

# The Donner Summit

# Heirloom



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

**June, 2022 issue #166**

## Making History Colorful

George Lamson

I'm sure that most of you out there at one time or another have been to an attraction where there's a service that will create a vintage historical photo of you. You dress up in period costumes that you are photographed in and then you get a sepia toned black & white photo to hang on your wall. In our media packed modern society, nothing says old like a black & white photo. Consider the color photo, below, of a restored vintage auto at Donner Summit Bridge taken just a few years ago. With a few digital manipulations the photo can be transformed into an aged looking black & white photo that makes it look like it might have been taken on the road when it was the Lincoln Highway.

There is of course a very practical reason for the connection of black & white photography to age. Prior to the 1950s, black & white photography was the predominant photographic method. Fortunately for us, it had been invented in the early 19th century and was used to photograph all aspects of that period in history. Although color photographic technology had been developed as early as the 1890s, the difficulty and expense of the process did not really make it practical until the 1950s. The result is that practically all of the photographs from the early 1800s until the 1950s are black & white. History owes much to black & white photography.



It was relatively simple to digitally age this photo of this impeccably restored vintage auto at Donner Summit Bridge. Converting it to black & white, fraying the edges, and adding some speckles and scratches put it in the way-back machine, back to its heyday in the 1920s.

# Story Locations in this Issue

Yuba Gap Lodge

Odds and Ends - Granite Plug and Environs

Norden Store

## DONNER SUMMIT



## Finding Your Way Through Donner Summit History

We've now passed 150 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 John Albert Index invented the index\* and 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 of Norm Saylor. 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.

\*historical society humor

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As valuable as black & white photography is to the historian, there is one overarching limitation to the process which is the absence of color. To understand the limitation, consider the limited amount of visual information there is in a black and white photo. Differences in tonality and color can only be visualized as shades of gray. When you look at the black & white photos in this article, each tiny dot or pixel that make up the photo can only be represented by 255 different shades of gray from black to white, but there is no color information. Compare this to the color images in which each pixel can express 16.7 million colors. It's obvious just from the loss of visual data that there is a lot missing in a black & white photo. Considering the important influences that colors can have on all aspects of life, there are also many more subtle losses when they are not present.

Now let us return to the vintage photo example above and turn it around. What if color could be added back to a Black&White photo to restore the missing visual information and make it more realistic to the original scene. This is by no means a new idea. Many photographers in the 19th century laboriously hand colored their prints in an attempt to add more realism to them. The process was tedious and required a real artist to simulate the natural colors. It is no surprise then that when Kodak brought color technology to the mass photography market in the 1950s, black & white photography pretty much disappeared except as a specialized photographic art form. Historically, however, we are left with a huge trove of images covering almost a century and a half of human history that is bereft of color.



This photograph of Pollard's Station at the west end of Donner Lake is from around 1870. The black & white photo shows in detail the activity at this early stage stop. The colorized photo restores the natural colors of the scene which add to the realism that is missing in the black & white photo. The lack of colors in black & white photos is especially limiting for the natural scenery of the Donner Summit area.

Today, due to advances in computer graphics technology, there may be a solution to the color limitations of our historical black & white images. It turns out that computers are remarkably adept at manipulating photographic images. In recent years, the algorithms developed for Artificial Intelligence (AI) and machine learning have been adapted to image technology to give almost magical results. This includes the colorization of black & white images. Simply put, these algorithms are “trained” by looking at millions of color and black & white versions of photos to “learn” how to add back colors to a black & white image. The algorithms learn how to find a sky and make it blue, find a face and make it flesh colored, find a tree and make the leaves green. They develop highly sophisticated models that can do amazing transformations. Up until recently, this technology was only available on high powered specialized computers, but in the last year, Adobe has made this technology available to a desktop computer running their Photoshop program. The photos here are just a few examples of what this program can do.



This photo of the old Beacon Hill hotel shows the way color can affect the "immediacy" of the photo. When you look at the black & white photo you think "What a great place that must have been to stay at back in the day." Looking at the color photo you think "We should stay at that place the next time we're up at the Summit." Of course, the hotel is long gone, so we can really only appreciate the way it must have looked by digitally restoring the colors.



Although this photo of Starr Walton carrying the Olympic Torch was taken in 1960, most of the press photos at that time were still black & white. Restoring the colors not only brings back the realism, but also accentuates the golden glow of the Olympic torch. Editor's note: when Starr saw this picture she said, "Perfect." It jibed with her memory of her blue ski outfit.

There are of course some important caveats to consider about this new technology. It doesn't work for every photo. Low quality photos (which unfortunately includes many historical photos) don't work very well. For the historian there is also the question of how accurate the colors are. For sky, trees, flesh tones, and other common elements the algorithm works well in assigning colors. But what about the color of a dress or a jacket or an automobile? The algorithm takes a guess, but there is no way to know if it is accurate unless there is some independent reference. The algorithm does allow for manual color assignments which does make it possible to make "educated" guesses, but for many photos color accuracy may be an issue.

I find that these image transformations result in more than technical changes to an image. As well composed and highly resolved as a black & white image may be, for me there is always an abstraction as the result of the missing colors. This is especially true for images of nature and people. It is hard when examining thousands of black & white photos as I do on a regular basis, not to develop an emotional bias that the world in those photos is a dull and even dreary place. Intellectually you know that it isn't so, but there is an emotional disconnect that diminishes the reality of the photo. For me seeing a photo of Donner Summit life in 1890 like the one below makes it much more real and immediate. The people could be people that I know and I can easily imagine myself being there.



*Summit Station, Donner Summit*



*Summit Station, Donner Summit*

This photo of the front of the Summit Hotel at Donner Pass shows a scene of daily life at the hotel around 1910. The choice of green for the color of the trim of the hotel is an example of an historical guess since there is no reference available. In addition to the added realism, restoring the appropriate colors also makes it easier to see that it is a man and his bear that the crowd of people is looking at.

As I continue working with the Donner Summit Historical Society image collection, I will be applying the colorization technology to selected photos and they will appear in future editions of the [Heirloom](#) and on the Facebook page from time to time.



Another Editor's Note: George Lamson is a former resident of Donner Summit and long time contributor to Donner Summit activities. One of his many projects was developing a data base of the thousands of DSHS historical photographs. The data base is searchable (see page 2) and one can spend hours scrolling through the pictures. Besides the convenience of the archive the data base also serves to preserve the unique collection in case of fire, theft, etc.

