

The Donner Summit

Heirloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

November, 2013 issue #63



The Donner Pass Route of the Stephens Party

The very first wagon train to bring wagons to California came over Donner Pass when the Stephens Party crested the pass in 1844. It's an interesting story and had it not been for the Donners two years later, [The Heirloom](#) would be a history newsletter of the Stephens Summit Historical Society.

The Donners did come and had a more sensational transit of the summit and so the Stephens, Murphy, Townsend Party was relegated to relative obscurity. It had interesting stories. The party was led by 80 year old Caleb Greenwood for whom the town of Greenwood in the Sierra foothills and Old Greenwood outside Truckee are named. 17 year old Moses Schallenburger, part of the party, spent most of the winter alone at Donner Lake and it is for him that Schallenburger Ridge is named. The Stephens Party also had the distinction of ending its journey with more people than it started. The first white baby born in California was a member of the party. Elizabeth Yuba Murphy was born at Big Bend where the women and children spent some months waiting for the men to come back from California with help. The men had been prevailed upon by Capt. Sutter to help fight the Mexicans and so the women had to wait a bit longer for the men's adventure to Monterey to be finished.

But this is not a story about Stephens Party itself. It is about their route over Donner Pass. What exactly was the route? Many wagon trains used the route until Roller and then Coldstream Passes were discovered in 1846. Climbing Donner Pass was excruciatingly difficult. There was no road; there was no trail. One emigrant said, "it was one continued jumping from one rocky cliff to another. We would have to roll over this big rock, then over that."

Where exactly the route is, is difficult to determine given the changes in the landscape from the railroad, the Dutch Flat Rd. the Lincoln Highway, Highway 40, the petroleum pipeline and the fiber optic cable. All changed things immensely and clues have been lost.

The experts argue. George Stewart, a famous author ([Ordeal by Hunger](#), [The Opening of the California Trail](#)) and historian and for whom Donner Summit's Stewart Peak is named, believed the route was up the south side of the pass and there is a monument there. Trails West posits that at least some trains may have gone up the north edge and they've put a monument on that side.

On page three of this [Heirloom](#), Marshall Fey, a trails expert does his best to show the route on the south side of the pass. Marshall has written for the [Heirloom](#) before many times (check the indices on our website) and is the author of [Emigrant Trails: The Long Road to California](#), reviewed in our April, '11 [Heirloom](#). Marshall encourages comments: mfey@libertybellebooks.com

Volunteers Needed

The DSHS is looking for a few good volunteers to help digitize Norm Saylor's extensive historical photo collection.

We want to preserve them, make research easier, and eventually provide a better experience for visitors.

Our Board just approved the purchase of a scanner and computer and we've got the procedure down and ready for volunteers to use.

Let us know if you'd like to participate: see "editor" on pg. 2.

So Much Mystery in History

Originally this reprint of a 1913 postcard in Norm Saylor's collection was headed for our "From the Archives of the DSHS" section of the Heirloom. But then our editorial staff read the text. That sounded like a good short story.

The text is printed to the right. As you can see the message occupies the traditional back and was written in January, 1913. The writer ran out of room and continued upside down at the top and then the next month, he wrote across the front of 1913 Truckee.

Was the writer in love with his correspondent? Did he send the picture? What had Miss Mitchell sent him? What did E. de Choudens do in Truckee in 1913? What lessons was he wanting to give? How long had he been in the country (given his language errors). Did it ever snow that winter? Did Miss Mitchell come to Truckee? Did she speak French (in those days only those with good educations could)? Did they meet in France while Miss Mitchell was on a Grand European Tour at the conclusion of boarding school for proper young ladies? Did they ever get together? Is there a record of marriage? What were their lives like after 1913. There is a novel here.

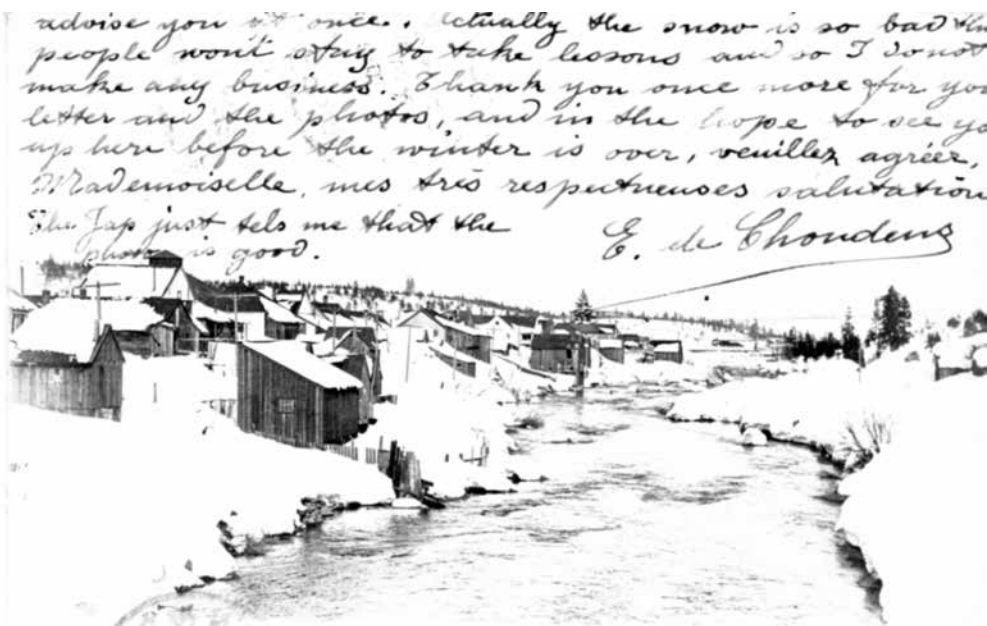
Dear Miss Mitchell,

Thank you very much for the fine pictures you were kind enough to send me. The Jap who develops the photos here refuses to do mine before today might otherwise I would have send you the one I took in front of the hotel. I hope it will be good and in this case I shall send you a few prints. We have not yet had any snow fall but if happens I shall advise you at once. Actually the snow is so bad that people won't stay to take lessons and so I do not make any business. Thank you once more for your letter and the photo, and in the hope to see you up here before the winter is over, veuillez agreer, Mademoiselle, mes tres respectueuses salutation.

The Jap just tells me that the photo is good.

E. de Choudens

French translation by Carole Raisback: "hope you will accept my very respectful greetings."



