

DONNER PASS



The Most
Important
Historical
Square Mile in
California

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, 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.

Standing on Donner Pass you are surrounded by history and the presence of the people who crossed the pass to make California what it is today.

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 all came up Summit Canyon, through Donner Pass, and over Donner Summit.

Once the railroad was completed the first transcontinental telegraph moved to Donner Summit as well.

First Wagon Trains, 1844-46

The Stephens-Murphy-Townsend Party was the first wagon train to reach California, doing so in 1844.



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. There appeared to be no way to pass save a small cleft that an ox could just

go through. The party 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. It is for him that Schallenberger Ridge on the south side of Donner Lake is named.

At the Stephens' Party camp at Big Bend, on the Yuba River, just a few miles past the summit, 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 shoveling, digging, blasting, carting, and cutting. They filled ravines, excavated and laid track. Then they built forty miles of snowsheds to protect the track from the average 34 foot snowfalls. Ironically the snowsheds blocked passengers from seeing Edwin Byrant's view. The picturesque sights were replaced with smoke-filled snowsheds.

The Chinese workers' 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. Letters brought news that was still “news.”



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. The first transcontinental railroad went right through Donner Pass.

First Transcontinental Highway, 1913

In 1913 the Lincoln Highway was inaugurated and it included a stretch through Summit Canyon. 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 here) 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 in Summit Canyon.

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, for 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. It sat above today's Donner Ski Ranch, on Signal Hill. It was airway station 15. 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.



Traveling 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] lake ...until 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 from the lake...you never saw a set of fellows more happy than when we reached the summit.”

William Todd 1845

