

The Donner Party: Beyond Cannibalism

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Individual Exhibit

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I chose the Donner Party because the concept of cannibalism was compelling. I wanted to learn more about what would drive a human to do that. As I began my research, I discovered their major troubles which led to the horror of cannibalism was the theme for NHD: communication issues. The reason they got in their dire situation in the first place was being given bad advice and not taking good advice. If it weren't for their mishaps in communication they would have made it to California just fine like the many other emigrants that year.

To conduct my research I watched a documentary, read books, and visited websites. I connected with a Donner Party historian named Bill Oudegeest, who suggested websites and gave me information of his own. In November 2020, an expedition of extreme athletes started to travel the Forlorn Hope trail that some of the Donner Party took, with a goal to honor the original members who risked their lives to try to save the rest of the Donner Party who were trapped. This Forlorn Hope Expedition had a website and a podcast that I participated in.

I decided to do an exhibit. I planned out ways to make my exhibit look like a wagon from 1846. I knew a map would be important because the whole point of the story is their journey, so I got a map that shows elevation so that you can see what mountains they had to cross. Then I drew their path and put information about all the important locations. I listed members in the Donner Party, as well as the smaller Forlorn Hope group. I used the tribute cards that this year's Forlorn Hope Expedition carried with them. Then I found diary entries and direct quotes to show what the members themselves thought.

My argument is manifest destiny drove a group of emigrants known as the Donner Party on an infamous journey. The major failing of the Donner Party was lack of communication, miscommunication from outside individuals, and not accepting good advice. Their 1846 migration to California led to future emigrants not taking the dangerous Hastings cutoff and saving lives.

This topic is important in history because it shows how grim it can turn out if your communication is bad and you are too stubborn to take good advice. This also shows how much humans can endure if their lives are on the line. The only reason the Donners were cannibals in the first place was so they didn't all die of starvation. The short-term impact of taking the Hastings Cutoff and surviving to tell the story led to no more emigrants taking that path and dying on it. The book Hastings wrote was ignored by future emigrants, and better communication among following emigrants in later years prevented more tragedies. Everyone after 1846 had heard of the Donner Party and knew it was a race to get over the Sierra Nevada Mountains before winter.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary sources:

12th May 1846: The Donner Party begin their ill-fated journey to California. Adapted by Scott Allsop, 2018. HistoryPod.net, 12th May 1846: The Donner Party begin their ill-fated journey to California. Accessed 21 Feb. 2021.

From this video, I got a picture of Oxen pulling wagons in 1845. This picture I put on my board to show visually how the Donner party traveled so that people looking at my exhibit don't just have to imagine.

Andersen, Stacy. Jacob Donner. MrKHistoryper5, www.pinterest.com/pin/553731716658467844/. Accessed 22 Jan. 2021.

This Photo of Jacob Donner was needed because he and his brother, Goerge Donner, and James Reed all started the Donner Party group. They were the founding members who left Springfield Illinois together with their families.

"April 1847." Received by Lewis Keseberg. Donner Party Diary, Dainal M. Rosen, www.donnerpartydiary.com/oct46.html. Accessed 11 Oct. 2020. Letter.

This Diary entry provided good insight into what the smaller families in the Donner party had to go through. The entries helped me understand what they talked about and discussed when they reached major points in their journey.

Bean, Patrick. "The Diary of Patrick Bean." The Diary of Patrick Bean, American Experience, www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/donner-diary-patrick-breen/. Accessed 11 Oct. 2020. Letter.

This Diary entry of one of the fathers in the party gave me a lot of information on the cannibalism part of the Donner Party. This helped me understand that the Donner Party was in a very dire scenario and had no other choice, helping me form an opinion. I can understand how they came to eat their deceased to survive.

Birrell, Andrew. "Relief Maps of the United States" ["Relief Maps of the United States"]. Relief Maps of the United States, birrell.org/andrew/reliefMaps/. Accessed 22 Jan. 2021.

I used this webpage for a map of the United States of America. I needed a map to show elevation to show how hard the trip the Donners took was. This topographic map shows how the first part of the journey was smooth, but once they got further west the elevation made traveling with wagons very difficult.

