

SUMMIT CANYON

at

Donner Pass

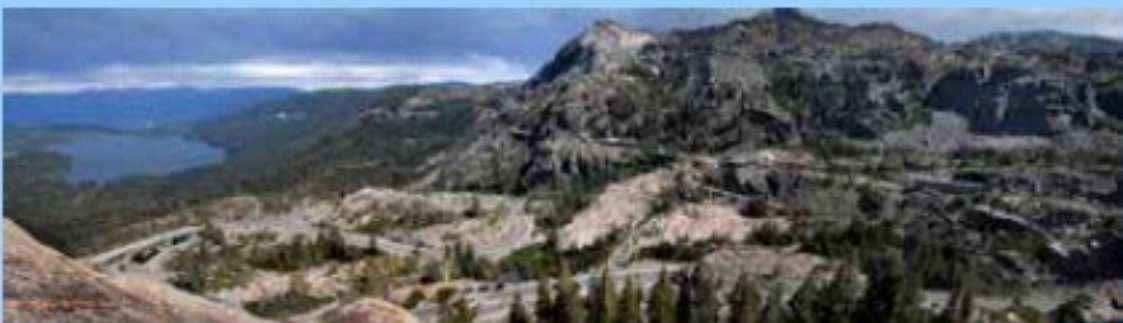
Explore California's
Richest
Historical Area



Donner Summit Historical Society

www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org

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The view from the crest of the Sierra to the east, is inexpressibly, comprehensive, grand and picturesque.

Edwin Bryant

What I Saw in California, 1848

The “view” in Edwin Bryant’s quote above was from the top of Donner Pass after “leaping our animals from crag to crag, and climbing in places nearly perpendicular precipices of smooth granite rocks.”

Standing at the top today (above), the view is still “inexpressibly ... grand and picturesque” and we can see the crags and perpendicular precipices that caused one of Edwin Bryant’s mules to somersault backwards down the route they had taken. (The mule was not hurt.)

Edwin Bryant, standing atop Donner Pass, was looking down the Summit Canyon onto what is today the most historically important square mile in California. Nowhere in California is there such richness in history, nor maybe such a pleasant walk. The map outlines a 3.5 mile walk downhill from the Pacific Crest Trailhead on Donner Summit almost to Donner Lake, a drop in elevation of almost 1000 feet.

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 many places into the granite of the pass and the Summit. No one knows what the mysterious markings mean.



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

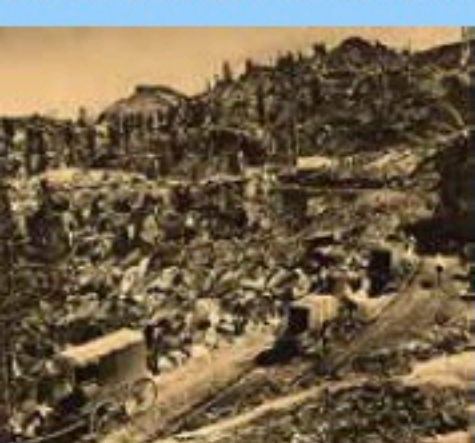
The Stephens-Murphy-Townsend Party was the first wagon train to reach California with wagons. They approached the Sierra after a grueling journey across the Nevada desert and along the Truckee River. As they climbed the Pass it was snowing as they came to a rock wall. They disassembled some of their



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.