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Do any of our readers live in Alameda and can they tell us what is now at 1031 San Antonio Ave.? Do the Mitchells still live there?

editor:
Bill Oudegeest
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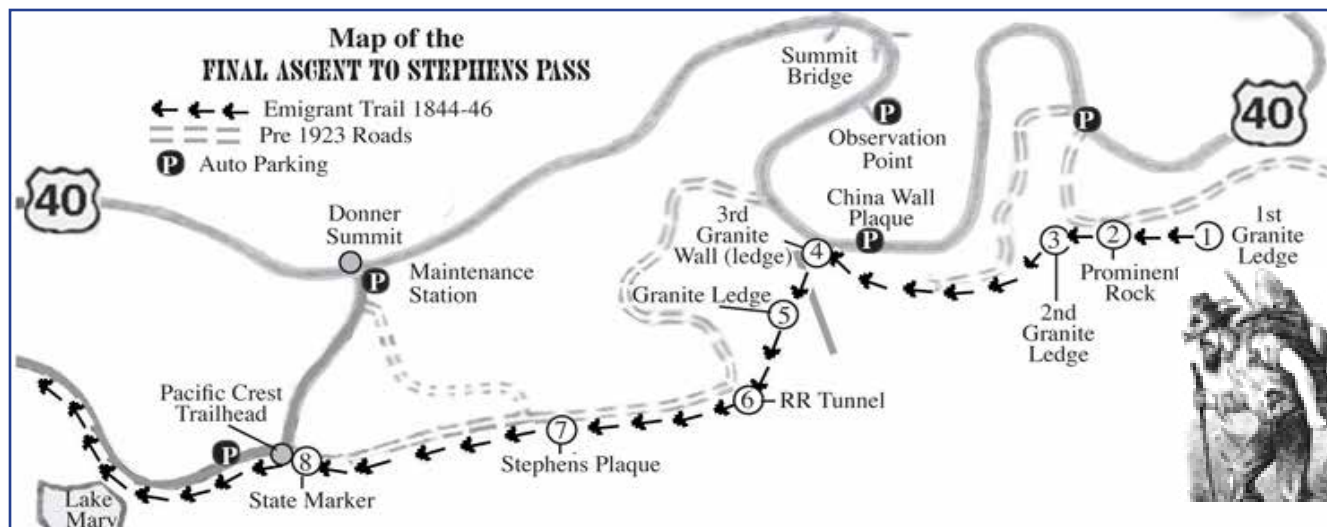
Here we usually say that photographs in the Heirloom come from Norm Saylor's collection but this month the pictures on pages 3-13 were provided by the author, Marshall Fey.

Researching the Route of the First Emigrants to Donner Summit

Marshall Fey (mfey@libertybellebooks.com)

When the first wagon train, the 1844 Stephens Party, reached Donner Lake, crossing the summit appeared to be an impassible barrier with its walls of granite. They spent several days in attempts to find a feasible route.¹ The following year, Caleb Greenwood, the guide on the first wagon train, convinced 250 people, including children, that were headed for Oregon—to with more than 50 wagons—to take the new trail over Stephens Pass to California.²

Unfortunately, not all of the exact route up to the summit is traceable today due to the construction of the 1864 Dutch Flat Donner Lake Road, 1913 Lincoln Highway and the burial of the fiber optic cables and petroleum pipeline. The following probable route has been conjectured by using diaries, 19th and 20th century trail historians, maps, contour of the land, and utilizing the three granite ledges included in this study.



The Goal



When the 1844 Stephens Party arrived at Donner Lake they saw, what appeared to be, the lowest and most obvious pass over the Sierra summit.

To Cross the Granite Ledges Some Emigrants Took Their Wagons Apart and Hauled Them Up In Pieces

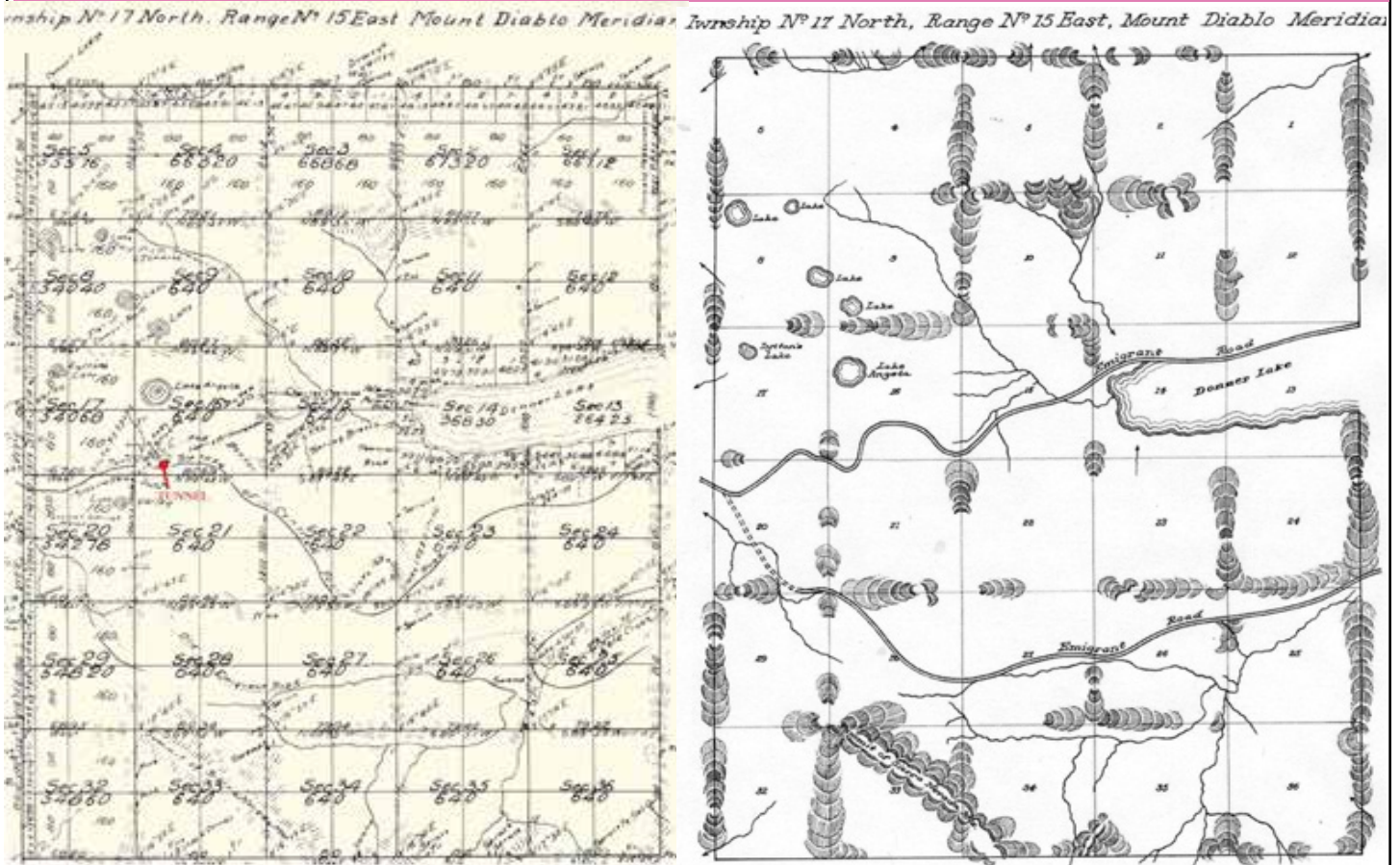
At last we came to the Sierra Nevada Mountains which seemed insurmountable it was some time before we could see which way we must go, at last we had to take the wagons apart & take them up in peieces over the mountains & the poor cattle got ove[r] or rather they were dragged up with bleeding shins, the folks got over the best they could & reached the summit & rested two days

Eliza M. Gregson 1845

1. Schallenberger Interview, H. H. Bancroft, Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California

2. Stewart, George R. *The California Trail*, Pages 91, 93

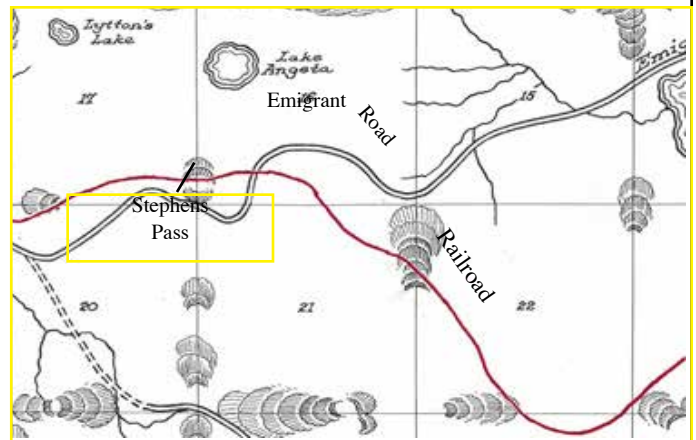
1866 USGS Map and Supplementary Map Confirm Stephens Pass Route



The USGS survey map¹ at the top left was created by J. E. Freeman twenty-two years after the Stephens Party crossed. His map included the Dutch flat Donner Lake Wagon Road. Because the latter and the first emigrant road shared much of the same roadway, Freeman drew a supplementary map,² top right, to show the Stephens and Coldstream Pass roads.