Burns, Ric. "The Donner Party." American Experience, www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/donner-rick-burns/. Interview. This interview with Historian Ric Burns helped me understand why Hastings wrote his book and how he was feeling when he wrote the book. This helped me get a better understanding of Hastings, making my project less biased against him. I formed an opinion that he wasn't trying to deceive and endanger emigrants, but he wanted to

populate California and thought his route would be good even though he had never traveled it with wagons himself.

Hasting, Lansford. *The Emigrants Guide to Oregon and California*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1845.

This is the book the Donner party read and followed causing their hardships. This helps me understand why the Donner party took this route so I know while making this project they were not just incompetent people, but fooled by this book.

"October 1846." Received by the author. *Donner Party Diary*, Danial M. Rosen, www.donnerpartydiary.com/apr46.html. Accessed 11 Oct. 2020. Letter.

This diary helps me understand the situation they were in and how the Donner Party weren't even that close to each other when they were traveling to California. This helped me understand that even within the group it was difficult to communicate with each other. Helping me by letting me link another point of miscommunication for my project.

Reed, Virginia. "Across the plains in the Donner Party A personal Narrative of the Overland trip to California" ["Across the plains in the Donner Party A personal Narrative of the Overland trip to California"]. *Century Magazine*, digital ed., vol. 42, 1891, pp. 409-26.

This book that Virginia Reed wrote years later helped me understand that the Party thought that the trip was going to be easy but in reality, it will be their hardest trip ever. This helps me understand how Hastings tricked people into taking his route.

Seabrook, Kim. "The Donner Party: Death of a Wagon Train" ["The Donner Party: Death of a Wagon Train"]. *P.O.E History Revealed*, 5 Dec. 2013, www.prisonersofeternity.co.uk/2013/12/05/. Accessed 22 Jan. 2012.

I used this website to find a picture of George Donner. Goerge Donner was one of the Founders in the Donner party and was voted to be leader, hence why the party was named Donner Party.

"Sunday, April 5, 1846." Received by H. H. Bancoft, 1877. *Donner Party Dairy*, Dainel M. Rosen, www.donnerpartydiary.com/apr46.html. Accessed 11 Oct. 2020. Letter.

This diary gave me a lot of day-by-day information on what happened while they traveled. This tells me that Breen joined after hearing about the shortcut. This ties into the theme of communication helping me with my project.

Trimble, Marshall. "The Donner Party Disaster" ["The Donner Party Disaster"]. *Truwest History of The American Frontier*, 2 Nov. 2020, truwestmagazine.com/the-donner-party-disaster/. Accessed 22 Jan. 2021.

I got a picture of James and Margret Reed on this website. I needed the picture to show who they were before their infamous journey. James Reed wanted to be the leader, and he made many bad decisions that affected the entire party.

Secondary sources:

Gibson, James J., editor. "Lansford Hastings" ["Lansford Hastings"]. *Knox History*, edited by Mark Ramser, James J. Gibson, www.knoxhistory.org/index.php/local-history/authors/118-travel/168-lansford-hastings. Accessed 31 Oct. 2020.

This website explains Hastings's life and tells me his motivations for doing what he did. This helps me know to focus on miscommunication on my project.

Oudegeest, Bill. E-mail interview. 14 Nov. 2020.

I interviewed a Donner Party Historian who has written multiple books and has made multiple websites. He told me many things to talk about and think about and what he told me completely changed my focus. From what he said I made a better thesis and he gave me websites to look at which gave me good information.

"Forlorn Hope Expedition" ["Forlorn Hope Expedition"]. *Forlorn Hope*, 2020, www.forlornhope.org/. Accessed 9 Jan. 2021.

This website gave me information on the Forlorn Hope part of my project and the members in it. This website told me the path they took helping me understand what went wrong. I also used this website for pictures of the Forlorn hope members and a list of the members in the Donner Party.

