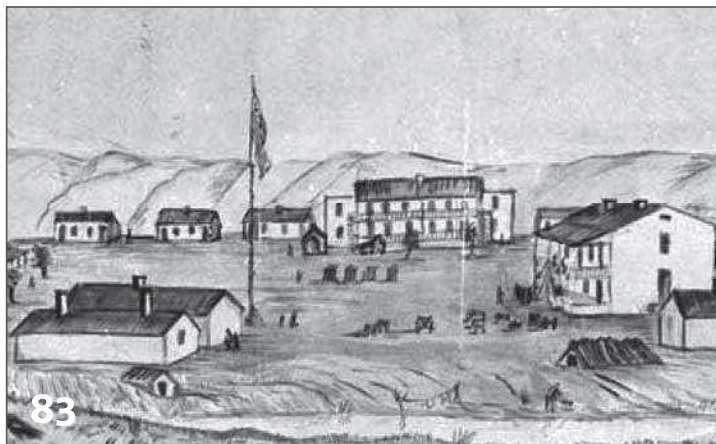


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#### ON THE COVER

Looking west from the switchback toward the original steep climb to Roller Pass in the upper right of the photo.  
PHOTO BY CHRIS WRAY

#### ON THE BACK COVER

Early map, *Sketch of the Routes of Hunt & Stuart*, fur men who are described as "two of the earliest American Travellers in Oregon Territory." The map shows Wilson P. Hunt's westward expedition from the Missouri River to John Jacob Astor's trading post on the Columbia River, and Robert Stuart's trip from Astoria to St. Louis. Cartographer Carl Wheat called the map "reasonably accurate, . . . an important milestone in western mapping." Hunt and Stuart discovered what would become the Oregon Trail; this is one of the earliest appearances of their route on a printed map. COURTESY OF BARRY LAWRENCE RUDERMAN, ANTIQUE MAPS, LTD., LA JOLLA, CALIFORNIA.

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## THE OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ASSOCIATION

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OCTA's membership and volunteer leadership seek to preserve our heritage. Our accomplishments include:

- Purchasing Nebraska's "California Hill," with ruts cut by emigrant wagons as they climbed from the South Platte River.
- Protecting emigrant graves.
- Initiating legislation designating the California and Santa Fe trails as National Historic trails.
- Persuading government and industry to relocate roads and pipe lines to preserve miles of pristine ruts.

#### CONVENTIONS AND FIELD TRIPS

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Local chapters also plan treks and activities throughout the year.

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*News from the Plains*—Also issued quarterly, *News* contains updates about members and the organization, convention reports, legislative action, genealogy, trail preservation, and special activities.

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- Marking the trails and maintaining weathered or damaged markers.
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1. To initiate and coordinate activities relating to the identification, preservation, interpretation, and improved accessibility of extant rut segments, trail remains, graves and associated historic trail sites, landmarks, artifacts, and objects along the overland western historic trails, roads, routes, branches, and cutoffs of the Trans-Mississippi region.
2. To prevent further deterioration of the foregoing and to take or pursue whatever measures necessary or advisable to cause more of the same to become accessible or more so to the general public.
3. To implement these purposes by acquiring either alone or through or jointly with others—federal, state, local, or private—title to the land or lands on which any of the same is located or a preservation or other easements with regard to the same—by purchase, gift, or otherwise—and by cooperating with or initiating, coordinating, and assisting the efforts of such others to do so.
4. To publicize and seek public exposure of the goals and activities of the Association so as to create popular awareness of and concern for the necessity of preserving the foregoing.
5. To facilitate research projects about the aforesaid and to publish a journal as a forum for scholarly articles adding to the sum of knowledge about the same.

It shall be the further purpose of the Association to be exclusively charitable and educational within the meaning of Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.

