

# Donner Memorial State Park



## Our Mission

The mission of the California Department of Parks and Recreation is to provide for the health, inspiration and education of the people of California by helping to preserve the state's extraordinary biological diversity, protecting its most valued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation.

ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER  
Governor

MIKE CHRISMAN  
Secretary for Resources

RUTH COLEMAN  
Director, California State Parks



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**Donner Memorial State Park**  
**12593 Donner Pass Road**  
**Truckee, CA 96161**  
**(530) 582-7892**

## The Donner Party

**T**he United States of America was growing rapidly during the 1830s, when American frontiersmen and sailors began to bring back stories about the wonders of Alta California. The political situation was uncertain. Mexico still held the area, but it was widely believed that she was losing control of her northernmost province. It seemed inevitable that, sooner or later, the U.S.A. would step in. It was "manifest destiny," they said, that the United States of America should stretch across the continent from sea to shining sea. Interest in California was further heightened in 1841, when word reached the eastern settlements that it was possible to travel directly overland to the West Coast and thus avoid an expensive sea voyage.

Two prosperous Illinois farmers, George Donner and his brother Jacob, were among the many who listened to the fabulous stories of fine soil, gentle climate and virtually unlimited opportunity in California. Both men were in their 60s, but California truly fascinated them, and in April 1846, they took their families and as many of their possessions as they could fit into six wagons and headed west. They were accompanied by their good friend, James Reed, a well-to-do cabinet-maker, and his family. Together they joined a stream of people of all sorts, rich and poor, bound for California.

By early summer, this stream had reached the plains west of the Mississippi River. Tamsen Donner, George's wife, wrote to a friend that the journey up to that point had been both beautiful and pleasant. But at a fork in the trail beyond South Pass, in what is now Wyoming, the stream of emigrants divided. Lansford Hastings, an eloquent spokesman for westward migration, was recommending a shortcut via Fort Bridger that he said would save 200 miles. Several families decided to take the new "Hastings Cutoff," and soon 23 wagons and a total of 89 people were committed to the route. George Donner was elected wagonmaster, and the group therefore came to be known as the Donner Party, though it also included the Reeds, the Breens, the Murphys, the Eddys, the Graves' and the family of Lewis Keseberg, a well-educated German who spoke four languages.

As it turned out, the "shortcut" was no timesaver. The group wore itself out hacking a 36-mile road through the Wasatch Mountains and then lost most of their oxen and cattle while crossing the desolate, completely waterless, 80-mile-wide Great Salt Lake Desert. As a result, several wagons and many possessions had to be abandoned. By the time the party returned to the main California Trail in eastern Nevada, they were a full three weeks behind those who had not chosen to take the Hastings Cutoff. Tired, frustrated, hungry and disillusioned, the party turned from a cooperative group into a cluster of



*The Donner Lake encampment, November 1846*

bickering families. James Reed knifed a man during a heated argument, and though he claimed to have acted in self-defense, sentiment ran high against him. In the end, he was banished from the party and traveled on to California alone, while his wife and children stayed with the main party.

Late October found the Donner Party in Truckee Meadows, near present-day Reno, Nevada. The local Paiute Indians were harassing them, and they were exhausted, demoralized, bitter and completely out of food. Then Charles Stanton, a bachelor who had gone ahead to obtain provisions, returned from Sutter's Fort in Sacramento with seven pack

mules loaded with beef and flour. He also brought news of a very difficult mountain crossing up ahead, so the group rested for nearly a week to gather strength. The delay proved fatal.

Winter came early to the Sierra Nevada that year. By the time the party reached Donner Lake, there was snow on the ground. The Donner families became snowbound at

Alder Creek, six miles from the lake. The rest of the party tried to cross Donner Pass three times but finally gave up.

#### **THE CAMP**

Still hoping that a thaw would open the pass, the

group at the lake settled in for the winter. The Murphys built a cabin against a large boulder, while the Breens and Kesebergs partitioned an existing cabin into two rooms, one for each family. The Reed and Graves families built a two-room log cabin further downstream, and with snow swirling about them, the Donners built two teepee-style, hide-covered brush shelters against trees. Food was soon scarce once again, and efforts at hunting and fishing in the snowy



*Arrival of the first relief party, February 1847*

mountains were unsuccessful. Individual survival instincts were already showing, as families with the most provisions could not be induced to share with the less fortunate.

