

The Donner Summit

Heirloom

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

May 2024 issue #189



Albert Bierstadt and 19th Century Art



Larger version on page 3

Last month's [Heirloom](#) delved into the relationship between 19th Century western landscape art and contemporary society and focused on Donner Summit art. This month we cover some different aspects of the topic. Albert Bierstadt is a perfect example of 19th Century landscape artists on whom to focus. He was a showman, catering to the public hunger for landscape art as entertainment. He organized exhibitions and shows of his paintings as a way of marketing his works and did very well.

Bierstadt's "Donner Lake from the Summit" (1873), above and on page 3, was a result of his visit to San Francisco where he was commissioned by one of the transcontinental railroad's Big Four, Colis Huntington, to make a painting celebrating the 1869 completion of the transcontinental railroad. The time was only twenty-three years after the tragedy of the Donner Party. The painting showed that there had been huge technological and economic growth in the meantime. By the time of the painting only a week and a few days were needed to cross the continent on the transcontinental railroad route pictured on the right of the painting. It had taken months by wagon train and weeks via stagecoach. Americans were conquering time and space. The painting also shows the magnificent Donner Summit scenery at sunrise, symbolizing the dawn of a new era.

Whereas the commission was to celebrate the railroad, Bierstadt's painting "communicates the message that human works, even as mighty as the railroad, are insignificant when placed in the context of God's creation." Feeling that not enough emphasis had been on the railroad, Huntington rejected the picture even though Bierstadt had reportedly been paid \$20,000. The painting went on to fame despite its rejection by the patron. Thousands visited the painting when it went on display for the public.*

"Although Bierstadt relegated human works to a minor role in his compositions he projected a vision of wilderness as a land friendly to people. – almost a Garden of Eden.... This Edenic aspect of the painting reinforced its theme of the railroad being a new dawn to California."*

The popularity of the painting encouraged other artists to produce their own versions of the scene. That continues today.

From [California History](#) Spring 1992 "The Tradition of Donner Lake Paintings" by Alfred C. Harrison, Jr. (San Francisco art historian and dealer).

Story Locations in this Issue

viewpoint paintings pg 1, 3, 4, 7 & 14 viewpoint lithograph pg 9

DONNER SUMMIT



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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Proofread by Pat Malberg, Lake Mary, Donner Summit



Bierstadt's "Donner Lake" (below and six by ten feet in size) was unveiled in San Francisco and drew an average daily attendance of 600 people. On Saturdays it would draw 1200. (1/25/1873 [San Francisco Evening Bulletin](#))

There followed a rush by other artists to produce Donner Lake paintings (See last month's [Heirloom](#) for examples.) Gilbert Munger's "Sunrise of Donner Lake" is an example that was not in the last month's [Heirloom](#). See the next page.

Because of admission fees and new memberships associated with the Bierstadt exhibition of Donner Lake, the San Francisco Art Association could afford to fund an art school which became the California School of Design founded in 1874 by Virgil Williams. (See last month's [Heirloom](#) for three newspaper articles about a trip to Donner Summit for aspiring art students from the School of Design led by Wm. Jackson, also a famous artist. Read about him in last month's [Heirloom](#) too).



The theme of Bierstadt's and other large paintings was dramatizing the sublimity of God's creation with an underlying corollary that this land is so wonderful the people must be destined for greatness. So the painting expresses America's aspirations of Manifest Destiny to conquer the continent. To carry out his theme Bierstadt had no compunctions about introducing "extras" to add to the drama. Here we should note that last month's [Heirloom](#) talked about the importance of landscape artistry to 19th Century Americans and that Nature was a healthful part of life. Here we can note that Bierstadt was implicitly saying that if some nature was good then more would be better. That's also the case with drawings that come later in this [Heirloom](#) edition.

Bierstadt's Donner Lake celebrates nature and the American technological expertise with the view of the most amazing development, the Transcontinental Railroad (seen on the right side of the painting as a very small part of the painting), the engineering marvel of the 19th Century. The painting "Donner Lake" showed the tremendous progress Americans had made. Just twenty five years before it was unveiled the Donner Party had met its fate at Donner Lake. Forty-three of the emigrants died.

In 1873, when the painting was completed, the transcontinental railroad had been completed and now people could travel over Donner Pass in comfort and safety at the average speed of 15-20 miles an hour. Could a people so creative be stopped by anything? The painting shows sunrise, of course the metaphor for just the beginning.

Gilbert Munger



In mid-November 1872 during intensely cold snow storms at the summit of the Sierra Nevada near Donner Pass, an aspiring landscape painter from Connecticut sketched along side one of the nation's most illustrious artists. "I am now sketching this place with [Albert] Bierstadt (1830-1902)," wrote Gilbert Munger. "We work from sunrise to sunset, muffled up to our eyebrows in furs ... We are sketching in the snow, sketching snow-storms and snow effects ... I am now familiar with the scenery and know where all the best things are."

Gilbert Munger, "Summit Sierra Nevadas," to his brother Russell Munger,
November 7, 1872;

reprinted in the St. Paul [Minnesota] Daily Pioneer, November 15, 1872.

Gilbert Munger was born in Connecticut in 1837. He worked for the Smithsonian, served as an engineer in the Civil War and ended up in California in 1869. He was apparently already an accomplished landscape painter exhibiting and selling paintings. One critic said he "has a conscientious feeling for Nature, and enough poetry to temper the harshness of the real with the softness of the ideal."

Munger made frequent sketching trips to gather material for his paintings. One favorite spot was Donner Summit and Summit Soda Springs, "a place where fountains of water bubble up, and where Indians used to sit on the rocks making arrowheads. (Lekisch Embracing Scenes About Lakes Tahoe and Donner). There he found Nature at its best, "a few stunted but picturesque cedars are stuck like coccades in the clefts above, and the summits of the chasm walls are rounded and smoothed by ancient glacial action. To this place was given the name of Munger's Gorge by a gay picnic party last summer, in honor of the fine artist who sat with them on its brink, and was first to paint it." ("Summering in the Sierra" pt. 2)

Read about Summit Soda Springs in past Heirlooms by looking at our article and picture indices on our website.

At the same time, the railroad and the human elements of the painting (houses and is there a road in evidence.) are small compared to Nature. Bierstadt's Donner Lake was unveiled in San Francisco in 1873 and probably was not what Mr. Huntington had in mind. The railroad is in the painting, but the celebration puts Nature at center stage rather than man's achievement.

Albert Bierstadt, 1830-1902 had a great influence on American landscape painting during a time when the American west was largely unknown and only beginning to be explored. He was, perhaps, the foremost painter of the American frontier. His subjects were very diverse.