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# Starved Camp of the Donner Party

✧ ON MARCH 4TH OF 1847, SEVENTEEN MEMBERS OF THE DONNER PARTY ARRIVED AT A CAMP NEAR TODAY'S DONNER SUMMIT. THEY HAD BEEN RESCUED FROM THEIR WINTER CABINS BY THE SECOND RELIEF, SO NAMED BECAUSE IT WAS THE SECOND SEARCH EFFORT SENT OUT FROM SUTTER'S FORT IN THE VALLEY, AND LED BY JAMES REED.

The Second Relief left the Lake camps with seventeen survivors. It took them three days to travel the six miles up to the pass that had stopped the Donner party four months earlier. They were now nearly out of food, and a winter storm was brewing on the summit. The next ten days would test their endurance and will to survive in the high Sierra with no shelter from a ferocious storm. In his diary, James Reed would call this place Starved Camp.

The exact location of Starved Camp was lost as soon as the last survivor was taken from the camp. Reed's diary provides clues, but they could fit many places on the west side of the pass. This paper describes the search for Starved Camp.

## STARVED CAMP

James Reed and the Second Relief took three adults and fourteen children from the cabins, departing on March 2. Several diarists wrote accounts of the experience, and there is some conflict between the authors over the exact dates, but all agree in the general facts. For dates, I've used Reed's diary:

Notice was given in all of the camps that we would start on our return to Sutter's early the next day. About the middle of the day we started, taking with us all who were able to travel. In a short time we reached Donner Lake. Traveling on ice a short distance, we made camp on the eastern side. Here were several small springs; in the water were many small fish. The next day we traveled up to the head of the Lake on the ice, making camp here for the night. . . .

The next morning we proceeded up the mountain and in the evening came to one of the camping places of the party [the First Relief] we had met in Bear Valley.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> James F. Reed, *Pacific Union Press*, April 1871, in Kristin Johnson, *Unfortunate Emigrants: Narratives of the Donner Party* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1996), 198–99.

This project would not have been possible without the assistance of Donald Buck, Chris Wray, and the many volunteers from Trails West who determined this wagon route over Donner Summit. Volunteers from the Institute of Canine Forensics included Adela Morris with her dog Jasper, Barbara Pence with Bailey, Lynne Angeloro with Berkeley, Lynne Engelbert with Piper, and Jerrold Christensen, who was Field Coordinator on several of the trips.

By this point only James Reed, William McCutchen, Hiram Miller, and Brit Greenwood of the Second Relief were assisting the seventeen emigrants in the difficult climb to the summit. McCutchen wrote:

We arrived at this camp about 3 o'clock in the afternoon; this camp was under the peak at the head of the Yuba River. The Glen [Glover] party had made it when returning from the Donner party. Every thing necessary for building a fire on the snow was here. A storm commenced this night and continued until about noon on the third day. The second night Mr. Reed became snow blind and chilled through; he had overexerted himself in securing shelter for the party. Now there was only Mr. Miller and myself who were able to do anything; the rest of the men were disheartened, and would not use any exertion; in fact they gave up all hope, and in despair, some of them commenced praying. I d—d them, telling them it was not time to pray but to get up, stir themselves and get wood, for it was a matter of life and death to us in a few minutes. The fire was nearly out; the snow in falling off the trees had nearly extinguished it before discovered; it was only rekindled by the exertion of Mr. Miller and myself. After we got the fire started I was so chilled that in getting warm I burned the back out of my shirts, having four on me; only discovering the mishap by the scorching of my skin.

On the third day about noon, the snow ceased falling, and it was agreed that all who were able should leave, all the provisions being consumed the day before. The day after our arrival at this camp Mr. Reed divided the remaining flour. A spoonful as each person's share, "young and old," and it was four days in all before we got anything [further] to eat. . . .

All who were able started to leave, except Mr. Brien [Breen] and family. He said that if they had to die he would sooner die in camp than on the way; he was repeatedly urged to come, but positively refused. . . .

