



“...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. A mile brought us to a small dimple on top of the mountain, in the centre of which is a miniature lake, surrounded by green grass.”

from [What I saw in California](#) by Edwin Bryant in 1849 upon reaching Donner Summit

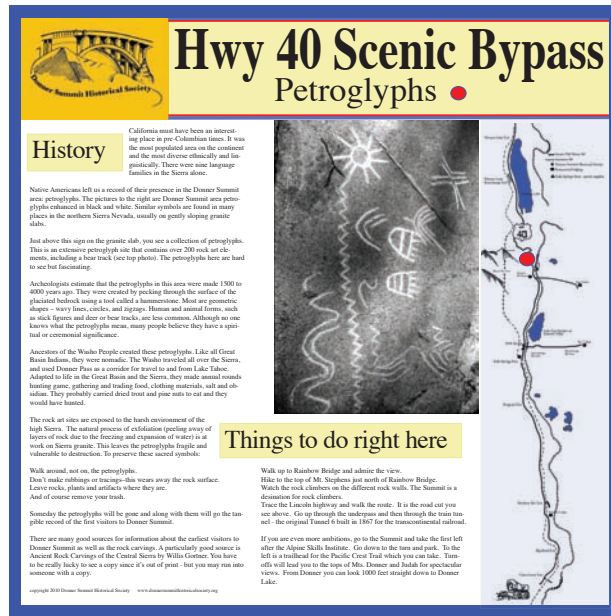
Donner Summit *is* grand and picturesque. It is unique. You can stand at Donner Pass where Native Americans crossed for thousands of years and left evidence of their crossings in the form of petroglyphs and grinding stones. The first wagon trains to California crossed using the same route. In the same spot you can see the first transcontinental railroad; the route of the first transcontinental highway, the Lincoln Highway; the first transcontinental air route and the first transcontinental telephone line’s route. That’s only a little of the history on Donner Summit. The Donner Summit Historical Society’s 20 Mile Museum, along Old Highway 40, celebrates the history of Donner Summit.



The 20 mile museum consists of thirty-four interpretive signs placed along Old Highway 40 from the Nyack exit, over the Summit and to just below Rainbow Bridge. Each sign highlights history, displays historical photographs and quotes, tells a good story, and lists activities for the location.

The signs highlight our unique history, share the beauty of Donner Summit, encourage visitation, and help revitalize the Summit economy.

The signs are sponsored by local businesses and individuals who paid for their construction and placement.



Hwy 40 Scenic Bypass Petroglyphs

History

California must have been an interesting place in pre-Columbian times. It was the most populated area on the continent and the most diverse ethnically and linguistically. There were one language families in the Sierra alone.

Native Americans left a record of their presence in the Donner Summit area petroglyphs. The pictures to the right are Donner Summit area petroglyphs etched in black and white. Similar symbols are found in many places in the northern Sierra Nevada, usually on gently sloping granite slabs.

Just above this sign on the granite slab, you see a collection of petroglyphs. This is an extensive petroglyph site that contains over 200 rock art elements, including a bear track (see top photo). The petroglyphs here are hard to see but fascinating.

Archaeologists estimate that the petroglyphs in this area were made 1,000 to 4,000 years ago. They were created by pecking through the surface of the glaciated bedrock using a tool called a hammerstone. Most are geometric shapes—very lines, circles, and zigzags. Human and animal forms, such as stick figures and deer or bear tracks, are less common. Although no one knows what the petroglyphs mean, many people believe they have a spiritual or ceremonial significance.

Ancestors of the Washo People created these petroglyphs. Like all Great Basin Indians, they were nomadic. The Washo traveled all over the Sierra, and used Donner Pass as a corridor for travel to and from Lake Tahoe. Adapted to life in the Great Basin and the Sierra, they made annual rounds hunting game, gathering and trading food, clothing materials, salt and obsidian. They probably carried dried trout and pine nuts to eat and they would have hunted.

The rock art sites are exposed to the harsh environment of the high Sierra. The natural process of oxidation (peeling away of layers of rock due to the freezing and expansion of water) is at work on Sierra granite. This leaves the petroglyphs fragile and vulnerable to destruction. To preserve these sacred symbols:

Walk around, not on, the petroglyphs.
Don't make rubbings or impressions—this wears away the rock surface.
Lay rocks, plants and artifacts where they are.
Don't consume any rock trails.

