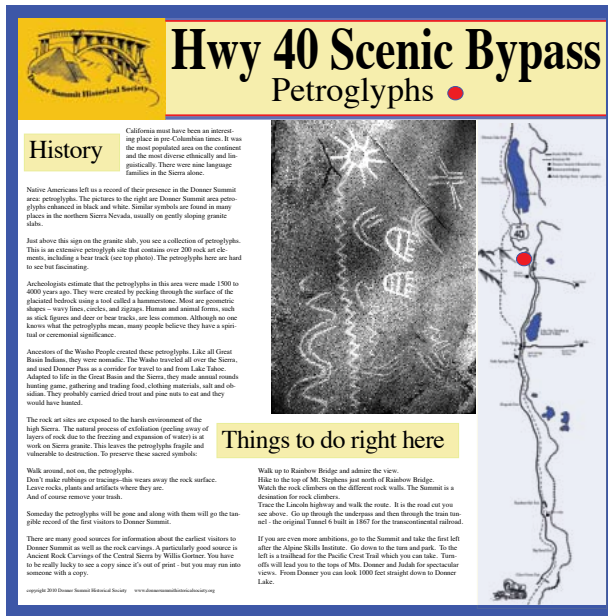
Donner Summit is grand and unique. You can stand at Donner Pass where Native Americans crossed for thousands of years and left evidence of their crossings in the form of petroglyphs and grinding stones. At the same spot the first wagon trains crossed. You can see the first transcontinental railroad and the route of the first transcontinental highway, the Lincoln Highway. That’s only a little of the history. The Donner Summit Historical Society has embarked on a project to highlight the history and beauty of the Summit.

The 20 mile museum consists of thirty-two interpretive signs placed along Old Highway 40 from the Eagle Lakes exit to over the Summit below Rainbow Bridge. Each sign highlights history, displays historical photographs and quotes, tells a good story, and lists activities for the location.



Not only do the signs highlight our unique history, they share the beauty of Donner Summit, encourage visitation, and help revitalize the Summit economy.

The project has met with overwhelming community approval and support. The signs are sponsored by local businesses and individuals who paid for construction and placement. Some of the participating businesses and organizations are: The Summit Restaurant, Royal Gorge, Soda Springs Store, Sugar Bowl, Boreal, Soda Springs Ski Area, Donner Spitz, Clair Tappaan, Cal Lodge, Heidelberg Lodge, Donner Summit Area Association, Gateway Mountain Center, and the Serene Lakes Property Owners’ Association. The signs were constructed and installed by community volunteers.



**Hwy 40 Scenic Bypass Petroglyphs**

**History**

California must have been an interesting place in pre-Columbian times. It was the most populated area on the continent and the most diverse ethnically and linguistically. There were nine language families in the Sierra alone.

Native Americans left a record of their presence in the Donner Summit area: petroglyphs. The pictures to the right are Donner Summit area petroglyphs etched in black and white. Similar symbols are found in many places in the northern Sierra Nevada, usually on gently sloping granite slabs.

Just above this sign on the granite slab, you see a collection of petroglyphs. This is an extensive petroglyph site that contains over 200 rock art elements including a bear track (see top photo). The petroglyphs here are hard to see but fascinating.

Archaeologists estimate that the petroglyphs in this area were made 1500 to 4000 years ago. They were created by pecking through the surface of the glaciated bedrock using a tool called a hammerstone. Most are geometric shapes – wavy lines, circles, and zigzags. Human and animal forms, such as stick figures and deer or bear tracks, are less common. Although no one knows what the petroglyphs mean, many people believe they have a spiritual or ceremonial significance.

Ancestors of the Washo People created these petroglyphs. Like all Great Basin Indians, they were nomadic. The Washo traveled all over the Sierra, and used Donner Pass as a corridor for travel to and from Lake Tahoe. Adapted to life in the Great Basin and the Sierra, they made annual rounds hunting game, gathering and trading food, clothing materials, salt and medicines. They probably carried dried trout and pine nuts to eat and they would have hunted.

The rock art sites are exposed to the harsh environment of the high Sierra. The natural process of oxidation (peeling away of layers of rock due to the freezing and expansion of water) is at work on Sierra granite. This leaves the petroglyphs fragile and vulnerable to destruction. To preserve these sacred symbols:

Walk around, not on, the petroglyphs.  
Don't make rubbings or images - this wears away the rock surface.  
Lay rocks, plants and artifacts where they are.  
Don't consume any rock.