Before leaving, we did everything in our power for those who had to remain, cutting and leaving wood enough to last several days.<sup>2</sup>

James Reed and the other three members of the Second Relief left, taking with them Solomon Hook, Patty Reed, and Tommy Reed. Those left at Starved Camp included the two adults and five children of the Breen family; Elizabeth Graves and her four children; and Mary Donner and Isaac Donner. Elizabeth Graves (age forty-five), her son Franklin (age five), and Isaac Donner (also age five) would all be dead when the Third Relief reached this camp seven days later. Oregon pioneer Jesse Quinn Thornton, who interviewed Donner survivors shortly after the rescue, wrote:

The next day, at 4 o'clock, they arrived at the camp of those whom Mr. Reed had been compelled to leave. The fire at the Starved Camp had melted the snow down to the ground, and the hole thus made was about twelve or fifteen feet in diameter, and twenty-four feet deep. As the snow had continued to melt, they made steps by which they ascended and descended.

The picture of distress which was here presented, was shocking indeed. And yet Patrick Brinn [Breen] and his wife seemed not in any degree to realize the extent of their peril, or that they were in peril at all. They were found lying down sunning themselves, and evincing no concern for the future. They had consumed the two children of Jacob Donner. Mrs. Graves' body was lying there with almost all the flesh cut away from her arms and limbs. Her breasts were cut off, and her heart and liver taken out, and were all being boiled in a pot then on the fire.<sup>3</sup>

The eleven surviving members at Starved Camp were led to safety by several of the members of the Third Relief.

#### LOCATION OF STARVED CAMP

The location of Starved Camp was quickly lost to history. Several historians speculated about where it was. C. F. McGlashan placed it "somewhere near the lower end of Summit Valley," about three miles from Donner Pass.<sup>4</sup> George Stewart stated

2 William McCutchen, *Pacific Rural Press*, April 1, 1871, in Johnson, *Unfortunate Emigrants*, 205–206.

3 J. Quinn Thornton, *Oregon and California in 1848*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1849), 220–21.

4 C.F. McGlashan, *History of the Donner Party: A Tragedy of the Sierra* (San Francisco: A. L. Bancroft, 1881), 170.

that they camped at the “head of the Yuba.”<sup>5</sup> Joseph King placed the camp “in the Summit Valley close to the head of the Yuba River and just south of today’s villages of Norden and Soda Springs.”<sup>6</sup> The headwaters of the Yuba are today’s Lake Angela, about one-half mile north of Graydon’s route of the original emigrant wagon road.<sup>7</sup> The possible locations span three miles, from lower Summit Valley to near the pass. That distance needed to be narrowed if we were to have any chance to locate Starved Camp.

The camp, we concluded, would likely be along the emigrant wagon road in use in 1846. Most of the members of the relief parties were emigrants who had passed over Donner Summit. They would likely back track the wagon road to avoid the steep cliffs on the east side of the pass.

The diaries kept by some members of the First and Second Relief provide significant clues to the location of Starved Camp. On February 18, the First Relief stopped to camp before descending to the camps at Donner Lake. R. P. Tucker, of the First Relief, wrote on February 18, “Travelled 8 miles and camped on head of Juba on the Pass we suppose the snow to be 30 foot deep—”<sup>8</sup>

They were camped near the head of the Yuba River on the

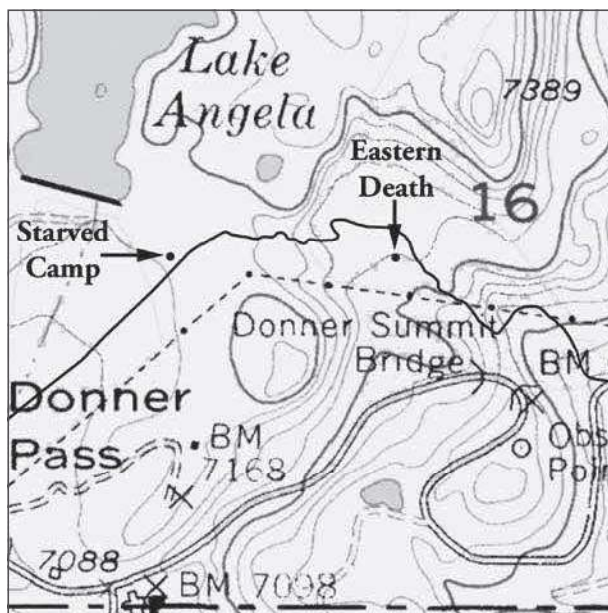
pass. On March 4, the Second Relief began the climb from the western end of Donner Lake to the summit. Reed’s diary of March 4th said “I mouved [moved] camp and after a [deleted: great] fatiguing day arriv[e]d at the praire [prairie] now Starved