Severn, Carly, editor. "Surviving the Donner Party:California, Gold, and Life Long secrets." ["Surviving the Donner Party:California, Gold, and Life Long secrets."]. *KQED*, www.kqed.org/news/11844019/donner-party-pt2. Accessed 31 Oct. 2020.

This website helps me understand how they got to California after they got trapped and how hard it was. This gives me good information on things that not many people know about to help me create an original project.

Weiser, Kathy. "Tragic Story of the Donner Party" ["Tragic Story of the Donner Party"]. *Legends of America*, edited by Kathy Weiser, Shervin Mirhashemi, Apr. 2020, www.legendsofamerica.com/ca-donnerparty/. Accessed 11 Oct. 2020.

This website was the site I used to get my background information I used to find other sites that will give me more specific information. This helps me with my project by letting me get a broad understanding of the topic.

The Donner Party: Beyond Cannibalism



Left Top Panel Photo

Source credit text:

Photograph of George Donner: P.O.E History Revealed

Photograph of Jacob Donner picture: MrK History

Photograph of James and Margaret Reed picture: True West Magazine



Left Top Panel Text

Members of the Donner Party

89 emigrants total

Founding Members

Jacob Donner
Wife and 5 children

George Donner
Wife and 5 children

James and Margaret Reed
4 children

Left Center Panel Photo

Source Credit Text:
Forlorn Hope members honored by
Forlorn Hope Expedition 2020.
www.Forlornhope.org/party-members/



Left Center Panel Photo

The pictures on the left center panel flip up to reveal these descriptions of the Forlorn Hope Party members.

ANTONIO
 BORN 24. 1818. Mexico.
 Captain of a small party of men who were sent to the mountains to find the trail to the gold mines.
 He was killed by the Indians on the 10th of January 1847 near Gold.

PATRICK DOLOAN
 BORN 22. 1818. Dublin, Ireland.
 A man of 27 years of age, tall, dark hair, blue eyes, and a good natured disposition.
 He was killed by the Indians on the 10th of January 1847 near Gold.

CHARLES TYLER STANTON
 BORN 26. 1818. Ireland.
 An Irish man, tall, dark hair, and a good natured disposition.
 He was killed by the Indians on the 10th of January 1847 near Gold.

SALVADOR (Spaniard)
 BORN 23. 1818. Spain.
 A man of 27 years of age, tall, dark hair, and a good natured disposition.
 He was killed by the Indians on the 10th of January 1847 near Gold.

LUIS (Emma)
 BORN 23. 1818. Spain.
 A man of 27 years of age, tall, dark hair, and a good natured disposition.
 He was killed by the Indians on the 10th of January 1847 near Gold.

AMANDA HENDERSON McCLUTCHEN
 BORN 23. 1818. Ireland.
 A man of 27 years of age, tall, dark hair, and a good natured disposition.
 He was killed by the Indians on the 10th of January 1847 near Gold.

WILLIAM McRADDEN FOSTER
 BORN 23. 1818. Scotland.
 A man of 27 years of age, tall, dark hair, and a good natured disposition.
 He was killed by the Indians on the 10th of January 1847 near Gold.

SARAH GRAYES FOSTER
 BORN 23. 1818. Scotland.
 A woman of 27 years of age, tall, dark hair, and a good natured disposition.
 She was killed by the Indians on the 10th of January 1847 near Gold.

SARAH ANN CHARLOTTE MURPHY FOSTER
 BORN 23. 1818. Scotland.
 A woman of 27 years of age, tall, dark hair, and a good natured disposition.
 She was killed by the Indians on the 10th of January 1847 near Gold.

THOMAS WARD GRAYES
 BORN 23. 1818. Scotland.
 A man of 27 years of age, tall, dark hair, and a good natured disposition.
 He was killed by the Indians on the 10th of January 1847 near Gold.

LINCOLN S. MURPHY
 BORN 23. 1818. Scotland.
 A man of 27 years of age, tall, dark hair, and a good natured disposition.
 He was killed by the Indians on the 10th of January 1847 near Gold.