Albert Bierstadt was born in Germany but came to America when he was two in 1832. He went back to Germany to study art, work with other artists and perfect his craft. It was after an 1860 trip on the Overland Trail that his reputation was established based on the subjects he'd seen and then painted. His paintings of dramatic and majestic scenery captured the Eastern public's mind. Some said viewing his paintings was a "religious" experience. His subjects were many and varied: Native American, the Alps, the Sierra and Rockies, Yellowstone and Yosemite, the Central Valley and the Golden Gate, wildlife, Westward Expansion, etc. He fit the Romantic Age, exploring nature and man's relationship to it. He painted the contradiction Industrialization and technology versus love of nature. The future of America was in both places he said in his painting. Colors were more as he wanted them to be rather than as they were as we can see on page 3. His transitions from fore to background were abrupt. There was an unreal quality with excessive luminescence but those diversions from reality were what the public wanted for awhile.

In 1863, he was already famous when he crossed the Sierra looking for subjects.

To meet the public's desire to see more of the West Bierstadt painted large and grand panoramas. People had seen small renditions of the west in books and stereoscope slides. They'd been reading and hearing about the west in newspapers and stories. Bierstadt's large panoramic paintings brought people closer to the west. In a time before movies on the large screen these large grand panoramas allowed viewers to visualize the west and its grandeur, the grandeur the country would come to control as part of Manifest Destiny. Bierstadt became rich from his marketing skills as well as his large landscapes.

Bierstadt images were of an undisturbed Eden, the land before man, before the Industrial Revolution, and before the Civil War then ravaging the Nation. His landscapes were the aspiration of America.

Later in the 19th Century Bierstadt fell out of favor and prices for his paintings collapsed. He had been criticized that his paintings were too grand and not personal, that he just copied Nature. His showmanship was also criticized. By the 1870's styles had changed from realism to more personal and interpretive art. He was eclipsed by other artists who did change their style. In addition, Bierstadt stuck with oils but others had gone to more intimate water colors. Even Mark Twain criticized Bierstadt, Twain said elements were real but views were "altogether too gorgeous... It is more the atmosphere of Kindgom-Come than of California (Daily Alta California August 4, 1867)

Donner Lake from the Summit

Bierstadt's latest work, "Donner Lake from the Summit," will be on exhibition during the coming week at the rooms of the Art Association. The effect represented is early morning, and the aerial effect and wonderful distance are worthy of Turner himself. The foreground of rock, pines and moss have been carefully studied, and the whole composition is that of a master. In comparing Bierstadt to Turner, we do so with this difference: While the great English artist sought out always the higher forms of nature and endeavored to represent them, he was not unfrequently [sic] eccentric, and the results of his work were often not up to the standard of his aspirations. Mr. Bierstadt has much of the same talent and as much or more of the same industry and never "runs wild." This work is evenly painted, has all the attributes of a great work, and would be noticeable in any gallery in the world.

It has been painted for C. P. Huntingdon, Esq., and will be forwarded to him in New York, immediately after it leaves the rooms of the Art Association, where it will remain for one week only.

Burglary.— The Howe Sewing Machine depot, Co. 113 Kearny street, was entered by burglars night before last, who carried off about \$350 worth of spool silk. They pried open the door with a well finished Jimmy without much difficulty, and, after plundering the premises, departed unnoticed

Daily Alta California
January 12, 1873

The Gallery, No. 313 Pine Street,

IS NOW OPEN TO THE PUBLIC.

It includes all the Latest Works by our Local Artists;
The Great Picture by GEROME, of Paris,

CLEOPATRA BEFORE CÆSAR

(Contributed by D. O. Mills, Esq.)

**BIERSTADT'S
MOUNT HOOD.**

A large collection of Water Color Drawings and
Paintings;

THE ENTIRE PIOCHE COLLECTION!

And a large number of Pictures contributed by Con-
noisseurs and Art Collectors.

ADMISSION, TWENTY-FIVE CENTS.

35¢ Catalogues, 25 cts. Season Tickets (admitting
gentleman and lady) \$2—good during the contin-
uance of the present Exhibition. d6

**ART ASSOCIATION.
NOTICE.**

35¢ The Gallery will be Closed to the Public
on FRIDAY, on account of the Member's Reception
on the Evening of that day.

By order of the Reception Committee.
d6-tt FRED. WHYMPER, Secretary.
Bulletin copy.

MARPLE & GUMP'S

**Exhibition of Choice Paintings,
301 and 303 Montgomery street,
Over Tucker's Jewelry Store.**

**NOW ON VIEW. PAINTINGS BY LAM-
binet, Veron, H. Voz, Bacon, Thompson and Velten
of Paris; Bethke, Prof. A. Muller, Wilford and Schua.**

Daily Alta California
December 25, 1872

SPECIAL NOTICE.
**Art Association Exhibition,
313 PINE STREET.**
BIERSTADT'S LATEST WORK,
Donner Lake from the Summit,
By kind permission of the Artist, remains on view
ONE WEEK LONGER,
But must positively be removed from the Gallery after
the evening of the 25th inst.
Admission to the Gallery, 25 Cts. ja19-7

Daily Alta California
January 22, 1873

Examples of landscape art advertisements.

BIERSTADT.-The world-renowned artist, Albert Bierstadt, has returned hither from his flying trip to the Sierras. In company with C. P. Huntington, of the Central Pacific Railroad Co., he paid a visit to the camp of Col. Von Schmidt, near Lake Tahoe, and returned with our Pioneer President to this city. Yesterday he visited the rooms of the Association, and afterward spent spare time in inspecting the great painting of "Samson and Delilah," and other pictures in the Bank Exchange. We are pleased to learn that Mr. Bierstadt contemplates sojourning for some weeks on the Pacific coast.

Daily Alta California
August 1, 1873

Here we have Albert Bierstadt visting the Sierra in company of Colis P. Huntington, the member of the Big Four who commis-
sioned Bierstadt to paint "Donner Lake from the Summit." The painting was done in 1873. Was the visit before or after Hunting-
ton rejected the painting as being insufficiently grand about the railroad?

The second reason this is interesting is that it mentions Col. Von Schmidt who had a camp at Summit Soda Springs which is
where one end of his tunnel to take Lake Tahoe water to the Central Valley was to be located. Spoiler alert - he did not build the
tunnel but go and see the February, '12 [Heirloom](#) for the full story.

Bierstadt ad from San Francisco Evening Bulletin 1/11/1873

ART ASSOCIATION

WINTER EXHIBITION

THE GALLERY, 313 PINE STREET

Is Now Open to the Public.

It INCLUDES ALL – THE LATEST WORKS
by our local artists;

Brandner’s Columbus in Chains;
Bierstadt’s Downer [sic] Lake from the Summit;

Large collection of Water Color Drawing and Paintings;
The Entire Pioche Collection!
And a large number of Pictures contributed by Connoisseurs and Art Collectors.

Admission25 Cents

Catalogues ready Open daily (Sundays excepted)
from 10 A.M. to 5 P.M. and from 7 to 9 P.M.