# The Memoirs of Mrs. Gregson

Bob Crowley, one of the four extreme athletes who did the reprise of the Forlorn Hope ([Heirloom](#) 12/20 and 1/21) and the reprise of the Donner Party Rescue Expeditions ([Heirlooms](#) 2/22 and 3/22) was speaking at the Auburn Civic Club. One of the attendees, Jim McNee, came up to Bob afterwards and gave him a copy of “Mrs. Gregson’s Memoir” which he’d found in his grandfather’s things. McNee’s grandfather, R.R. Mussetter, was a contractor in Auburn who remodeled a lot of old buildings. He found all kinds of things in those buildings and Mr. McNee assumed this was one. It’s a fascinating chapter in the life of a 19<sup>th</sup> Century woman. She started life in England, traveled to America in 1839 and to California in 1845. She then lived in California, ending up in Green Valley, just east of Napa. It’s an interesting piece of social history with details about what life was like for early Californians.

The memoir is also interesting because Mrs. Gregson lived in California during a consequential time and her memoir highlights those big events: the Mexican War, the Gold Rush, emigration to California, and the Donner Party.

The memoir can be confusing at times due to its sometimes non-linear nature, confusion of events, and consequential typos so we’ve distilled the best parts. We should also say that after some work our historical research team discovered that Mrs. Gregson is the Eliza Gregson who has been quoted in many books about the emigrants (see the sidebar here for an example). It also turns out that Eliza’s husband James wrote a memoir too, and it was in response to his “Statement” that Eliza wrote hers. She felt that “pioneer women had been neglected by historians” so she “proceeded to write her own memory”. James’ statement resides at the Bancroft Library at U.C. Berkeley and appeared in the [California Historical Society Quarterly](#) in June, 1940 along with Eliza’s Memoir.\*

Eliza’s original memoir is a bit longer than the McNee version, above, and includes some vignettes not in the found memoir. So the wall discovery is not a unique piece of history but Bob’s receipt of it provides the impetus for this article.

We have a bit of a mystery. Why did the person type up the memoir and correct most of Eliza’s spellings (for example, “sirra-naveds” for Sierra Nevadas”) and at the same time leave out some consequential details such as those surrounding the discovery of gold. Another missing detail is something that would seem personally important to Eliza. Shortly after gold was discovered Eliza discovered that her sister, just a bit over thirteen years old, had married a doctor in Sonoma who was part of the New York Volunteers. Apparently he deserted because the family kept him hidden to prevent his arrest. So there’s a good story but also an acceptable social custom of the time in a place with few women. Thirteen year-olds could marry. The memoir found in the wall also has some text that varies from the original which is bad form for those of us in the history business.

Doing some further research into the memoir our editorial staff discovered that Mr. Gregson was highlighted a number of times in the History of Sonoma County published in 1880.

Here we have, reported by Eliza, the details of life at the time.

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Eliza was born in England in 1824. Her father ran into troubles of various kinds over the years and eventually abandoned the family and headed for America. Eliza was twelve. She had four siblings, three younger than herself. Since the father had absconded in debt, all of the family’s belongings were sold at auction and Eliza and the family were destitute.

Eliza and her older brother went to work in a cotton factory to support the family. They worked from 5 AM to 8 PM “with sometimes milk and other time treacle, with oat meal mush, three times a day.”

When Eliza was fifteen her father came back into the picture, sending the family, and an aunt’s family, passage money to New York.

When Eliza was nineteen she met a man who had been a neighbor of her family’s when she was very young. They were married in 1843. Her new husband was a blacksmith and boiler maker.

Eliza and her husband decided on Oregon and the next year headed out. They had just \$18 in ten cent pieces. They stopped in Illinois where they were joined by the rest of the family. In 1848 their first child was born but he died. Eliza blamed their living conditions in a cabin “where there were holes in the walls you could have thrown your hat through if you wished to.”

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\*available at JStor: [https://www.jstor.org/stable/25160874?read-now=1&seq=2#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/25160874?read-now=1&seq=2#page_scan_tab_contents)

In 1845 the journey to Oregon resumed. They were aiming at the “talk about the country” which was that there was a “large amount of land for each man, and a portion... for his wife and each child.” They had very little to take with them and discovered they did not have enough food for the estimated six-month trip. To supplement their food Eliza would milk cows they passed along the road. Hunting supplied more fare.

Some of their cattle, pulling their wagon, gave out and so they cut the wagon down into a cart. They had to throw away some of their belongings. They joined up with an emigrant in a wagon train named Bristow for whom Eliza did cooking and washing while her husband drove the team. The wagon train was guided by Caleb Greenwood, aged about 82, the year after he’d guided the Stephens Murphy Townsend Party to California. This wagon train was headed for California. Eliza does not explain the change in destination.

When they got to what is today Nevada, the Indians began to molest the party. They would kill the oxen or wound them so they could not travel. Then the party approached the mountains.

#### The Sierra

“seemed unsurmountable. It was sometimes before we could see which way to go. The wagons were taken apart and taken over some places in pieces. The poor cattle were literally dragged up some seemingly impassable places, while their hoofs were worn and the skins cut and bleeding. The folks got over as best they could and finally all reached the summit where we rested for two days.”

This of course was Donner Pass, the pass emigrants used on the way to Johnson Ranch in 1845 and where wagons had to be taken apart. This makes Eliza Gregson’s memoirs eligible for the Heirloom.

A day later the party “camped on the banks of a beautiful lake.” Eliza thought it was Tahoe and some others thought it was Weber Lake. More likely it was Kidd Lake.

Days later “Myself, with several other young folks climbed up a very steep mountain and there standing under a Manzanita bush we saw the valley below stretched far and wide like an ocean. It look [sic] beautiful to us, for we were tired and weary of the mountains, but we still had three or four days travel to reach it. At length we arrived at the Johnson’s ranch on Bear River [sic].” Then it was on to Sutter’s Fort and Sacramento. Her family went to work for Captain Sutter but there was little work for women. Eliza said, “our clothes we had to patch until the original piece could scarcely be found.” Men worked for \$1 a day and “common dress goods’ cost \$1 per yard. “it took \$8.00 to buy a dress.” “Our food was very coarse flour and sometimes pretty good beef. No coffee, tea, sugar, milk or butter.”