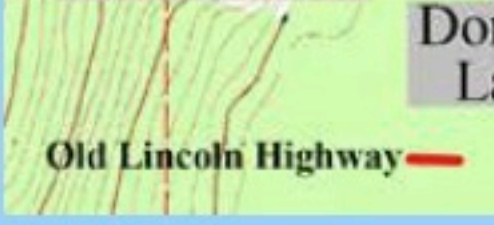
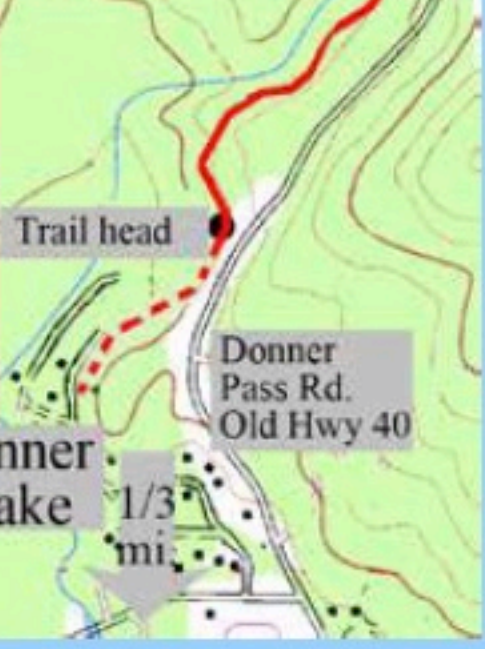
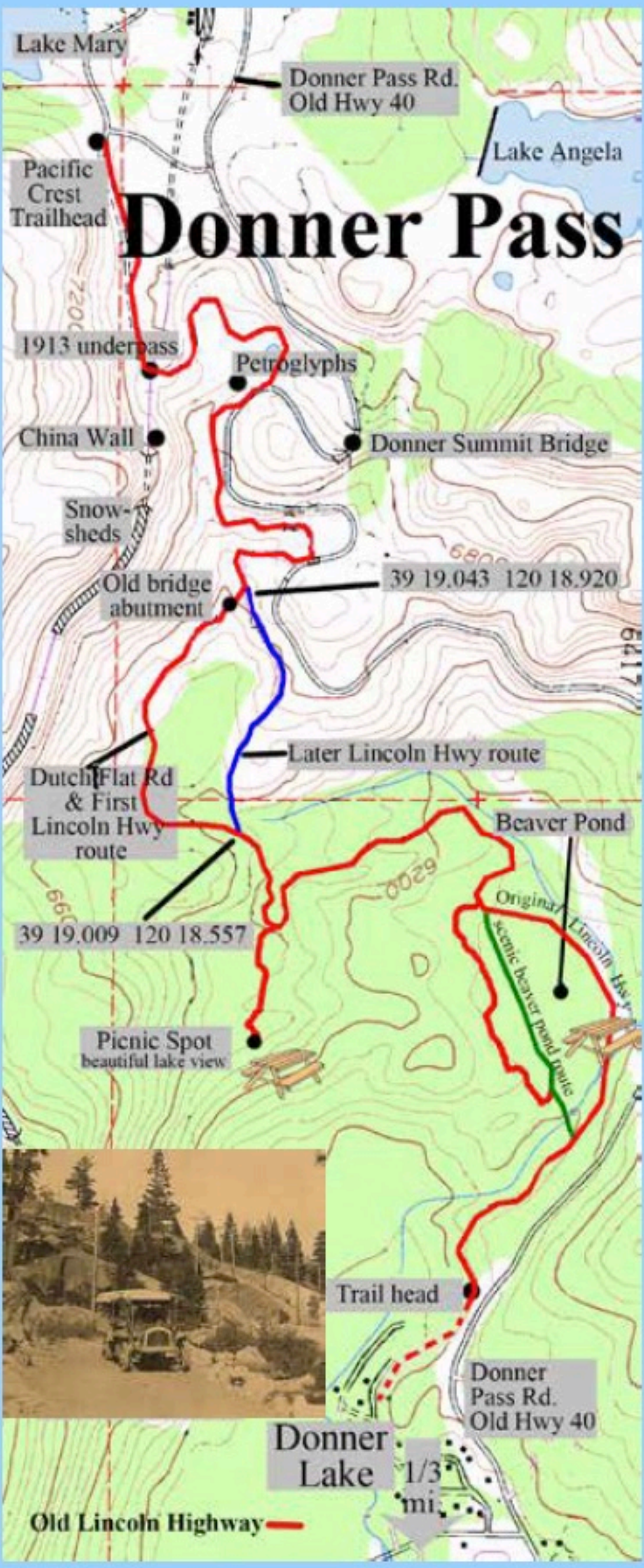
At the Stephens' Party camp at Big Bend, on the Yuba River, the first white baby was born in California, Elizabeth Yuba Murphy.

First Transcontinental Railroad, 1869



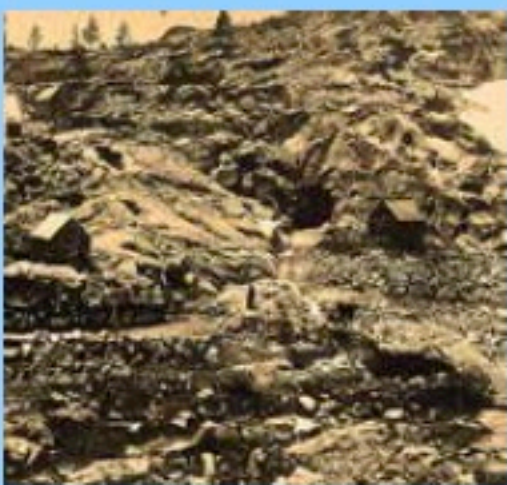
Fighting avalanches, accident, fire, and blizzards the mostly Chinese workers of the Central Pacific built a railroad across the Sierra. Then they built forty miles of snowsheds to protect against average 34 foot snowfalls.

Donner Pass



Old Lincoln Highway —

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.

Until the overpass (pictured below) was built, autos approached the snowsheds, opened the door, listened for approaching trains, and then hurried across the tracks through the door on the opposite side. There were collisions.

You can see sections of the highway, and hike them, on Donner Summit and down Summit Canyon to Donner Lake. Along the way, look for old advertisements painted on the



rocks, old bridge abutments, and other evidence of the highway.

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. A beacon and a little house housing a weather



station sat at the head of Donner Pass overlooking Summit Canyon. 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.

To Take the Historical Walk

To take this historical walk, start at the Pacific Crest Trailhead on Donner Summit. The PCT is just off Old 40 on Donner Summit. Take the Sugar Bowl Rd. turnoff to the Old Donner Summit Rd. Drive up to the PCT trailhead. Parking is just below it. The PCT goes uphill to the right, towards Mt. Judah and Mt. Lincoln. You will go straight ahead instead - east. The walk is 3.5 miles downhill with lots of photo and picnic opportunities.

Summit Canyon 1845

"You can form no idea, nor can I give you any description of the evils which best us. From the time we left the [Donner] lakeuntil we reached the top it was one continued jumping from one rocky cliff to another. We would have to roll over this big rock, then over that; then there was bridging a branch; then we had to lift our wagons by main force up to the top of a ledge of rocks... Three days...found ourselves six miles form the lake... you never saw a set of fellows more happy than when we reached the summit."

William Todd 1845