

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
 NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
 INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

 SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*
 TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS
1 NAME

HISTORIC

Donner Camp Sites

AND/OR COMMON

Donner Memorial State Park

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

-- NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

Truckee

 VICINITY OF

2nd

STATE

CODE

COUNTY

CODE

California

06

Nevada

057

3 CLASSIFICATION**CATEGORY**
 DISTRICT
 BUILDING(S)
 STRUCTURE
 SITE
 OBJECT
OWNERSHIP
 PUBLIC
 PRIVATE
 BOTH
PUBLIC ACQUISITION
 IN PROCESS
 BEING CONSIDERED
STATUS
 OCCUPIED
 UNOCCUPIED
 WORK IN PROGRESS
ACCESSIBLE
 YES: RESTRICTED
 YES: UNRESTRICTED
 NO
PRESENT USE
 AGRICULTURE
 COMMERCIAL
 EDUCATIONAL
 ENTERTAINMENT
 GOVERNMENT
 INDUSTRIAL
 MILITARY
 MUSEUM
 PARK
 PRIVATE RESIDENCE
 RELIGIOUS
 SCIENTIFIC
 TRANSPORTATION
 OTHER
4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME

California Department of Parks and Recreation/Alder Creek: U.S. Forest Service, Tahoe National Forest, Supervisor Robert G. Lancaster

STREET & NUMBER

Highway 49

CITY, TOWN

STATE

Sacramento/Nevada City -- VICINITY OF

California

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,

REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC

Nevada County Hall of Records

STREET & NUMBER

Courthouse Square

CITY, TOWN

STATE

Nevada City

California

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

National Survey of Historic Sites and Buildings

DATE

1961

 FEDERAL STATE COUNTY LOCALDEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS

Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service

CITY, TOWN

Washington,

STATE
D.C.

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The sites of the cabins where the Donner Party wintered are in three locations. Included within the Donner Memorial State Park are the sites of the Murphy Cabin and the Breen-Keseberg Cabin. Across U.S. Route 40 and about a half mile east is the site of the Reed-Graves Cabin. About 5 miles to the north on the Tahoe National Forest lies the Alder Creek of George and Jacob Donner. There each family built a separate tipi using the wagon tilt and brush.

All that remains of the dreadful camp is a large rock against which the Murphys built their cabin and the quiet of the forest. A plaque marks the rock. An heroic statue dedicated in 1918 and showing a pioneer family facing westward marks the site of the Breen-Keseberg Cabin. To the east is a modern building housing a museum. Across the highway and a short distance to the east is a simple white wooden cross marking the site of the Reed-Graves cabin.

The Alder Creek Camp, five miles north, is impressively natural and lonely. On a fine summer's day it is a lovely camping place, untroubled by modern intrusions save for simple interpretive signs put up by the Forest Service. Fine tall trees reach for the sky. A lush meadow stretches away to the east and the violet-purple of the mountains, seen at a distance, seem hardly threatening. Cut into the face of the land, the ruts of the Emigrant Trail are still visible. In winter, the snow can be as deep as a man on horseback is tall.

On the first of November 1846, the sites looked far different. The cabins were squat, hastily constructed, and rawer than the usual frontier cabins. Doors were the only openings, and they were covered with hides. The roofs were green poles placed across the log cribs and covered with tents, wagon tilts, or hides. The Breens had taken possession of a cabin already there; the Kesebergs built a lean-to to this. The other cabins were built double to save building one wall. Into these flimsy structures were packed 60 people - 19 men, 12 women, and 29 children, some so young as to be still at the breast. Around the cabins lay piles of belongings hurriedly unpacked from snow-bound wagons. A few half-starved cattle, horses, and mules staggered about, browsing on the trees, for the hay in the meadow was already deep under the snow. Many of the oxen had already been slaughtered and their quarters stacked like cord-wood, frozen stiff.

At the Alder Creek site, George and Jacob Donner had cut logs to build cabins after their November 3rd arrival, but it snowed, and they quickly abandoned the idea, settling for crude brush arbors covered with canvas, their coats, and any thing else they could find. This camp housed 21 people - six men, three women, and 12 children.

