

# The Donner Summit

# Heirloom



History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society and the most historically significant square mile in California.

April, 2024 issue #188

Here a scene of grandeur meets the eye. It takes one's breath.

Modesto Bee August 2, 1931



## Donner Summit Landscape art in the Context of the Wider 19<sup>th</sup> Century World

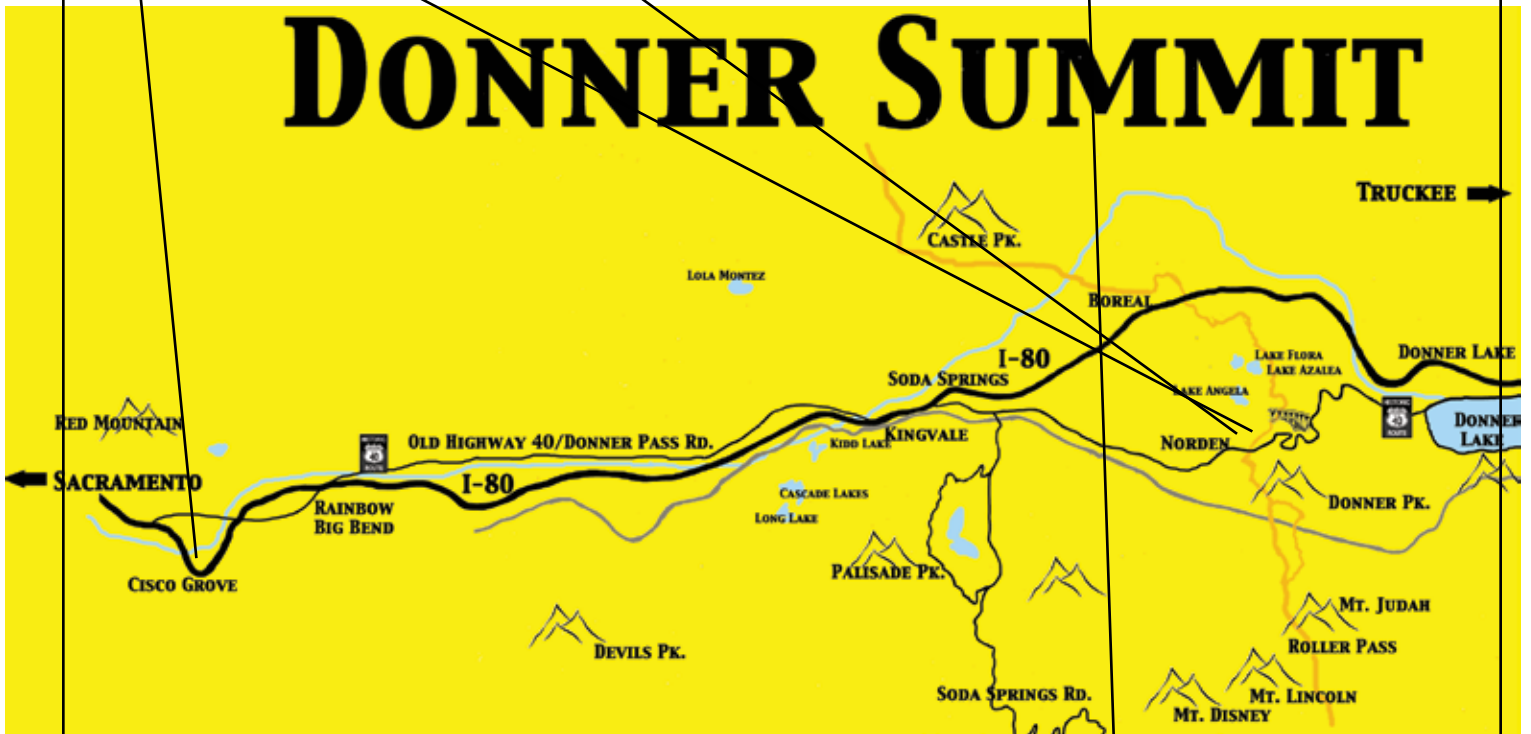
“The Alps, so celebrated in history, and by all travelers and admirers of mountain landscape, cannot, I am satisfied, present scenery more wild, more rugged, more grand, more romantic, and more enchantingly picturesque and beautiful... The view from the crest of the Sierra to the east, is inexpressibly, comprehensive, grand and picturesque.

Edwin Bryant  
What I Saw in California Pgs 228 & 231\*

\* Edwin Bryant was part of the larger group of wagons that included the Donner Party. He and his friends traded in their wagons for mules along the way to California and so arrived some weeks prior to others in the larger group and of course, months ahead of the rescuees from the Donner Party. He made the quote about arriving at Donner Summit in his book What I Saw in California which became a best seller of the time for people wanting to come to California.

# Story Locations in this Issue

Cisco pg 17   picture pg 1   the various views of Donner Lake from the summit   Summit Soda Springs pg 8, 13



## Finding Your Way Through Donner Summit History

We're closing in on two hundred issues of the Heirloom: thousands of pages, thousands of pictures, and hundreds of subjects. You've probably begun to realize that you cannot keep all the history in your head. Even if you remember it all, retrieval is difficult.

Fortunately one of the choices we made back at the birth of the DSHS was to index all our Heirloom articles and pictures. We've diligently kept up the indices so that they are many pages long, full of alphabetized titles and subjects. Go to our website and to any of the Heirloom pages (one for each year) and you'll find links to the Heirloom indices.

One of the strengths of the DSHS is the incomparable historical photograph collection. The collection is thousands of pictures and again the sheer number makes finding anything in particular, difficult. Avoid the long URL by going to our website and clicking on the "photographs" link and then to the "historic photo collection link." A third link, to the Flickr URL will take you to those thousands of searchable historical photographs of Donner Summit. Have fun.

Find us on the the DSHS YouTube channel <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJenAxPCb47Y14agmVGI-zA>

Find us on FaceBook where we place a new historical picture daily.

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Find us on 

 YouTube

19th Century Donner Summit was a popular destination for artists and so there was a lot of 19th Century Donner Summit landscape art. The art was also popular with the public because it focused on such a scenic area and catered to popular thought. That makes the art worthy of study and of sharing with modern readers. It's taken a long to finalize the topics for this and next months' Heirlooms: "Donner Summit art in the context of the wider 19th Century world," "Donner Summit Landscape Art," "Painting with Prose," an article about Albert Bierstadt and his famous painting "Donner Lake from the Summit." (see below), and more.

As all well-read readers of the Heirloom know, Donner Summit is the most historically significant square mile in California and maybe the entire Western United States. Donner Summit has other attributes too: amazing biological diversity\*, world class winter and summer sports and recreation, and extraordinary scenery that "takes your breath away," according to a 1931 Modesto Bee article. Lots of places have recreation, biological diversity and scenery. Since this is not a travel periodical those last categories don't really belong in the Heirloom but this month, and next, we're going to look at historical depictions of scenery - landscape art.

The research for this story has been marinating ever since the beginning of the Donner Summit Historical Society in 2008. It's been waiting for the right emphasis, the interest having been sparked by museum visits, contemporary art books, and 19th Century travel books featuring the art of famous contemporary artists which were aimed at whetting readers' appetites for travel.



Figure 61  
Albert Bierstadt. *Donner Lake from the Summit*, 1873. Oil on canvas, 72 × 120 in. (182.9 × 304.8 cm). The New-York Historical Society.

Above: Albet Bierstadt's "Donner Lake from the Summit", 1873. This is maybe the most famous of the Donner Lake from Donner Summit paintings done by various artists in the late19th Century.