Sometimes the petroglyphs will be gone and along with them will go the tangible record of the first visitors to Donner Summit.

There are many good sources for information about the earliest visitors to Donner Summit as well as the rock art. A particularly good source is Ancient Rock Carvings of the Central Sierra by Willis Corcoran. You have to be really lucky to see a copy since it's out of print—but you may run into someone with a copy.

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Things to do right here

Walk up to Rainbow Bridge and admire the view.
Hike to the top of Mt. Sierritas just south of Rainbow Bridge.
Watch the rock climbers on the different rock walls. The Summit is a destination for rock climbers.
Trace the Lincoln Highway and walk the route. It is the road out you see above. Go up through the underpass and then through the main tunnel—the original Tunnel # built in 1867 for the transcontinental railroad.
If you are even more ambitious, go to the Summit and take the first left after the Alpine Ski Lift Institute. Go down to the rim and park. To the left is a trailhead for the Pacific Crest Trail which you can take. Summit will lead you to the top of Mt. Donner and Julia for spectacular views. From Donner you can look 1000 feet straight down to Donner Lake.

20 Mile Museum

Nyack Lodge
Emigrant Gap and Nyack have been stopping points for people crossing the Sierra since long before I-80 was built. This sign sits outside the store at Nyack.

Red Mountain
65 million years ago Red Mtn. was an island in the Pacific Ocean. More recently it was a downhill ski contest site and maybe more importantly, it was a fire lookout for the railroad. It’s 360 degree view is spectacular. The sign is 2000 feet below the peak at the Eagle Lakes exit from I-80 on north side of the freeway and just beyond the curve uphill.
39° 19.448/120° 33.734

Meadow Lake
Meadow Lake might have become a thriving metropolis had they been able to get the gold out. At one time there were thousands of people and hundreds of buildings there. A little later, Mark Twain said it was a beautiful town, except there were no people. “You can have a house all to yourself merely by promising to take care of it.” Just beyond the Red Mountain sign.
39° 19.472/120° 33.781

Forest Gift Shop
The stone buildings at Cisco along Old 40 are curiosities. This sign sits just off the north side of Cisco exit from I-80. 39° 18.672/120° 32.475

View of the Lincoln Highway
The Lincoln Highway was the first transcontinental highway and the first national memorial to Abraham Lincoln. It ran alongside the Yuba River at Big Bend. From the north side of the river between Big Bend and the I-80 overpass you have a great view of the old route. 39° 18.255/120° 31.475

Big Bend
The “bend” in the river was a resting stop for wagon trains and then highway travelers. Today there is a USFS fire station along with a Lincoln Highway monument. 39° 18.400/120° 31.061

Rainbow Lodge/Tavern
Built in 1927 as a stop on the highway, the Lodge is a wonderful old building with wonderful a collection of historical photographs. Enjoy the lodge, the river, and the nearby old houses. Sign is to the right of the lodge at the edge of the parking lot.
39° 18.603/120° 30.564

Donner Summit Lodge
Donner Summit Lodge was another of the travelers’ stops on the highway. Today it serves good food and is a good example of the many lodges that accommodated visitors along the old highway. The lodge is at the Soda Springs exit from I-80.
39° 19.513/120° 23.363

Soda Springs Store
There has been a succession of stores in Soda Springs over the decades. The current store sells a little of everything including sandwiches and picnic fixings in “downtown” Soda Springs. 39° 19.457/120 23.017

Soda Springs Hotel
Built in 1927, the hotel served travelers for decades. The sign sits right outside the Donner Summit Historical Society. The museum there has a huge collection of historical photographs and ephemera.
39 19.408/120 22.768

Ice Lakes
Ice Lakes hosted an ice harvesting industry for a few years until the huge snowfalls (35 feet on average) sent the ice harvesting to Truckee. Turn west out of Soda Springs on Soda Springs Rd. at the blinking light and head 2.5 miles west to Ice Lakes and Ice Lakes Lodge. Signs are in the Ice Lakes Lodge parking lot and inside the lodge.
39° 17.697/120° 22.959

Soda Springs Ski Area
Here is the oldest ski resort on the Summit and the site of the first Summit ski lift.