Camp at the head of Juba it was made by the other Compy [company] who had passed in but a few days previous.”<sup>9</sup>

Both of the relief parties used the same camp near the head of the Yuba River. This camp is “on the Pass,” which implies that it is near where the wagon road used in 1846 crossed over the pass before descending into Summit Valley.

Historian and trail researcher Donald Buck, in a separate article in this issue, has described the recent research into the establishment of the wagon road over Donner Summit in 1844–46.<sup>10</sup> The contributions of several trail historians have reconstructed the path of this wagon route and show it crossed a pass between Stewart Peak and Mount Stephens, which they named Stephens Pass. This is a little south of modern Lake Angela, which is the head of the Yuba River. Their trail reconstruction suggests that Starved Camp would be located

near this pass. Donald Buck and Chris Wray provided me with a map of this wagon route.



Starved Camp.

MAP BY JOHN GREBENKEMPER.

5 George R. Stewart, *Ordeal By Hunger* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 223.

6 Joseph A. King, *Winter of Entrapment* (Toronto: P. D. Meany Company, 1992), 83.

7 Charles K. Graydon, *Trail of the First Wagons over the Sierra Nevada* (St. Louis: The Patrice Press, 1986), 36–37.

8 R. P. Tucker, First Relief Diary, in Dale Morgan, *Overland in 1846* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 1:332.

9 James F. Reed, Second Relief Diary, in Dale Morgan, *Overland in 1846* (University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 1:347.

10 Donald Buck, “Development of Emigrant Trail Research in the Post-Weddell Era in the Truckee-Donner Pass Region of California,” *Overland Journal* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 50–72 (in this issue).

## THE CANINE SEARCH

The forensic canines associated with the Institute for Canine Forensics have been discussed in several previous articles in *Overland Journal*.<sup>11,12</sup> These dogs only detect the scent from human decomposition, and have found human burials that have been radiocarbon dated as 9,000 years old. Three of the five dogs on this Sierra search also participated in a National Geographic expedition in the summer of 2017 to look for the remains of Amelia Earhart on a South Pacific island.<sup>13</sup>

The remains of three people who died at Starved Camp had been partially eaten and were left on the snow when the last survivors were taken out. Animal activity would dismember the bodies and scatter body parts over a wide area. This factor significantly reduces the intensity of the human decomposition scent and makes detection more difficult.

Based on the diary descriptions and trail research, the search area was defined as an area of about ten acres on the west side of Stephens Pass. The search was conducted on November 15, 2016, as the first major snowstorm of the winter was approaching. The wind and chilly conditions provided a sample of what it must have been like at Starved Camp in 1847. It did not take long for the first dog to detect the scent of human decomposition. Over the course of the next few hours all five dogs alerted to decomposition scent. The alerts were primarily concentrated in the first grove of trees

west of the pass. We were eventually forced to terminate the search in the early afternoon as the first few snowflakes were filling the air.

During 2017 we made four more searches to fill in some of the areas we had not covered due to our early retreat in November. These eventually resulted in a total of twenty-two alerts in or near the grove of trees. The scattered alerts over a distance of one hundred meters are typical of what we see when a person is not buried and the body dismembered by animal activity.

While the dog alerts tell us that one or more people died in this area, there is no way to determine who died. However, the First and Second Relief diaries contained many clues about the location of Starved Camp. As we have already discussed, the camp is located near the head of the Yuba River at the pass. The location of the canine alerts was in the first grove of trees west of the pass and just south of modern Lake Angela, which, as noted, forms the source of the Yuba River.