Right: about the same view but taken today.

We'll get to Mr. Bierstadt next month. Stay tuned.



\*500 species of plants, 115 species of butterflies, 100+ species of birds and dozens of species of amphibians and mammals.

“English romantic poets and American transcendentalist writers popularized the notion that contemplation of unspoiled nature was a therapeutic experience of the city dweller, and the idea became ingrained in American culture. Landscape art became a way for urban residents to be reminded of the morally healthy great outdoors.”

Alfred Harrison, Jr. art dealer and historian pg 12 of [Edwin Deakin California Painter of the Picturesque](#) in an article, “A Nineteenth-Century Man Deakin and the San Francisco Art Scene” .

Before we get to the 19th Century art specific to Donner Summit we need a little context. How did 19th Century landscape art reflect the thought of 19th Century society and meet people’s needs and desires? Today there is a lot of competition for people’s attention and free time. Art is only one of many ways to spend one’s time and landscape art is only a small sliver of that for only a small sliver of the population. In many ways life was harder in the 19th Century leaving people will less free time than today. Nevertheless 19th Century landscape art was of immense importance to Americans, attracting a lot of attention by the wider public, much more than art does today for the wider public.

Western landscape art reflected and shaped the nation. The country expanded again and again during the century spreading from sea to sea and north and south. The new lands were mostly wilderness and that captured the public’s attention and interests. What were these new territories like? What was there? Of course some people went out to explore and settle the new lands but the vast majority stayed home. It’s they, mostly, who were interested in the art that depicted the wilderness' new lands. Landscape artists went west with the first settlers and documented the land. They demystified the land but also romanticized it, meaning they did not necessarily make accurate depictions of what they saw. For some, if a little Nature was good then more would be better as they added to the scenery with paint and brushes.

The paintings in turn spurred westward migration both for individuals and for the nation as a whole. 19th Century western landscape art was a kind of visual reminder of Manifest Destiny, the philosophy that it was the manifest destiny of the United States to occupy the continent. Landscape art became a kind of cultural Manifest Destiny illustrating the philosophy. Look at the richness of the lands, resources, and potential of this country, as portrayed in the art; there was so much available for growth, so much to be used and exploited.

19th Century landscape art addressed the psyche of the American public. Importantly it connected viewers to nature as the nation urbanized during the Industrial Revolution and life began to move faster. Landscape art was tranquility and idyllic, removed from the hustle and bustle of the cities. Landscape art was beautiful and invoked a sense of wonder.

We know all this because lots of landscapes were produced in the 19th Century, all exploring the same themes, though in different ways. Prices for the art were good. Good landscape artists made a living from their paintings. Had there not been a market there would not have been the art and the artists.

It was also common for people to go to art exhibitions, paying admission, having responded to ads in the newspapers, for paintings to go on tours, and for dramatic showings highlighting particular paintings. Certainly people go to art exhibitions today but not to see even just one painting and not in such large numbers relative to the total population as they did in the 19th Century. Given that life was more difficult in the 19th Century it is remarkable that so many people would make time to go see a painting by a famous artist. Albert Bierstadt's "Donner Lake from the Summit" painting, maybe the most popular of the landscapes, went on exhibition in San Francisco and attracted an average daily attendance of 600 people. On Saturdays it would draw 1200 people (1/25/73 [San Francisco Evening Bulletin](#)). The painting is on page 3 but we'll get to Mr. Bierstadt next month.

Another aspect of the popularity of American 19th Century landscape was the popularity of reproductions, prints, of famous paintings,

## **SPECIAL NOTICE.**

**Art Association Exhibition,**

313 PINE STREET.

**BIERSTADT'S LATEST WORK,**

**Donner Lake from the Summit.**

By kind permission of the Aruat, remains on view

**ONE WEEK LONGER,**

but must positively be removed from the Gallery after the evening of the 25th last.

Admission to the Gallery, 25 Cts. Ja19-1

[.25 would be \$6.41 in 2023]

Daily Alta California January 22, 1873

example of newspaper ad for a painting exhibition

“The prints that were published in guidebooks, magazines, and advertisements allowed a significant proportion of the population to view and, thus, be influenced by them. As reproductive prints began circulating throughout the public, making the images of artists’ original paintings more accessible, collective imaginations of America’s wilderness, as well as ambitions for future national prosperity, developed the minds of Americans, fulfilling landscape paintings’ potential to influence public discourse, perception, and identity.”

The Business of 19th Century American Landscape Paintings:  
A Case Study of the Connection Between Art History and Economics  
Clair Di Meglio, 202

Complementing the interest in art, 19th Century literature celebrated the themes people saw in the art. Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman were only a few. The development of national parks also shows the importance of nature to people and the nation. As the wilderness closed, people began to want to preserve and protect the new-found wilderness they’d seen in art rather than focusing on exploiting it. This brought about the environmental movement. People began feeling nature should be saved for its own sake because of what it did for people. This helped pave the way for John Muir, who promoted the preservation of wilderness particularly in California, and the national parks.

Another aspect of 19th Century art was its relationship to healthy living. Being out in nature was beautiful and healthful and so a jump in logic was that viewing landscape art must be good for the viewer too and required much less effort. Alfred Harrison is an art historian and dealer in San Francisco who said about landscape art and the 19th Century, “The contemplation of a beautiful painted landscape was a vicarious way of attaining this beneficial [healthful] experience.”

To varying degrees 19th Century landscape artists’ aesthetic was to exaggerate nature’s grandness, boundlessness, and abundance reinforcing the desire of Easterners to see the art and parenthetically, eventually go west as tourists to see the landscapes and richness for themselves.

As an aside it should be noted that many 19th Century landscape artists painted sublime idealistic depictions of the west which the public loved and wanted more of which in turn caused landscape artists to deliver even more sublime depictions. Larger audiences paid more to see the paintings.

Landscapes at this time represented an era of widespread change in the United States and became a cultural source of national pride, as they emblemized a vision of national progress and prosperity. Although Americans still collectively thought of the West as an exotic and unknown territory, the increased patronage and distribution of landscapes by the American Art Union as well as the newspaper articles, reports, travel accounts, and novels stirred the nation’s desire to witness more visual images that would confirm the accuracy of such descriptions. Landscape’s impact was thus due to the responses by the nation’s audiences who deemed the invented scenes of nature’s beauty to be accurate visual records of the geography that artists witnessed. Rather than a purely cultural movement, America’s quest to understand its new territories and to configure a national identity in the midst of imperial expansion provided the foundation for businesses to emerge in both the production of art as well as in the industrialization of the contemporary United States.

The Business of 19th Century American Landscape Paintings:  
A Case Study of the Connection Between Art History and Economics  
Claire Di Meglio 2020



*sf call 106/998 pg 12*

Example of an art auction of landscape paintings.

## EDWIN DEAKIN'S

PAINTINGS, AND SKETCHES ON view at the Rooms of The Art Association, Pine street and will be sold on account of his departure

Daily Alta California September 27 1881

Example of ad for Mr. Deakin's art.

# Donner Summit Landscape art

"Donner Pass was one of the great obstacles to the Transcontinental RR and its ruggedness was an impediment to emigrants coming from the United States on wagon Trains. That and its compelling beauty made the Summit and the Pass subjects for artists and photographers like Bierstadt, Keith, Jackson, Hill, Watkins, etc." (Direct from Nature Oil Sketches Thomas Hill 1997 Janice Driesbach Crocker Museum) That created the supply of art.

