

# Donner Summit

“...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 picturesque. It is 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. The first wagon trains to California crossed using the same route. In the same spot you can see the routes of the first transcontinental railroad; the first transcontinental highway, the Lincoln Highway; the first transcontinental air route and the first transcontinental telephone line. That’s only a little of the history on Donner Summit. The Donner Summit Historical Society’s 20 Mile Museum, along Old Highway 40, celebrates that rich history with forty-one interpretive signs.

Most of the signs have been placed along Old Highway 40 from the Nyack exit on I-80, over Donner Summit and down into Truckee. A few signs sit on adjacent roads. Each sign highlights history, displays historical photographs and quotes, tells a good story, and lists activities for the location.

The signs highlight our unique history, share the beauty of Donner Summit, encourage visitation, and help revitalize the Summit economy.

The signs are sponsored by local businesses and individuals who paid for their construction and placement.

# 20 Mile Museum

**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**  
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 at the Eagle Lakes exit from I-80 on north side of the freeway and just beyond the curve uphill. Conquering Red Mtn. after a hike is a thrill and accomplishment. 39° 19.448N/120° 33.734W

**Meadow Lake**  
Meadow Lake might have become 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. A little later, 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.” Just beyond the Red Mountain sign. 39° 19.472N/120° 33.781W

**Forest Gift Shop**  
The stone buildings at Cisco along Old 40 are curiosities. This sign sits just off the north side of Cisco exit from I-80. 39° 18.672N/120° 32.475W

**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 of the old route. You can walk it as well with access across the street from the Big Bend fire station. 39° 18.255N/120° 31.475W

**Hwy 40 Scenic Bypass Petroglyphs**

**History**

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

Native Americans left as a record of their presence in the Donner Summit area petroglyphs. The pictures to the right are Donner Summit area petroglyphs enhanced in black and white. Similar symbols are found in many places in the northern Sierra Nevada, usually on poorly slipping 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 flattened 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 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, and other values. They probably carried dried trout and game onto 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 exfoliation (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 tracings; this wears away the rock surface.  
Leave rocks, plants and animals where they are.  
And of course remove your trash.

Someday 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 art. A particularly good source is Ancient Rock Carvings of the Central Sierra by Willis Gortner. 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.

**Things to do right here**

Walk up to Rainbow Bridge and admire the view.  
Hike to the top of Mt. Stephen just north 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 on you see above. Go up through the underpass and then through the train tunnel – the original Tunnel 6 built in 1867 for the transcontinental railroad.  
If you are even more ambitious, go to the Summit and take the first left after the Alpine Ski Inn. Go down to the town and park. To the left is a trailhead for the Pacific Crest Trail which you can take. Trails off will lead you to the top of Mt. Donner and trails for spectacular views. From Donner you can look 1000 feet straight down to Donner Lake.

**Big Bend**  
The “bend” in the river was a resting stop for wagon trains and then highway travelers. Today there is a USFS fire station along with a Lincoln Highway monument. 39° 18.400N/120° 31.061W

**Rainbow Lodge/Tavern**  
Built in the 19th Century and remodeled in 1927 and subsequently, the Tavern was a stop on the highway. It’s a wonderful old building with wonderful a collection of historical photographs. Enjoy the lodge, the food, the river, and the nearby old houses. Sign is to the right of the lodge at the edge of the parking lot. 39° 18.603N/120° 30.564W

**Donner Summit Lodge**  
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 lodges that accommodated visitors along the old highway. The lodge is at the Soda Springs exit from I-80. 39° 19.513N/120° 23.363W

**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° 19.457N/120 23.017W

**Soda Springs Hotel**  
Built in 1927, the hotel served travelers for decades. The sign sits right outside the Donner Summit His-

torical Society. The museum there has a huge collection of historical photographs and ephemera. 39 19.408N/120 22.768W

**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. at the blinking light and head 2.5 miles west to Ice Lakes (today Serene Lakes). Sign is in the Ice Lakes Lodge parking lot and inside the lodge. 39° 17.697N/120° 22.959W

**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. Turn at the blinking light and cross the RR tracks. 39° 19.276N/120° 22.758W

**Wagon Train Route**  
On the way out of Soda Springs towards Ice Lakes, just before Pahatsi Rd. at the top of the hill you will come to the actual wagon train route. 39° 18.777N/120° 22.870W

**Norden Station**  
This was the railroad station inside the snowsheds for people wanting to come ski at Sugar Bowl. Across from the Old Norden Store on Old 40. 39° 19.036N/120° 21.196W

**Hutchinson Lodge**  
The lodge was built in 1924-25 by the Hutchinson brothers to serve their new “Sierra Ski Club.” This is a classic Sierra lodge. 39° 19.061N/120° 21.159W

**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° 19.012N/120° 21.011W

**Cal-Lodge**  
This is a classic mountain lodge belonging to the students of U.C. Berkeley. It was built in 1937 and rebuilt in 1939. 39° 18.997N/120° 21.023W

**Tri Lodges**  
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. 39° 18.996N/120° 21.022W

Map showing the route from Donner Lake Exit to Cisco Grove Exit. Landmarks include Donner Lake, Soda Springs, Rainbow Lodge, and various ski areas. Sponsor logos include: 20 Mile Museum Sponsors (Sugar Bowl, Royal Gorge, Soda Springs, Boreal, DSAA, Sierra Club, The Summit Restaurant & Bar, Soda Springs General Store, The Gateway Mountain Center, Serene Lakes, NVACK).