SPECIAL NOTICE.

Art Association Exhibition, 313 Pine St.,
Bierstadt’s Latest Work.

DONNER LAKE FROM THE SUMMIT

Will be on view FOR ONE WEEK ONLY, from the 12th
to the 18th instant, inclusive

Admission to the Gallery, 25 cents.



Compare the view, left, photographed by Art Clark in 2012 with the Bierstadt painting of the same scene on page 3. Note how Bierstadt has romanticized the scene and added a lot of detail that's missing in the actual scene. That was common among landscape artists of the time as you can see in the drawings that follow.

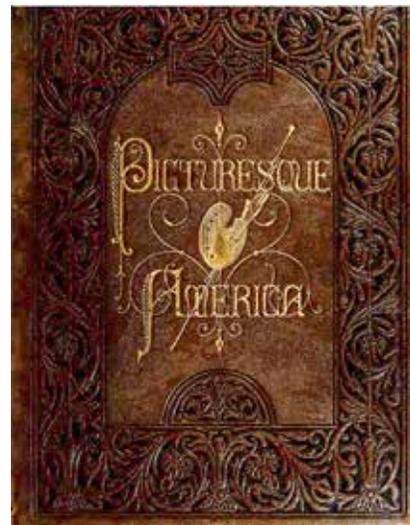
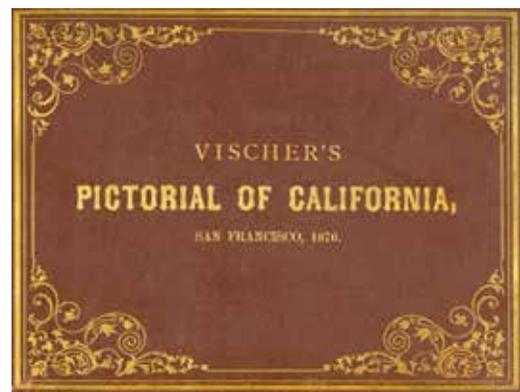
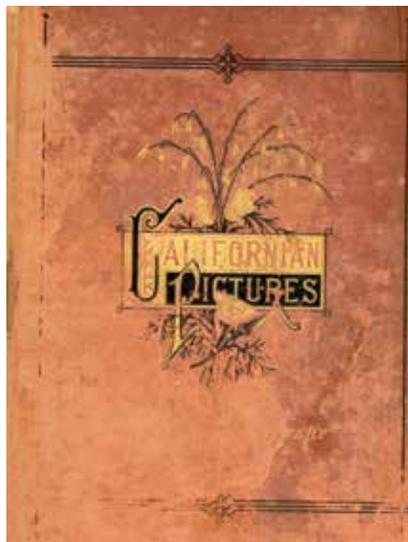
Illustrative 19th Century Art

Paintings on exhibit, or even stereoscopes (3d pictures) or prints, were not the only ways that Americans could satisfy their desire to see the West. Many books featured pen and ink drawings, copies of art already in existence, fresh art made for the book, or drawings made from photographs made by famous photographers. Those last came in variations as the pen and ink artists each interpreted the details of the originals in different ways. Some books also contained actual photographic copies of western scenes. Some pen and ink drawings appear over and over in different 19th Century books. We'll just give a few examples because the number of books, and so pictures, is huge. Because this is the [Heirloom](#) we'll feature only Donner Summit.

To personalize this, imagine sitting at home in 1884 without all of today's distractions. You've just bought one of the books listed on the next page (from what was called a store! instead of Amazon) and you begin to page through it before reading. The pictures of the west (Donner Summit for these [Heirloom](#) pages) must jump out at you, must fill you with wonder. You are vicariously crossing the continent to see the wonders of the west. You can dream about seeing the wonders in person; you can wonder at your great nation possessing such wonders and the Americans taming the wilderness containing such wonders. You can also wonder at the technological prowess of America in depictions of the transcontinental railroad, Tunnel 6, and the snowsheds. There was nothing like them in the world. God must be shining on America and Americans. It's a wonderful time. Perhaps too, you are progressive and you're joining a nascent group focused on protecting these wonders.

“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
Claire Di Meglio 2020



Three examples of books exposing the public to American landscape art.

The Pacific Tourist, 1884



THE PACIFIC TOURIST.



SUMMITS OF THE SIERRAS.

Some examples of books available on the internet in digital form showing western landscape art. Some have been reviewed on our "Book Review" web page on our website donner-summithistoricalsociety.org

- Beyond the Mississippi 1869
- Californian Pictures in Prose and Verse 1878
- California for Health Pleasure and Residence a Book for Travelers and Settlers 1873
- Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper Handbook of Paintings
- History of the big bonanza de quille (Comstock) Overland Monthly 8/1875
- Our New West 1869
- Pacific Tourist 1884,
- Vischer's Pictorial of California
- Picturesque America 1872
- Vischer's Picturesque California
- Plains and the Sierras 1896
- Railroads by Lucius Beebe

The above view is recognizable, kind of, if you are on Mt. Judah looking southeast. Anderson Pk. is top left and Tinker Knob is a bit right. The Pacific Crest Trail would one day be on the ridge in the center. It's a romanitized view, not completely accurate.

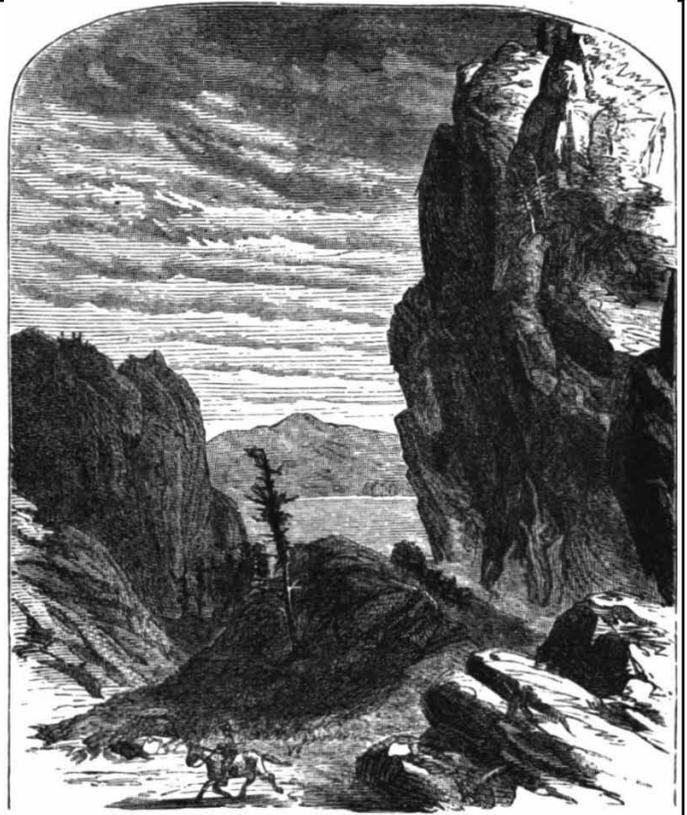
"Summit of the Sierras" in *Pacific Tourist*, 1884 copied from a painting by Thomas Moran Also romanitized



GALLERY IN SNOW SHEDS, C. P. R. R.