Artists set up shop in San Francisco and Sacramento. They gave instruction, did portraits, and held exhibitions of their landscapes. Art schools popped up. Art was sent across the country so the admission paying public in the rest of the U.S. could see the wonders of California and live the adventure of California vicariously.

Demand for artists work grew as California grew. California was a sleepy province until the Gold Rush. With the Gold Rush came modern 19th century society with all its accoutrements. San Francisco exploded from a little village of sixty or so adobe huts into a city with wealth created by the Gold Rush, the Comstock Lode, the coming of the transcontinental railroad, and the maturing of the California economy. Along with the prospectors came store keepers and other small businessmen, bankers, industrialists, lawyers, craftsmen, mechanics, farmers, and artists. As California became richer there was more interest in art.

The rest of the nation was hungry for information about life in California and artists provided visual depiction of the wonders of California: the Spanish lifestyle, the Gold Rush, huge redwoods, the mountains, lakes, forests, and ocean. Landscapes became the most popular.

With the opening of the transcontinental railroad artists could get to California after only a nine day trip. One of the subjects was Donner Summit. Many of the major artists traveled to Donner Summit to record the beauty that fit with the art about the rest of the state. California's subjects: grandeur, beauty, old forests, snowy mountain peaks, picturesque coast, mountain lakes, Yosemite and the Sierra, it was all now in reach.

What follows are just some 19th Century landscape art paintings of Donner Summit. The paintings serve as examples to show how Donner Summit art matched the public's aesthetic hunger.

**CALIFORNIA VIEWS**  
—FOR THE—  
**STEREOSCOPE AND ALBUM.**  
—  
**1,000 BEAUTIFUL VIEWS**  
Of the most conspicuous and interesting points on the Pacific Coast, comprising SACRAMENTO CITY, the CENTRAL PACIFIC RAILROAD, DONNER LAKE, LAKE TAHOE, and a Magnificent Series illustrating the HYDRAULIC, PLACER, QUARTZ and RIVER MINES of California and Nevada; also, the  
**YOSEMITE VALLEY**  
**AND THE BIG TREES.**  
Catalogues sent free on application.  
A RELIABLE AGENT WANTED in Sacramento city and in every settlement on the Pacific coast. References required.  
**LAWRENCE & HOUSEWORTH,**  
fe2-1m1p 817 and 819 Montgomery st., San Francisco.

Sacramento Daily Union

February 15, 1867

Seeing the West whet people's hunger for art

# The Petroglyphs

Petroglyph photograph enhanced with Photo-Shop to make the visible.

The first art of Donner Summit we should cover are the petroglyphs made by the Martis Culture (Native Americans) two to four thousand years ago.

This article is not intended to cover Donner Summit petroglyphs. It is only to cover one aspect of them. If you want to find out more about Donner Summit petroglyphs take a look at the end of this article, below.

Petroglyphs can be found in dozens of places around Donner Summit and the Donner Pass part of the Sierra. They are clearly art even though some people may take umbrage saying they are sacred and should not be denigrated. Calling them art does not cheapen them however, whether they may have been sacred to the artists or not.



We don't know the meaning of the abstract symbols carved into granite, one of the hardest rocks on the planet. They must have been important though, because of the time and effort needed to produce them. Just for perspective on a hardness scale of one to ten with diamonds being ten, granite rates six-eight.

The meaning behind petroglyphs has been lost to history but there are various possible meanings. All Martis petroglyphs are abstract. There are no human or animal figures. The closest the symbols come to animals are ubiquitous bear paws (center above). Petroglyphs could have had magical or religious significance. They may have been used by the shaman giving them religious or mystical meaning; perhaps they had totemic meaning (having to do with family or clan). Perhaps they were wishes for the future or records of the past. Willis Gortner, an amateur archeologist who studied the Martis and petroglyphs hazarded one more meaning. Seeing that some looked like tree branches he copied them and overlaid them on maps of local rivers drainages. Some matched. Could they have been maps to show good hunting? Could they have been used to illustrate stories or the recounting of events?

Petroglyphs are found all over the summit but only in those places on the summit with magnificent views of the surround mountains. This seems to say that the Martis found the mountains of Donner Summit very special. Perhaps the petroglyphs were meant to signify that specialness, the awe in which the Native Americans held the mountain peaks. Any of the other meanings may be true but we have to account for the symbols being in these special view spaces. That makes them like the art of the 19th Century as artists also celebrated the awe in which they held Donner Summit. Next month the Heirloom will included "Painting with Prose" illustrating another way that people recorded the awe they held about Donner Summit.

We'll never know the meaning of the petroglyphs but we can still admire their artistry and the difficulty in their production. That makes them relevant to this [Heirloom](#) issue.

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If you want to read more about the Native American petroglyphs on Donner Summit there are two out of print books you will like, both available in the Truckee library?

[Ancient Rock Carvings of the Central Sierra: The North Fork Indian Petroglyphs](#)  
Willis Gortner Portola Press 1984 183 pages (half the pages are drawings)

[Martis Indians: Ancient Tribe of the Sierra Nevada](#)  
Willis Gortner, 1986 Portola Press 145 pages

## Petroglyphs, continued from the previous page

There is also an introduction on our website,  
<http://www.donnertsummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/petroglyphs.html>

On the “Brochures” page of the website there is a brochure you can download about “Native Americans of Donner Summit” which has a section about petroglyphs.

Then, of course, there is also the September, '23 edition of the Heirloom. If you check both our article and picture indices you will find other editions with more things to say and pictures.

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# Norton Bush



Norton Bush (American, 1834-1894), Soda Springs, Sierra Nevada Mountains, 1868. Oil on Canvas, 30X48 inches. Crocker Art Museum, E. B. Crocker Collection 1872.674

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The painting above is of Summit Soda Springs in 1868 just before the transcontinental railroad was finished. The area was spoken for, but not owned yet, by one of the Big 4, Mark Hopkins. This became his estate where he built a hotel so that his wife could invite San Francisco society to rusticate so she would not be lonely. In the background you see Anderson Pk. on the left and Tinker Knob on the right. Both make nice hikes with spectacular views from Donner Pass. Both are on the Pacific Crest Trail. The painting is not a quite accurate portrayal but that didn't matter to the viewing public or the artist. Nature is beautiful regardless. We can rely on the newspaper article on the next page from the [Daily Alta California](#) to explain the painting. See the [Heirloom](#) article and picture indices on the DSHS website to find more articles and pictures of Summit Soda Springs.



## SUMMIT SODA SPRINGS.

### **A Spot of Wild Magnificence and Beauty-The Future Saratoga of the Pacific--Fine Painting--Etc.**

There is now on exhibition, in the window of a picture store on Kearny street, a large oil painting of the Summit Soda Springs. These springs are situated about seven miles south of the Central Pacific Railroad line in Summit Valley. Excepting Yosemite, there is not in all the Sierra a spot of wilder magnificence or beauty. The road over to it runs through a continuous succession of natural beauties of mountain, forest, river, natural lawns and modest shrubs. The springs are close to the headwaters of the American River- one of the most beautiful of our mountain streams, which leaps over many waterfalls near its source. The painting is the work of Mr. N. Bush, one of our best landscape painters. Mr. Bush made his sketches in October, when the frost had begun to tinge the leaves with the beautiful hectic flash of decay, when the streams were low, and when modest brown was the prevailing color upon the ground. Two of the loftiest peaks of the Sierra turn up behind the springs. The only house (a rough cabin) is shown in the foreground of Mr. Bush's picture. The house has a natural setting of lofty evergreen trees. Two of the precipitous cañons for which the locality is famous are shown in the picture. These springs, we are told, possess great medicinal virtues in the cure of affections of the kidneys, dysentery and dyspepsia. The water is most agreeable and appetizing. The surroundings are positively magnificent, and, unlike Yosemite, a lady or an invalid can reach the place without fatigue, via the Pacific Railroad. There is a first-class road from the railroad line to the springs and a hotel is about to be erected by the Railroad Company. The springs are situated about half way between Donner Lake and Lake Tahoe, in an oblique direction. Those who have tasted the water and seen the surroundings say that the Summit Springs are destined to become the Saratoga of the Pacific, and that they will be thronged with pleasure seekers next summer....