WILLIAM HENRY EDDY
 BORN 23. 1818. Scotland.
 A man of 27 years of age, tall, dark hair, and a good natured disposition.
 He was killed by the Indians on the 10th of January 1847 near Gold.

JAY FOSDICK
 BORN 23. 1818. Scotland.
 A man of 27 years of age, tall, dark hair, and a good natured disposition.
 He was killed by the Indians on the 10th of January 1847 near Gold.

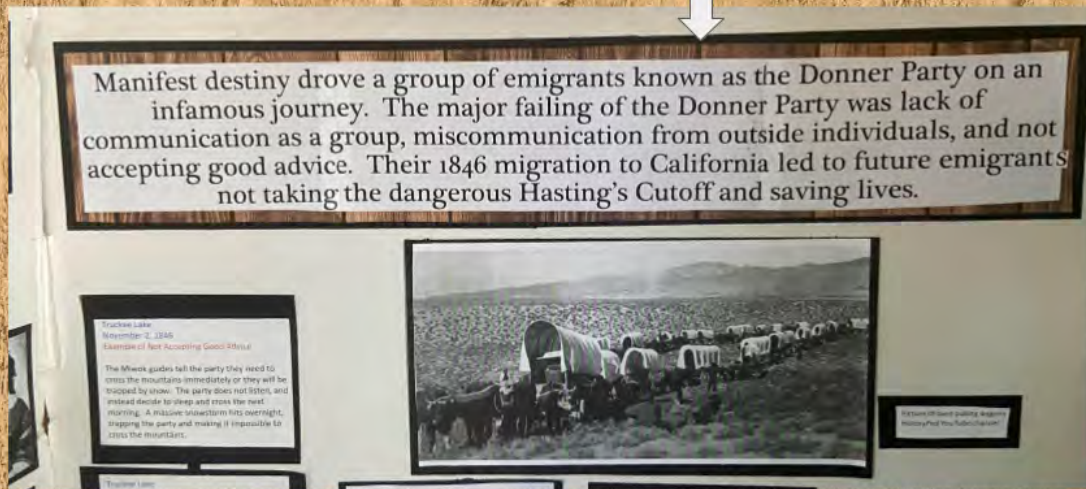
Left Bottom Panel Text

The Forlorn Hope was a small group who set out over the mountains to get help. This was the last example of **miscommunication** in this story. Stanton went snow blind, leaving only the Miwok guides who didn't speak English. Wrong turns due to bad communication led to misery and death for 8 men.

Ultimately, William Eddy made it to Johnson's Ranch. There **communication** was quick and clear, leading to the rescue of the rest of the survivors.

Center Top Panel Photo

Thesis Statement



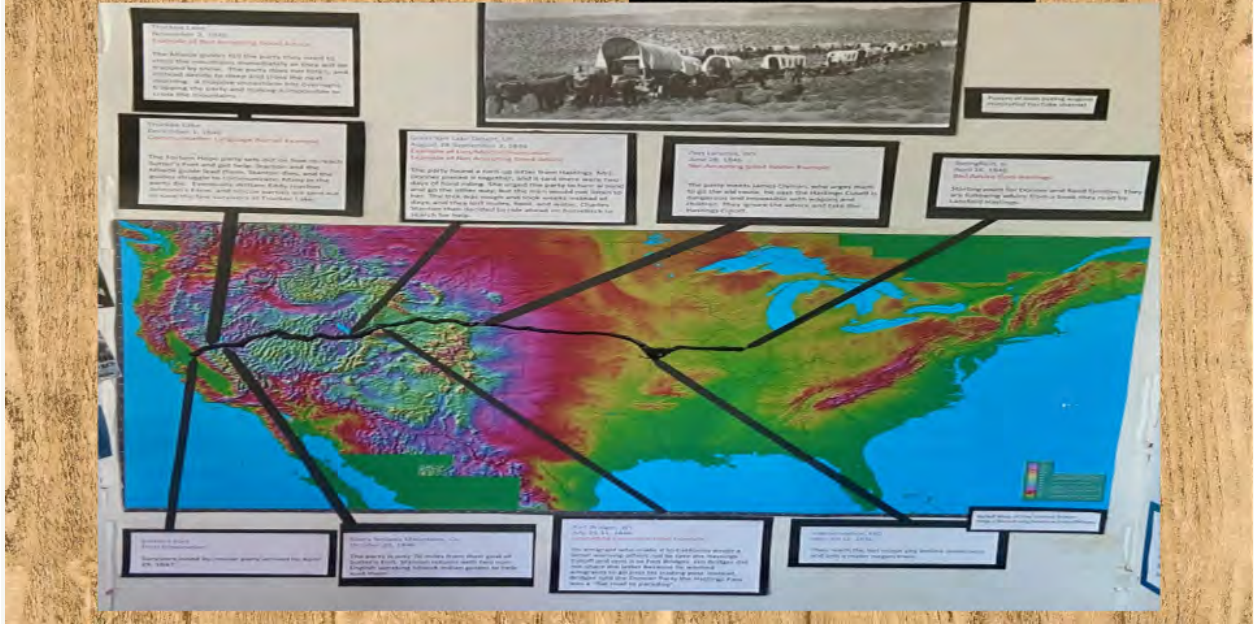
Source Credit Text: Picture of oxen pulling wagons, History Pod