In December, with snow continuing to pile up, ten men and five women decided to make a desperate attempt to get to Sutter's Fort.

They left camp on crude snowshoes made from oxbows and rawhide strips, carrying only six days' skimpy rations. Five days out, Stanton, the only one who knew the route, became exhausted and snowblind. To avoid delaying the group, he stayed behind to die. The others quickly became lost and had to sit out a three-day Christmas storm huddled under blankets to keep from freezing. Four of them died, and with no other food, the rest ate their bodies. One month later, two men and all five of the women, all extremely emaciated, arrived at the settlement. They



*Patty Reed's doll. A replica can be seen at Donner Memorial State Park. The original is on exhibit at Sutter's Fort State Historic Park in Sacramento, California.*

had survived on one deer and the bodies of their dead companions.

### THE RESCUERS

Relief was slow in coming for the Donner Party. There was a war going on, and finding men to take food into the snowy mountains was difficult. Finally, in late February, seven men reached the cabins buried in the snow at Donner Lake. Several half-starved people emerged as the rescuers approached, and one woman asked, "Are you men from California, or do you come from Heaven?" They had been reduced to eating the last of their oxhides and ox bones. Several deaths from starvation had already occurred.

Gathering 21 able-bodied survivors, including some children, the rescue party started back across the mountains to the west. Having eaten all its food, this group was fortunate to meet a second party led by the once-banished James Reed. After a brief reunion with his wife, Reed pressed on to the cabins, and on March 1 was reunited with his young children. At the Donner tents, Reed saw his old friend, George Donner, dying from a badly infected cut on his hand. He also saw evidence of cannibalism at both the cabins and the Donner camp. Leaving five survivors at the cabins and six at the Donner camp, Reed started back with the rest. Tamsen Donner insisted on remaining with her ailing

husband. Reduced to starvation, Reed's party was forced to wait out another three-day blizzard at a spot later known as Starved Camp, the scene of more deaths and cannibalism.

After the blizzard, Reed and the strongest members of the group pressed on and met a third relief party of four men at Emigrant Gap. These men, among them the two male survivors of the December "snowshoe party," continued on to Donner Lake to bring out the last able survivors. Of those who were still able to move about, only two remained behind—Lewis Keseberg, who was suffering from a bad foot, and Tamsen Donner, who still refused to leave her husband.

In April 1847, only a year after the Donners had started out from Illinois with such high hopes, one last party of rescuers came to salvage the immigrants' belongings. Keseberg alone was still alive.

The Donner story is a tragic page in the saga of westward migration. Poor judgment, heroic sacrifice, struggle for survival and plain bad luck all played their part. Though other parties had made it through Donner Pass intact, the winter of 1846-1847 was one of the worst ever recorded in the Sierra. The base of the monument at Donner Memorial State Park stands 22 feet high, the depth of the snow that trapped the travelers. Only 49 of the 91 members of the party, including the entire Breen and Reed families, survived the terrible ordeal.

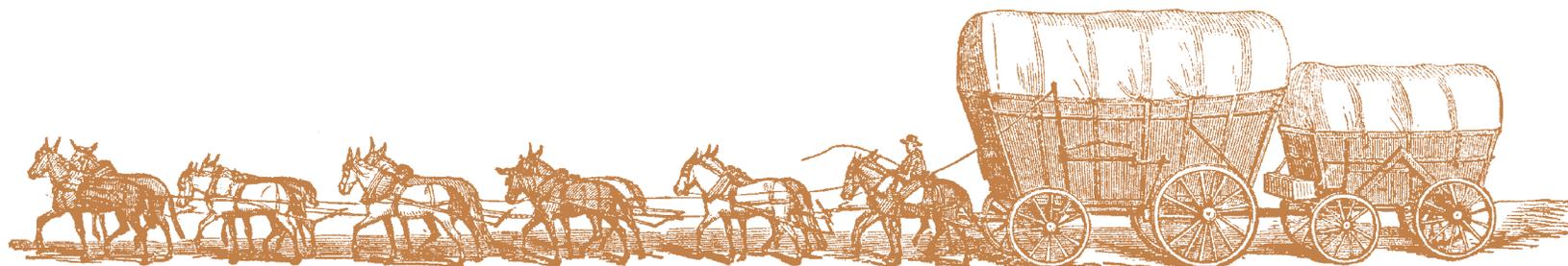
Most of the survivors carried out their original intention of settling in California, but their lives were indelibly marked by the events of that winter. Keseberg, for example, died a tormented, half-crazed man after being hounded throughout his life by people who accused him of having murdered Tamsen Donner.