You can see Soda Springs Ski Area from Soda Springs. Turn at the blinking light.
39° 19.276/120° 22.758

Wagon Train Route
On the way out of Soda Springs towards Ice Lakes Lodge, just before Pahatsi Rd. at the top of the hill you will come to the actual wagon train route.
39° 18.777/120° 22.870

Norden Station
This was the railroad station for people wanting to come ski at Sugar Bowl. Across from the Old Norden Store on Old 40 39° 19.036/120° 21.196

Hutchinson Lodge
The lodge was built in 1924-25 by the Hutchinson brothers to serve their new “Sierra Ski Club.” This is a classic Sierra lodge. 39° 19.061/120° 21.159

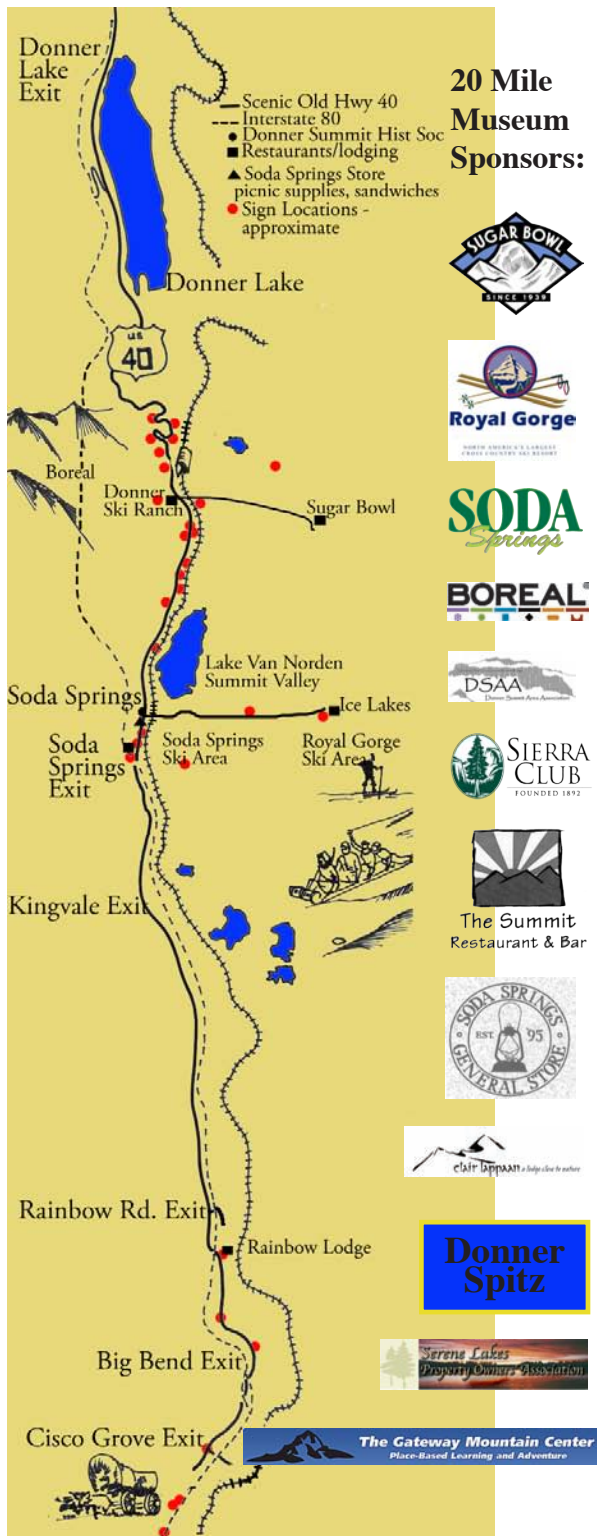
Clair Tappaan Lodge
Built by Sierra Club volunteers in 1935, the lodge has been expanded a number of times and has served skiers, hikers, and nature lovers for decades. Come up for a look. 39° 19.012/120° 21.011

Cal-Lodge
This is a classic mountain lodge belonging to the students of U.C. Berkeley. It was built in 1937 and rebuilt in 1939. 39° 18.997/120° 21.023

Tri Lodges
The Cal, Heidelberg and Clair Tappaan lodges were the “Tri Lodges” in the middle of the 20th Century. They are classic old style ski lodges.
39° 18.996/120° 21.022