The entries in the Second Relief diary provide other detailed information about the location. James Reed wrote on March 6, "At daylight I discovered the Storm to Slack by hushing as it ware entirely [deleted: up] for a few minutes and then it would burst forth with such fury that I felt often alarmed for the safety of the people on acct of the tall timber that surrounded us."<sup>14</sup>

The camp was located in tall trees, just as the dog alerts had



Kayle alert at Starved Camp.  
PHOTO BY JOHN GREBENKEMPER.

11 John Grebenkemper, Kristin Johnson, and Adela Morris, "Locating the Grave of John Snyder," *Overland Journal* 30, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 92–108.

12 John Grebenkemper and Kristin Johnson, "Forensic Canine Search for the Donner Family Winter Camps," *Overland Journal* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 64–89.

13 <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/amelia-earhart-search/>.

14 James F. Reed, Second Relief Diary, in Morgan, *Overland in 1846*, 1:349.

indicated that the scent was primarily contained in a grove of trees. Reed continued,

[Mar 6th] the location of our camp [deleted: is] a bleak point under the summit of the great California Range about 1000 feet. Consequently our altitude about 8300 above the Sea with a small Prairie [Prairie] on our south and west about 3 miles in length & one in breadth here the snow and wind had full sweep this Camp was used by the other party that had passed out of the mountain<sup>15</sup>

Reed stated again that the camp was located at the same place as the First Relief camp. The prairie that lies to the southwest can only describe the meadows in Summit Valley. The beginning of these meadows is one and a half miles from Starved Camp on a southwest heading. The highest nearby mountains rise 1,200 feet above the camp. Reed's diary description fits the location that the dogs found with scattered human decomposition scent. While we did not find any physical evidence that links this location to the Donner Party, there is substantial circumstantial evidence that suggests this is Starved Camp.

#### THE EASTERN DEATH LOCATION

In August 2017 I met Donald Buck and Chris Wray at Donner Summit to walk the emigrant wagon route to Stephens Pass. Accompanying me was Barbara Pence and her ICF-certified dog, Bailey. We followed the wagon route to where it crosses the Pacific Crest Trail. Bailey and my dog, Kayle, alerted to human decomposition scent near the junction of the wagon road and the Pacific Crest Trail.

This was a completely unexpected set of alerts. We eventually had eight alerts scattered over about thirty meters. The scattered alerts again indicate one or more people had died and were not buried. The alerts were primarily in a grove of trees within a narrow valley. Was this another death associated with the Donner party? we wondered.

The first diary reference to a body found near the pass occurs in September 1847, in the diary kept by Levi Hancock, a returning member of the Mormon Battalion, which crossed the Sierra on the route back to Utah:

I stopped [by] the place where the men ate each other [Donner Group]. This day the boys said they saw one man lying on the plain up about one mile above us in a hollow. [It] was the most horrible sight, my informant says, he ever saw.<sup>16</sup>

Hancock was near the Donner Lake camps when he made this entry. The location the dogs found was in a narrow valley that could be called a hollow. The exact location in Hancock's diary is unclear, but is somewhere above the Donner camps.

THE WAGON ROAD OVER DONNER SUMMIT WAS RARELY used after 1846. The wagon traffic diverted to Roller Pass, which was considered easier to scale. In September 1849 Elisha Lewis had camped in Summit Valley after taking Roller Pass. Using Bryant's description, Lewis backtracked to Donner Lake and then followed the Donner Pass wagon route back to Summit Valley. He found evidence of the modifications made to the route to allow wagons to reach the summit. He also found snowshoes and a skeleton. The eastern location the dogs found is just above where rocks had been rolled, making a passage for wagons described in Lewis's diary entry.