For those who would like to know more about the tragic story of the Donner Party, a selection of books is available at the Emigrant Trail Museum in Donner Memorial State Park.



## Overland Emigrant Trails

- Conventional Trail
- ..... Donner Party Trail



## DONNER MEMORIAL STATE PARK

The park is located amid the pine and fir forests just east of Donner Pass in the Sierra Nevada. Surrounded by magnificent alpine scenery and directly adjacent to a beautiful three-mile-long lake, the park offers vacationers a wide range of recreational opportunities including camping, picnicking, hiking, boating, fishing and waterskiing.

The Emigrant Trail Museum at the park is open year round and includes exhibits about the human and natural history of this area. Campfire programs and other interpretive programs are conducted by park staff during the summer. A schedule of interpretive programs can be obtained by contacting the park staff or consulting the bulletin boards.

The forest is made up primarily of lodgepole pine, Jeffrey pine and white fir. Because of its elevation, nearly 6,000 feet, there is no poison oak. Deer, squirrels, chipmunks, porcupines, raccoons, beavers and a wide variety of birds are commonly seen.

In and near the park are some fascinating traces of the geologic process that shaped this portion of the Sierra Nevada. Rounded, smooth-surfaced rock outcrops are the result of granitic intrusions that welled up into the earth's surface—giant bubbles of molten rock, cooling and hardening as they rose.

More recently that granite bedrock has been exposed by erosion. The Sierra's steep eastern face, the barrier that faced the Donner Party and other California immigrants, was formed over the last few million years by the tilting up

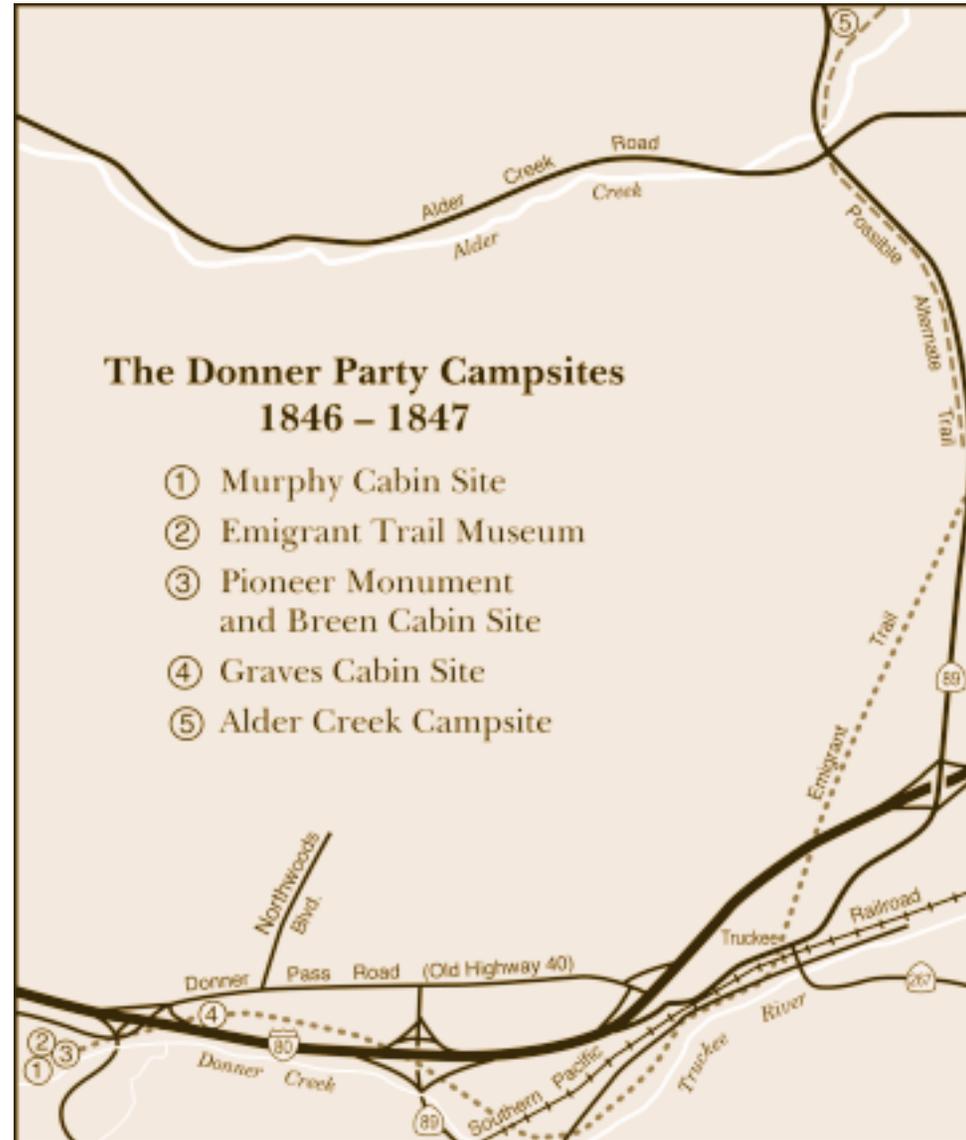
of a gigantic section of the earth's crust. The huge granite block tipped up dramatically on the east and tipped down on the west to disappear beneath the accumulated sediments that form the Sacramento Valley. Glaciers dominated the crest of the Sierra Nevada throughout much of the last million years. One of them carved out the Truckee Basin, where the park is located, depositing gravel and even some huge boulders in what is now a thickly forested area. When the glacier began to retreat, it left behind a terminal moraine of loose soil and gravel that blocked the creek channel and resulted in the formation of Donner Lake.

