

The Basic History Tour

4th graders in California study California history. They should not miss a tour of Donner Summit. Neither should others who like scenery and history.

Donner Summit is integral to California history; it is the most historically significant area in California and maybe in the entire Western United States. Native Americans crossed for thousands of years leaving behind mortars, petroglyphs, metates, and millions of basalt flakes from making arrow and spear heads. The first wagon trains to come to California went over Donner Summit as did thousands of wagons afterwards. Rust marks and grooves worn into the granite show the routes. The first transcontinental railroad went over Donner Summit followed by the first transcontinental highway, the first transcontinental air route, and the first transcontinental telephone line. Many of the emigrants who built California came over Donner Summit as did the first bicyclist to cross the Sierra and the country and then to go around the world. The first auto over the Sierra went over Donner Summit as did the first motorized vehicle crossing of the U.S. There's lots more. Over Donner Summit went the products of California to the rest of the country and the world. Donner Summit is extraordinarily historically rich. Even today Donner Pass is a gateway to California.



Stop One - The Donner Pass Overlook

Take the Soda Springs exit from I-80 or approach on Old 40, Donner Pass Road, from Truckee and Donner Lake. At the very top of the pass is a large building (above) and a

parking lot. Just to the right there is an historical marker (bottom of the 4th panel). Take the trail behind the buildings that goes uphill two hundred yards or so to a magnificent view seen above. The 1869 view is to the right.



Up this draw came the Stephens Party, the first wagon train to reach California with wagons, in 1844. It was led by 81 year old Caleb Greenwood. You can see the route of the first transcontinental highway coming up as well, on the right. It was put together in 1913 with expectations that the maximum speed would be 35 mph for cars and 10 mph for trucks. The average speed for crossing the country would be 18 mph because not all stretches of the road were optimal. Look down at the Donner Summit Bridge and follow the road below it to the horseshoe curve.



That's our next stop. Native Americans carved petroglyphs into the granite there thousands of years ago. First though, thousands of emigrants headed for California. When they saw the Sierra Nevada it was a huge barrier. It was "steep as the roof of a house." It struck terror in their hearts. They were so close to California. But first they had to get over the mountains and they had to get over quickly because by the time the emigrants reached the Sierra, winter and snow were coming. The Sierra was the hardest part of

the whole journey.

The Stephens Party was the first wagon train to get to California with wagons. They had to leave half their wagons at Donner Lake and take the other half apart to get them up here. 17 year old Moses Schallenberger offered to stay at Donner Lake and guard the wagons.



It snows a lot in the Sierra and it kept snowing at Donner Lake. It did not melt. There was no game because the animals had all left. Moses spent most of the winter alone at Donner Lake in a small cabin that had no door and cow-hides and branches for a roof. He was so lonely. "My life was more miserable than I can describe," he said. Moses ate fox, coyote and crows. For Christmas he had saved just enough coffee for one cup. At the end of February he saw one person coming towards him over the snow. Imagine how he felt.

Schallenberger Ridge, on the south side of Donner Lake, is named for Moses Schallenberger.

Two years after Moses the Donner Party came along late in the season. Of the 83 members of the Donner Party, only 45 survived.



Stop #2 - The Petroglyphs

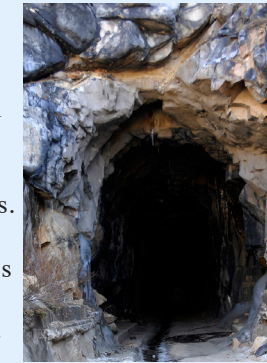
Go down Old 40, driving past the Donner Summit Bridge to the first big curve. Pull off and park after you've done about half the 180 degree curve (above). You'll see a 20 Mile Museum sign for petroglyphs and China Wall and you'll see a monument off the road to the right. Just above the monument, which explains the petroglyphs, there is a rock slab with ancient drawings 2-4,000 years old. Granite is one of the hardest rocks on the planet. Imagine how long it took to carve the petroglyphs into the granite. For



No one knows what the petroglyphs mean. Perhaps they are religious or magical symbols. Perhaps they are records of what had occurred. Perhaps they are wishes or predictions. There are no human or animal forms although there is one bear paw here. Can you find it?

Stop #3 - Tunnel 6

Hop in your car and go back to the top. Just opposite Donner Ski Ranch is Sugar Bowl Rd. Park where the two 20 Mile Museum signs are, just before the overpass. Walk across the overpass and look down on the left side. That's Tunnel 6 (right), the longest of the original Sierra tunnels for the transcontinental railroad. It was



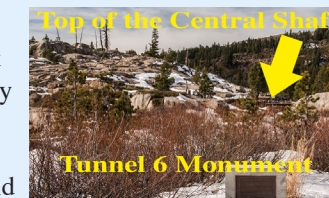
carved from the Sierra granite and took two years to build.



Go back across the overpass and then down underneath to walk through the tunnel. You'll really want a flashlight to spot the tool marks that are 150 years old (left).

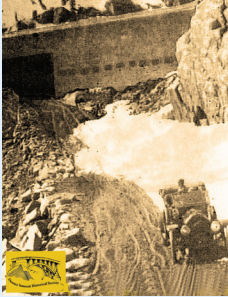
It was a race. The Union Pacific was building a railroad from the east. The Central Pacific was building from the west, from Sacramento, but the Central Pacific was stuck. The Sierra was the hardest part of the country to cross, just as it had been for the emigrants with their wagons, and 15 tunnels were needed, all in solid granite. Day after day, 24 hours a day Chinese drillers drilled into the granite to set explosives. Rock rubble was all removed by hand.

To speed things up the Central Pacific started Tunnel 6 from the west and the east at the same time. They still only made inches of progress every day. So they bore a hole down the center so they could



that reason they must have been important to the Native Americans.

work not just from the east and the west, from the outside in, but from the inside out. When you get to the center of the 1659 foot Tunnel 6 look up. There is the central shaft, 89 feet high. You can see the top from the parking lot at stop number 1. Flash your light on the north side of the tunnel below the shaft. Look for the drill marks of the Chinese workers. There are many here. Then look for some drill holes. The 1 ¼ inch ones were for nitroglycerine. The 2 ½ inch ones were for black powder. They are almost 150 years old.



Even working four faces at once Chinese workers only made progress of less than a foot a day.

When you get out of Tunnel 6 you are in the sunlight. When the railroad was built it was all in darkness here. A long building, a snowshed 40 miles long, covered the train tracks to protect them from snow.



On leaving Tunnel 6, look left immediately. Here is the original road used to help build the railroad and get over Donner Pass. Wagons and cars had to cross the railroad tracks and travel for a distance inside the snowshed. On coming to the tracks the driver turned off his engine so he could hear if a train was coming. Then he opened the big door. Still no train? He went across the tracks and then fifty yards down the tunnel to open the other door on the other side. Still no train? He went back to his car, started up the engine and drove into the snowshed, across the tracks, down the shed, and out the other door. Sometimes there were accidents. The picture to the left shows an automobile leaving the snowshed just outside Tunnel 6.

Continue along the railroad route through the next tunnel, Tunnel 7. Next you cross the underpass (above) that was built in