(Continued)

8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW					
PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION		
1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE		
1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE		
1600-1699	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN		
1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER		
X 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION		
1900	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)		
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION				

SPECIFIC DATES

1846-47

BUILDER/ARCHITECT

N/A

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Scene of the snow-bound winter camps of the Donner Party, 1846-47, where tragedy and horror struck this group of 87 California-bound emigrants, these sites represent the worst disaster in the record of western migration. While many of the vicissitudes suffered by the Donner party before they went into winter camp were visited upon other migrants, never had so much gone wrong, so fatally, for any other group. When the stranded people were reduced to eating the flesh of their dead comrades, the final thrill of horror was added to a story of trial, heroism, greed, cowardice, and despair, that raised this venture to epic proportions.

HISTORY

In April of 1846 a well-equipped party of emigrants, led by Jacob and George Donner, set out from Illinois for California. All America was going west that year, and the Donners were joined by other travelers en-route. At South Pass on July 17, the train received word that Lansford W. Hastings would be waiting at Fort Bridger to escort them along a new and shorter route to California. Hastings' 1845 Emigrants' Guide to Oregon & California was well known to members of the train, so, despite the warning of a group of old mountain men, twenty wagons split off from the train and headed for Fort Bridger. George Donner was elected captain of the new train. They arrived at the log-cabin fort on July 28th. The famous old mountain man told them that Hastings' cut off would save them 350 or 400 miles. No bad canyons, trail mostly smooth, hard, and level. Only Digger Indians, and only one dry drive of around 40 miles.

Hastings had gone ahead with a wagon train because the season was getting short. He left directions to follow, and on the last day of July, the party set off in his tracks. Almost at once things began to go wrong. The track was much worse than any they had encountered before. At the place where the trail crossed the Weber River they found a letter from Hastings telling them that the trail in Weber Canyon was very bad. If they would camp where they were and send a messenger forward, he would come back and guide them. Their

(Continued)

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

(See continuation sheet).

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY circa 260 acres (the three sites)

UTM REFERENCES (See continuation sheet.)

A	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING	B	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
C	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING	D	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION
(See continuation sheet.)

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

Marilynn Larew, Historian

ORGANIZATION

DATE

Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service

March 1978

STREET & NUMBER

TELEPHONE

1100 L Street, NW

(202) 523-5464

CITY OR TOWN

STATE

Washington,

D.C.

12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS

NATIONAL

STATE

LOCAL

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVE SIGNATURE

TITLE

DATE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

10/12/83

ATTEST:

DATE

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

HISTORIC

LANDMARKS

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARKS

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARKS

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARKS

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By February 18, 1847, the camps bore a different aspect. Snow was piled high above the roofs. "Inclined planes led up from the cabins to the top of the snow, and up these slopes the dead bodies had been dragged with ropes since the starving people had not been able to lift them. Some bodies now lay upon the snow wrapped in quilts. Some of the hides which were being used for food were putrefied from having served as roofs of cabins and thus been kept warm on the inside. The emigrants were overwrought emotionally, and many seemed mentally unbalanced." (From George R. Stewart, Ordeal by Hunger, New York, 1971, p. 153.)

On April 13, the scene was still worse: "A scene of filth and mutilated corpses." (Ibid., p. 205). At the Donner's Alder Creek camp, "the rich property of the Donners lay scattered around everywhere. The melting of the snow and the spring freshets had flooded most of the camp, and sodden in the water lay books, bolts of cloth, tea and coffee, shoes, percussion caps, kitchen ware, and goods of all conceivable kinds which the Donners had hoped to use for themselves or to sell to advantage in California. A survey of the camp revealed worse things. At the entrance to the tent they found a large iron kettle, containing human flesh, cut up...Further search disclosed the body of George Donner carefully wrapped in a sheet, the last tender attention of his wife. But this care had not prevented the mutilation of the body. The head had been split open and the brain removed; flesh had also been taken for the kettle." (Ibid, p. 206).

All that is gone now. The last of the bodies was buried by the eastward-bound column under General Stephen Watts Kearny in June 1847. What they collected they buried under the Breen-Keseberg Cabin and then put the cabins to the torch. Nothing remains of the horror and the valor but the land and the mountains.

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messenger returned 5 days later with bad news. In places the canyon was entirely impassible, but Hastings refused to come back. He had taken his train thru Weber Canyon without ever actually having been there before and had lost too much time. The messenger, James Reed, had explored a new way as he came back, and the party decided to take that route. The route proved to be thru a canyon choked with willow, alder, taspens 20 ft. high, intertwined with servic-berries and wild rose. Having cut their way thru that, they had mountains, the likes of which they had never seen before--The Wahsatch range--to cross, cutting road every inch of the way with only 31 men, some too old to do the hardest work. They used 21 days traversing 36 miles. It was now the 27th of August. They had become the rear guard of the year's migration.