I left camp in Summit Valley in company with several of our men to finde Briente [Bryant] Pass which is distance from the pass which we came over 2 miles North we discovered the trail nere a small lake called Truckee lake The Sun had nerely set in the western horizon as we followed the blind path which Bryent made up this rock bound mountain We wondered that it could be possible that los[e] cattl[e] could make the ascent there being some place 8ft perpendicular whare rock had been rolled in to fill up making a passway for the wagons wheels although a very indifferent one about half way up our attention was arested and what I discovered to be a pair of snow shoes they sho[w]ed marks of the white being made with an auger and hewed out with an axe we examened them and looking a little farther we saw the caus[e] of this at once for before us lay the bones of someone who had perished in the mountains we conjectured it to be one of the downer [Donner] party several having left there winter quarters

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 1:349.

<sup>16</sup> Levi Ward Hancock, Diary Entry September 7, 1847, in Herbert A. Hancock, ed., *The Saving Sacrifice of the Mormon Battalion* (Utah: Bystander at Large Productions, 2000).

which was nere the above named lake and was never heard of again it is supposed they perished in the mountains we took the skull and continued our march toward the summit and arrived at that place as daylight was disappearing got to camp 8 oclock we related our discoveries and showed the skull which we brought with us the conversations for the evening respecting the sufferings of the Downer Party<sup>17</sup>

The description is clearly of the emigrant wagon route used to cross Donner Pass. There is no mention of this body in emigrant diaries prior to 1846, and the use of snowshoes made with auger and axe is clearly reminiscent of the construction of snowshoes by the Donner Party. It is unlikely that these were snowshoes constructed by the Paiutes, given the description of the tools used to make them. That leaves a Donner Party member as the most likely to have built them, since the body was first seen in 1847 and near the wagon road in 1849.

There were only two Donner Party members who disappeared in the snow in this area. Charles Stanton collapsed in the snow three or four days after crossing the pass. There is no way he could have traveled back over the pass to this area.


The other possibility is John Denton. The First Relief left the camps near Donner Lake on February 22 and camped somewhere along Donner Lake. On the next day, they made the difficult climb up to the top of the pass. While R. P. Tucker's diary entry doesn't state where they camped, it would likely have been the same camp that they used on the way to Donner Lake because the camping platform would already have been prepared. On the third day they traveled into Summit Valley. According to Tucker,

[Feb 24th] We had travelled about two miles when one man gave out (John Denton) I waited for him some time but in vain he could go no further I made him a fire and chopped some wood for him when I very unwillingly left him telling him he should soon have assistance but I am afraid he would not live to see it travelled 7 miles and camp<sup>18</sup>

The Second Relief found John Denton's body, but made no mention of where his body was found. He was only a few miles from the pass and it is possible that after a little rest, he was able to walk back toward the camps at Donner Lake, but collapsed and died shortly after crossing the pass. A later account by one of the survivors said that "The party who followed in our trail from California [Second Relief] found his dead body a few days after we had left him, partially eaten by wolves."<sup>19</sup>

*I waited for him some time  
but in vain  
he could go no further  
I made him a fire and  
chopped some wood for him when  
I very unwillingly left him  
telling him he should soon have assistance*

James Reed, too, described finding Denton's body. He wrote, in a letter dated July 2, 1847, "John Denton left with the first company; he gave out on the way. I found him dead, covered him with a counterpane, and buried him in the snow, in the wildest of the wild portions of the earth."<sup>20</sup>

It is impossible to know if these dog alerts are the death location of John Denton. It is unlikely that Denton was carrying anything that could provide physical evidence to his presence. However, recent advances in forensic science now make it possible to recover DNA from the soil where people have decomposed without burial.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps someday in the future we will be able to determine who died here. 

17 Elisha Lewis, Diary Entry 1849, in Olive Newell, *Tail of the Elephant* (Nevada City, Calif.: Nevada County Historical Society, 1997), 180.

18 R. P. Tucker, First Relief Diary, in Morgan, *Overland in 1846*, 1:333.

19 Daniel Rhodes dictated to H. H. Bancroft in 1873, in Morgan, *Overland in 1846*, 1:329.

20 James Reed to Gersham Keyes, July 2, 1847; Morgan, *Overland in 1846*, 1:304.

21 Viviane Slon et al., "Neandertal and Denisovan DNA from Pleistocene Sediments," *Science*, 10.1126/science.aam9695 (2017).