Eliza’s husband joined up with Fremont’s battalion in 1846



California Historical Society Quarterly June, 1940

JAMES AND ELIZA GREGSON

From a photograph taken in Petaluma about 1860

during the war with Mexico. Eliza mentions that General Vallejo was brought as a prisoner to Sutter’s Fort.

There are several vignettes of the times. For example a doctor who believed in bleeding came down with malaria. He requested that he be bled and “died soon afterwards.” Another vignette described the Indians working for Capt. Sutter, “Their food was put into long troughs (wooden) on the ground and they would sit on each side of the trough and scoop their mess with their hands. And it was laughable to see them when the food was too hot, they would shake their hands.” She mentions families living in the area, a marriage, a soldier’s drowning, etc.

Eliza’s husband and other men went off to Monterey and the women left behind could hear nothing of “from the seat of war.” So when news came of Americans having been killed Eliza says “we few women were very uneasy... for we did not know whether we were left widows or not.” One can

only imagine.

Then it rained for a fortnight and the Sacramento River flooded so much that a navy ship anchored close to Sutter's Fort which today is several miles away from the river.

Early in 1847 news came "that some immigrants had just come in from the Sierra Nevada Mountains almost starved to death, and that they had left a large party starving in the mountains." This was the Forlorn Hope expedition of the Donner Party (Heirloom 12/20). Eliza relates preparations to prepare food for the emigrants and pack it on the "best mules at the fort." There were only a few with women in the fort but they "did all in our power for them."

Despite being present Eliza confuses the order of things putting Charles Stanton's arrival at Sutter's Fort in 1846 in the middle of all the relief parties of 1847. In reality, Stanton and Wm. McCutchen had left the Donner Party in Nevada and headed for Sutter's Fort to get supplies many months before the relief parties set out. Eliza describes Stanton as having no relations in the Donner Party, "nor any interest in them, but humanity and a big heart prompted him to go. He left his waistcoat, a watch and a letter to be mailed to his sister in New York [sic] in case he should never return. The poor man was frozen to death." Stanton was part of the Forlorn Hope and died somewhere around what is now Kingvale, just west of Donner Summit.

Two or three weeks later Eliza says the rescue party returned "Themselves almost dead..." They had brought out eighteen survivors. This would be the actual first relief party of the four that saved about half of the Donner Party. "I shall never forget how those people looked. The greater part of them were crazy. Their eyes danced and sparkled like stars." Here she confuses the Forlorn Hope with the first rescue parties. The Forlorn Hope escaped Donner Lake and reached California to tell the news that the Donner Party was trapped. The Forlorn Hope sparked the relief parties that left some weeks after their arrival at Johnson Ranch. Then Eliza adds to the story saying that women took the lead in the snow packing it down for the men to follow in. "but for all that the men sank down and died." In addition the women made all the fires and prepared the food. She then describes the heroism of Mrs. Fosdick whose husband died on the trail. She stayed with him until he died and then caught up with the rest of the group and acceded to the request that her husband provide food for the living, "You cannot hurt him now." This was the Forlorn Hope.

"at last we came to the Sierra Nevada Mountains which seemed insurmountable it was some time before we could see which way we must go, at least we had to take the wagons apart & take them up in pieces over the mountains & the poor cattle got ove[r] or rather they were dragged up with bleeding shins, the folks got ove[r] the best they could..."

Eliza Gregson 1845

Then the second rescued group came out. Here we see some of the conditions the rescued were in. One of the Donner Family girls had frozen feet. "The flies had flown them [sic] and there were maggoats [sic] in them. She suffered a great deal... her feet were ruined." There were other stories including about "Keysburg." She describes the standard sensationalism of the time that he and Mrs. Donner were the only two left alive at Donner Lake. He was discovered by the rescuers "cooking his supper of human flesh." Nearby was a box containing Mr. and Mrs. Donner's flesh "all cut and packed in butcherly style." Eliza visited Mr. Keseburg at Sutter's Fort with a friend, "We thought we would like to see the man-eater." She relates the meeting and how Mrs. Keseburg would "arouse the neighbors by screaming 'murder' at midnight." The story of the Donner Party must have been of great interest because Eliza gave it a lot of space.

With the war ending the men came home and with them, Eliza's husband and there are more slices of life. There was Sacramento fever. It almost killed Mr. Gregson and they had to give the doctor all their cows and horses in payment for his services. Apparently the doctor's attentions did nothing so Eliza resorted to natural medicine. She wanted to gather some herbs she thought would help him but the cattle "had taken it all." Since the cattle had eaten all the plants there must be some of the plants' efficacy in the manure they left. So Eliza gathered manure and boiled it. Her husband would not drink it thinking Eliza was trying to poison him but she drank some as encouragement. Her husband drank his draught and fell asleep. "The fever was gone when he awoke." So many others

were sick too, including Eliza's baby and Indians. They, the Indians, "suffered terribly, they died in heaps [unreadable], and there was not one able to bury the others."

On recovering, her husband and Eliza went back to work for Sutter at Coloma taking two and a half days to get there from Sacramento. They were there when James Marshall discovered gold. Eliza cooked for the work crew in Coloma. Her daughter was the only white child the Indians in the area had ever seen and became an object of curiosity. One Indian woman even wanted to trade children.

There was a dearth of women in California and when Eliza was given the opportunity to go visit one, she was excited. The woman was living in a wagon and she was just as glad to see Eliza. They did not sleep much during the two day visit "but put in the time talking." While there the woman showed Eliza a gold nugget as big as a thumb. There had been no news about gold up to then. Then Eliza describes the discovery of gold.



Even though gold was being discovered Eliza and her husband continued to work for Sutter.

“Our living was very poor. We ate salt beef, so poor and salty that it looked like blue flint, salt salmon so salty and oily that it was hardly fit to eat, and boiled barley, sometimes boiled wheat and dried peas. Neither flour, coffee, sugar or tea and only one keg of butter strong [enough] to run away by itself. And that is the way we lived for seven months.”

Those are the kinds of details that give depth to the simple history of gold discovery.