Center Top Panel Text

Manifest destiny drove a group of emigrants known as the Donner Party on an infamous journey. The major failing of the Donner Party was lack of communication as a group, miscommunication from outside individuals, and not accepting good advice. Their 1846 migration to California led to future emigrants not taking the dangerous Hasting's Cutoff and saving lives.

Center Center Panel Photo

Source Credit Text:
Relief Map of the United States,
<http://birrell.org/andrew/reliefMap/>



Center Center Panel Text

Springfield, IL
April 16, 1846
Bad Advice from Hastings

Starting point for Donner and Reed families. They are following advice from a book they read by Lansford Hastings.

Independence, MO
May 10-12, 1846

They reach the last major city before wilderness and join a major wagon train.

Center Center Panel Text

Fort Laramie, WY
June 28, 1846

Not Accepting Good Advice Example

The party meets James Clyman, who urges them to go the old route. He says the Hastings Cutoff is dangerous and impossible with wagons and children. They ignore the advice and take the Hastings Cutoff.

Fort Bridger, WY
July 24-31, 1846

Untruthful Communication Example

An emigrant who made it to California wrote a letter warning others not to take the Hastings Cutoff and sent it to Fort Bridger. Jim Bridger did not share the letter because he wanted emigrants to go past his trading post. Instead, Bridger told the Donner Party the Hastings Pass was a "flat road to paradise".

Center Center Panel Text

Great Salt Lake Desert, UT
August 28-September 3, 1846

Example of Lies/Miscommunication Example of Not Accepting Good Advice

The party found a torn-up letter from Hastings. Mrs. Donner pieced it together, and it said there were two days of hard riding. She urged the party to turn around and go the other way, but the men would not listen to her. The trek was rough and took weeks instead of days, and they lost mules, food, and water. Charles Stanton then decided to ride ahead on horseback to search for help.

Sierra Nevada Mountains, CA
October 20, 1846

The party is only 70 miles from their goal of Sutter's Fort. Stanton returns with two non-English speaking Miwok Indian guides to help lead them.

Center Center Panel Text

Truckee Lake

November 2, 1846

Example of Not Accepting Good Advice

The Miwok guides tell the party they need to cross the mountains immediately or they will be trapped by snow. The party does not listen, and instead decide to sleep and cross the next morning. A massive snowstorm hits overnight, trapping the party and making it impossible to cross the mountains.

Truckee Lake

December 1, 1846

Communication Language Barrier Example

The Forlorn Hope party sets out on foot to reach Sutter's Fort and get help. Stanton and the Miwok guide lead them. Stanton dies, and the guides struggle to communicate. Many in the party die. Eventually William Eddy reaches Johnson's Farm, and rescue parties are sent out to save the few survivors at Truckee Lake.