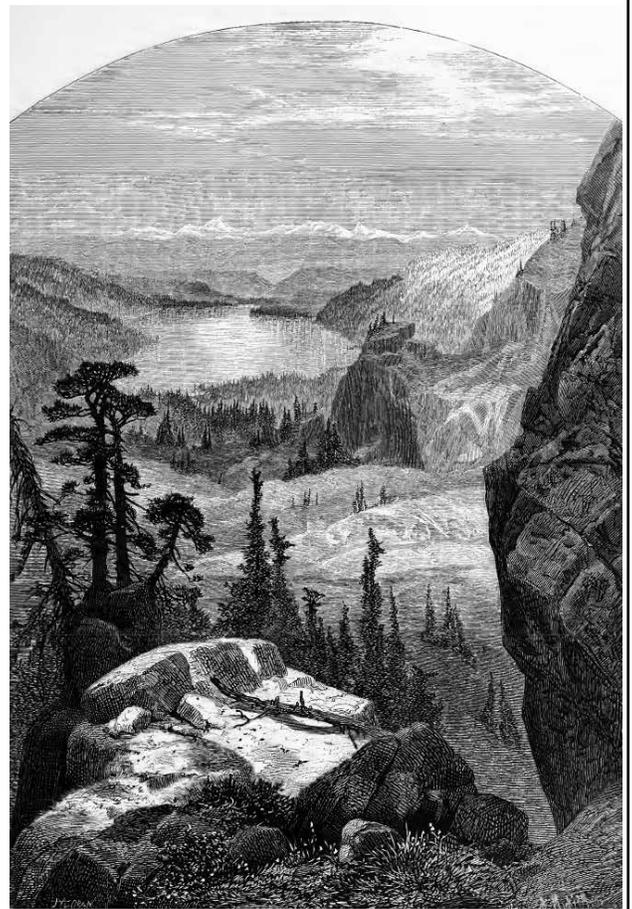
Snowshed interior Pacific Tourist, 1884 Snowsheds were also a technological marvel of the 19th Century. Man was winning the fight against nature and heavy snows with 40 miles of snowsheds. They were featured in many publications. The snow-plough [sic] on the next page does the same thing.

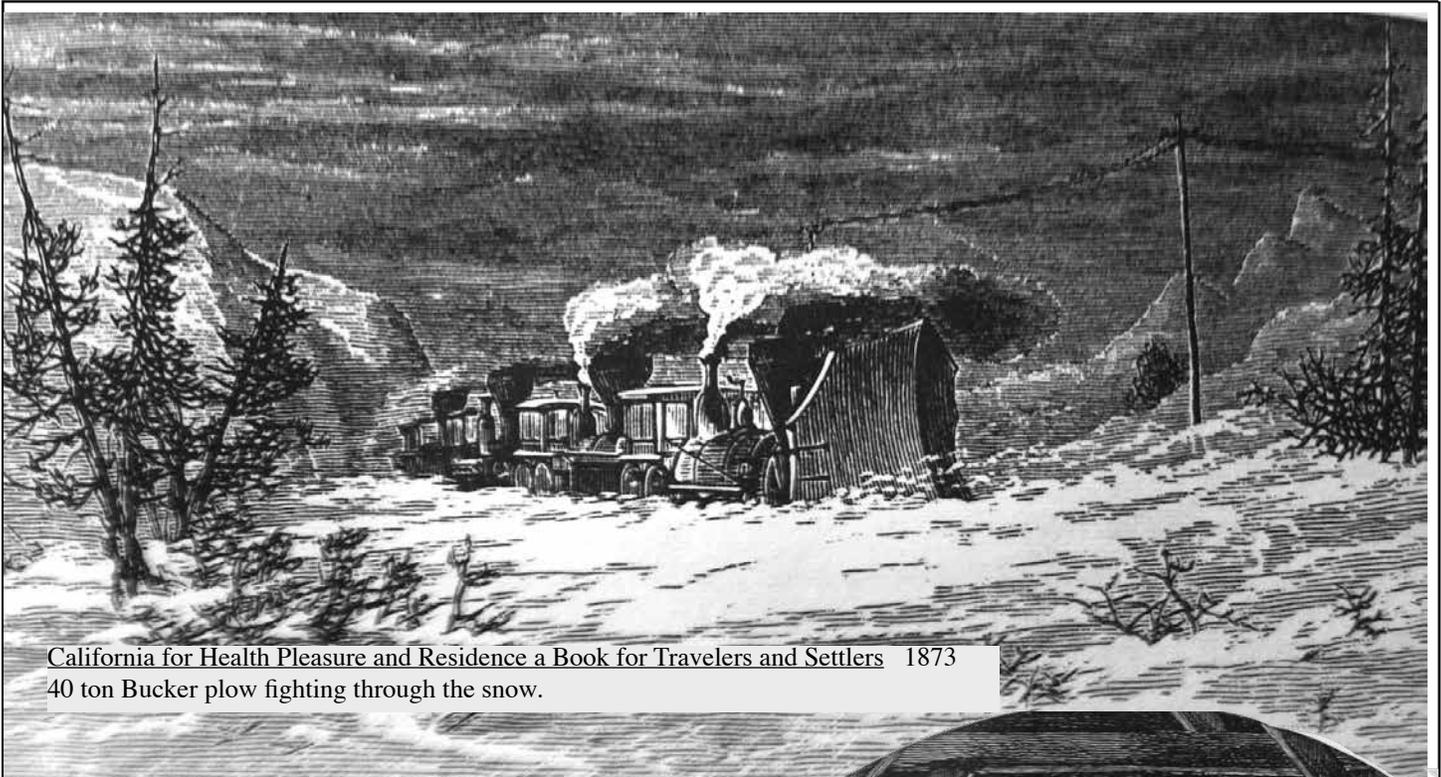
Donner Lake from Picturesque America, 1874 from a painting by Thomas Moran very romanticized



SUMMIT-CROSSING OF SIERRA NEVADAS, NEAR DONNER LAKE.

"Summit Crossing" from The History of the Big Bonanza. 1876 This is an impossible view.