Gregson, as Eliza called her husband, continued to work under James Marshall until Marshall would not share gold they'd found, so Gregson quit and using his blacksmith skills, made a pick. Then he made “a great many picks and drills” for a mine that was nearby. It would be nice to say he grew wealthy on picks and drills but he didn't. Meanwhile Eliza said, “Everyone was gold crazy.” Everyone was coming from everywhere including “run-away soldiers and sailors [sic]. Arrivals include Eliza's mother, brothers, and one sister. Prices went up and Eliza gives some examples like eggs at \$16 a dozen which would be about \$505 in today's money. “Women folks could get plenty of sewing to do... and we could make \$10.00 per day,” which is about \$292 today.

Trials and tribulations continued. Gregson got so sick he could hardly walk and another baby arrived. Both of Eliza's children got sick. They had to borrow \$300 to pay the doctor (almost \$10,000 today). With the sicknesses the family moved to Sonoma and the further away from the mines they got, the better Gregson got so pretty soon he could walk again. The daughter continued to be sick; all her teeth fell out. It's unclear about the details. One daughter could no longer walk and another had a “blood tumor growing between her eyes.” In Sonoma Eliza “took in washing and ironing and sewing to help support the family.” She would “sew until one or two o'clock in the night and in the days wash and iron and take care of my babes.” When her husband had recovered enough, he went back to the mines leaving Eliza with all the work and child-care. “I toiled as best I could.”

Her husband got sick again. Her family joined her. They bought two lots on the river with two adobes. They were washed away in a flood leaving them “without any resources.”

Things improved with an Army surgeon removing the blood tumor for \$150 (\$4700 today) and Gregson, a friend and James Marshall building James Marshall a cabin. Then another cabin was built for the Gregson family on a ranch it seems they acquired in Green Valley just east of today's Napa. The wall-hidden memoir stops here but the original from the California Historical Society Quarterly

continues for a bit. More relatives came from the east and the family worked to farm the Green Valley ranch. They planted orchards and vineyards, raised stock and milked cows. Another son was born. New towns were springing up and people were building houses “leaving old cabins to be used for outhouses.” Farms improved. There were county fairs, better fences and “more usefull emplements.” The family eventually received a silver butter knife for the best butter. By 1858 there was another daughter.

In the Gregson Memoirs in the California Historical Society's Quarterly (June, 1940) there is the original of James Gregson's Statement which complements Eliza's “Memori.” His is the source for Caleb Greenwood being their guide across the continent and who charged people \$2.50 to guide them to California. Gregson includes other detail left out by his wife such as the names of people in their wagon train, that he guarded General Vallejo in Sutter's Fort, his experiences in the Mexican War, and that he traded a white shirt to an Indian for his feather festooned hat. Then he traded the hat to a Mormon for a horse.

James' description of the discovery of gold is a bit different from other accounts. He says the Indians would dig during the day and the mill races would run at night. In the morning “we would find the gold in the crevices of the rock... we did not pay much attention to it. We picked it up off and on for six weeks without any excitement.” He doesn't even go into any more detail about the gold discovery. Apparently it didn't mean much. James does say he later found about \$3000 in gold (today about \$95,000). That belies Eliza's “Memoir” where she says, “we remain poor until this day.” It's ironic that with being at the point of gold discovery they lived so poorly. James Marshall was living with the Gregsons and they all suffered from scurvy from their poor diet as noted by Eliza above.

The footnotes of James Gregson's “Statement” include details it seems strange that both he and his wife did not report, for example, the reason the Gregsons had to cut their wagon down into a cart is because they'd been attacked by Indians who killed their stock. The cart could carry little and so Mr. Gregson, his wife, and Eliza's mother “traveled on foot the entire distance from Humboldt to Johnson's ranch in California.”

Other Eliza Gregson links:

<https://www.sierracollege.edu/ejournals/jsnhb/v4n2/gregson.html>

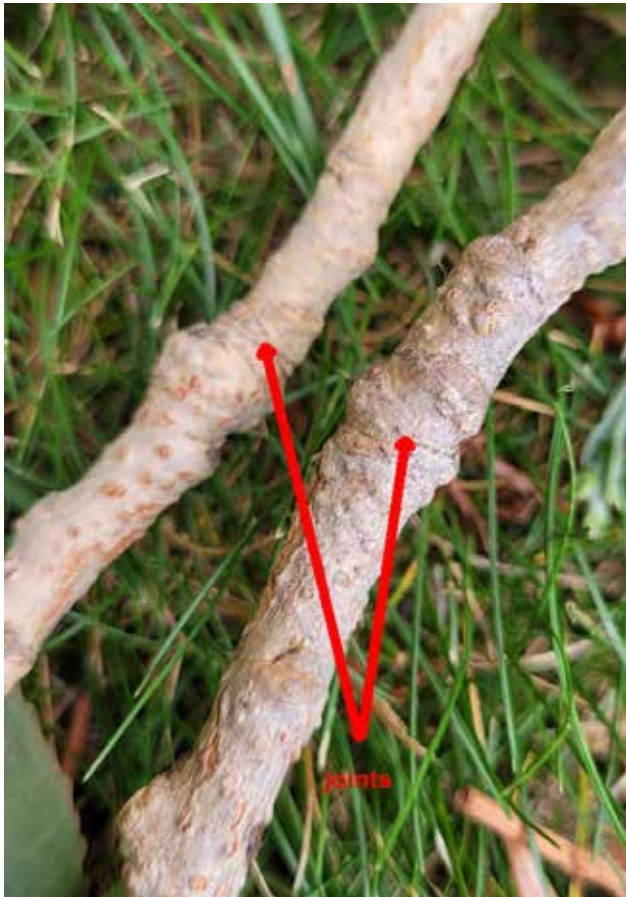
<https://www.loc.gov/item/40033553/>

<https://memory.loc.gov/service/gdc/calbk/116.pdf> annotes Mrs. Gregson's memoirs

Of course there is a DSHS link:

<http://www.donnersummithistoricalociety.org/pages/Poster2013.html>

# Miscellaneous from Art Clark



Have you heard of Cottonwood stars?

If one cuts or breaks Cottonwood twigs it reveals a star in the center. Lots of Indian references to them online.

Here's the secret - the star only appears in the joints of the twigs. If you cut 1/4 inch on either side, no star. Who knew?



## A Rough Trip.

H. F. Judell writes from Cisco, under date of the 17th: I write to inform you that we have crossed the summit-just got here, 9 o'clock P. M. Please inform the people not to attempt crossing the summit from your side with wagons. There is over 20 feet of snow there yet, and we (H. L. Judell and E. Sklarek, a traveler for Michaletschke Bros., and the latter with Weil, Leifer & Co.) had to have our wagon bodily carried by 6 men for half a mile over the trail, over the top of the snowsheds and tunnel No. 7, with the kind assistance of Capt. Joe Goulden from the Summit Hotel. It was the first vehicle that ever passed that way.