Mr. Bush has done the State a service in illustrating the marvelous beauties off this wild region upon canvas. The eye can form a better idea of it from an inspection of his picture than can be by any description from the pen. We believe that this painting is one of a number which Mr. Bush is engaged upon for one of the managers of the Central Pacific Railroad Company.

Daily Alta California January 24, 1869

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Below is also an article from the Daily Alta California describing a new art gallery opening in San Francisco. That this is an actual article full of so much detail in a busy San Francisco newspaper, shows the interest the public had in landscape art (as does the article above). Note the last sentence, "There must much taste for art in a city of 150,000 inhabitants in which dealers in pictures and artists' materials find it profitable to establish a free art gallery full of fine paintings." Indeed.

### **OPENING OF A NEW ART GALLERY**

A new art gallery, to be free to the public, was opened yesterday by Messrs. Snow & Roos, over their store on Kearny street, at the corner of St. Marks' place. The gallery is twenty feet wide, twenty high and seventy long, lighted through a skylight which is protected from the sun's rays, so that the light is about the same at all hours of the day. The ceiling is arched and is ornamented to frescoes with devices representing the North, South, East and West, painting and statuary. The walls are colored with a pleasant middle tone, and the floor is nicely carpeted. Gas is provided for the night. The walls are covered with one hundred thirty-four pictures, all save about a dozen in oil, and the majority of them being California landscapes by San Francisco artists, including Keith, Arriola, Denny, Young, Holdredge, Marple, Narjet, Wilson Walker, Hills, Bush and Wandesford. The collection is very creditable to the artists and of this city, for a number of the pictures possess distinguished merit. Besides the domestic production, there are some imported paintings of high value "The Spanish Beauty," "The dog Cart," "The Pets," "the Roman Bath" and "the Gamblers" would be ornaments to any miscellaneous collection. We advise all persons who admire good pictures to visit the gallery, which is the best of its kind in the United States, and a decided credit to San Francisco. There must much taste for art in a city of 150000 inhabitants in which dealers in pictures and artists' materials find it profitable to establish a free art gallery full of fine paintings.

Daily Alta California pg 1 April 11, 1869

# Thomas Hill

Read a contemporary review on page 26



Thomas Hill, Donner Lake, 1874 from Direct from Nature the Oil Sketches of Thomas Hill Janice Driesbach Crocker Museum, Sacramento, CA Compare Mr. Hill's rendition of Donner Lake from the summit to other artists' views later in this Heirloom edition.

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Direct from Nature Oil Sketches Thomas Hill 1997 Janice Driesbach Crocker Museum

Today Thomas Hill is not well known but in the late 19th Century he was one of America's and California's eminent artists. He was known for painting huge canvases, as much as eight feet across, for public exhibitions and for sale as well as smaller paintings. 19th century exhibitions of Western Art brought the west and its grandeur to Americans who could not yet travel west.

The subject he came back to again and again, and where he spent his later years catering to tourists, was Yosemite. But Hill traveled extensively around the West on numerous trips and to Europe a number of times. (Landscape art must have paid well for some at least.) He also visited other parts of the Sierra composing a number of paintings of Lake Tahoe and the vicinity as well as Donner Summit.

He came to the U.S. in 1844 at 15 years old and was apprenticed as a carriage painter. He must have done well as he moved to interior decoration just a few years later.

He married in 1851 and moved to Philadelphia in 1853 to study art at night school. Shortly thereafter he visited the White Mountains where he met Hudson River School painters.

In 1862 he moved to San Francisco at least partly because of his health and set up as a portrait painter. San Francisco was a rich city following the Gold Rush and the Comstock Lode. He was able to make a living painting the portraits of well-off customers.

By 1865 he had painted many landscapes of California and the West Coast and had earned a good reputation.

He went to Europe in 1867 where he saw the Barbizon School which influenced his art. He began using more layered pigments and just daubs of color to suggest people and bushes and made richer foregrounds. These improvements to his technique enlivened his paintings.

After the European trip he continued to paint California landscapes even though he was not in California. He shipped many west for sale. His reputation continued to improve. In 1872 Watson's Art Journal said "Thomas Hill.... possesses a freshness, originality, and power..." and two months later said "...Art, like Christianity and Civilization has for its mission to bring us back to Nature and God." Thomas Hill is "an apostle of Truth... he has given us the incarnation of his ideas, with all the power, freshness and grandeur of nature." pg 29 Direct from Nature...

By 1869 he was back in California where there was increased demand for works with a Yosemite painting going for \$10,000 (about a quarter of a million dollars in today's money).

In those days summers saw California artists off to nature in Yosemite, Sonoma, the Sierra, St. Helena, etc. to gather sketches for oil paintings that would be done later in the Fall and Winter back in the city.

Bierstadt (page 3 and next month) uses light of sun and dark foregrounds to convey spirituality but at the same time that distances the viewer from the subject. Hill's paintings are much brighter with even light and more color. They are more intimate and reminiscent of something people have visited.

By U.S. 1876 Centennial Hill's works were hanging with Bierstadt's and Moran's which was a substantial achievement and accomplishment. He earned a gold medal for the best landscape.

Eventually the art market weakened and Hill made more money trading stocks.

Yosemite was a favorite subject and eventually he spent most of his time there painting and selling works to tourists. at Wawona.

"we do not exaggerate in saying that there is a freshness, vigor and truth in all that are seldom found, even in the finest compositions. They represent nature as she really appears in all her wayward and varying moods of sunshine and shadow, calm and storm, forest glade and mountain glacier. Studies of this kind, by first-class painters, have always been valued more highly than even their finished works."

article prior to a sale of Hill's paintings reprinted in Direct from Nature Oil Sketches Thomas Hill

His paintings are noted for their richness and brilliancy of color, and their bold and broad style of execution – having the reality and solidity of nature, that is so difficult to express on a flat piece of canvas.

from Lights and Shades in San Francisco  
pg 416 1876



Thomas Hill and Carleton Watkins, a famous photographer at Yosemite. You can read about Mr. Watkins in the Heirloom - check out the article index. The photo ceoms from Direct from Nature...

# William F. Jackson



William F. Jackson, Donner Lake from Meadows and Mountains The Art of William F. Jackson Alfred C. Harrison Jr.

Meadows and Mountains  
The Art of William F. Jackson  
Alfred C. Harrison Jr.

The book accompanied an exhibition of Jackson's work in San Francisco and Sacramento.

Wm. Jackson was the leading painter in Sacramento in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This was a time when landscapes changed from a rigid detailed celebration of nature to looser renditions sometimes approaching impressionism.

A favorite retreat for Wm. Jackson was Soda Springs on Donner Summit and the American River.