Sometimes the petroglyphs will be gone and along with them will go the tangible record of the first visitors to Donner Summit.

There are many good sources for information about the earliest visitors to Donner Summit as well as the rock carvings. A particularly good source is Ancient Rock Carvings of the Central Sierra by Willis Corcoran. You have to be really lucky to see a copy since it's out of print - but you may run into someone with a copy.

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**Things to do right here**

Walk up to Rainbow Bridge and admire the view.  
Hike to the top of Mt. Sierritas just south of Rainbow Bridge.  
Watch the rock climbers on the different rock walls. The Summit is a destination for rock climbers.  
Trace the Lincoln Highway and walk the route. It is the road out you see above. Go up through the underpass and then through the train tunnel - the original Tunnel # built in 1867 for the transcontinental railroad.  
If you are even more ambitious, go to the Summit and take the first lift after the Alpine Ski Lift Institute. Go down to the inn and park. To the left is a trailhead for the Pacific Crest Trail which you can take. Timonoffs will lead you to the top of the Donner and Judah for spectacular views. From Donner you can look 1000 feet straight down to Donner Lake.

## 20 Mile Museum Interpretive Signs

**Nyack Lodge** Emigrant Gap and Nyack have been stopping points for people crossing the Sierra since long before I-80 was built. This sign sits outside the store at Nyack.

**Red Mountain** Eagle Lakes exit from I-80, north side and just beyond the curve uphill. 65 million years ago Red Mtn. was an island in the Pacific Ocean. More recently it was a downhill ski contest site and maybe more importantly, it was a fire lookout for the railroad. It’s 360 degree view is spectacular. The sign is 2000 feet below the peak. 39° 19.471/120° 33.779

**Meadow Lake** Eagle Lakes exit from I-80, north side and just beyond the curve uphill on the old stage road. Meadow Lake might have been a thriving metropolis had they been able to get the gold out. At one time there were thousands of people and hundreds of buildings there. Mark Twain said it was a beautiful town, except there were no people. “You can have a house all to yourself merely by promising to take care of it.” 39° 19.472/120° 33.781

**Forest Gift Shop** The stone buildings at Cisco along Old 40 raise the curiosity of passersby. This sign sits just off the north side of Cisco exit from I-80. 39° 18.666/120° 32.471

**View of the Lincoln Highway** The Lincoln Highway was the first transcontinental highway and the first national memorial to Abraham Lincoln. It ran alongside the Yuba River at Big Bend. From the north side of the river between Big Bend and the I-80 overpass you have a great view. 39° 18.255/120° 31.490

**Big Bend** The “bend” in the river was a resting stop for wagon trains, then highway travelers. Today there is a USFS station and museum along with a Lincoln Highway monument. 39° 18.397/120° 31.061

**Rainbow Lodge/Tavern** Built in 1927 as a stop on the highway, the Lodge is a wonderful old building with good food and a collection of historical photographs. Enjoy the lodge, the river, and the nearby old houses. 39° 18.603/120° 30.564 Sign is to the right of the lodge. at the edge of the parking lot.

**Donner Summit Lodge** was another of the travelers’ stops on the highway. Today it serves good food and is a good example of the many rest stops. The lodge is at the Soda Springs exit from I-80, next to the gas station. 39° 19.513/120° 23.363

**Soda Springs Store** There has been a succession of stores in Soda Springs over the decades. The current store sells a little of everything including sandwiches and picnic fixings in “downtown” Soda Springs. 39° 19.457/120 23.017

**Soda Springs Hotel** Built in 1927 the hotel served travelers for decades. The sign sits right outside the Donner Summit Historical Society. The museum there has a huge collection of historical photographs and ephemera. 39 19.408/120 22.768

**Ice Lakes** Ice Lakes hosted an ice harvesting industry for a few years until the huge snowfalls (35 feet on average) sent the ice harvesting to Truckee. Turn west out of Soda Springs on Soda Springs Rd. just at the hotel and head 2.5 miles west to Ice Lakes and Ice Lakes Lodge. There is good hiking and good food. 39° 17.697/120° 22.959 Signs are in the Ice Lakes Lodge parking lot and inside the lodge.

