



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, nor maybe such a pleasant walk. The map at left outlines a 3.5 mile walk downhill from the Pacific Crest Trail on Donner Summit almost to Donner Lake, a drop in elevation of almost 1000 feet.

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.

First Wagon Trains, 1844-46

The Stephens-Murphy-Townsend Party was the first wagon train to reach California. 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. They 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 Schallenger, who would stay the winter.

At the Stephens’ Party camp at Big Bend, on the Yuba River, 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 across the Sierra. Then they built forty miles of snowsheds to protect the track from the average 34 foot snowfalls.



The 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.



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.

First Transcontinental Highway, 1913

In 1913 the Lincoln Highway was inaugurated. It put together stretches of road all across the country to form