A Member of the Stephens Party Told Where They Crossed the Summit

In an 1885 interview Moses Schallenberger³ stated, "Several days were spent in attempts to find a pass, and finally the route, over which the present railroad is, was selected." The map at the right shows both routes.



This map is an enlarged section of the supplementary map above and is identical in scale to the map at the left. The route of the railroad (the red line), was transposed from the map at the left and placed on the above map. The railroad crossing and then paralleling the emigrant road to the west verifies Schallenberger's placement of the Stephens Party route.



This enlarged section of the survey map at the top left shows the route of the proposed Central Pacific Railroad.

First Granite Ledge Was Confronted Halfway Up to the Summit



This ledge is located where the forest of trees ends and lies in the saddle between the two pre-1923 roads. Crossing this huge granite barrier was made possible by the sloping face and a rift in the rock. The hand points to the latter, which offered a place where the oxen could be led through to the level plateau above.

GPS 39°19.037 / 120°18.872

Martin Murphy , a Member of the 1844 Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party, Was With the First Covered Wagon Train to Encounter the Granite Ledges and Successfully Cross the Summit into California.

The main party then started to cross the mountain, flowing the north side of the lake to its head at the base of the mountain, the emigrants unloaded the wagons, harnessed to them double teams, and started toward the summit. The contents of the wagons were carried in their arms. About half way up to the top of the mountain a perpendicular rock ten feet in height was discovered lying across their path, and they thought they would be forced to abandon the horses and cattle, and everything but the few goods that could be carried over on their shoulders. At length, however, a narrow rift in the rock was discovered, of just sufficient width to admit the passage of one ox at a time. The yokes were removed, and the cattle driven through. The latter were then stationed near the upper edge of the rock, the harness was replaced on them, and chains were attached to the tongues of the wagons below. The men at the bottom then pushed the wagons upward as far as they were able, while the oxen tugged at the chains, and thus one by one the wagons were all finally landed on the other side of the barrier.

Martin Murphy 1844

Today's dense forest extends from Donner Lake almost up to the base of the first granite ledge.

from previous page:

1. J. E. 1866 Freeman USGS Survey Map, Bureau of Land Management, Sacramento, California
2. J. E. Freeman Supplementary Map, Suart Library, University of the Pacific, Stockton, California
3. Schallenberger Interview, H. H. Bancroft, Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California

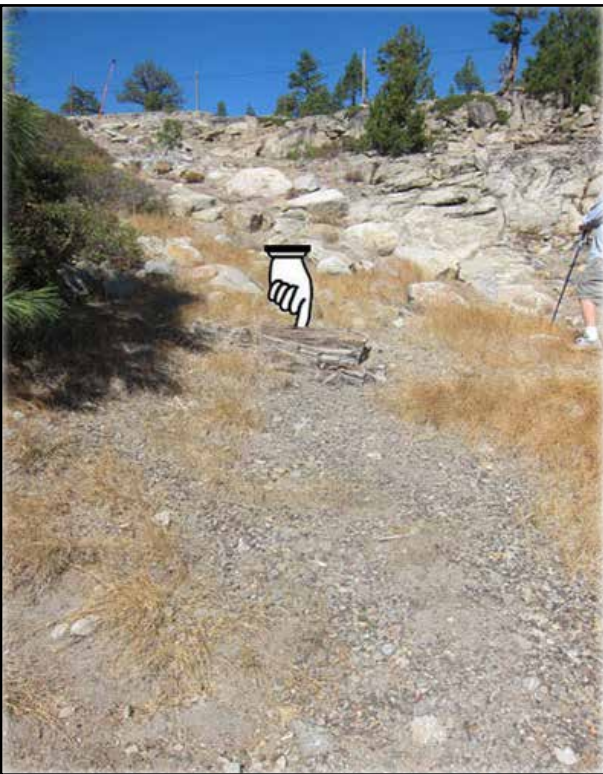


Crossing the First Granite Ledge

When the emigrants were confronted with the first granite ledge they would have noticed the favorable slope for pulling a wagon up the lower rock. By placing logs, to fill in a crevice, between the two sections of rock they would have had a workable grade all the way up the face of the rock. By using long chains connected from the oxen pulling on the level plateau above to a wagon below, they could roll the wagon up and over the ledge. Note the grey streak in the photo at the left and its enlargement in the photo below.



The Emigrant Road Above First Granite Ledge



The arduous grade above the first granite ledge is covered with surface rocks that apparently rolled down this steep incline when the pipeline above it was dug.

This section of Road continued uphill until it met the road dug up for the pipeline, which followed the mutilated trail west to the "Permanent Rock."

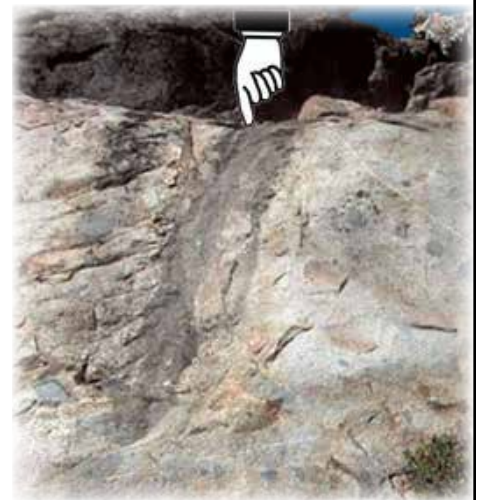
Hand-Cut Logs



The arrow in the photo at the left points to a pair of hand-sawed logs that may have been used to block the wheels of a wagon.



There is a second pair of rotten logs above te first ledge that are to the right of the photo at the left.



The hand in the above photo points to a possible scraping on the face of the boulder and the hand below points to a potential groove, located at the top of the granite shelf in the photo below. Could these two scars been worn by the chains pulling the wagons over the ledge?