**Soda Springs Ski Area** Here is the oldest ski resort on the Summit and the site of the first Summit ski lift. You can see Soda Springs Ski Area from Soda Springs. Head west at on Soda Springs Rd. 39° 19.276/120° 22.758

**Pahatsi Wagon Train Route** On the way out of Soda Springs towards Ice Lakes Lodge you will come to Pahatsi Rd. at the top of the hill. This is the actual wagon train route. 39° 18.776/120° 22.869

**Summit Valley Overlook** Summit Valley, Van Norden Meadow, is the headwaters of the Yuba River. Through this valley came Native Americans who left grinding rocks, wagon trains, freight wagons, the railroad, and the first transcontinental highway. It is today an important wayspot of migratory fowl. This sign sits across from Clair Tappaan Lodge. 39° 18.997/120° 21.022

**Cal-Lodge/Heidelman** The Cal, Heidelman and Clair Tappaan lodges were the “Tri Lodges” in the middle of the 20th Century. They are classic old style ski lodges.

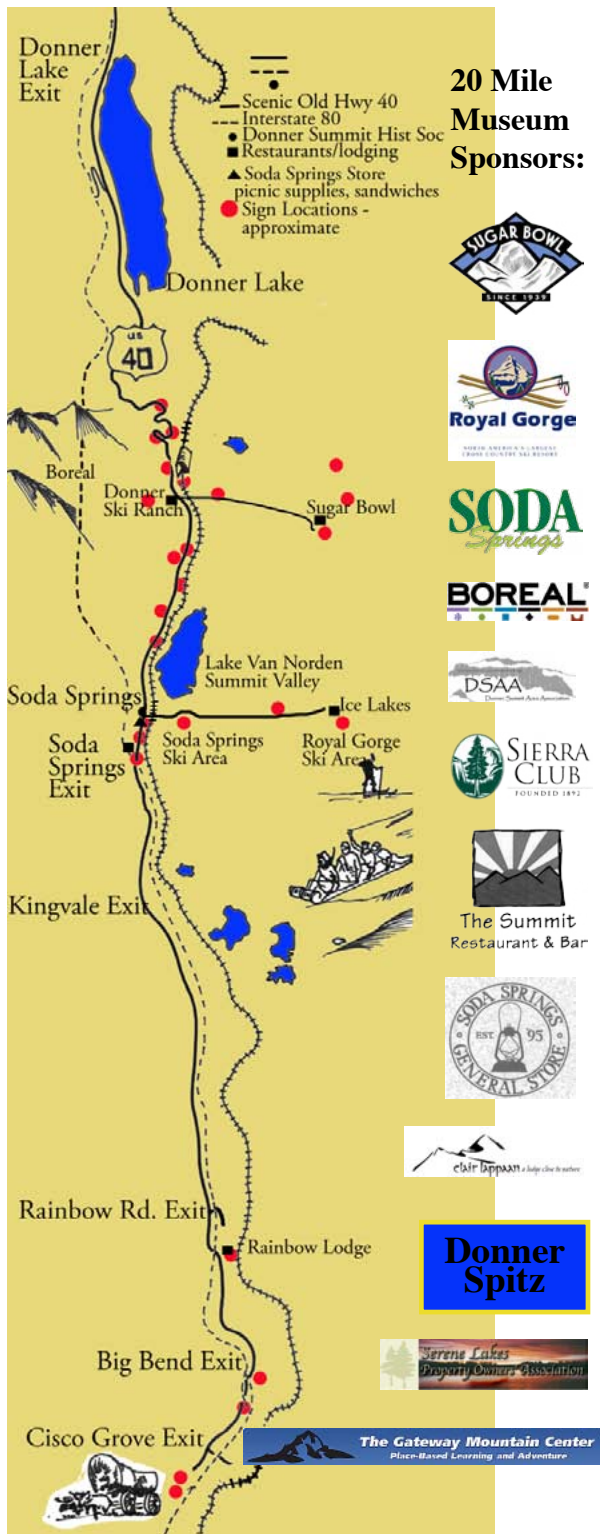
**Hutchinson Lodge** Built in 1924-25 by the Hutchinson brothers to serve their new “Sierra Ski Club.” This is a classic Sierra lodge. 39° 19.056/120° 212.159

**Clair Tappaan Lodge** Built by Sierra Club volunteers in 1935 the lodge has been expanded a number of times and has served skiers, hikers, and nature lovers for decades. Come up for a look. 39° 19.012/120° 21.006

**Sugar Bowl** Built as the first California destination ski resort and the site of the first chairlift in California in 1939, Sugar Bowl is a popular ski resort. This sign sits at 39° 19.036/120° 21.194 on Old Highway 40 just next to the parking structure.

