

THE EMIGRANT TRAIL



OVER DONNER PASS



Donner Summit Historical Society

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Roller Pass

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.

Coldstream Pass

Donner Pass

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.

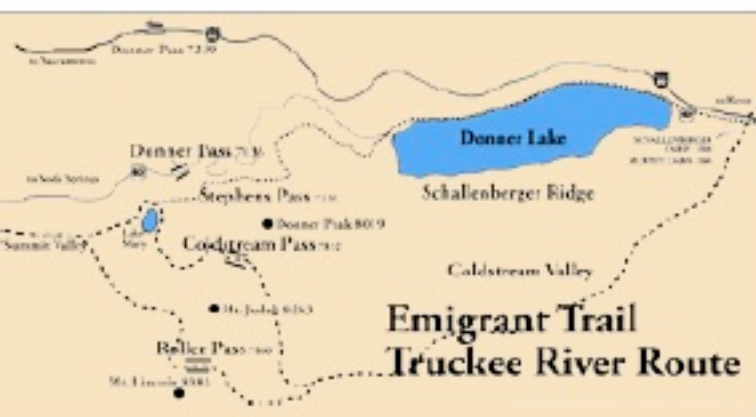
Jos. Hackney, 1849

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



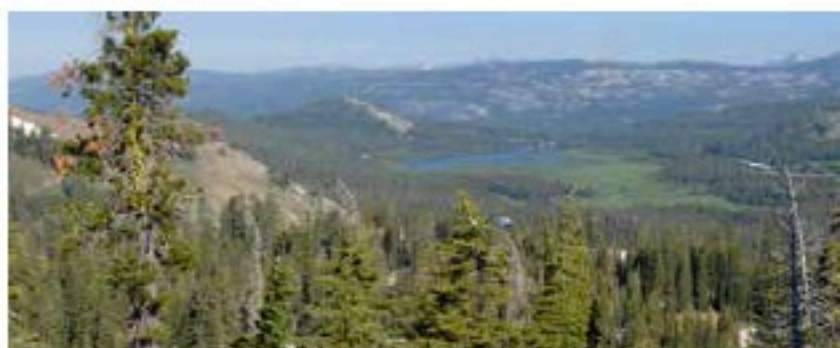
After the First Emigrants

After the first wagon trains reached California emigrants continued to use the passes. During the Gold Rush about 28% of all wagons heading for California used one of the Donner Passes.

Imagine the emigrants' thoughts as they looked down on Summit Valley after crossing the pass (pictured below from Mt. Judah). There was water and feed and they could rest. It would be all downhill to California from there. It wasn't though.

One emigrant, D.B. Wood said, "The western slope of the Sierra is rough beyond description. The mountain breaks off in immense granite ridges from the main summit. Streams heading in near the main divide, plunge down impassable Kanyons... fierce and terrific descents you should not deem it possible for wagons to pass. This rough country continues for 10 miles from the summit."

After the emigrants people continued to use Donner Pass. It is the route of the railroad, became the route of the Lincoln Highway and later U.S. 40. Today people who want a more leisurely trip take Old 40 instead of the Interstate.



"The view from the crest of the Sierra..., is 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.

Edwin Bryant 1846 What I Saw in California

Even though the crossing was grueling the magnificence of Donner Summit could not be missed by the emigrants.

Roller Pass 1852

About nine o'clock we doubled teams and began the ascent for the summit. While the teams were slowly toiling up the summit, Father, Mr. Buck, Margaret and I climbed one of the highest peaks near the road [Donner Peak] and were well repaid for our trouble by the splendid view. On one side the snow-capped peaks rise in majestic grandeur, on the other they are covered to their summits with pine and fir, while before us in the top of the mountains, apparently an old crater, lies a beautiful lake [Donner lake] in which the Truckee takes its rise.

Eliza McAuley 1852

Summit Valley 1849

It was bitterly cold, but from the almost pointed summit, the grandeur and wild, confused desolation of the prospect was sublime indeed. North, east, and south peak rose beyond peak in endless succession.

Isaac Wistar 1849

Hike to Roller Pass (4 miles RT)

The Roller Pass hike is a fun hike. You have nice views of Summit Valley (below left) as you go up and you find a piece of California history at the top. You also have a great view of Coldstream Valley. Then it's all downhill on the way back.

Pacific Crest Trailhead

Just opposite Donner Ski Ranch is the Sugar Bowl Road. Just down that, past the overpass and Tunnel 6 is Old Donner Summit Rd. Turn left and drive up to the parking area. The trailhead is at the sharp 90° turn just beyond.

Take the Pacific Crest Trail two miles to the saddle between Mt. Judah and Mt. Lincoln. Instead of continuing on the PCT along the side of Mt. Lincoln, head further into the saddle, east. You will find markers for the Emigrant Trail. Take a look down the steep incline leading up from Coldstream Valley. They actually took wagons up that! They were a lot tougher in the old days. As wagons waited to be pulled up one at a time, the others camped down below. You can hike down the incline and then back up to see what it was like. Imagine doing it many times as you helped oxen pull the wagons.

In early summer after snow melt, there are lots of wildflowers further along the PCT below Mt. Lincoln. You can return the way you came or at the first fork on the way back, a few hundred yards down the trail, you can turn uphill and go to the spectacular views on Mt. Judah. Then continue down the other side between Donner Pk. and Mt. Judah and go left. The trail will take you back to the PCT trailhead.