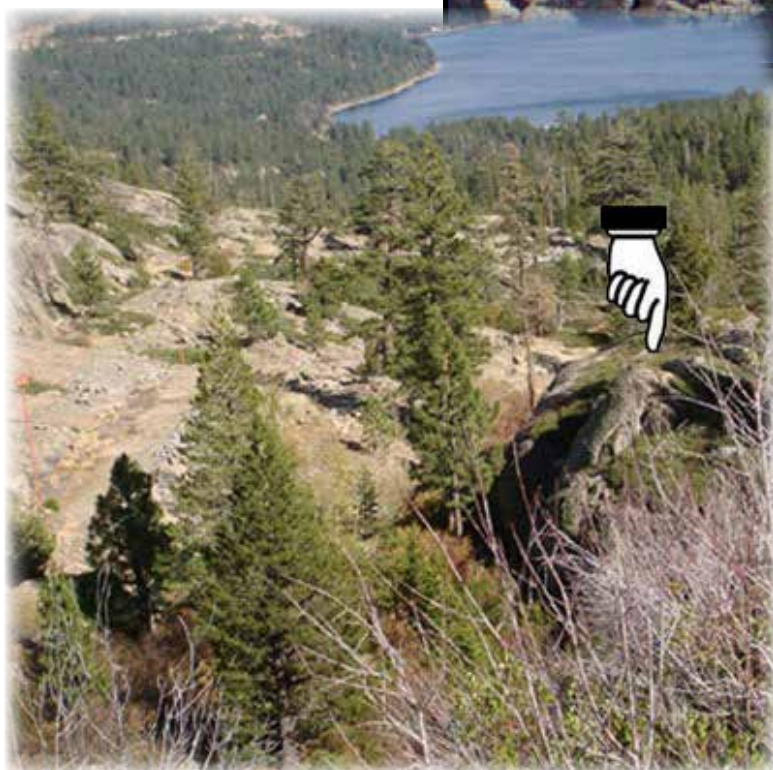
The Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Road Passing Alongside the “Prominent Rock” Would Also Have Been the Passageway for the first Emigrants

THEN

The Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Road is shown leading to and passing alongside the “Prominent Rock,” pointed to by the hand. It is probable that the road next to the rock was also the route of the first emigrant wagon trains for the vegetation and landscape would not have changed much in twenty years.

Note:

The photo at the right has been reproduced from an early Stereoscopic card.



NOW

Today the terrain around the large “Prominent Rock,” that is shown in the photo above and at the left, is heavily overgrown allowing the pinpointing the path of the emigrant trail virtually impossible

The “large Prominent Rock” was located west after a long, steep uphill drive from the first granite ledge and stood before another steep climb to the second granite ledge.

Note: The new road has moved a short distance uphill from the “Prominent Rock” after the Lincoln Highway and petroleum pipeline were constructed.

This probable section of trail, marked with rocks by a contemporary trail researcher, is located a short distance south of today’s road, just below and to the east of the Prominent Rock”.



Wagons Unhitched Again and Pulled Over the Second Granite Ledge

When we reached Sierra Nevada mountains they looked terrible. There was no sign of any road or trail. I went up the mountain with others to look out the best way, and we all pronounced it impassable for wagons. But before we got back some of the wagons had passed some of the places we had considered impassable. So we hitched up our team and made a start, and when we came to benches of rock six and eight feet straight up and down we would unyoke our oxen, drive them around to some low place, get them above the bench yoke up the oxen. In the mean time some of us would cut some long poles strong enough to bear up the wagons and lay them up on the rocks. Then take enough chains to reach back to the wagons, hitch to the end of the tongue, and pull the wagon up, in this way we reached the top of the mountain.

David Hudson 1845



The second granite ledge shown in the photo at the left appears to be another situation, with the rock's slanted face and the large flat plateau above, that was ideal for the oxen to pull the wagons over the obstruction.

The trail sign below was hung years back and is imbedded more than a half-inch into the bark of a tree located at the top of the granite ledge.



GPS N39°10.027' W120°18.998'

The Bonney Party's Wagons were taken Apart and Hoisted to the Top of the First Two Rim Rocks (Granite Ledges)

We camped at the foot of the mountains for several days, waiting for other emigrants ... to join us. After a day's traveling we came to a rim rock ledge where there was no chance to drive up, so the wagons were taken to pieces & hoisted to the top of the rim rock with ropes, the wagons were put together again, reloaded, & the oxen which had been lead through a narrow crevice in the rim rock, were hitched up & we went on. Once again in the Sierras we came to a rim rock that could not be mounted, & repeated the process of hoisting the wagons up. It took us 4 days to reach the summit of the mountains.

Benjamin F. Bonney 1845



Photographed from the trail above the second ledge, the hand points to the flat, level rock alongside the plateau, an ideal situation for oxen to get a footing to pull up the wagons.

The Emigrant Road Above the Second Granite Ledge

The hand to the right of the photo at the left, taken from the trail above the Second granite ledge, points to the location of an old nail found several years ago and shown below.



The hand at the bottom left of the photo points to a contemporary trail marker.

Identical trail markers, like the one shown below, have been placed on the Donner Trail from the family campsite west along Alder Creek.



Proceeding from the trail above the second granite ledge, the goal of the emigrants would have been to connect with the trail shown in the above photo at the left. This section of trail is located just beyond the far end of the long granite wall shown in the above right photo. Due to the Lincoln Highway improvements and the pipeline construction, it is no longer feasible to pinpoint the emigrant trail location in this area.

The Road Blazed By the Stephens Party Was Used For Less Than Two More Years

It took us three days to take our wagons and cattle from the bottom of the cascade to the top—about 4 miles. The oxen could be trailed from bottom to top by blood. Since we crossed, there has been a new route found that is a great deal better. Six or eight yoke of oxen can pull up a wagon in two hours. On top of this mountain is a lake [Mary].

Daniel Rhoads, 1846¹

1. Rhoads's last three sentences, referring to "six or eight yoke of oxen and a lake," verifies Coldstream Pass becoming the new route during 1846. The following year he re-crossed the summit with the first Donner Relief Party.



This Lengthy Section of the Emigrant Trail, Lying Beneath the Graded Lincoln Highway, had a Moderate slope and Led to the Third Granite Ledge

Reading Clockwise: The first two photos show the large natural shoulder along the road. In the center of the third photo is a large granite slab, broken up by the pipeline, that had to be crossed. The fourth photo taken from the China Wall parking lot, shows a level section of trail that the wagons would have crossed. The last scene is a piece of over-grown trail located a short distance before reaching the third granite ledge.



Nevada County Historical Society Verifies Stephens Pass

In the Nevada County publication entitled *Tail Of the Elephant*, trail authority. Olive Newell, states, “Emigrants developed three trails on the Truckee Route across the Sierra from the foot of Truckee Lake to Summit Valley. The earliest route called the Truckee Pass by the emigrants, skirts the North Shore of Truckee Lake and ascends the wide ravine leading to the gap edging the north slope of Donner Peak.”

When The Wagons Reached the Third and Final Ledge Some Were Lifted By Force to the Top of the Wall, As They Were Unable to Roll

From the time we left the lake on the north side of the mountains until we arrived at the lake on the top [Lake Mary], 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 [a small stream]; then we had to lift our waggons by main force up to the top of a ledge of rocks, that was impossible for us to reduce, bridge, or roll our wagons over, and in several places, we had to run our waggons round with handspikes, and heave them up to the top, where our cattle had previously been taken. Three days were spent in this vexatious way, and at the end of that time, we found ourselves six miles from the lake at the north side of the mountain, and you never saw a set of fellows more happy than when we reached the summit. When night came we were very glad to take a blanket or buffalo robe, and lay down on the "softest side of a rock", and were sorry to be disturbed from our sweet repose, when we were called in the morning to our labor.

William Todd 1845



The Final Hurdle

The immense granite ledge extends from old Highway 40 to the ravine at the foot of the future Chinese Wall that supported the railroad.