Summit Valley Overlook
Summit Valley, Van Norden Meadow, is the headwaters of the Yuba River. Through this valley came Native Americans who left grinding rocks, wagon trains, freight wagons, the railroad, and the first transcontinental highway. It is today an important wayspot for migratory fowl. This sign sits across from Clair Tappaan Lodge.
39° 18.997/120° 21.022

Sugar Bowl
Sugar Bowl was the first California destination ski resort and the site of the first chairlift in California in 1939, Sugar Bowl is a popular ski resort. This sign sits on Old Highway 40 just next to the parking structure. 39° 19.036/120° 21.194



20 Mile Museum Sponsors:



Magic Carpet

There were no roads into Sugar Bowl so people took tractor pulled sleighs until the Magic Carpet, the first ski gondola in California, was built. Skiers could ride to Sugar Bowl for 15 cents. Just east of the parking structure on Old 40. 39° 18.793/120° 20.345

Mt. Lincoln Charlie Chaplin's "The Gold Rush"

It was the highest grossing comedy of its day. Charlie Chaplin filmed "The Gold Rush" partly on Mt. Lincoln. Sign sits on Old Highway 40 just next to the parking structure. 39° 19.036/120° 21.194

Lodge at Sugar Bowl

The lodge was built in 1939 by William Wilson Wurster, the most "influential unknown architect in California." Sign sits on Old Highway 40 just next to the parking structure. 39° 19.036/120° 21.194

Donner Ski Ranch

The first rope tows on Donner Summit were here and across the old highway. Donner Ski Ranch has been the site of many "firsts." Sign is in the parking lot. 39° 19.082/120° 19.808

Airway Station and Beacon.

Donner Summit was part of the first transcontinental air route. The station and beacon helped guide early planes. On Old 40 at Donner Summit just up from Donner Ski Ranch. 39 19.007 120 19.619

Tunnel 6

Just across from Donner Ski Ranch is the road into Sugar Bowl. Tunnel 6, the longest tunnel of the Sierra crossing of the original Transcontinental Railroad is just below the overpass. 39° 18.019/120° 19.794

Roller Pass Wagon Train Route

One final hurdle before crossing into California: Roller Pass was so steep double teams of oxen hauled wagons up one at a time. Then it was all downhill to the emigrants' dreams. The sign is at Roller Pass on the Pacific Crest Trail. 39° 17.627/ 120° 19.226

Sugar Bowl Academy Building

This was the old highway maintenance building built in 1932 when Highway 40 was first plowed and became an all season highway. This is at the very top of Donner Summit on Old 40. 39° 18.999/120° 19.572

Donner Lake Overlook

This is a wonderful view of Donner Lake, named for the ill-fated Donner Party located just over the Summit on the Rainbow Bridge pedestrian walkway. 39° 19.156/120° 19.118



Transcontinental Railroad

The Transcontinental Railroad bound the nation together and allowed California to grow. Rainbow Bridge Parking lot. 39° 19.113/120° 19.115

Rainbow Bridge

The 1927 Rainbow Bridge is the first bridge built with a curving elevation change, a "grand and compound curve." Across from the Rainbow Bridge parking lot. 39° 19.138/120° 19.156

Petroglyphs

Native Americans crossed the Sierra for thousands of years before the coming of European Americans. They left interesting and mysterious petroglyphs. Just below Rainbow Bridge on Old 40. 39 19.056 120° 19.232

China Wall

There would have been no transcontinental railroad if it had not been for the Chinese workers. The China Wall was built without mortar by Chinese workers. Just down from Rainbow Bridge on the west side of the road. 39° 19.048/120° 19.226

Snowsheds

It was thought snow would not be a problem on Donner Summit when the railroad was built. Snow was a problem and soon almost 40 miles of snowsheds protected the tracks from snowfall and avalanche. They also kept passengers from seeing any of the beauty of Donner Summit. This sign sits 4 curves below Rainbow Bridge on Old 40. 39° 19.123/120° 18.968

Explore all the 20 Mile Museum signs and read the many stories about Donner Summit in our newsletter archives: www.donnertsummithistoricalsociety.org

Contact the Historical Society at:
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20 Mile Museum

Take the Scenic Route Along Old Highway 40 on Donner Summit