With men and animals worn out they entered the valley of the Great Salt Lake and began the terrible 80 mile dry march in Utah. They lost oxen and had to leave wagons behind, but, although they were all worn and dehydrated, no lives were lost. Following Hastings' track again they drove west and then south around the Ruby Mountain, before turning north again. Finally on the last day of September they reached the westward flowing trickle of the Humbolt River and were back again on the main California trail. They had taken a harsh 125 mile detour which had pulled down men and animals, taken precious time (and time was running out), and the first faint fault lines of disintegration were beginning to show in the unity of the train. Temper already frayed grew worse and finally snapped. James Reed killed John Snyder in self defense but found himself banished from the train. The rot had begun to accelerate. Mr. Hardcoop, a 70 year old man, had wandered away and been left to die alone in the desert. The unit was atomizing before the joint fears of starvation and snow. The Humbolt Sink was a nightmare. Supplies were terribly low as they crossed the last desert and came to rest in the paradise of Trucker Meadows. Dangerously late in the season, failing in mind, body, and equipment, and running short of supplies, they still had the awesome Sierra Nevada to cross. On October 23 they began the cruel climb up the narrow canyon of the Truckee. At Truckee Lake (now Donner Lake), but a short march to the summit of the pass--three days at most--it began to snow. It was October 31st.

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Unable to proceed they camped near the lake, hoping to be able to push on when the snow melted. The one cabin already there was appropriated by the Breen family. Keseberg built a lean-to to it. They built two other cabins, double ones, and huddled in them, hardly a wagon train any longer gathering, but a group of desparate individuals unable to cooperate and driven by terror.

The Donners had fallen behind, plagued by a broken axle. They never did reach the lake. Five miles back up the trail at a meadow beside Alder Creek they camped. Unable to build even the wretched cabins that sheltered the others, they threw up a pair of brush arbors covered by cloth and dug in.

And still the snow fell. Deeper and deeper. There was no game and most of the remaining cattle wandered off in the storm and perished.

What followed is the most terrible story in the annals of the western migration--a very human blend of high heroism and utter degradation.

By December they were reduced to eating hides and bark. Each family group hoarded what they had with no thought of sharing. Four men had died and one was insane. Around the middle of the month fifteen of the strongest set out to cross the snow choked pass on foot. Caught in a blizzard, eight men died, and the others survived by eating the flesh of the dead. After an incredible 32-day journey the survivors arrived at Johnson's Ranch and safety. In turn the first of four relief expeditions set out to rescue the stranded party..

Conditions back at the camps continued to deteriorate. The snow was nearly 10 feet deep. Eight more were dead, half of them toddlers. Sharing and community effort long since forgotten, the group hardly existed as a group any longer. Each family dug into its pitiful shelter and clutched the rapidly declining food supplies. Even the hides were getting scarce. With shudders and averted faces, some of the stranded had begun to subsist on the flesh of the dead.

The seven of the first relief expedition took 20 survivors out with them in February.. Twelve were under the age of 16 and four were women. Only three lives were lost in reaching the central valley, but among those left behind, eight more died, including George and Tamsen Donner (Jacob had died in December; his wife Elizabeth died in March). Tamsen had refused to leave her dying

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husband when the first relief expedition went--stayed and came to a mysterious end, possibly murdered by Lewis Keseberg. She was certainly eaten by him.

The second relief arrived in early March and was able to take out only eight, all but 2, children. Three died on the trek. The third and fourth relief expeditions lost no lives, and with the removal of the half-mad Lewis Keseberg, no human was left in the shambles at the lake and beside Alder Creek, but the look of the camps is almost impossible to describe. As the snow melted, many things stood revealed: ruined property, the carcasses of animals now rotting, hair, bones, and parts of human bodies. No writer of fiction could imagine a place of such horror.

Of the 23 men, 15 women, and 41 children who were trapped below the pass, 2/3 of the men died (and most died early), about 1/3 of the children died (beginning around the middle of the ordeal), but just 1/4 (4) of the women died (and most of them near the end), were the men inspired by their sense of responsibility and by the heroics of the age to over-exertion? Were food portions doled out equally in spite of size? Or was the reason physiological? Or psychological?