When They Came to the Granite Ledges the Decision Was Made Whether to Take the Wagons Apart or to Look For an Easier Way to Cross the Imposing Barriers

This guide had told them the only way was, to "take the wagons to pieces, and haul them up with ropes." Our Yankee adventurer thought he would find and try a better way... Mr. Ide found on the line of the ascent several abrupt pitches, between which there were comparative level spaces, for several rods distance, where the team might stand to draw up at least an empty wagon. Accordingly, he went to work, with as many of the men he could induce, by mild means, to assist him—removing rocks, trees, etc, and grading a path 6 or 7 feet wide, up the several steep pitches and levels to the summit. The next thing for them to do, was to get a team of 5 or 6 yoke of cattle up onto the first inclined grade or semi level. This was a tedious process. The first pitch was longer and more abrupt than any of the others. I think Mr. Ide told me they had to take one ox at a time, and by the help of men, with ropes assist him up the first steep grade. After having, by this process, their ox team of 5 or 6 yoke in order, on the first "level," (as we call it) they then, by the use of ropes and chains, attach a wagon to it, haul it up one "hitch," then block the wheels, "back" the team, take another hitch and another start forward,—and they thus continue the operation till the wagon is on the first "inclined grade." It was then, by a similar, but less tedious process, drawn up over the remaining steppes or "pitches," to the level plain above—and the same operation was repeated with all their wagons.

William B. Ide 1845

Apparently, Ide found an easier spot than the Todd Party to reach the top of the wall and was then able to use the same method that he had utilized on the lower ledges.

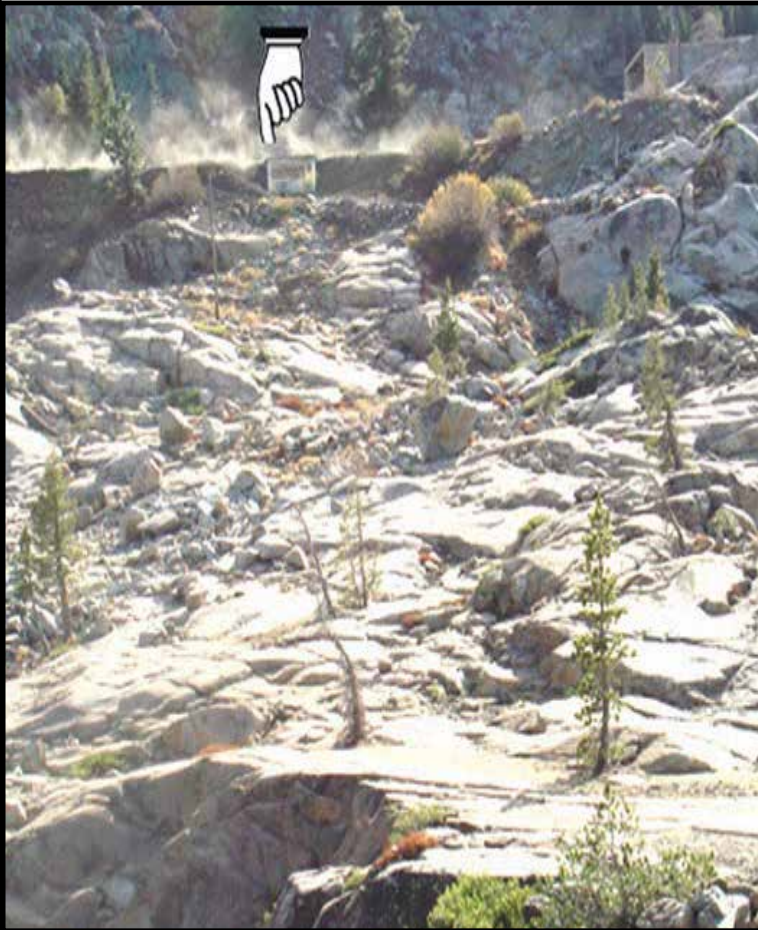


Crossing this Long, Rough, Inclined Granite Ledge Was Brutal for the Weary Oxen

It took us a long time to go about 2 miles over our rough, new-made road up the mountain, over the rough rocks, in some places, and so smooth in others, that the oxen would slip and fall on their knees; the blood from their feet and knees staining the rocks they passed over. Mother and I walked, (we were so sorry for the poor, faithful oxen), all those two miles—all our clothing being packed on the horses' backs. It was a trying time—the men swearing at their teams, and beating them most cruelly, all along that rugged way.

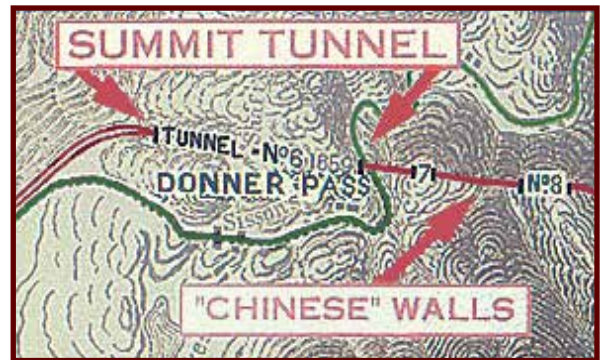
Sarah E. Healy 1845

Trail Authorities and 1883 Map Confirm the Crossing The Granite Ledge



Emigrant trail historian George Stewart, referring to the ledge stated, “Rust Marks left by wheels on the rough granite slope indicate the emigrants here hauled their wagons.

This was confirmed by Walter Mulcahy, trail authority for the Nevada Emigrant Trail Marking Committee. He also stated he had seen wagon wheel rust marks on the ledge and added that the trail left the long granite slope at the site of the future Lincoln Highway Tunnel, the latter pointed to by the hand. This location is also verified in the map below.



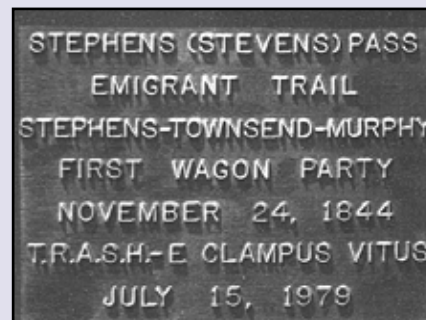
This 1883 map shows the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Road (green) passing under the railroad (Red) at the east end of Summit Tunnel 6. The 1844 Emigrant Trail, in blue, followed a more direct route.

The Ledge is a Jagged Composite of Granite

We ascended the ridge ... it was composed entirely of granite, which lay in large detached fragments, over the whole surface, and gained the summit. This, on either side of the narrow gap through which we passed, was very sharp, and perfectly bald and barren.

William H. Winter, 1845

Stephens Pass Marker 1979



This marker was in commemoration of the Stephens Party, the first to blaze a covered wagon road into California. The plate was mounted on a large boulder, shown on the following page.

