

The Emigrant Trail Over Donner Summit



Donner Summit has a lot of firsts: first transcontinental railroad, first transcontinental highway, first transcontinental telephone line, and first transcontinental air route. The first motorized transcontinental trip went over Donner Summit as did the first automobile to cross the Sierra.

In 1844 the first wagon train to reach California with wagons, the Stephens Party led by 80 year old Caleb Greenwood, went over Donner Summit as well*. Arguably, Donner Summit is the most important historical square mile in California and maybe the entire Western U.S.

After the Stephens Party Donner Summit became a regular route for emigrants to California as many thousands of travelers used it to cross the Sierra.

By the time the emigrants had reached Donner Pass they had crossed half a continent or more, leaving the United States to challenge geography for better lives.

They had no idea what they would face or how ill-prepared many were for the hardships and disasters that awaited. The emigrants heading for California were courageous and driven though, and there was no giving up.

Those who survived the journey, and about one in ten didn't, were hardened by the crossing having faced

*Two prior wagon trains abandoned their wagons rather than challenge the Sierra with them.

“When we struck the main ridge of the mountains, every heart was filled with terror at the awful site [sic].”

William Tustin 1846

accident, storm, disease, dehydration, Indians, desert, and sick and dying animals and friends. They learned skills they'd never contemplated. They forded rivers, over and over, and crossed mountains. They left behind prized possessions scattered in the 40 mile desert. They buried friends and family members. The later emigrants passed grave after grave and animal carcasses all along the trails.

They thought they'd conquered it all and won. California was in sight.

And then they came to the Sierra Nevada, a solid wall of granite, the last and greatest hurdle - the view above. It



struck fear in their hearts and they must have wondered, what do we do now?

That first train, and others went right up Summit Canyon, right next to what is now Donner Pass

Rd. or Old Highway 40 (labeled “Stephens Pass” on the map to the right). It was excruciatingly difficult. There was no road and no path. Wagons were taken apart and hauled up in parts or slid up rock faces on wooden ramps made from saplings.

By 1846 the emigrants had discovered Roller Pass, a few miles south between Mt. Judah and Lincoln. At least there the wagons could be driven up, although the route was horribly steep.

While wagons were waiting to go one at a time up Roller Pass, emigrants discovered Coldstream Pass between Donner Pk. and Mt. Judah. It was nowhere near as steep.

No matter which pass the emigrants took it was a difficult passage. Imagine how happy they were to stand on top - now it was downhill to California.

We arrived at the main difficulty from here to the summit is one mile it is as steep as the roof of a house.

Jos. Hackney, 1849

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 [Sierra] again. Woodruff Lee says he would swim around Cape Horn on a log before he would cross them again.

Tom Hart

We went on smoothly until we reached the California Mountains,... There we met with tribulations in the extreme. You can form no idea, nor can I give you any description of the evils which best us. From the time we left the lake [Donner Lake] ... 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 that it was impossible for us to reduce, bridge or roll our wagons over, and in several places we had to run our waggons [sic] broadside off a ledge, take off our cattle, and throw our waggons round with handspikes and heave them up to the top where our cattle had previously been taken. Three days found ourselves six miles from the lake on the north side of the mountain, an you never saw a set of fellows more happy than when we reached the summit.

William Todd 1845