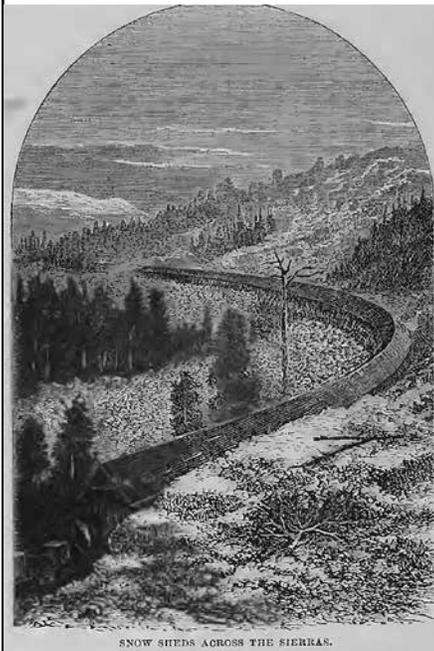




California for Health Pleasure and Residence a Book for Travelers and Settlers 1873
 40 ton Bucker plow fighting through the snow.



SNOW-SHED, CENTRAL PACIFIC RAILROAD.

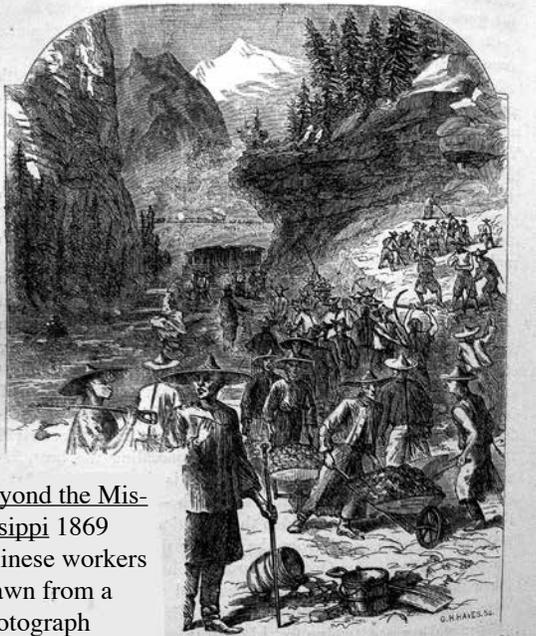


SNOW SHEDS ACROSS THE SIERRAS.

Snowsheds Across the Sierras
 Pacific Tourist, 1884



California for Health Pleasure and Residence a Book for Travelers and Settlers , 1873



Beyond the Mississippi 1869
Chinese workers
drawn from a
photograph

CHINAMEN BUILDING PACIFIC RAILROAD IN THE SIERRA NEVADAS.



Section of Snow-shed.

California Pictures in Prose and Verse 1878
"Section of Snowshed"



Pacific Tourist, 1884 Donner Lake

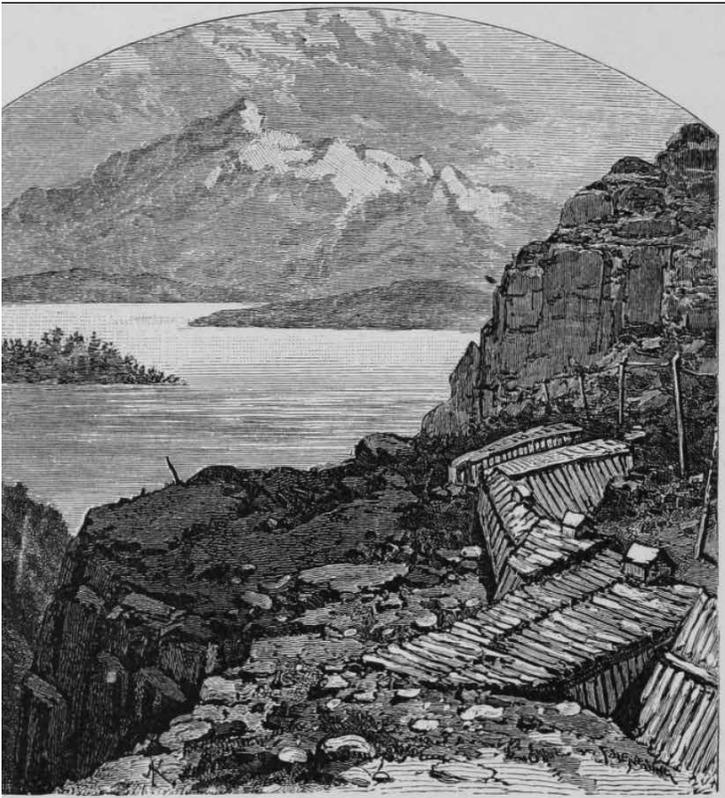


REFLECTION IN DONNER LAKE, SIERRA NEVADAS.

"Donner Lake" looking west
Beyond the Mississippi, 1869



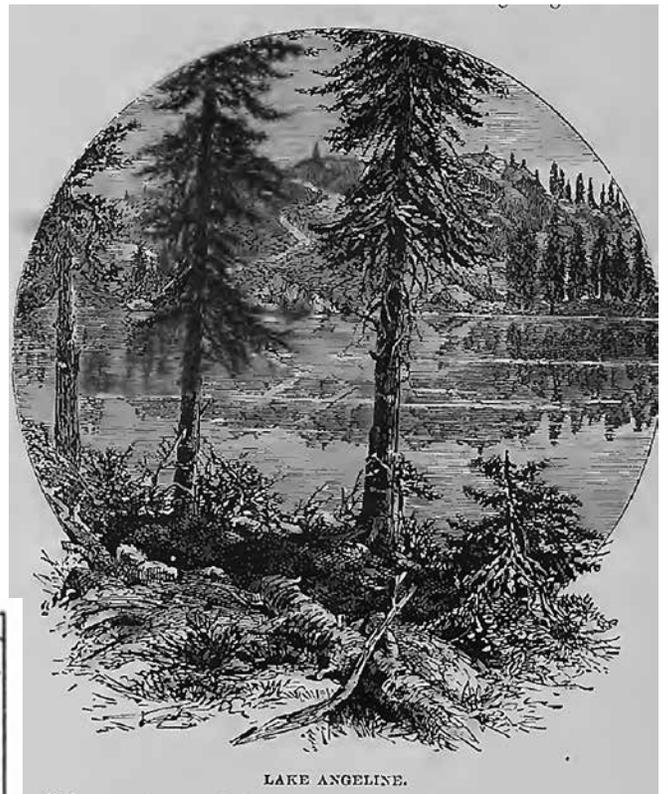
The Donner Party from
Beyond the Mississippi, 1869.
This picture was reproduced
in many books.