## RECREATION

### Fishing

The park has more than three miles of frontage on Donner Lake and Donner Creek. Fishing is not spectacular, though the lake is planted periodically with catchable trout, and both trout and kokanee are sometimes caught. A valid sport fishing license is required. Many fishermen prefer to use the park as a base to visit nearby lakes.

There is no boat launching ramp in the park, but a public ramp is available in the northwest corner



of Donner Lake. The lake is open to both power and sail boats.

The park has about two and a half miles of hiking trails, and there are excellent trail opportunities in the neighboring Tahoe National Forest. Hiking information is available at the trail museum.

### **Camping**

The 154-site campground is usually open from Memorial Day until mid-September. Each campsite has a table and stove, as well as a parking space. Restrooms with hot showers are nearby. Some of the campsites will accommodate trailers or motorhomes up to 24 feet long. There are no hookups available. Reservations for family campsites can be made up to seven months in advance by calling (800) 444-7275. Reservations are strongly advised from mid-June through Labor Day.

### **Picnicking/Swimming**

The picnic area is located near the lake and includes picnic tables, restrooms and piped drinking water. A sandy beach and walking trails are nearby.

### **THE EMIGRANT TRAIL MUSEUM AND PIONEER MONUMENT**

The museum was completed in 1962 after 15 years of effort by local citizens, park staff and legislators. Open all year, the museum in-



*Donner Lake*

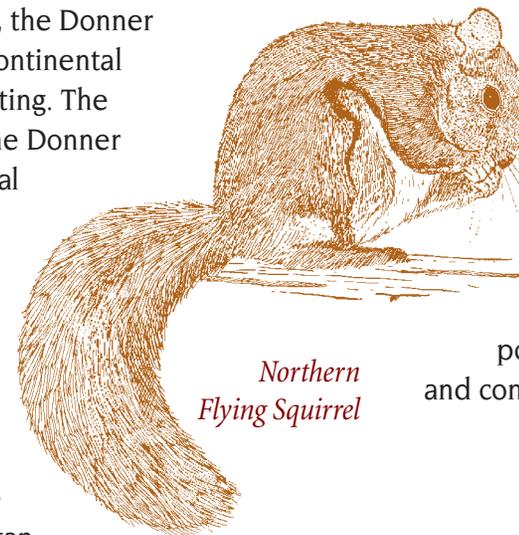
cludes exhibits about the natural history of the Truckee Basin, local Native American life, the overland immigration of the 1840s, the Donner tragedy, construction of the transcontinental railroad, lumbering and ice harvesting. The museum store features books on the Donner Party and Emigrant Trail, local natural history and recreation and related items.