Jackson arrived in California and Sacramento in 1853 from Iowa when he was 13 years old. Interestingly it was not his father who provided the impetus for the family to move to California; it was William's mother, Phoebe, who wanted to move to the new territory perhaps partly to escape persecution of Mormons in the east. The family's legend says the final decision was made over a game of euchre between mother and father. The father, who usually won, lost two of three games and the bet was to move to California. Even if the story is not true, it's a good one.

William wanted to be an artist and the trip west provided him with a rich visual education of magnificent western scenes and Indian life.

Upon arriving in California William worked in Sacramento until 1875 when he went to the California School of Design in San Francisco where he did really well earning a scholarship and medal validating his desire to be an artist. Leaving school he set himself up as a portraitist.

Jackson's painting style was a break with earlier popular artists like Bierstadt. Where Bierstadt liked "minutely detailed foregrounds" and "compositions that overtly suggested transcendental spiritual value underlying natural appearances" or really lyrical renditions of the natural world, Jackson had picked up a simpler technique from William Keith. (Harrison Meadows and Mountains The Art of William F. Jackson pg 19)

Keith's technique was a "fashionable French look to the Sierra" which were rougher and bolder and less idealized and less pretty. (Harrison.)



Left: Soda Springs - in a private collection 1885

Below: General's Pool, Soda Springs - in private collection

Below left: Stream near Soda Springs - No. Point Gallery San Francisco (Alfred C. Harrison Jr.) 1897



This new “Barbizon” style began with sketching outdoors, with less foreground and limiting colors to just a couple of highlighted tones. Simplifying scenes increased “emotional power.” (Harrison) Another way of describing Jackson’s philosophy was, (Harrison page 31) “God’s creation undisturbed by man.” (Harrison)

The Barbizon school called for open foregrounds, a few dominant tones and sometimes a path leading into the picture. Simplify, don’t record it all was the philosophy.

Jackson had met Wm .Keith in 1875 and they went on numerous trips to the Sierra to Donner Lake and Soda Springs.

Jackson moved to Sacramento in the late 70’s to 1622 G. St setting up as a portrait painter again. He would live in Sacramento for the next 50 years and would run the Crocker Museum until 1936 when he died. He would keep his studio at the museum.

He stayed at Soda Springs many times until the hotel burned in 1897.

Jackson took Sacramento School of Design students to the Summit Hotel June twenty-eighth, 1890 (see below for Pt I) for two weeks saying that two weeks on Donner Summit was better for aspiring artists than three months in the classrooms.

### **AT THE ART GALLERY.** [This is part I; Page 21 is part II and part III is on page 22]

New Arrangement In the Cabinet— The School of Design— Etc. At the Art Gallery there is considerable activity just now. The Ladies' Museum Association has just placed a new scholar in the School of Design, a lad whose tint efforts have surprised the instructors, and evidence the discovery of a possible genius. Mrs. Crocker has also placed a new scholar in the school permanently for a full course. The scholars of the school, who are working very hard, are now agitating a scheme to take the last weeks of the present term for a trip to the mountains to study nature in her own field. It is supposed that for transportation and board at the Summit the entire cost per pupil will be \$25 for the two weeks. But it is hoped to secure some reduction on this figure. The idea is to have the entire school go to the Summit and study mountain scenery for full two weeks, and thus at one and the same time have a summer vacation and improve it by delightful study. If there are any scholars, however, who cannot go because unequal to bearing the expense, the assistant instructor will remain and devote himself to them, but the desire is that Instructor Jackson shall accompany the classes to the Summit. The hotel at that place has agreed to give the scholars special low rates. Mr. Jackson says that two weeks in the upper Sierras will be worth three months in the classroom to every pupil. There are a few scholars who are not able to meet the expense of the outing, and it is possible that some effort will be made to aid these, not in an individual way, but by contribution to a general fund for the excursion and fortnight of study in the noblest of studios— that of nature.

May 14, 1890  
Sacramento Daily Union

Planning for Wm. Jackson's trip to Donner Summit with his students from the School of Design in Sacramento. That the outing is being planned is one example of the popularity of landscape art. That this occasions, with all its detail, mention in the newspaper also shows the popularity.

# William Keith

Mountain Cascade Near Cisco 1867



William Keith the St. Mary's Collection Alfred Harrison Jr.  
Embracing Scenes About Lakes Tahoe and Donner Barbara Lekisch

“William Keith was the acknowledged leader of art on the West Coast.” (Embracing Scenes About Lakes Tahoe and Donner)  
He painted in a "grandiloquent" style - Lekisch

He was born in Scotland in 1838 emigrated to America with his mother and two siblings about 1850. He was first apprenticed to a lawyer and then a wood carver. In 1859 he received a commission to head to California to make illustrations. In the 1860's he was established in San Francisco giving art lessons at \$2 per lesson. Fame came as he exhibited his own paintings. To get material for his paintings he made trips to the Sierra. We can get an idea of his outlook from this quote about a Sierra trip,

About his first Sierra trip Keith said,

“the deep blue of the sky joining the light gray rounded and polished cliffs and the purpled and browned pines in the distance the green foliage and yellow-trunked trees of the foreground, together with the clear pure waters of the lake. Gaudy butterflies; bees droning and humming in the summer air; winged insects of different kinds – all unite to make a picture which indelibly impresses itself on the mind. Breathing in such beauty with the pure air, free from taint of every kind, no wonder that to the echoes sounded their returns joyously on and up through the glittering sunshine, sparkling on every twig and rock and leaf, dancing back from the surface of laughing and gurgling brooks. We seemed to float on ethereal wings up and up, until, looking back, the deep dark lake appeared to have ingulfed [sic] the sunlight.



Donner Lake 1876

"Nature takes kindly to her children, if they would be leave their swaddling-clothes of conventionality and submit themselves to her influences – leave...cares and come to the mountains, for a little while at least."

Wm. Keith in an artist's trip in the sierra I, II in Overland Monthly 8/1875 198-201

Many later Sierra trips were with John Muir.

In 1878 and 79 Keith painted in the Donner Summit area and made a number of paintings.

Later in life Keith gave up the grandiloquent style in favor of "small, sometimes imaginary bits of landscape with special emphasis on atmosphere and moody lighting moving away from realistic representations and that set the stage for modern painting in California according to Lekisch.



Donner Lake ca. 1879



North Fork of the American River "In the distance are what are frequently called the Keith Alps. The elevation of the highest point is 9000 feet. There are patches of snow all about the peak and rocks cropping out here and there. Cedar and other trees abound. There is a good deal of glacial action there, the rocks being smoothed and polished over, and then there are chaparral spots and croppings of lava and conglomerate rock of sandstone."

January 5, 1896 [San Francisco Call](#)



THE NORTH FORK OF THE AMERICAN RIVER BY WILLIAM KEITH.

## Marianne North

Marianne North was an English artist who spent some time at the Summit Hotel on Donner Summit in 1875. This comes from her reminiscences. This first appeared in the May, '11 [Heirloom](#).

"...I started back to the 'Summit Station, Colonel and Mrs. M going with me as far as Sacramento, where there was a fair at which he hoped to see fine horses and cattle, but was disappointed. I continued in the train, which slowly climbing its 8000 feet and landed me at midnight at the top of the pass, in the midst of the Nevada Mountains, and I settled for a week in a very comfortable railway-hotel. One could go ten miles on either side under cover of one long snow-shed, east and west... there was

no village, so it was a most quiet locality. My other window looked over the bright rocks and trees and mountain-tops, with a few small lakes here and there, like the top of some Swiss pass. The house was still well filled with San Francisco people doing "Vileggiatura." The food was excellent, popped corn and cream being the thing for breakfast. ...Half an hour's climb took me to the highest point near, from which was a most magnificent view of the Donner Lake below, and all its surrounding. Of this I made two large sketches, taking out my luncheon and spending the whole day on those beautiful hills, among the twisted old arbor vitae, larch, and pine trees, with the little chipmunks (squirrels) for company, often not bigger than large mice. The sunshine was magnificent; I could trace the long snow-galleries and tunnels of the railway, high along the projecting spires of the mountains, into the far horizon. It was a most quiet enjoyable life...[T]hat air made me feel so happy."