Truckee Republican June 21, 1882

# From the DSHS Archives



Yuba Gap Lodge



Norden Store, 1936

# Book Review

Overland in 1846

Diaries and Letters of the California-Oregon Trail Volume I  
Edited by Dale Morgan 1963 457 pages

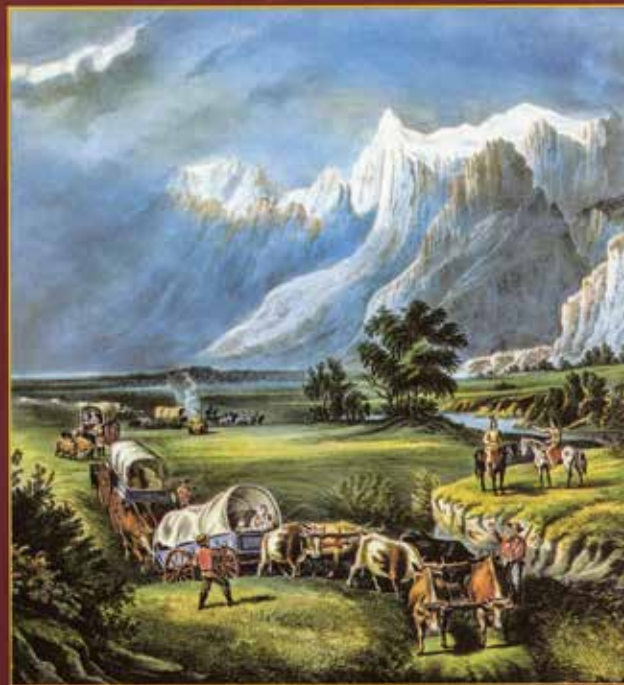
This book is a collection of diaries, letters, and other writings which Mr. Morgan says should serve as a “source book for overland emigration in 1846... it invites us to share the experiences of specific overland travelers...”

Before the collection there is a long introduction of 117 pages which puts the book and its contents in context including interesting little facts some of which I didn't know. For example, Chief Truckee had two sons and he and his sons were part of the Fremont expedition. John Sutter didn't like Lansford Hastings. People weren't just going to the west coast; there were many people heading back east from California and Oregon. There were many people traveling west even before the mass of travelers following the discovery of gold in 1848. To tell all that there are lots of quotes and letters of the people involved. The reader hears the voices of early emigrants about what emigration was like and it's all put into some context, such as the Mexican War.

“To day we met all most one continual stream of Emigrants wending their long and Tedious march to oregon & californnia... they came to us with Pails full of good new milk which to us was a treat of greate rarity after so many long tiresome days travel... We passed several small Brooks and met 117 teams in six different squads all bound for oregon and californnia...” [sic] (James Clyman heading east from California in 1845 with Lansford Hastings.)

Some descriptions are very colorful, for example the description of Peg Leg Smith, “He had fought Apaches in Mexico, had ‘captured’ the horses of the Spanish Dons in California, lived among the Sioux and Crows and had a Snake Indian wife, and was as notorious for his lawlessness as for his success in all walks of a trapper's life. He had been compelled by misfortune to part with one of his legs just below the knee in order to save his life ; and had long been known by the name of ‘Peg Leg Smith.’”

Another description bears including describing a traveling companion of Lansford Hastings named Hedspeth. “...he was about as repulsive in manner as Hastings was attractive. He was a coarse, profane creature, who seemed to feel that loud swearing was the best title to public favor.” In contrast Lansford Hastings is described as, “a tall, fine-looking man, with light brown hair and beard, dressed in a suit of elegant pattern made of buckskin, handsomely embroidered and trimmed at the collar and opening, with plucked beaver fur... an ideal representative of the mountaineer.”



OVERLAND IN 1846:

DIARIES AND  
LETTERS OF THE  
CALIFORNIA-  
OREGON TRAIL

EDITED BY DALE MORGAN

After the introduction comes almost a dozen diaries, along with more parts of letters and newspaper articles covering the emigrant experience in 1846. Each diary is preceded by its own introduction putting it in context and giving a short biography of the author. If you like primary source material this is for you. Once the book moves to the diaries, etc. the notes move to the end of the book and there are 88 pages of notes that elaborate on diary entries or match main text diary entries to other writings and diaries. The introduction sets the stage for the diaries.

Reading the diaries brings the cross-country trek to life: miles per day, small incidents, and hardships. Indians kill or run off stock leaving a wagon with no food. A cow is killed by the cold. Hungry emigrants are helped by Native Americans who share venison and salmon. There are good camps and bad camps, lots of feed for animals and none. There is death and accident and almost impassable roads as well as remarkably good roads. Having read all those things we can appreciate the emigrant saying, we travelled down the valley and camped on the Willamette, “the handsomest valley I have ever beheld.

All charmed with the prospects and think they will be well paid for their sufferings.”

The end of the book includes Donner Party related material some of which is the most interesting, particularly the diaries of the relief parties. The second Virginia Reed letter is particularly poignant when she relates her mother having to send two children back to Donner Lake and continue on with the other two. There was the danger in sending two back that they would “starve to Death Martha said well ma if you never see me again to do the best you can the men said they could hardly stand it maid them all cry they said it was better for all of us to go on for if we was to go back we would eat that much more from them...” [sic]

The relief parties are an inspiring part of the Donner Party story. Here are people presumably comfortably set for the winter in California giving up their comfort and risking their lives to save people trapped by winter more than a hundred miles away. The diaries tell some of the heroism,

“Our road was in a very bad condition and at frequent intervals we had to unpack the mules and drag them out of the mire. In about five or six miles a day we reached the snow which we found three feet deep. Through this we worried along some five miles when it became too deep for mules to go any further it being eight feet deep and falling all the time; a regular storm having set in. Our encountering the snow so deep and so much sooner than we had been led to anticipate utterly disheartened some of the party and six men turned back.

“we made a camp and left the mules in charge of one of Sutter’s men a German who went by the soubriquet of ‘Greasy Jim’ ... Our party now consisted of seven... Each man made a pair of snowshoes.... About two feet long and 1 wide... On these we had to travel continuously...