1. Stewart, George R., *Donner Pass*, 1964, page 96
2. Mulcahy, Walter W. From a statement during a 1979 Donner Trail feasibility study
3. <http://cpr.org/museum/tunnels.html>

The Terrain Approaching the Summit was Compatible for a Wagon Road

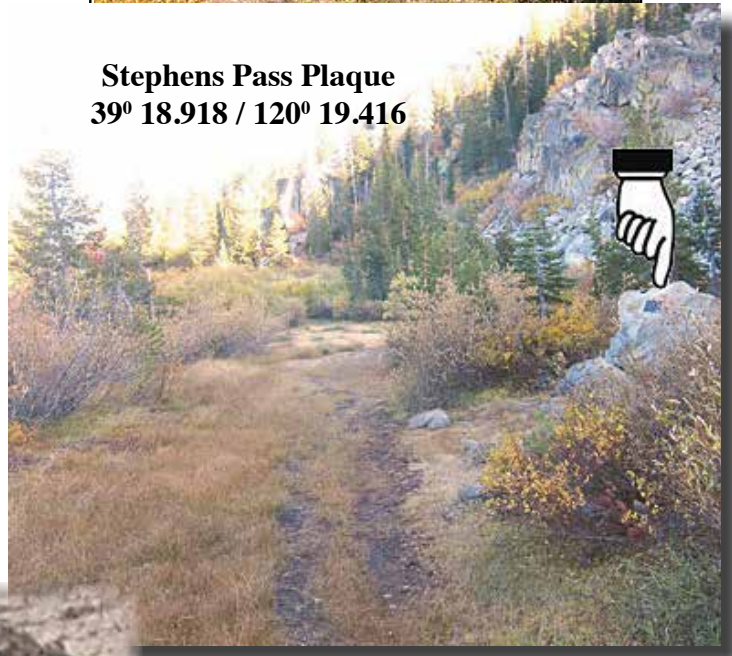


The trail leading up to Donner Summit, with little or no vegetation and a very easy grade, was ideal for the 1844-46 emigrant wagon trains.

The modern day photos of the trail route read clockwise. The first photo shows the road passing under the railroad. The third photo, with the Stephens Pass marker, (the hand points to the marker shown on the previous page) was located about half way between the railroad tunnel and the Pacific Crest Trail Head. The other two scenes are on either side of the piece of trail shown in the third photo.

Note: There are many boulders in this section of trail, dug up for the petroleum pipeline and fiber optic cable, that conceal the identity of the road used for eight decades. In addition, there is an abundance of shrubbery that has overgrown this route, once the emigrant road, in the past 40 years. In sharp contrast, compare the current photos shown on this page with the photo below.

Stephens Pass Plaque 39° 18.918 / 120° 19.416



When photographed over 50 years ago, the trail above the railroad crossing, leading to the summit, was devoid of vegetation.



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ST. PAUL, MINN.

From the Archives of the DSHS



SUMMIT STATION AND EXTERIOR OF SNOW SHEDS.

Above: first Summit Hotel which burned in 1895. Its front door was connected to the snowsheds. It sat about where the corporation yard for Donner Ski Ranch sits, across from Donner Ski Ranch. The second Summit Hotel sat a few hundred yards southeast.

Below: Trailsyde Lodge early 1950's, Trailsyde sat opposite the fire house in Big Bend and in those days was run by Zelda and Glenn Parsons. Zelda ran the school bus for the Summit and Glenn bought an old Sno Go and did snowblowing for example for Soda Springs Ski Area. He was the first commercial snow blowing operator on the Summit.

Next page: Western Skiing November, 1946 showing the "many comfortable lodges and resorts" on "famous Donner Summit."

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From Western Skiing, 1946

Donner Summit

All year HIGHWAY 40

Ski Area



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For reservations or information write any of the resorts shown on the map

SKI THE TRAIL OF THE FAMOUS DONNER PARTY

Book Review

With Golden Visions Bright Before Them Trails to the Mining West 1849-1852

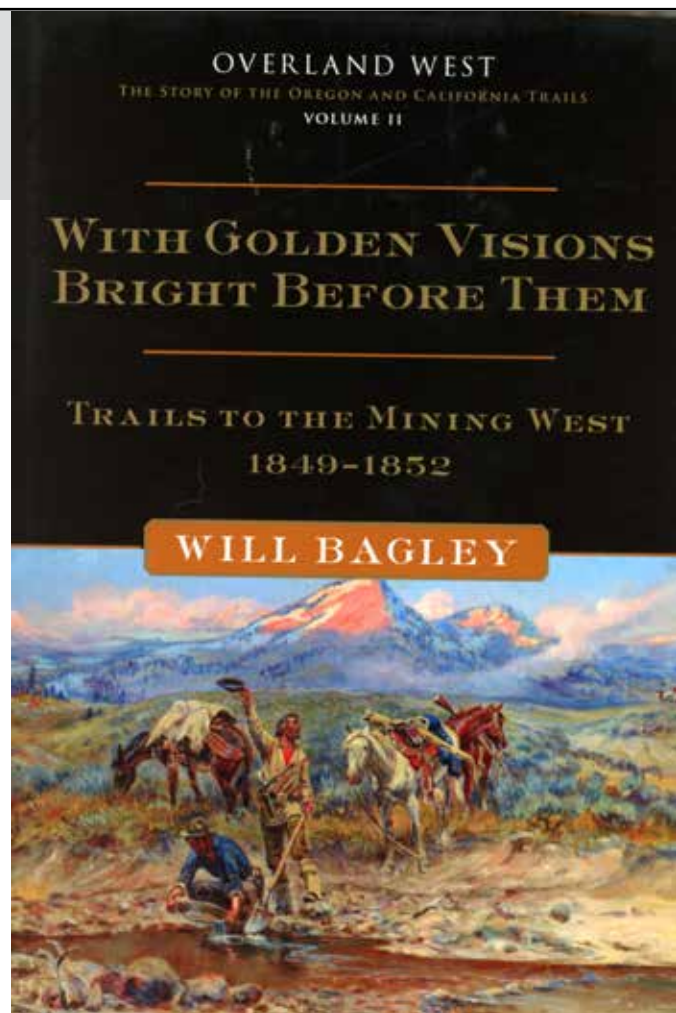
Will Bagley 2013 414 pages (w/o bibliography, sources and index)

This is Volume II of the Overland West Series. (Volume I was So Rugged and Mountainous Blazing the Trails to Oregon and California 1812-48 reviewed in our December, '11 Heirloom).

The first book in Will Bagley's Overland West Series was a exploration of the discovery of the West and the emigration of the first pioneers and settlers. It was very good if you are someone interested in the experiences of people in the old days. It was full of stories, vignettes, descriptions, and quotes of the pioneers. As a package it told the story well and the quotes were the strong part. Hearing what people actually thought and felt gives a better feeling for the reality of the experience. That's also the case with Tail of the Elephant and Emigrant Tails (reviewed in the Heirloom respectively in April, '11 and August, '13). All reviews are on our website as well.

With Golden Visions... is a continuation of the western experience saga by settlers. Almost 19,000 American had come to the West Coast before 1849 with women and children in the majority. It became a rush into the new American territories after 1849 by a new kind of settler and set the stage for the development of the west. This is the story of that migration. By 1849-50 100,000 people, mostly men (women made up only 5-10% during the early Gold Rush years), were on their ways west with dreams of immediate riches in their heads. It was such a rush that 2/3 of Oregon's male population headed south to join those coming west.

Bagley covers every subject imaginable: how to get to California, routes (the good the bad and the alternate), guide books, "seeing the elephant", preparations, provisions, Indian troubles, disease, breakdown, abandonment of wagons and equipment, tales of heroism and mendacity, liars, storms, over laden wagons, untamed mules, floods, rivers, mosquitoes, dust, lack of informa-



"Now my advice to you is, stay where you are. A trip across the plains is very hard. I would rather remain here all my life, than cross them again. Woodruff Lee says he would swim around Cape Horn on a log before he would cross them again."

Tom Hart

"Imagine to yourself, desert plains, long drive, without grass or water, boiling springs, lofty mountains, stony roads, cattle giving out, and dying men, women and children, worn out with fatigue [and] exposure, and patience all gone, and you have an have some faint idea of the scenery on the laws of our journey,"

Austin Howard

"Nothing but an actual experience will give one an idea of the plodding, unvarying monotony, the vexations, the exhaustive energy, the throbs of hope, the depths of despair, through which we lived."