And what of the incredible heroism of the relief parties? To be sure, a money price was offered by Sutter, but they knew what they would have to endure, not once, but twice, to bring out the stranded emigrants. Thirty men chose to go against the mighty Sierras in full winter to the rescue. Four of the men had family there, the rest went to help strangers.

What of the party? It is one thing to say that 42 of them perished. Better to say that over half-47-survived hardships physical and psychological that make the blood run cold. That some of them ate human flesh to survive gives the story its peculiar fascination down the years, for that taboo runs strong in the human soul; that they survived at all is the highest kind of tribute to the indomitable human spirit. That is what we memorialize at the Donner sites--not the bickering, the petty selfishness of the party, but the will, now flickering, now flowing strong and hot--the will to survive.

And the cause of the disaster? Say bad judgement, bad information and still you have not explained it. It was the ill-fate, the bad luck of the draw, that more things went wrong--including an early and heavy winter in the Sierras--for the Donner Party than for any other recorded emigrant party.

Both the State park and the Alder Creek site are open during daylight hours. There is a well-designed museum at the State park.

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C.F. McGlashan, History of the Donner Party, A Tragedy of the Sierra
(Stanford, 1976).

Virginia Reed Murphy, "A Personal Narrative of the Overland Trip to
California," reprint from Century Magazine, 1892.

George R. Stewart, Ordeal by Hunger, 2nd edition (New York, 1960).

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UTM References

1. Murphy and Graves Cabin Sites (USGS 7.5' Tuckee Quadrangle)
 - A. 10.739615.4356400
 - B. 10.739620.4356215
 - C. 10.738620.4355835
 - D. 10.738680.4356255

2. Alder Creek Camp (USGS 15' Tuckee Quadrangle)
 - A. 10.745450.4362650
 - B. 10.744950.4361700
 - C. 10.743875.4361650
 - D. 10.743900.4363300

Verbal Boundary Description

1. Murphy Cabin Site - Donner Memorial State Park. The verbal boundary description is keyed to USGS Tuckee Quadrangle, 7.5' Series. Beginning at the northeast corner of the Donner Memorial State Park boundary proceed along the boundary in a southerly then westerly then southerly direction circa 1,550' to a point circa 300' southeast of the Murphy Cabin site, thence in a westerly direction circa 400' to a point circa 300' to the southwest of the Murphy Cabin site, thence in a northerly direction in a straight line circa 1,100' to the north boundary of the Donner Memorial State Park, thence in an easterly direction along the State Park boundary circa 1,000' to the northeast corner of the State Park, the point of beginning.

2. Graves Cabin Site. The verbal boundary description is keyed to USGS Tuckee Quadrangle, 7.5' Series. Beginning at a point on the southern edge of the U.S. Route 40 right of way circa 800' east of the Donner Memorial State Park exit from U.S. 40, proceed in a straight line in a southerly direction circa 500' to a point on the northern edge of Interstate Route 80 right of way, thence along the northern edge of the Interstate 80 right of way 725' to a point on the Donner State Park exit ramp from Interstate 80, thence in a northeasterly direction in a straight line circa 800' to the point of beginning. This boundary encloses in a triangle the Graves Cabin site.

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Verbal Boundary Description (continued).

3. Alder Creek Camp. The verbal boundary description is keyed to USGS Truckee Quadrangle, 15' Series. Beginning at the junction of Alder Creek and Prosser Creek proceed in a southerly then southwesterly then westerly direction following Alder Creek to the point where Alder Creek meets the "Old Railroad Grade" then along the "Old Railroad Grade" in an easterly then north then northwesterly direction to the point where the "Old Railroad Grade" meets the Tahoe National Forest Boundary almost at the center of section 26, T. 18 N., R. 16 E., thence north along the Tahoe National Forest Boundary to the point where the boundary meets Prosser Creek, thence following Prosser Creek in a southeasterly direction to the junction of Prosser Creek and Alder Creek, the point of beginning.

Boundary Justification.

The Donner camp sites were designated a national historic landmark in 1961 without boundaries. In drawing the boundary for the landmark, the sites of the Murphy Cabin and the Graves Cabin as well as the Alder Creek site of the Donner "Cabin" have been included in the landmark as non-contiguous units of the Donner Camp Site National Historic Landmark. All three sites are associated with the 1846-47 Donner party tragedy.