View of Donner Lake



An Old Cypress or Juniper Tree in the Nevada Mountains 1875. Of course the centerpiece is a Sierra Juniper

"My landlord drove a drag, four-in-hand, down to Lake Tahoe [sic] most days, and at the end of the week took me on there, driving down the steep descent to Lake Donner. We went along the whole length of its clear shore to Truckee, then followed the lovely clear river to its source in the great Lake Tahoe, a most lovely spot with noble forests fringing its sides. There was another capital wooden hotel there, where I could work again in peace. Behind the house were noble trees, fast yielding to the woodman's axe; huge logs were being dragged by enormous teams of oxen, all smothered in clouds of dust. They made fine foregrounds for the noble yellow pines and cypress-trees, with their golden lichen. The M's picked me up there again, and after going round the lake in the little steamer we disembarked on the east side, and took a carriage with a driver who has been made famous by Mark Twain. We followed one long shoot of floating wood-logs for a mile or more, all tumbling over one another on the rushing water till one felt one must go too ; it would be impossible to stand over

it and watch the moving mass without throwing oneself in.... goes to Virginia city and Carson and sketches

"Back to the Summit Hotel, which I reached at four in the morning. There were rough people in the train, but they were always good and civil to me, and gave me a couple of seats to myself. The landlord's little daughter took me the next day to see her lake, a lake that no one could find unless she showed the way, she said. She had a swing there, between two trees; and I tried to paint her, for she was a rare child, very beautiful, and not more than six years old. She knew all the birds' notes, and imitated them so well that the birds answered her, and she called up all kinds of pretty echoes for my entertainment."

# Edwin Deakin



Donner Lake from the Summit 1876

## Edwin Deakin California Painter of the Picturesque

Scott Shields – chief curator Crocker  
2008

Edwin Deakin was born in England in 1838 and died in Berkeley California. He came to the U.S. in 1856 and arrived in San Francisco in 1870. At first he made a living hand coloring photographs and then took up painting in 1867 and made a comfortable living with his painting. He traveled to Lake Tahoe and the Sierra many times looking for subjects for his painting. He showed his works in Sacramento and won prizes at the State fair multiple times.

Even though he won prizes his popularity suffered because of his exaggerated and augmented sense. Some critics criticized him for that as well. You can see that in the two paintings here. Above Keith has manufactured a whole range of Alp-like mountains beyond the east end of Donner Lake. This would fit the philosophy of if a little Nature is good then more is better. People liked what he did, maybe people who had never been to the summit liked it more.

There were lots of paintings of the popular places so Deakin moved from grand landscapes to more personal views of lesser known places. Deakin went far afield sometimes as did Bierstadt. He grew tired of common views of Lake Tahoe, Yosemite and looked for smaller more personal subjects. To get them he had to be adventurous.

“He is very venturesome, and once...climbed up the face of almost inaccessible rocks, throwing his sketching material from ledge to ledge.” San Francisco Chronicle June 22, 1874



Donner Lake 1869

Deakin's paintings show a love of pristine nature; humans are no part of his depictions or are very small parts. In some work Indians featured more prominently because they were of nature. The Industrial Revolution is not in evidence; there is no logging, no railroad road, no cities, no tourists, and no roads. He could have included evidence of civilization he could have but since he didn't we must interpret that he found raw nature more attractive.

In the 1880's the art market became saturated with landscapes so he moved to still life. His paintings hung in many private collections but were destroyed in the San Francisco earthquake.

Deakin marketed his paintings like most other West Coast artists at the time. "They would send major works to Art Association exhibitions, where they would be reviewed in the newspapers. Often the paintings were sold directly out of this venue. Other painting would be consigned to Snow and Roos or the many other commercial art galleries that came into existence in the 1870's." (Edwin Deakin Painter of the Picturesque pg 12) See the ad on page 22. If paintings did not sell Deakin would take back his work, reorganize his pictures and auction them off himself. Other painters did likewise.

# Andrew Hill



Andrew Hill's painting above, the "Murphy Party," shows an historical view of Donner Lake from the Summit. Hill won a gold medal for it in 1878 in Sacramento. The original version, along with most of his other art, was destroyed in the San Francisco earthquake leaving only black and white reproductions.

**AT THE SUMMIT.** This is Part II of the story that started on page 14 Pt. III is page 22

The School of Design Pupils Will Celebrate the Day In Style. A quantity of fireworks was sent up to the Summit yesterday to the order of the pupils of the School of Design rustivating there. They propose to celebrate "The Fourth" to-day and this evening in orthodox style.

The school on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday made studies looking towards Lake Donner and of rocks back of the Summit Hotel. Yesterday they studied cliffs overlooking Lake Donner. Tomorrow they will approach nearer that sheet of water, and on Saturday will complete the first week of the outing with rock and tree studies opposite and near the Summit.

Next week broad landscape work will be resumed. Sketches of three of the chief study views of the week thus far have been sent down to this city and show excellent work by the class.

Several Sacramentans have joined the excnrsionists, who now number thirty-five.

July 4, 1890  
Sacramento Daily Union

**AT THE SUMMIT.** [This report concludes the page14 announcement "At the Gallery" and the Pt II "At the Summit" on page 21.]

The School of Design and Its Work— A Slight Accident. The Sacramento School of Design has now been at the Summit one week. In that time its progress in landscape study has exceeded the expectations of the instructors. They testify that the scholars have applied the principles of landscape drawing taught them in the classroom very much more quickly and intelligently in the broad field of the Sierras than had been anticipated. The present week the course of study will be more difficult, their attention being given to strong light and shade and low detail, and somewhat less to color work, which, however, will be continued. It is the intention also to do more in study of distance effects.

The school celebrated "The Fourth" by a pyrotechnic display in the evening after a half holiday in the afternoon. One evening last week an orchestra was secured, and by the kindness of the proprietor of the hotel the scholars enjoyed a delightful "hop."

One day last week the only accident of the excursion occurred. Miss Myers, unthinkingly, sprang from a hand car near the hotel and fell between the rails, the car passing over, but not striking the young lady or another young woman who fell with her. The former sustained a sprain of an ankle and one or two bruises, but nothing at all serious. She now limps to her work, while reflecting upon the folly of jumping from a moving vehicle.

Assistant Instructor Sawyer came down to the city yesterday morning and taught the Saturday class at the Art Gallery. He returned to the Summit last night. The scholar's instructors and accompanying friends are all warm in their commendation of Joseph Goulden, proprietor of the Summit Hotel, for his attention to their comfort and the excellence of his table.

Mr. Goulden is also a member of the firm of Goulden & Jacobs, proprietors of the Summit Soda Springs Hotel, which will be open for guests on the 10th inst. This hotel is situated in the midst of a perfect sportsman's paradise. It is distant from the Summit only twelve miles and is reached by stage from Summit Station. A telephone line connects the two lines so that guests at the springs, while located in the midst of the forest still have the means of communication with the outer world. There are innumerable lakes and streams in the vicinity, all teeming with trout while deer and other game abound in the surrounding hills and canyons.