“Each man also took a single blanket a tin cup, a hatchet and as near as the captains could estimate 75 pounds of dried meat. ... Of course we had no guide and most of our journey was through a dense pine forest... we set fire to every dead pine tree on and near our trail ... At Sunset we made camp’ by felling pine saplings 6 inches in diameter and cutting them off about 12 feet long, & placing them on the snow making a platform 6 or 8 feet wide. On this platform we kindled our fire, roasted some meat for supper and then throwing our blankets over our shoulders sat, close together, around the fire and dozed through the night the best way we could... In this manner we

passed every night of our journey... The snow increased as we proceeded until it amounted to a depth of eighteen feet...

“We travelled in Indian file. At each step taken by the man in front he would sink in the snow to his knees and of course had to lift his foot correspondingly high for his next step. Each succeeding man would follow in the tracks of the leader.— The latter soon became tired fell to the rear and the second man took the head of the file...”

Then as the relief party approached the encampment at Donner Lake and saw a woman emerge from the snow, “As we approached her several other made their appearance in like manner coming out of the snow. They were gaunt with famine and I never can forget the horrible, ghastly sight they presented. The first woman spoke in a hollow voice very much agitated & said ‘are you men from California or do you come from heaven?’”

The diaries also expose the negative aspects of human nature.

“Notes kept by M.D. Ritchie” relate an incident when Mr. Ritchie went to Mr. Kerns, from Sutter’s Fort, asking him for some pork for “emigrants that I had under my Charge” just rescued from Donner Lake. The good people of Yerba Buena (San Francisco) had contributed money for what Mr. Kerns had control of. Mr. Kerns’ answer “was that there was none for them...” meanwhile Ritchie saw Mr. Kerns and his group “faring sumtiously on Pork and superfine flour.”

### Crossing Donner Pass, 1846

“West 3 m to the foot of a bold mountain that looked to be almost impassable [which given the following description would be Roller Pass between Mt. Judah and Mt. Lincoln]. The road was rocky and some places steep others flat We were now obliged to take most of the loading out of our wagons and pack it up the mountains 100 rods and 6 or seven yoke of oxen that drew up the wagons, and about noon on the 7th we were ready to move down the mountain and encamped in a valley [Summit Valley] about 4 m from the summit. The weather was cold and on the 7th we had frequent squalls of snow and the brows [sic]

James Mathers’ diary October 6, 1846

When Ritchie asked for more Kerns “told me he would give the none they might eat hard Tack old dry sea bread which was broke to Crumbs...” [sic]

An excerpt from *The Expedition of the Donner Party and Its Tragic Fate*, by Eliza P. Donner Houghton relates the poignant incident when her mother sent three of her children off with a couple of the rescuers, who would later leave the children at Donner Lake rather than keep their word to take the children out of the Sierra for \$500.

“The agreement was made, and we collected a few keepsakes and other light articles, which she wished us to have, and which the men seemed more than willing to carry out of the mountains. Then, lovingly, she combed our hair and helped us to dress quickly for the journey. When we were ready, except cloak and hood, she led us to the bedside and we took leave of father. The men helped us up the steps and stood up on the

snow. She came, put on our cloaks and hoods, saying, as if talking to herself, 'I may never see you again, but God will take care of you.' The three children were six, five, and four. How does a mother do that - giving up her children for strangers? How does she feel when she later discovers she's been betrayed?

The many quotes and diary entries by the emigrants really do tell their remarkable stories.

The climate is never so cold as to freeze- and an instance of death on the coast by a fever has never been known. The soil produces the fruit and vegetation of every climate in the world. Its commercial advantage and natural resources are the greatest in the known world."

Lansford Hastings

Lecturing upon the advantages of emigrating to California, 1845

Lansford Hastings was the author of the emigrant guide book, Emigrant's Guide to Oregon and California, that steered the Donner Party wrong. It was reviewed in the January, '17 Heirloom in case you want to go.

## One Spot - Lots of History

Get off the freeway at the Rainbow exit. If you are going east on the freeway take old Highway 40 or Donner Pass Rd./Hampshire Rocks Rd. and go west past historic Rainbow Lodge and to the USFS restrooms which you'll find on the right after a small parking lot. If you are going east on the freeway take the Rainbow exit to Hampshire Rocks rd. and go east past the USFS fire station and to the USFS restrooms on the left and then to the small parking lot. Parenthetically those exits are set up that way so that buses could easily leave the freeway, stop at Rainbow Lodge and then re-enter the freeway. That was when the freeway was new in the early 1960's. Bus transportation is not so popular now.

Park your car in the small parking lot and nearby you'll see picture #1 which is a granite dome. You can scramble up the rocks if you like. Here is part of the great granitic batholith that makes up and underlies the Sierra. It was all once part of the seafloor. Subduction, where one tectonic plate slides under another, in this case the Pacific Plate sliding under the North American Plate, melted the seafloor. Eventually all that melted seafloor became granite and rose to expose itself as the Sierra. Volcanic activity from Nevada flowed over it all but that's been eroded away. #2 shows implants in the granite from when it was deep in the earth and molten. These inclusions are xenoliths. They were in the rocks above the granite.

#3 shows striations on the rock, which you can easily feel, from the glaciers sliding across the granite during the ice ages. Depending on which geologists you listen to, there was 500 or 1,000 feet of ice on Donner Summit during the last ice age.

#4. Gravel deposited as the glaciers melted. #5 look on the north side of the dome where you find slabs of granite. Look for brown streaks - the rust marks of thousands of iron wagon wheels from wagon trains bound for California. The color has been enhanced here to show the streaks better. #6. Man entered the picture and installed the concrete and various anchor bolts in the granite dome possibly for a weather vane.

So much history in one spot.