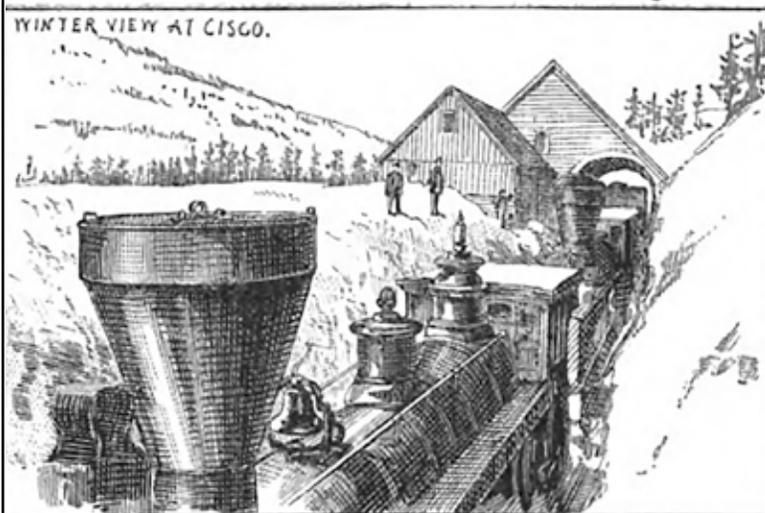
Donner Lake, Mount Sanford in the distance.

California Pictures in Prose and Verse, 1878 Donner Lake (Mount Sanford was actually Mt. Stanford and is today Castle Pk.) This view is impossible. It's made up of real characters: Donner Lake, Mt. Stanford, and the snowsheds on the right.

Lake Angeline (no doubt Lake Angela) from Pacific Tourist, 1884



LAKE ANGELINE.



Cisco from the History of the Big Bonanza 1876



Painting in Prose

This engraving goes with this text

"This beautiful mountain-retreat [above] is situated immediately east of and in full view of the crowning granite summit of the Sierra Nevada at Donner Pass. The lake is three miles long, and a little over one mile in width. Its water, clear as crystal, reflects mountain and pine forest as perfectly as the finest plate glass mirror. The air is clear and pure, and eminently invigorating. A moonlight sail on the lake is a glimpse into the weird beauty of fairy land. Nothing disturbs the slumber of nature here, save the murmur of falling waters, the sighing of pines, and, since spring, the hoarse yell of the locomotive as it goes clattering through the railroad snowsheds above the lake.

"Seen from the heights, the lake is of an intensely blue color, owing to its great depth which, in one place, is said to reach 1,500 feet. The surrounding mountains rise to 2,000 feet above the lake. A purple haze overspreads these mountains in the evening; while nothing can be more beautiful than to see the soft yellow sunlight gradually steal down their sides in the early morning, covering the trees, the rocks, the earth, and even the dead stumps, with a flood of golden light. Nature paints colors and arranges combinations of harmony in this, one of her great natural temples, such as no painter ever succeeded in approaching."

Vischer's Pictorial California page 60

"Half an hour's easy, scarcely perceptible ascent from the Summit House, a path between rocks and thickets, leads to the very top of the douse opposite Donner Peak; and there, with a foreground of stupendous rocks, and some of the lordliest specimens of the forest reaching up out of a neighboring ravine, a picture of magic significance unfolds itself before our eyes. It speaks to the mind with the full impressiveness of weight and breadth and power of awe-inspiring solitude: a panorama of the central high Sierra, a study of the great outlines of its mighty ranges; and, near by, as imposing specimens of the material it is built of,

picturesquely grouped, there is Donner Peak, and Mount Lincoln, with its massive flanks and patches of perennial snow, rising in the south; on the other hand, dominating the next range, Fremont Peak [today Castle Pk], with its castellated forest, and further on, summit on summit, extending towards the Downieville Buttes and Lassen's Peak; the Truckee Nevada range in the east, and Donner Lake sweetly nestled in the forest depth; and everywhere, through rock and timber, the charming surprises of the wilderness: occasional glimpses towards the Californian slopes, with dark blue mountain lakes, set in roseate granite ledges, reflecting, mirror-like, the belts of timber lining these somber ravines down to the very water's edge.

Hard by, though chastely hidden in the forest depth, is Angela Lake, so baptized in honor of the queen of a merry party from Sacramento, the guests at the suror's camp on the shore of that lovely expanse of water; and truly, a more romantic spot than that summit lake cannot be imagined.

Vischer's Pictorial of California pg 62

No. 42.-"Donner Lake," from the Summit of the Sierra Nevada. on the Dutch Flat, Virginia Road.

Painting in Prose

The April and May issues of the Heirloom featured various artists' interpretations of the magnificence of Donner Summit. Those Donner Summit works were all examples of 19th Century landscape art, an art form that was important to the American public. The paintings and sketches are beautiful, but they are not the only way that beautiful landscapes were celebrated in the 19th Century. We thought it would be fun to cull through the files and see what we could find that celebrated Donner Summit in prose. There are quite a lot and some people may find the 19th Century prose fun to read. As you read the descriptions of Donner Summit imagine what the scenes were like. Unfortunately, printing a large number in this Heirloom will take up too much space so we'll divide the collection and you can see the rest next month.

Benjamin Avery was a 19th Century California editor and nature writer. He wrote the following in his introduction to Californian Pictures in Prose and Verse (1878) and it looked like a good introduction to this Heirloom edition's article, "Painting with Prose."

"A WORD BEFORE.

"The only aim of the following pages is to present a few word-sketches of Californian scenery-studies from nature, true to local color and form, and barely indicating the salient characteristics of plant and animal life and rocky structure. Those who love nature for her own sake, and for her relations to the best art, will sympathize with the motive, whatever may be the imperfection, of these sketches. Some of them originally appeared in the Overland Monthly, but these have been retouched for this volume."

Benjamin Avery

Are the words that follow Mr. Avery just as rich as the paintings and do they not show the magnificence of Donner Summit just as much?

"The air has a fresh crispness about it that gives a new life to the visitor whether he has come from the fertile plains or the foggy city. And no wonder... there are seven thousand feet between you and sea level. Seven thousand feet nearer heaven and so much nearer purity. It is a relief to... look up to the stars, nowhere brighter than here, with only the dark pines closing in the distance... The air redolent with the perfume of fresh grass and wild flowers; and aromatic with pine needles. It is a physical pleasure to breathe, a 'delight to exist'... It is small wonder that a millionaire [Mark Hopkins]... should confess to be happier and healthier here than in the handsomest house on California Street. Nob Hill, to the sierras indeed."

California Spirit of the Times magazine June 13, 1885 pg 3-4

"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 than that which surrounds this lake, of which the lake itself composes a part."

What I Saw in California (1846),
description of Truckee Lake (Donner) from Edwin Bryant's book,

The view from the crest of the Sierra to the east, is inexpressibly, comprehensive, grand and picturesque.

also Edwin Bryant

A short distance north of the pass I climbed the dizzy heights of a granite peak The view was magnificent. Perennial snow, rock, chasm, forest, lake and stream; a veritable map of the wildest, grandest parts of America, spread out at every side.

John Steele, 1850
from Tail of the Elephant page 191

Here the tourist has in store for him one of the chief joys of physical existence, provided he is strong enough to enjoy it. For all he has to do is to make terms with one of the rough but good-natured mountaineers, whose snug dwellings are nestled in the loftiest of the Sierra valleys, known as Summit Valley, and he may live in a region fit for the residence of the gods, as far as pure air and the luxury that pure air can supply are concerned ; how great is that luxury, people "in cities pent" have but a feeble conception.