Luzena Wilson

About Truckee Lake: "I went up this evening to view the lake – it's a romantic sheet, lined on all sides by the highest mountains in America, apparently deep and remarkable clear, with a pebbly shore,... The mountains surrounding it heavily timbered with pine and the dark green reflected from them – gave this water a deeper hue than any I have seen."

Thomas Van Dorn

tion, hucksters, stampede, stolen stock, hazards, rescues, effects of travel on female wear, descriptions of visits to the site of the Donner Party tragedy, and details of daily life (cooking, laundry, etc.). Most of the detail goes with 1849. The following years are covered less exhaustively, focusing more on the differences in migration in those subsequent years.

The strength of this book, but also a weakness, is the lavish illustration of the emigrant experience with quotes. The reader's mind can only boggle at the amount of research Mr. Bagley did to put this all together. His bibliography is 25 pages long. He seemingly has read every diary, letter, news account, and article written by those who made the journey. Then he has quoted from every one. That comment might be a little misplaced because I really enjoyed reading the quotes but the book might be better digested over a longer period of reading time rather than reading the book straight through. For example, the emigrants celebrated the Fourth of July on the trail. There follows pages of quotes about various celebrations. I could have skimmed those but my responsibility to the reader here required a full reading of every word of every celebration.

Not only did Bagley read all of his sources but then he collected and collated what he'd read. That must have been a tremendous organizational job – but worth it for the telling.

This book focuses more on the quotes to illustrate the experience than the previous book. So Rugged... had many stories as well as the quotes. With Golden... does have stories however. Imagine heading for California with a wheelbarrow to carry your needs. There were many who did that or who used carts and walked the whole way. Of course emigrants guiding ox wagons also walked. Imagine the shoulders on the wheelbarrow emigrants when they arrived in California! As one said, there were advantages: no worries about stampedes or stolen stock.

The last chapter covers the effects of the Gold Rush emigration. The effects on the Native Americans and the environment are well known. Bagley posits that the kinds of people who came and the reasons they came still affect the State's personality today, "...we are a place and a people dedicated to the proposition that as citizens of the American West it is our birthright to get rich quick." Most surely.

This book is well worth the effort, but maybe it should be read in pieces.

There is not much specifically about Donner Summit that is not quotes. Maybe the only specific fact is that recent research says that in 1849 36% of the emigrants used Carson Pass, 35% the Lassen route, and 29% one of the Donner passes.

There are also a number of quotes about getting up one of the Donner Passes or going west from there.

Getting Up Donner Pass

The "granite ramparts" of the Sierra "Our Last Tremendous Summit" Donner Pass

Edward Jackson

The road to Donner Summit was "over the worst road we have seen yet, and Commenced ascending the dividing ridge of the California Mountains. The road was filled with large rocks which seemed impossible for wagons to pass over. The emigrants now all double their teams which make slow progress over a road almost perpendicular in ascent."

William Z Walker

The road went "over rocks, rugged mountains, down precipices and long steep hills, where ninety-nine out of every hundred in the states would swear a wagon could never go. ...extremely difficult – took twelve of fifteen yoke of cattle to draw up the lightest loaded wagon."

John T. McCarty

"These mountains are mountains in good earnest, and very difficult to pass over, being very steep in ascent and descent and many places so near perpendicular and so rocky that were compelled to take the teams from the wagons and let them down by ropes."

John Pickett

Getting Up Roller Pass

"...the hogback of Creation, being a wall of granite near 1000 feet above the surrounding region." He said a lot of work had been done on the route and was necessary. The way it had gone "it would have been impossible to get a wagon up with all the oxen in the train, for it would be quite all they could do to get themselves up." They only had to use 8-12 yoke of oxen per wagon. We "had achieved a victory, having today completed the great work of making the pass over the Sierra Nevadas."

Thomas Van Dorn

[You can read about Roller Pass in our November, '11 Heirloom]

Then & Now with Art Clark



Above: just above and to the right of the picture spot is an old Lincoln Highway marker.

Houseworth 772 - Scene on the Yuba River, near Cisco.

In the 1860's view, the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Road can be seen climbing up and away from the river. The rock walls and fill are still in good shape, and can be seen while driving up Interstate 80. Just above it, the Emigrant Trail climbed up a steep rocky shelf and crossed over a shoulder.

In the 1920's, Old Highway 40 was built along the rocks at the bottom of the photos. In 1960 it was removed in this section during the I-80 construction.

Photo location 39° 18.952'N 120° 33.308'W

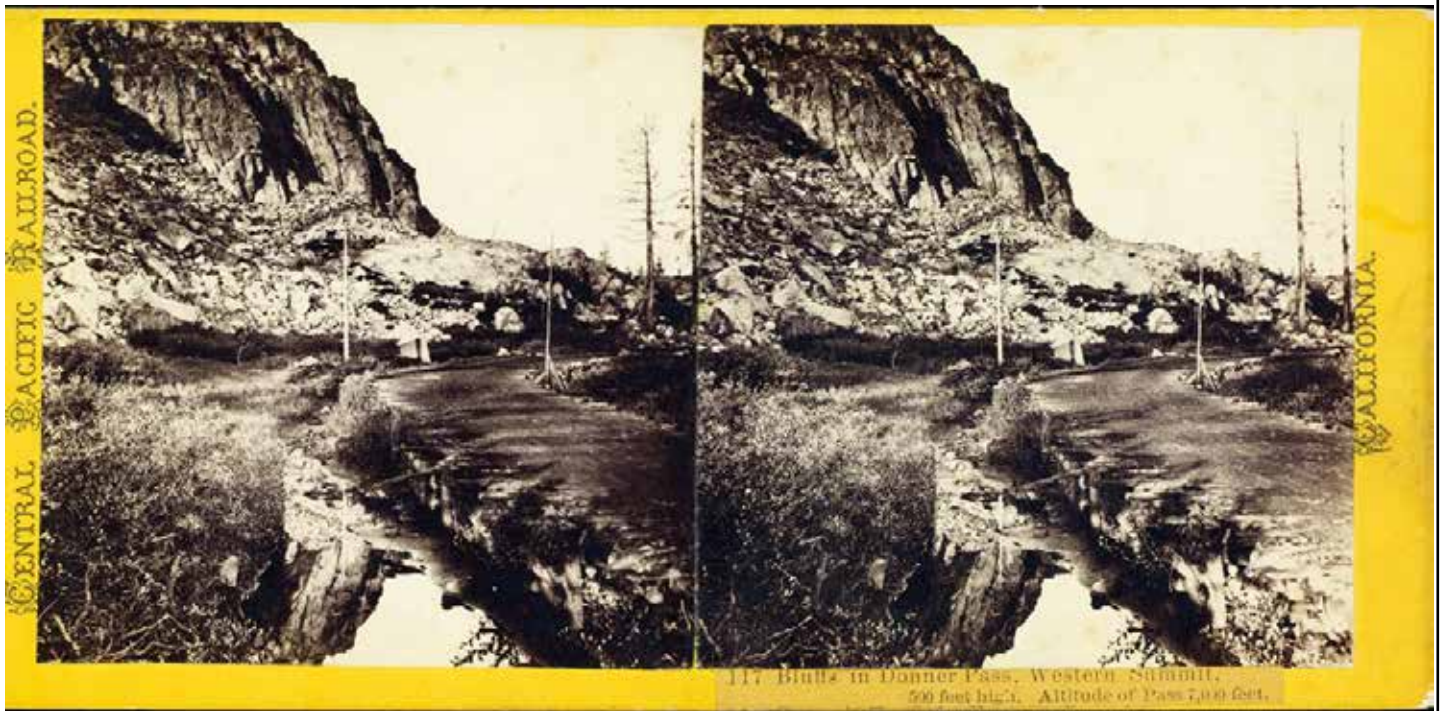
Yuba River and Cisco Butte
Compare to Houseworth 772



