

# Donner Summit



The most historically significant square mile in California

Historic Donner Pass Trail

“Donner Summit has its beauty of high crags and gleaming granite; the view eastward across the lake [Donner Lake] is justly famous” and the beauty should be preserved ... What makes Donner Summit special is that “It has kept a rendezvous with history, and its interest to the person who passes here should be historical as much as scenic. At the summit, for instance, one can enjoy the beauty of the view, but can also see the remains of two primitive roads in addition to the present highway, can look across at the railroad, and can also know that the emigrant wagons were dragged up somewhere to reach the same gap.”

George R. Stewart

## Donner Pass and Those Who Crossed It.

Donner Summit is the most historically significant square mile in California and maybe the entire Western United States. Nowhere in California is there such richness in history. To that we can add the dramatic scenery, exciting recreational activities, and biological diversity.\*

### Native Americans

For thousands of years Native Americans used the pass to cross Donner Summit in summers to hunt and trade. Their petroglyphs are incised in dozens of places into the granite of the Summit. Grinding rocks and metates are also found in many places but almost never in the same places as the petroglyph.



Using almost the same route the first California-bound wagon trains, the first transcontinental railroad, the first transcon-

\*500 species of plants, 100+ species of birds, 115 species of butterflies, and dozens of species of mammals, amphibians and fish

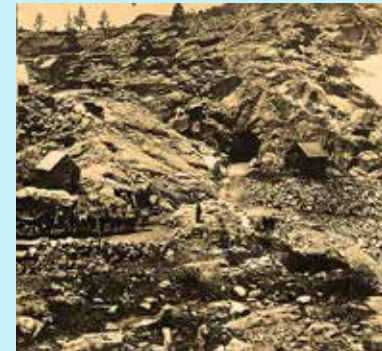
\*\*Via the [Donner Summit Heirloom](http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org) or the Donner Summit Historical Society’s website [www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org](http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org)

tinental highway, the first transcontinental air route, and the first transcontinental telephone line all came up Summit Canyon and through Donner Pass.



### First Wagon Trains, 1844-46

The Stephens-Murphy-Townsend Party was the first wagon train to reach California with wagons. They approached the Sierra after a grueling journey across the Nevada desert and along the Truckee River. As they climbed the Pass it was snowing as they came to a rock wall. They disassembled some of their wagons and hoisted the pieces up. The rest of the wagons were left at Donner Lake, along with a teenage Moses Schallenberger, who would stay the winter - alone. At the Stephens’ Party camp at Big Bend, on the Yuba River, the first white baby was born in California, Elizabeth Yuba Murphy.



There followed, according to Will Bagley, a famous author of the Emigrant Trail, about 28% of all the wagon trains coming to California.



### First Transcontinental Railroad, 1869

Fighting avalanches, accident, fire, and blizzards the mostly Chinese workers of the Central Pacific built a railroad across the Sierra. Then they built forty miles of snowsheds to protect against average 34 foot snowfalls.

The crowning achievement was blasting fifteen tunnels through the solid Sierra granite. Some of the tunnels, including the longest which took two years to bore, along with snowsheds, sit overlooking Summit Canyon.



With the coming of the railroad it suddenly it took only days to get to California, averaging an incredible 22 miles per hour, instead of months.

The railroad opened California and united the nation. It brought settlers, business, and ideas and in exchange it took the products of California to the rest of the nation.

### First Transcontinental Highway, 1913

In 1913 the Lincoln Highway was inaugurated. It put together stretches of road all across the country to form America’s first transcontinental highway and to be the first national memorial to Abraham Lincoln. With the new



highway, independent travelers could more easily explore the Sierra and travel the country.

### First Transcontinental Air Route

The first transcontinental air route used Donner Pass too. Beacons, ground markings, and arrows guided flyers through the Pass in the days before radar and high altitude flying. Airway station 15 sat above today’s Donner Ski Ranch, on Signal Hill. On one side of the roof “Donner” was painted and on the other, “SL - SF” (Salt Lake- San Francisco) so pilots knew where they were and where to go next.

Those are all the big firsts. Delve into the rich history\*\* and find the first man to ride across the Sierra, across the country, and around the world on a bicycle (1884), the first auto to cross the Sierra (1901), the first motorized crossing of the U.S. (1903), the development of modern winter sports, early settlers, the ice industry, movies, famous personalities, and so much more.



Photographs, left to right, Donner Summit Bridge, Native American petroglyphs, Harold Von Schmidt painting of wagons surmounting the pass, east end of Tunnel 6, automobile on the Lincoln Highway overlooking Donner lake, entering the Lincoln Highway underpass, Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd., the transcontinental air routes weather station on Donner Summit.

**The Donner Summit**

*Heirloom*

*Photographs and stories of Donner Summit history*

Free monthly stories of Donner Summit history  
For more information or to receive *The Heirloom*, free, go to:  
[www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org/](http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org/)



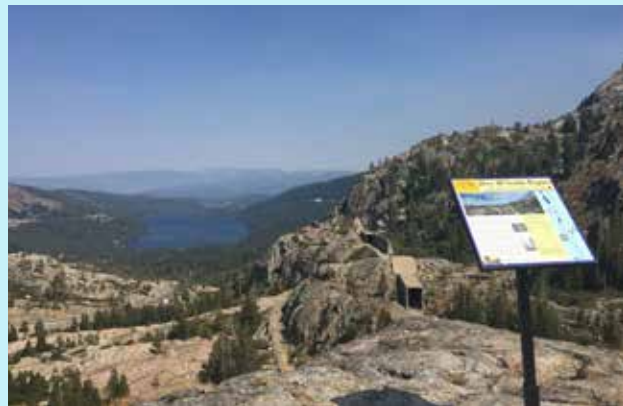
# Donner Summit, Summit Canyon Walk

First, you should take a friend and leave a car at the TDLT trailhead 2.7 miles down Donner Pass Rd. from the pass (pictures far right). Then you have a nice 3.5 mile downhill walk.

Here you can get an idea of how historically significant Donner Summit is as you pass one historical spot after another. As you come to a labeled spot use the QR code reader\* on your Smart Phone to open a web page telling a little story.

To start, go to the knoll behind the two buildings at the top of the pass (a gray one and a brown one). There you'll find a 20 Mile Museum sign (below) which will give you an overview and a marvelous view. Then head back to the parking lot and down the road to the Pacific Crest Trailhead. Take the left fork. You are on the Lincoln Highway. Follow the red line on the map. When you get to the petroglyph USFS monument you'll travel on Donner Pass Rd. for a few hundred yards, just past the climbing rocks. Then look for the trail to continue on the right, the Lincoln Highway again.

\* free at your phone's app store if your phone doesn't have one. Open the app and get one of the QR images around the map centered you'll get a web page.



Not the Turkey Truck



Lincoln Highway marker



Mt. Stephens  
Mt. Stewart



Donner Summit Bridge



Tunnel 6



Underpass



Dutch Flat Rd.



Petroglyphs



Steam Heat



China Wall