# Odds & Ends on Donner Summit



# T.H. Jefferson Emigrant Road Map

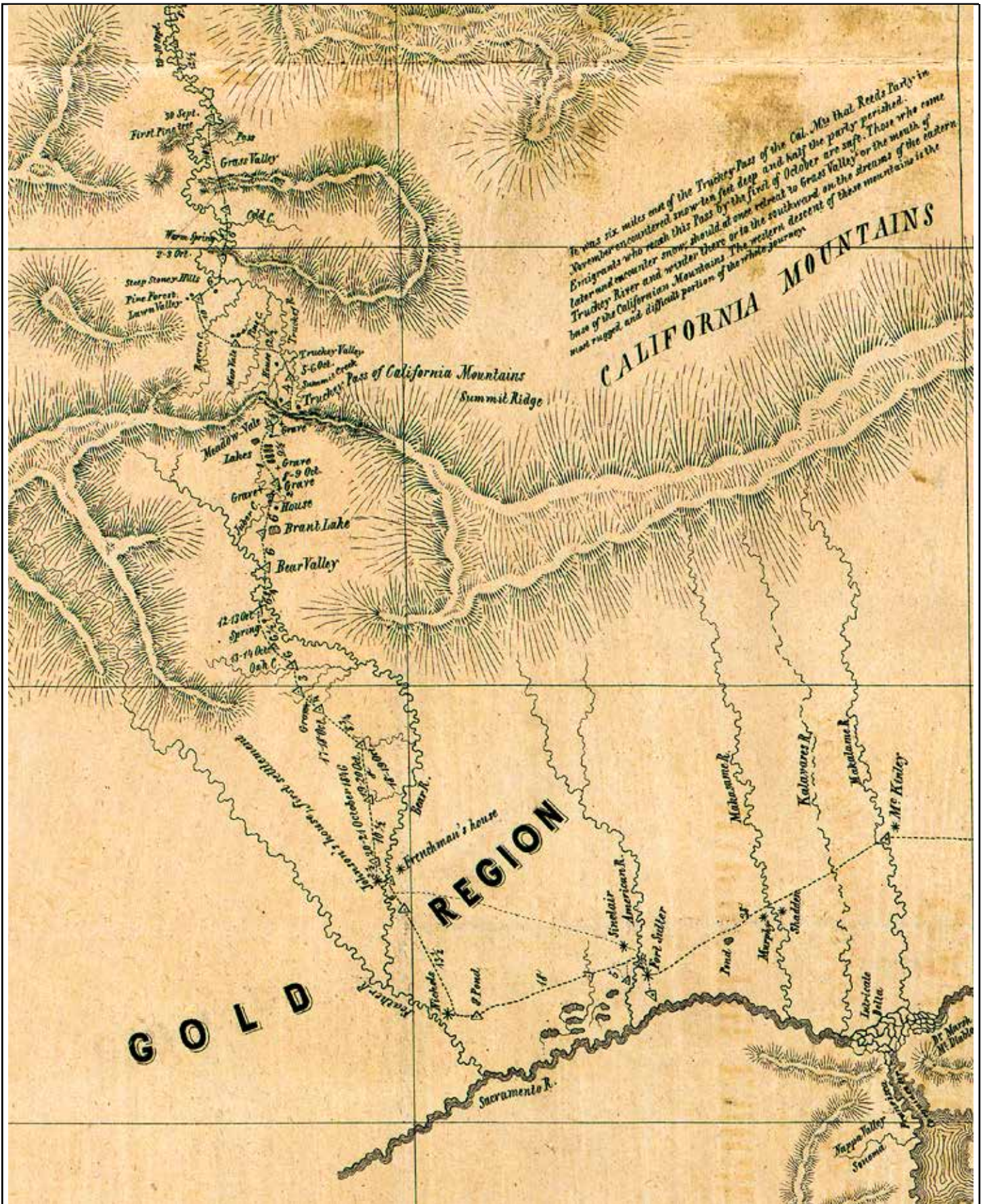
The map on the following pages was included in the text of Overland in 1846 but the copy is unusable so I turned to the Library of Congress which has a large clear version from which I extracted the graphic here. This is the last part of the emigrant road to California going from Donner Pass to Napa. You can follow the map author's route over that and see where he was on particular dates in 1846 (the map was published in 1849). Note too the graves along the way. Grass Valley is the Reno area. Brant Lake is Crystal Lake. Juber Creek is the Yuba River. Truckey Pass is Donner Pass.

The author was T.H. Jefferson about whom almost nothing is known except that he was an emigrant in 1846 and came from New York. If you want to explore the whole map go to the LOC website, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2005627024/>

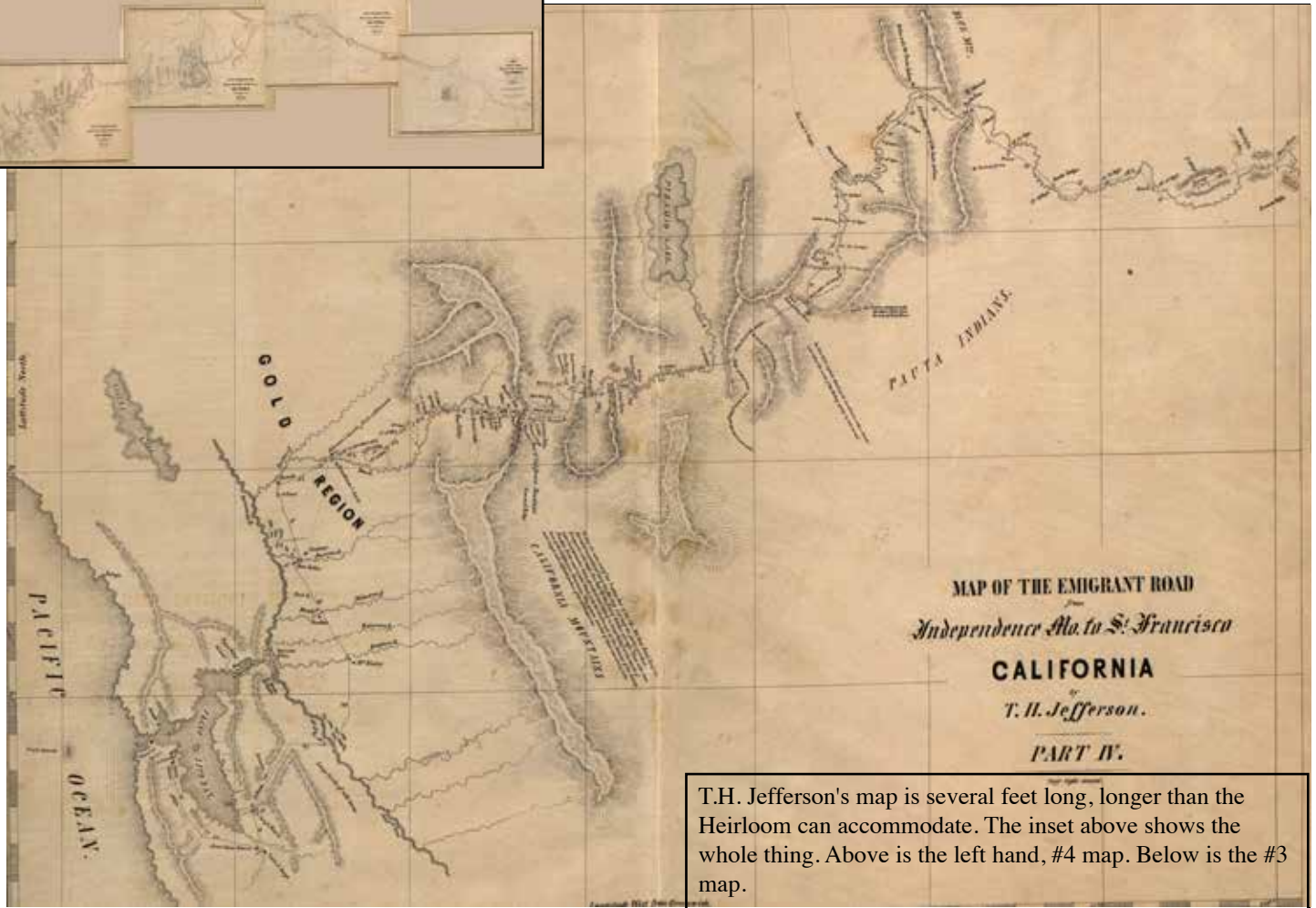
The map has a number of notes on it to help emigrants. For example, The largest note, on the next page, talks about the Donner Party,