Travels West, 1877
Wm. Minturn

The path was "strangely beautiful at night..." "The tall firs, though drooping under their heavy burdens, pointed to the mountains that overhung them, where the fires that lit seven tunnels shone like stars on their snowy sides..." "the only sound that came down to break the stillness of the winter night was the sharp ring of hammer on steel, or the heavy reports of the blasts." The Railroad Chinese night shifts were hard at work in those tunnels.

John R. Gillis in Tunnels of the Pacific Railroad 1870
Out for a walk in 1866 after snow had fallen

Fine Views.

About one mile east of the Summit one of the finest views on the road will be had. The line passes at a great elevation along the face of one of the Summit peaks, and the view into the deep canyons below and across Donner Lake, ... is sublimely magnificent. ... It is no exaggeration to say that the scenery all through the canyon is one continuous glorious masterpiece of painting. At the foot of the canyon the Truckee River winds its musical-way eastward. On each side of it in many places almost perpendicular peaks rise to the high [sic] of from 1,000 to 1,500 feet above the river's bed, and are all very thickly covered with timber, this last being largely due to the fact that until the railroad force came along, man, the vandal, had seldom disturbed this out of the way spot of loneliness and beauty.

Sacramento Union
April 22, 1867

The scenery was of the grandest, yet of the most savage and desolate character. The very highest peaks were close to us, bare rock, except for splotchy covering of thin snow and a few stunted trees. In a deep gorge to the left Lake Donner, to the right lofty cliffs of granite. The air was cold and the wind strong, but I had borrowed an overcoat at the hotel, and with my gloves on was very warm."

Benjamin Avery CPRR AP correspondent on retainer rode a pony to Tunnel 6

Through the biting night air we were whirled down the eastern slope for three miles to Donner lake, blue, shining, and sprinkled with stars, while from the wooded hill beyond glared an Indian fire like a great fiendish eyeball. The lake is an exquisite body of water...and the reflections of snowy peak, pine forest, clear sky, and minute twig and leaf in its depths, seem almost miraculous. The illustration, as faithful to nature as artist and engraver can make it, is far less vivid than the original photograph. In that, concealing the boat, figures and trees in foreground-water, it is almost impossible to decide which side up the picture should be – which are the real hills, snow and forest, and which the reflection.

Beyond the Mississippi, 1869

We are on the dividing ridge which separates the head waters of several mountain rivers,.... Close to our right,... the waters of

the South Yuba leap and dance along, amid dense and gloomy forests, and over almost countless rapids, cascades and waterfalls....There is no grander scenery in the Sierras – of towering mountains, deep gorge, lofty precipices, sparkling waterfall and crystal lakes – than abound with an easy distance of this place [Summit Valley]. The tourist can find scenes of deepest interest and grandest beauty; the scholar and philosopher, objects of rare value for scientific investigations. The hunter and angler can find an almost unlimited field for their amusement - the former in the gorges of the mountains where the timid deer and fierce grizzly bear make their home ; the latter among the mountain lakes and the streams, where the speckled trout leaps in its joyous freedom, which around all is the music of snow-fed mountains torrent and mountain breeze, and over all is the clear, blue sky of our sunny clime, tempered and softened by the shadows of the everlasting hills. There is life, health and vigor on every hand if one will but embrace it. There are roses on the zephyr's breath, which are transferred with a morning kiss to the "pale-faced city's daughter," to renew the bloom wasted amid balls and the aimless life of city dissipation. There is health and vigor for the invalid, for the toil-worn business man, if he but cast aside his business cares and for awhile become a natural person among nature's grandest scenery.

Great Transcontinental Railroad Guide 1870

It will repay the traveler to spend a day here [Summit Valley], in one of the loftiest of the Sierra valleys. It is covered with a luxuriant growth of grass, affording pasturage for large bands of cattle, during the summer. It is all occupied by dairymen and stock raisers at whose comfortable dwelling the tourist will find a hearty welcome. it is a delightful summer retreat – a favorite resort for those who prefer the mountains with their cool breezes and pure water. The valley is watered by many springs and snow-fed rivulets, whose waters flow to the American river [sic].

Great Transcontinental Railroad Guide 1870

In the morning we awoke at Truckee with frosty window, a crisp and bracing air about us. We had commenced the ascent of the Sierra range.

The ascent from Truckee mingles the grand with beautiful. The first rays of the sun added brilliancy to the landscape and tinged the mountain peaks with gold. All were pointing out objects of beauty and grandeur. As we rounded a mountain peak, or pursued our course through a gorge, or darted through a tunnel, on every side, and ever, scenes awing, grand and beautiful, passed before us. The weight of the rails, and the solidity of the track, and the ease with which the locomotive moved our heavy train in this wild region of mountain cañons and peaks, drew forth unstinted praise from out practical party of railroad judges.

A Souvenir of the transcontinental Excursion of Railroad Agents, 1870,

After breakfast the party, guided by Mr. Goodman, who, since his meeting the party at Ogden, had been most indefatigable in his efforts to make us all perfectly comfortable, proceeded through the long tunnel on the summit (1,659 feet) to the mountain tops overlooking Donner lake. [sic] Here the party were for a moment lost in silent admiration of the beautiful landscape reposing in serene beauty far beneath them. However awe-inspiring the scene and sublime the spectacle of so large a number of person thus quietly doing homage to the great Creator, it could not long continue. The pent up feeling of the party must have vent, and so with one accord they sang – "Praise God from whom all blessing flow".

A Souvenir of the transcontinental Excursion of Railroad Agents, 1870,

From Truckee the [rail]road ...will give you ample opportunity to study the triumphs of railroad engineering, and through great tunnels that rival the labor of Simplon [a pass in the Alps].

...You rise up and up, over Alp on Alp, till the external snows stretch all around you; then through another tunnel, emerging from which you find yourself on the Summit, with Donner Lake — said to be the loftiest sheet of water in the world — reposing in wondrous beauty beneath your feet. Here,... there is a royal feast of fat things for the imagination. It would be impossible to conceive of mountain scenery of more varied sublimity than meets the vision during this ride; where majestic, frowning peaks overhang you and bottomless abysses lie below, and where the splendor of snow and the music of sighing pines invite to "Summer high in bliss among the hills of God!"

New York Times report of June 18, 1869,
published in the June 28, 1869 newspaper of the George Mortimer Pullman Excursion.
At http://cpr.org/Museum/Newspapers/New_York_Times/1869-06-28.html

Odds & Ends on Donner Summit

<https://allaroundnevada.com/donner-summit>

Spend some time at the above website to take a virtual reality tour of Donner Summit's train tunnels. You will be able to explore the area zooming, rotating, and moving link to link. There is a fun gallery of 3d historic photographs (stereoscope slides).