Center Center Panel Text

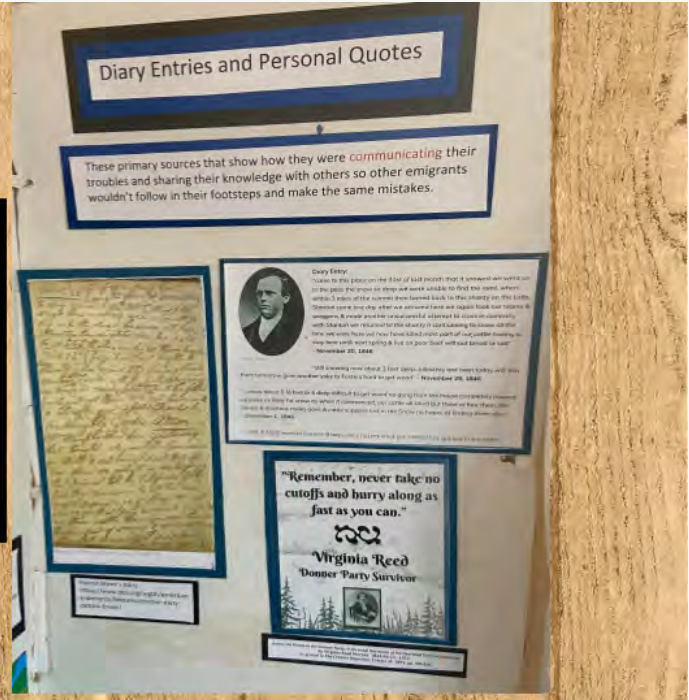
Sutter's Fort
Final Destination

Survivors aided by rescue party arrived by April
29, 1847

Right Top Panel Photo

Source credit text:
Patrick Breen's
Diary
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americaneperiences/feature/donner-diary-patrick-breen/>

Source credit text:
Across the Plains in
the Donner Party: A
Personal Narrative
of the Overland Trip
to California by
Virginia Reed



Right Top Panel | Text

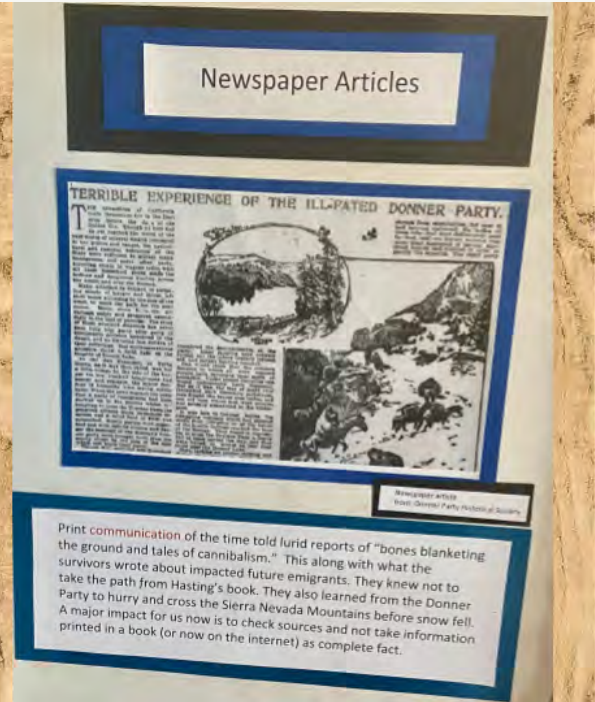
Diary Entries and Personal Quotes

These primary sources that show how they were *communicating* their troubles and sharing their knowledge with others so other emigrants wouldn't follow in their footsteps and make the same mistakes.

Right Bottom Panel Photo

Source credit text:

Newspaper article
Donner Party Historical Society



Right Bottom Panel Text

Print **communication** of the time told lurid reports of "bones blanketing the ground and tales of cannibalism." This along with what the survivors wrote about impacted future emigrants. They knew not to take the path from Hasting's book. They also learned from the Donner Party to hurry and cross the Sierra Nevada Mountains before snow fell. A major impact for us now is to check sources and not take information printed in a book (or now on the internet) as complete fact.