“It was six miles east of the Truckey Pass of the Cal. Mts that Reeds Party in November encountered snow ten feet deep and half of the party perished. Emigrants who reach this Pass by the first of October are safe. Those who come later and encounter snow should at once retreat to Grass Valley [the Reno area] or the mouth of Truckey River and winter there or to the southward on the stream of the eastern base of the Californian Mountains. The wester descent of these mountains is the most rugged and difficult portion of the whole journey.”

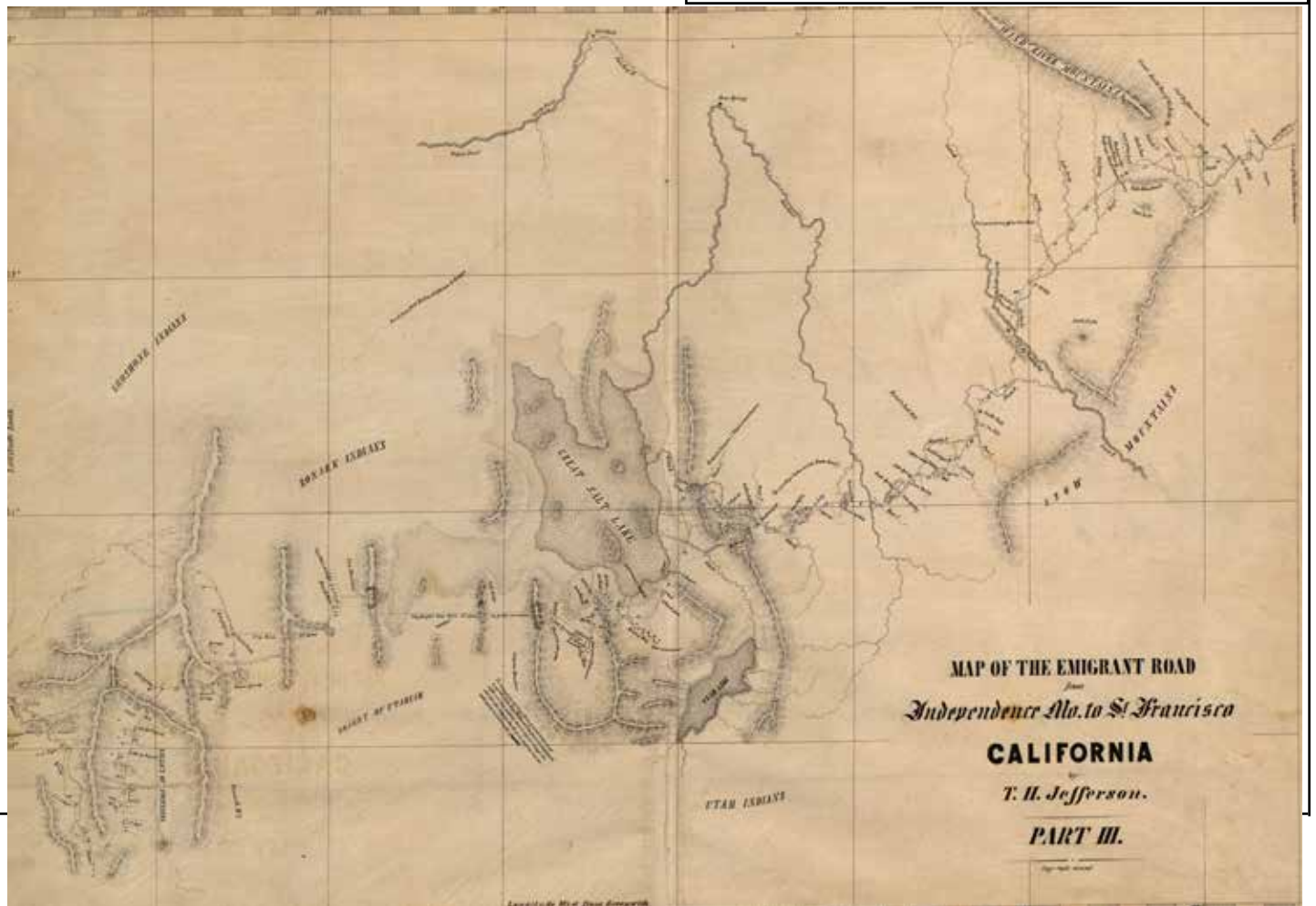




T. H. Jefferson Emigrant Road Map showing Donner Summit dated 1849. Any emigrant would have been proud to carry it. Get our your magnifying glass and read the note on the map at the top.



T.H. Jefferson's map is several feet long, longer than the Heirloom can accommodate. The inset above shows the whole thing. Above is the left hand, #4 map. Below is the #3 map.



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