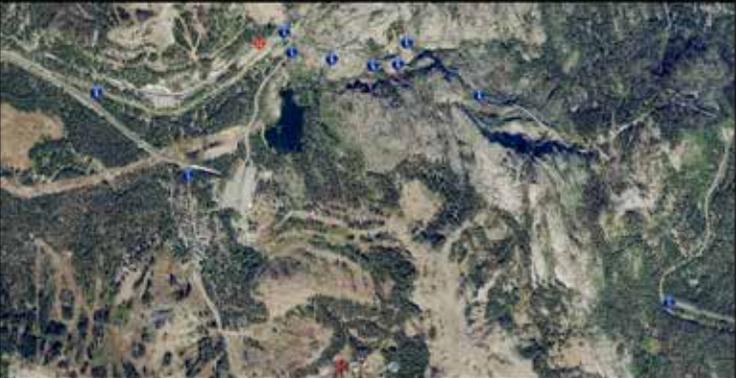
The project was done by UNR emeritus professor Howard Goldbaum and is a nice addition to Donner Summit.

All Around Nevada

Explore the Silver State (and beyond) in Virtual Reality

After two years of construction, in often abominable conditions, the Central Pacific Railroad sent its first passenger trains through the Summit Tunnel at Donner Pass in November of 1867. The 1,659-foot Summit Tunnel (also known as Tunnel #6) was the most difficult engineering challenge of the Transcontinental Railroad and the engineering marvel of the 19th Century. There were four crews of Chinese laborers working to blast out the tunnel from the granite rock. One crew attacked the rock face at each end, and two crews worked from the center of the tunnel toward each end. These two crews were lowered into the tunnel from a 75 ft. deep vertical shaft excavated down from Donner Pass.

The virtual-reality tour below begins with a satellite view of the entire Donner Summit area. Click the red hotspot to begin the interactive VR tour.



CLICK THE IMAGE ABOVE TO ENTER THE VR TOUR IN A NEW BROWSER WINDOW. Then click and drag to explore the tunnels and snow sheds at Donner Summit. Double-click for full screen.

The railroad was not the first to create a route over Donner Summit. More than 4,000 years ago members of the Maidu Culture of Native Americans traversed these mountain passes and documented their presence with the petroglyphs that may still be seen today. These are included in the VR tour. Before the railroad came through, the Dutch Flat and Donner Lake Wagon Road served as an essential link over the Sierras. Later, the Lincoln Highway (also seen in the VR tour) followed the same route. With the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869, its 1,912-mile of continuous steel rail provided a tangible symbol of a unified nation emerging from the bloody discord of the Civil War.



VR Tour Control Bar

In 1925, the Southern Pacific Railroad built a second—longer and deeper—tunnel over Donner Pass. This 10,325 ft shaft was dubbed "the Big Hole," although its official name is "Tunnel #1." Both tunnels were used until 1993 when the railroad mothballed the original route and removed its rails. Today all train traffic through Donner Summit passes through the "Big Hole," with east-bound passengers exiting the tunnel to views above Donner Lake (as noted in the VR tour), and west-bound trains leaving the tunnel near Norden.

[Click here to see the location in Google Maps.](#)

Click on the image below to enter a gallery of 3D images made during the construction of the railroad through Donner Summit.



This is part of a series of miscellaneous history, "Odds & Ends" of Donner Summit. There are a lot of big stories on Donner Summit making it the most important historical square mile in California. All of those episodes* left behind obvious traces. As one explores Donner Summit, though, one comes across a lot of other things related to the rich history. All of those things have stories too and we've been collecting them. Now they're making appearances in the [Heirloom](#).

If you find any "Odds & Ends" you'd like to share pass them on to the editor - see page 2

*Native Americans; first wagon trains to California; the first transcontinental railroad, highway, air route, and telephone line, etc.

Donner Summit Historical Society

www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org

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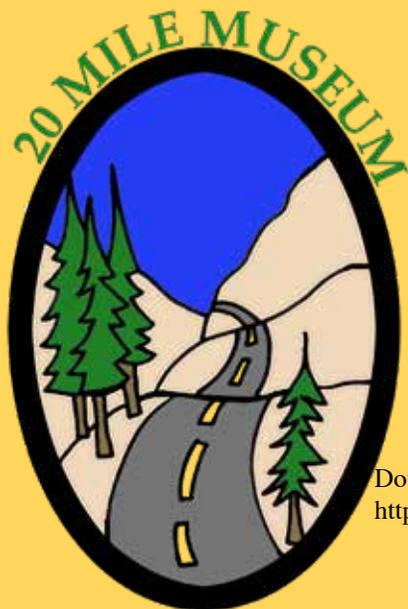
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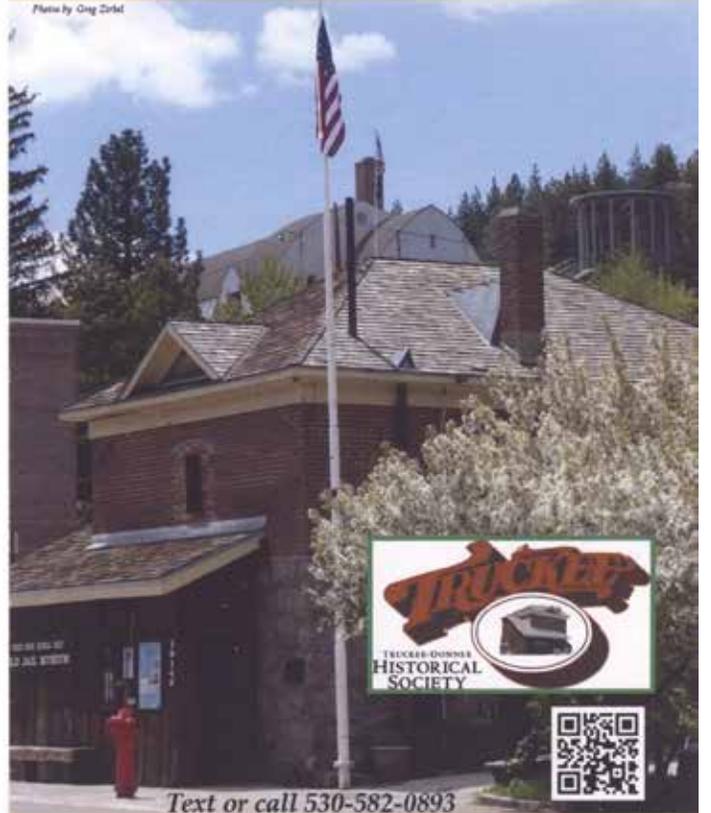
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Photo by Greg Zirkel



Text or call 530-582-0893

Old Truckee Jail Museum

OldJailMuseum@TruckeeHistory.org



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



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