Sacramento Daily Union  
July 6, 1890

## Picture Sales

HI. M. Newhall & Co. will sell at auction to-morrow at salesrooms forty-five oil paintings by Edwin Deakin, the industrious, earnest, ambitious and progressive young artist, who desires, with the proceeds of the sale, to study in Europe and avail himself of the advantages obtainable in the best schools in the world. We hope our citizens will liberally encourage Mr. Deakin, as Californians have reason to be proud of the record of three or four young men, who have gone from this State, and won great fame in the art schools of Europe.

Daily Alta California  
April 3, 1877 pg 1

Example of artist's ad.

# Email to the Editor

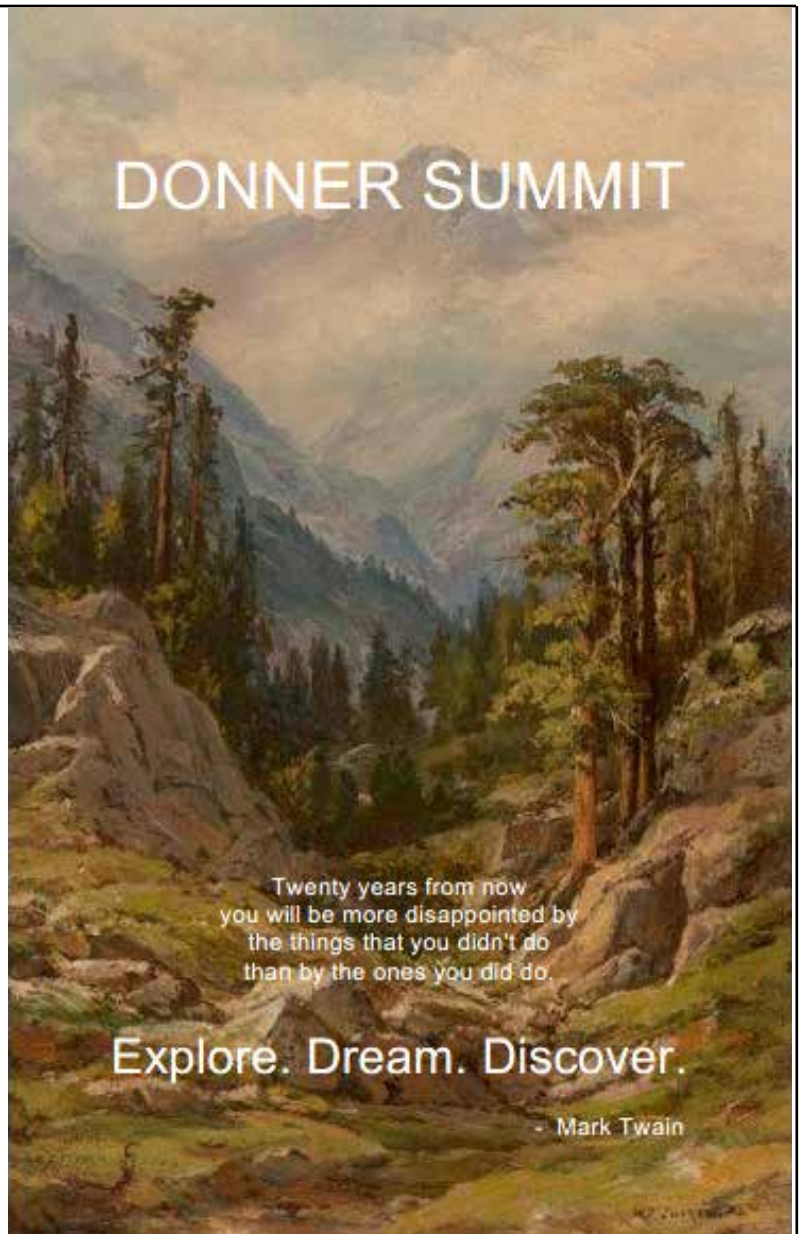
Reading through your August 2023 Heirloom I was inspired to get creative.

I suddenly found myself pairing an image of an antique William F. Jackson Painting “Headwaters of the Yuba” with a favorite Mark Twain quote!

I very much appreciate the spirit of the Heirloom.

Thanks for keeping the issues interesting... and inspiring!

David Daniel, Heirloom reader



## A Good Conclusion

The English romantic poets and American transcendentalist writers popularized the notion that contemplation of unspoiled nature was therapeutic experience for the city dweller, and the idea became ingrained in nineteenth-century American culture. Landscape art became a way for urban resident to be reminded of the morally healthy great outdoors. One could revel [in natural] splendor in the comfort of the drawing room, sparing oneself the long and uncomfortable stagecoach ride..."

Alfred C. Harrison, Jr.  
Edwin Deakin California Painter of the Picturesque pg 12

# Donner Summit Historical Society

[www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org](http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org)

## Membership

I/we would like to join the Donner Summit Historical Society and share in the Summit's rich history

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The Donner Summit Historical Society is a 501(c)(3) non-profit

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Please mail this card with your check payable to the DSHS to Donner Summit Historical Society P.O. 1 Norden, CA 95724

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If you would like monthly newsletter announcements, please write your email address below VERY neatly.

\_\_\_\_\_



## Take the Scenic Route: Donner Summit's Old Highway 40



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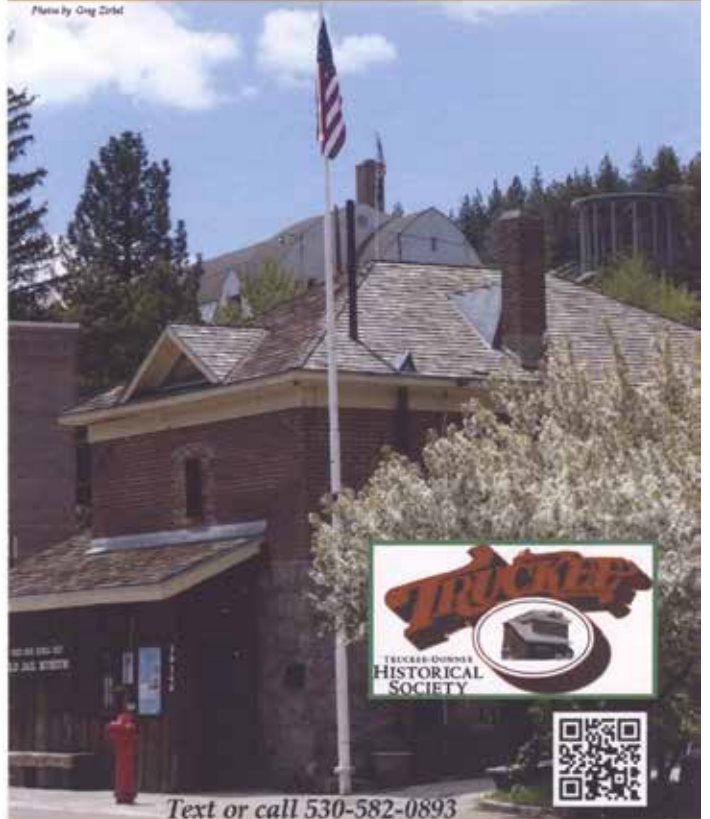
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# DOWNTOWN TRUCKEE HISTORY MUSEUMS

Photo by Greg Zerk



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## Old Truckee Jail Museum

[OldJailMuseum@TruckeeHistory.org](mailto:OldJailMuseum@TruckeeHistory.org)



Want more history, visit our nearby friends at the  
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Donner Summit Historical Society at Soda Springs