Yuba River and Cisco Butte
Compare to Houseworth 772

Art and Janet

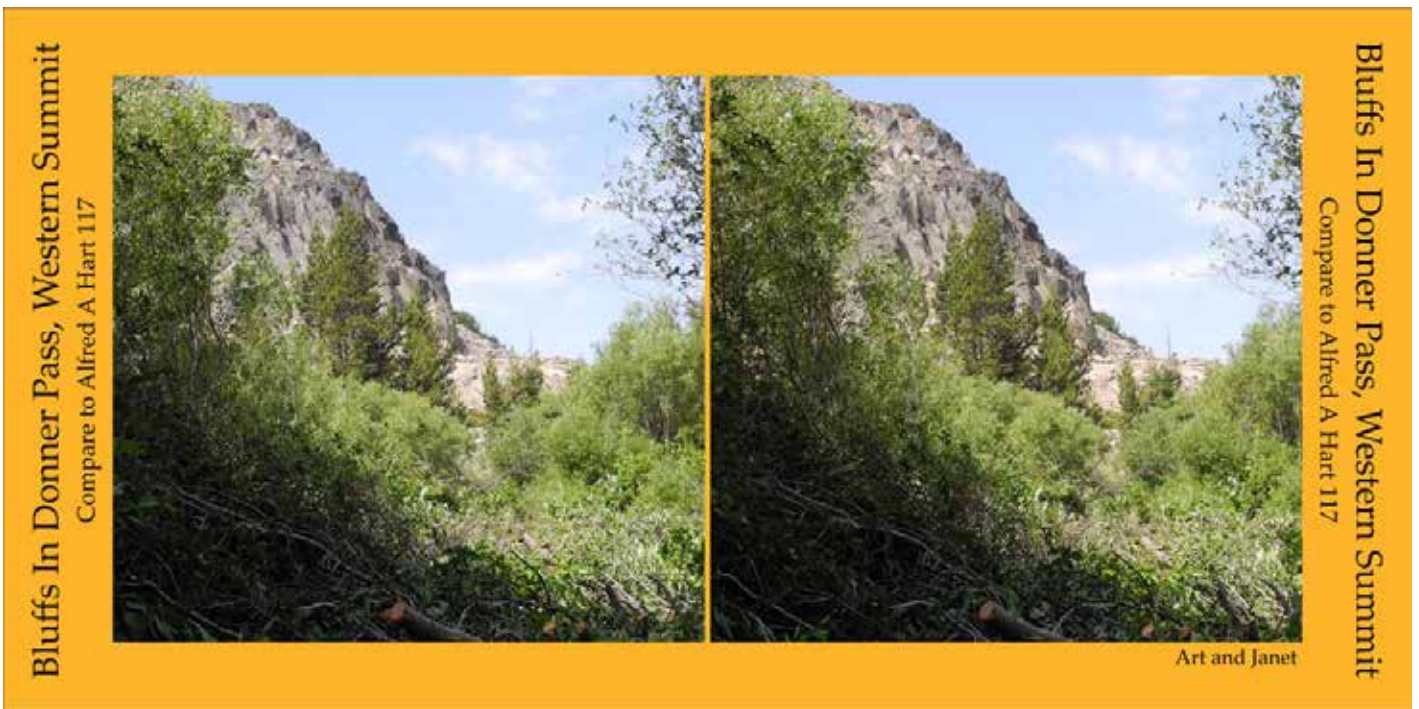
Then & Now with Art Clark



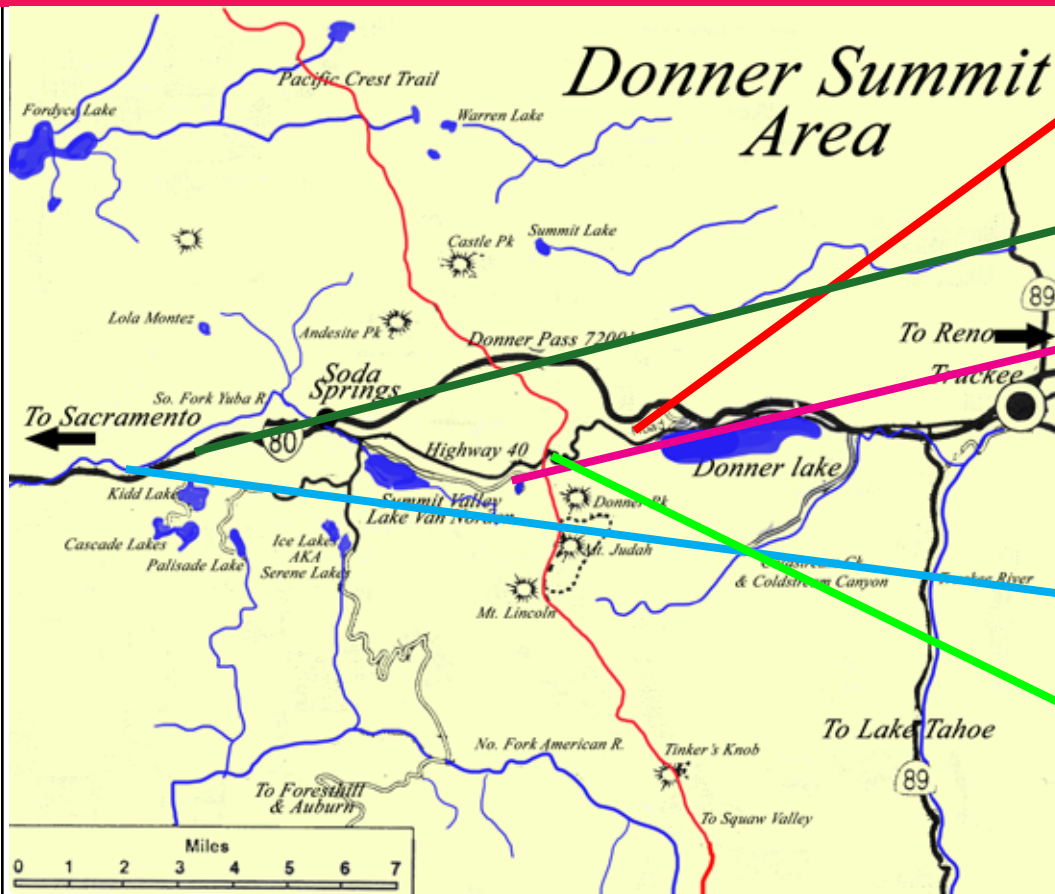
Alfred A Hart 117 - Bluffs in Donner Pass -

The Dutch Flat Road was built to facilitate the construction of the railroad. This view of it is above Tunnel Six and crosses an area that stays wet. Logs were used to build up the roadbed and then rocks and dirt provided the surface. When the road was rerouted further east under the railroad, this section was abandoned and nature has now reclaimed it.

Photo location 39° 18.907'N 120° 19.358'W



Story Locations in this Issue



Story or Photo Locations

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