The Pioneer Monument, located near the museum, was erected in honor of all who made the difficult trek across the western plains and mountains to reach California during the 1840s. Work on the monument began

in 1901, when the Native Sons of the Golden West purchased the site and constructed the stone base on which the bronze statue stands today. The monument was completed and officially dedicated June 6, 1918.

This is the site of the Breen Cabin, one of the structures used by members of the Donner Party during the winter of 1846-1847. The Murphy cabin site is located 200 yards south of the museum. It was built against a large rock that formed the west end of the cabin. The cabin was built in November 1846, and was approximately 25 feet long and 18 feet wide. It was cold and damp, with an earthen floor. Sixteen members of the Murphy, Foster and Eddy families spent the winter in this cabin.

A gentle, self-guided nature trail starts near the museum and makes a loop through the forest. Printed trail guides are available at the museum and entrance station. An easy, 1-mile lakeside interpretive trail starts in the lagoon portion of the day-use area and continues along the lake.



*Northern Flying Squirrel*

## ACCESSIBLE FEATURES

- **Camping**—7 accessible family sites; most have paved access to restrooms.
- **Picnicking**—1 retrofitted table and restroom.
- **Exhibits**—Paved access to monument; captioned video and audio available.

Accessibility is continually improving. Call the park for the latest information.

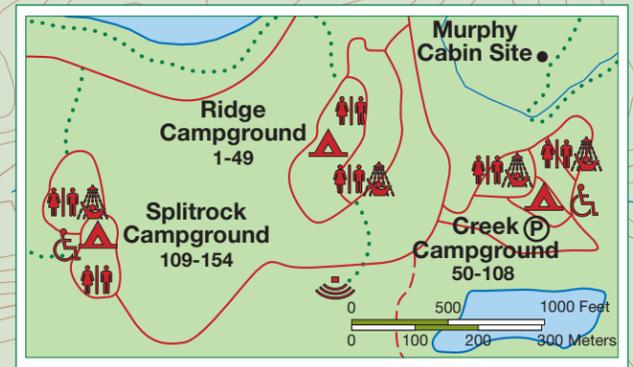
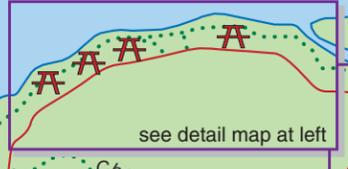
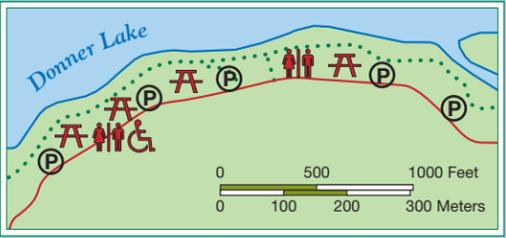
## NEARBY STATE PARKS

- Tahoe State Recreation Area  
1/4 mile east of Tahoe City on Highway 28  
(530) 525-7232
- Sugar Pine Point State Park  
10 miles south of Tahoe City on Highway 89  
(530) 525-7982
- D. L. Bliss State Park  
17 miles south of Tahoe City on Highway 89  
(530) 525-7277
- Emerald Bay State Park  
22 miles south of Tahoe City on Highway 89  
(530) 541-3030

## PLEASE REMEMBER

- Fires are only permitted in the established fireplaces. The danger of wildfire can be acute in midsummer.
- Dogs are permitted in the campground and picnic area but must be on a leash (six-foot maximum length) at all times and in your tent or motor vehicle at night. They are not permitted on the trails or on the beach.
- Plants and animals are protected in order to preserve the natural beauty of the area. Please do not feed the squirrels, chipmunks or any other animals.
- Family sites accommodate up to eight people and two vehicles. Check-out time is noon. You may make camping reservations by calling (800)444-7275.
- Quiet hours are 10:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m.

# Donner Memorial State Park



This park is supported in part through a nonprofit organization. For more information contact: Sierra State Parks Foundation, P. O. Box 28 • Tahoe City, CA 96145 • (530)583-3737

- ### Legend
- Paved road
  - Unpaved road
  - Trail
  - Accessible Feature
  - Boat Ramp
  - Campfire Center
  - Campground
  - Locked Gate
  - Parking
  - Picnic Area
  - Restrooms
  - Showers
  - Swimming