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# Contemporary Review of "Donner Lake" by Thomas Hill

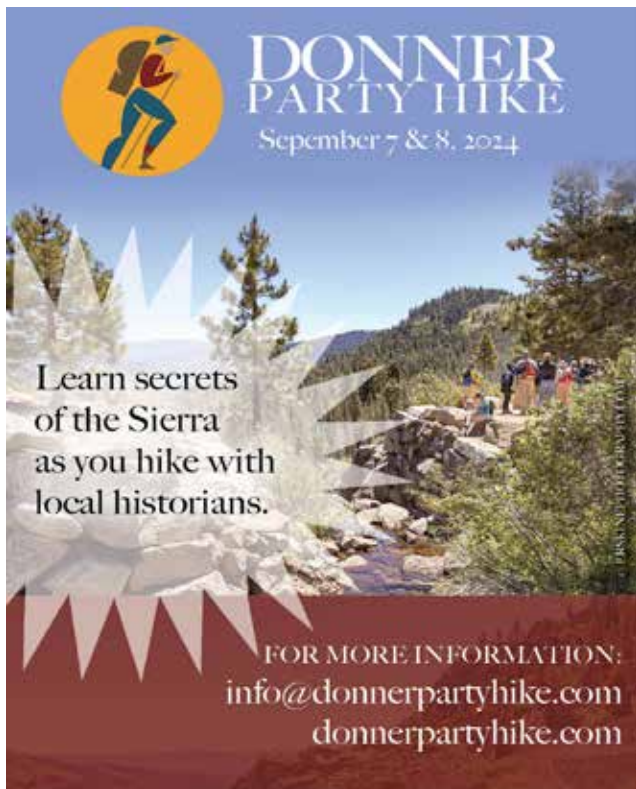
"Donner Lake." (Painted 1874)

The large oil picture of Donner Lake, lately finished by Thomas Hill to ornament a palatial residence as yet unfinished, in San Francisco, is a great work of art. The object is a difficult one. The view is taken from the summit of the Sierra, a short distance north of the Central Pacific Railroad, and the spectator looks down over a vast extent of country. In the foreground is the slope of the mountain, with rock, shrubbery, and some sugar-pine and fir trees; in the middle-ground, about 600 feet below, is a bench, on which are Angeline Lake, high rocks and dense forest; beyond that, in the right, is the steep mountain side, with the line of the railroad cut into the rocky cliff; in the centre of the picture is Donner Lake, 1000 feet further down over it drifts a line of morning mist, and beyond and above mists the eastern ridge of the Sierra, tipped with snow. The time is about 5 a. m. the formation of the country and the color of the rocks being such that in the general opinion of artists, no tolerable picture could be painted of the scene with any fidelity to nature, at a later hour of the day.

The coloring is so pleasing, the effect of light and shade is so strong and full of unity, and the general impression left by the work is so pleasing, that it requires some familiarity with art to understand that the subject is not one that would have been preferred by the artist. The vast and vague middle ground and distance, the foreground made up chiefly of scanty shrubbery and bare rocks without imposing forms or large masses of dark color, are difficult to handle. But the wide sweep of the landscape, the sudden descent of 1500 feet, and the associations connected with the completion of the railroad to the Summit, with the tragedy of the Donner party and with the remembered beauty of the scenery around the lake, though hidden to the eye by its distance from this point, have made this a favorite scene with railroad men. Mr. Bierstadt painted it on a canvas of the same size of Mr. Hill's 6 by 10 feet for Mr. Huntington, and rumor said he received \$20,000 for it.

When exhibited here at the gallery of the Art Association it attracted thousands of visitors, and was highly praised. Taken from near the same point, and at nearly the same hour of the day, it necessarily suggests a comparison in the mind of all who have seen both, and the result is not unfavorable to Mr. Hill. His painting is one that will be an important addition to the art treasures of our city.

November 7, 1875  
Daily Alta Californian



The Daily Alta was a major San Francisco paper. That the newspaper included this article reviewing Donner Lake by Thomas Hill shows the importance 19th Century society placed on landscape art.

# Unearthing the West: History Expeditions Retraces Footsteps and Recites Forgotten Tales

The American West, a land of rugged beauty and pioneering spirit, holds a treasure trove of stories waiting to be unearthed. Enter History Expeditions, a unique group driven by a passion to explore the tales and trails of this captivating region. But their adventures go beyond breathtaking landscapes; they delve into the forgotten heroes who shaped its history.

These intrepid explorers the members of History Expeditions, a blend of ultra-distance athletes and amateur historians, embark on challenging expeditions that combine historical research with physical endurance. Their mission? To breathe life into the past by retracing the footsteps of remarkable individuals who have faded from the public eye.

One such figure is John "Snowshoe" Thompson, a legendary mail carrier whose feats of winter mail delivery in the 1850's pushed the boundaries of human endurance. Thompson braved treacherous snow-covered terrain, relying solely on his instincts and the stars to navigate a 100-mile route in a mere three days. In March, 2024, History Expeditions aimed to retrace his steps, battling deep snow and freezing temperatures to honor Thompson's legacy.



Their mission was achieved on March 10th, finishing their reprise from Placerville, begun five days before and ending in Genoa, NV at Thompson's gravesite. The expedition members gently laid down tribute cards they'd created, with a photo and biographical details of Thompson, his family and close friends. It's all intended to honor the man and his accomplishments. He was an integral part of opening communications between the West and the rest of America at a particularly consequential moment of the New Nation's progression.

Their dedication goes beyond a simple trek. Reconstructing Thompson's route is a detective's game. Lacking detailed maps, they meticulously comb through historical documents and venture into the wilderness, piecing together the most likely path.

Remnants of ancient trails and meticulous research become their tools, allowing them to not only retrace the physical journey but also understand the mental fortitude and resourcefulness it demanded.

Thompson's story is far richer than just athletic prowess. History Expeditions reveals the multifaceted nature of these forgotten heroes. Thompson, for instance, was not just a mail carrier; he was an



Above the History Expeditions group at the Snowshoe Thompson grave in Genoa, NV after completing their reprise of Snowshoe's route  
Bottom: the group with Frank Tortorich, author of *John A. Snowshoe Thompson*. History Expeditions team left to right: Hal Hall, Bob Crowley, Frank Tortorich, Elke Reimer, Jen Hemmen, Tim Twietmeyer.

entrepreneur, establishing his own mail service, and a pillar of his community, contributing to its growth with irrigation projects.

The expeditions go a step further by incorporating historical artifacts into the experience. Recovered letters, believed to have been carried by Thompson, are recited during the trek. These snippets of communication transport the team back in time, offering a glimpse into the lives of those who relied on this crucial mail service.

But the journey doesn't end on the trail. History Expeditions understands the importance of sharing their discoveries and the significance of these forgotten figures. They document their expeditions with film crews, capturing the physical and emotional challenges encountered. Real-time GPS tracking allows the public to virtually participate in the adventure. Through meticulous research and storytelling, they ensure these heroes are not lost to the sands of time.

History Expeditions is more than just a team of adventurers; they are historical sleuths, piecing together forgotten narratives. Their expeditions are testaments to the power of human spirit, both in the past, with figures like Thompson, and in the present, with the team's dedication to unearthing these stories. By exploring the tales and trails of the American West, they remind us that history isn't just about grand events; it's about the remarkable individuals who shaped our past.



Just for fun, some pictures from Genoa, NV. Top: an antique store. Center: the Oldes saloon in Nevada. Bottom: A wagon and luggage. Left: Snowshoe Thompson statue.