**Magic Carpet** There were no roads into Sugar Bowl so people took tractor pulled sleighs until the Magic Carpet, the first ski gondola in California was built. Skiers could ride to Sugar Bowl for 15 cents. Southeast corner of the concrete Sugar Bowl parking structure on Old 40 directly opposite Sugar Bowl’s ski area. 39° 18.793/120° 20.345

**Roller Pass Wagon Train Route** One final hurdle before crossing into California: Roller Pass was so steep double teams of oxen hauled wagons up one at a time. Then it was all downhill to the emigrants’ dreams. Sign sits at the PCT/Mt. Judah trail trailhead on Lake Mary Rd. 39° 18.869/120° 19.612



**20 Mile Museum Sponsors:**

**Norden Station**

This was the railroad station for people wanting to come ski at Sugar Bowl. Across from the Old Norden Store on Old 40 39° 19.036/120° 21.194

**Mt. Lincoln Charlie Chaplin's "The Gold Rush"**

It was the highest grossing comedy of its day. Charlie Chaplin filmed "The Gold Rush" partly on Mt. Lincoln. Sign sits 39° 19.036/120° 21.194 on Old Highway 40 just next to the parking structure.

**Lodge at Sugar Bowl**

The lodge was built in 1939 by William Wilson Wurster, the most "influential unknown architect in California." It sits in Sugar Bowl proper and serves great meals and has a bar where you can take refreshment. Sign sits 39° 19.036/120° 21.194 on Old Highway 40 just next to the parking structure.

**Donner Ski Ranch**

The first rope tows on Donner Summit were here and across the old highway. Donner Ski Ranch has been the site of many "firsts." Look at the top of the mountain and see the old airplane beacon used for guiding airplanes over the Summit at night.

Sign is in the parking lot. 39° 19.082/120° 19.808

**Airway Station and Beacon.** Donner Summit was part of the first transcontinental air route. The station and beacon helped guide early planes. On Old 40 at Donner Summit across just up from Donner Ski Ranch. 39 19.007 120 19.626

**Tunnel 6**

Just across from Donner Ski Ranch is the road into Sugar Bowl. Tunnel 6, the longest tunnel of the Sierra crossing of the original Transcontinental Railroad is just below the overpass on Sugar Bowl Road. 39° 18.019/120° 19.794

**Sugar Bowl Academy Building**

This was the old highway maintenance building built in 1932 when Highway 40 was first plowed and became an all season highway. This is at the very top of Donner Summit on Old 40. 39° 18.999/120° 19.572

**Donner Lake Overlook**

This is a wonderful view of Donner Lake, named for the ill-fated Donner Party located just over the Summit on the Rainbow Bridge pedestrian walkway. 39° 19.156/120° 19.118

**Transcontinental Railroad**

The Transcontinental Railroad bound the na-



tion together and allowed California to grow. 39° 19.119/120° 19.113 Rainbow Bridge Parking lot.

**Rainbow Bridge**

Rainbow Bridge is the first bridge built with an elevation change, a "grand and compound curve." It was completed in 1927. Across from the Rainbow Bridge parking lot. 39° 19.134/120° 19.150

**China Wall**

There would have been no transcontinental railroad if it had not been for the Chinese workers. The China Wall was built without mortar by the handwork of the Chinese workers. Just down from Rainbow Bridge on the west side of the road. 39° 19.052/120° 19.226

**Petroglyphs** Native Americans crossed the Sierra for thousands of years before the coming of European Americans. They left interesting and mysterious petroglyphs. Just below Rainbow Bridge on Old 40. 39 19.052 120 19.224

**Snowsheds**

It was thought snow would not be a problem on Donner Summit when the railroad was built. Snow was a problem and soon almost 40 miles of snowsheds protected the tracks from snowfall and avalanche. They also kept passengers from seeing any of the beauty of Donner Summit. This sign sits below Rainbow Bridge on Old 40. 39° 19.123/120° 18.968

Explore all the 20 Mile Museum signs and read the many stories about Donner Summit in our newsletter archives on our website:

[www.donnertsummithistoricalsociety.org](http://www.donnertsummithistoricalsociety.org)

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**20 Mile Museum**

**Take the Scenic Route Along Old Highway 40 on Donner Summit**

