

County of Nevada
State of California
Nevada County Historical Landmarks Commission
Application for Registration of Historical Landmark

Name of proposed landmark:

Donner Cross

Location: In front of 12047 Donner Pass Road, Truckee, CA 96161;
39.32540, -120.22161 GPS coordinates
Next to Graves Cabin plaque (tablet) mounted on a boulder (currently removed for safekeeping)

Name of applicant:

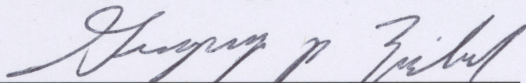
Truckee-Donner Historical Society (TDHS)

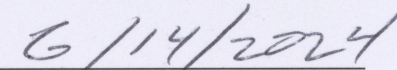
Address: P.O. Box 893
Truckee, CA 96160-0893

Phone: 530-582-0893

Owner: Truckee-Donner Historical Society, easement granted 1979,
refined in 1985; "to display the historic Donner Trail Cross and the
Graves' Cabin marker."

I consent to this application and authorize the placing of a plaque or marker on site.


Gregory P. Zirbel, TDHS President


Date

Brief history and description of proposed landmark.

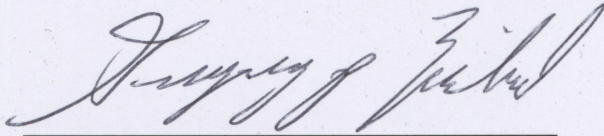
The Donner Cross is on the list of National Register of Historic Landmarks and has been since the Keeper of the Register signed the original 1961 Application. Sadly, the Donner Cross has been "relocated" at least five (5) times in the name of progress, be it highway expansion or commercial development. The Donner Cross should be protected from being moved again.

Historically significant aspects or properties of proposed landmark.

The original Donner Cross was the FIRST public recognition of the ill-fated Donner Party erected after their 1946-1947 horrific experience. It was erected in the Marzen meadow area subject to flooding. The Donner Cross is one of the first or earliest roadside (trail) memorials found in California.

How will the landmark be protected and maintained?

Will continue to be part of the routine maintenance grounds program of the West Truckee Center 'strip mall'/shopping center at 12047 Donner Pass Road.



6/14/2024

Applicant's signature

Date

Gregory P. Zirbel, President, Truckee-Donner Historical Society

Introduction

The tragic story of the Donner Party occurred during the winter of 1846-1847 when a group of 89 California-bound emigrants led by Jacob and George Donner was trapped by the heavy snows of the High Sierra. Bitter cold and dwindling food supplies reduced the wagon train to a group of desperate individuals unable to cooperate, driven to terror and degradation. Four relief expeditions eventually rescued 47 of the party (National Register of Historic Places, # [66000218](#), designation January 20, **1961**, Statement of Significance) (**Appendix 1** – Keeper signed October 12, 1983 for NRHP with accompanying 2 maps).

When researching this long - and convoluted and at times infuriating - history of the Donner Cross (aka Graves Cabin site, Graves cross, white cross, wooden cross painted white, 24', 20' and 16' over time), note that the cross was originally conceived to mark the location of the **Graves' Cabin site**, part of the 1846-1847 Donner Party. Many articles refer to just the Cross, or just the cabin site, but they are used interchangeably. Regrettably, investigation into the myriad Donner Cross locations is perplexing as the cross has been moved at least five times before finally being adjudicated to be included in Truckee's Historic Preservation District (formerly Truckee's Historic Preservation Advisory Commission), by means of a 1979 Grant Deed, revised in April 1985 by a **Partnership Easement Deed** declaring the Donner Cross / Graves Cabin (Site) to be of historical significance AND to be properly displayed with right of public access (Parcel No. 18-500-13), including the property description Exhibit "A". (**Appendix 2**).

The story of the Donner Cross is an unfortunate example of what can happen when historical sites are left unprotected. After years of research and scouring every known available source, to the best of our knowledge, the Donner Cross has been moved *at least five times* since its initial erection in 1887. This is a travesty. If this research appears to be “hopscotching”, it is. Researchers have to rely on later documents, most without images, and most of them undated, reporting the relocation efforts of the Donner Cross. But the “relocating” of the Donner Cross has to cease.

Keep in mind reviewing the articles and photos that the *very first* Donner Cross erected in **1887** had squared-cut ends at both top and horizontal beam. A second Donner Cross erected after the first cross fell over still had a straight horizontal beam ends, but a *pointed* top. **AFTER 1927** when the Truckee Chamber of Commerce erected a new Donner Cross, it had BOTH a pointed top AND pointed horizontal beam ends.

Abbreviated Timeline

1846-47 Donner Party

1879 Map by a survivor, page 22, in 1879 W.C. Graves, who had passed through the experiences of the Donner Party as a lad of 18, drew this map from memory. Stewart, George R. (1964). *Donner Pass and those who crossed it*. Menlo Park, CA: Lane Book Company. LCCCNo. 60-8367.

1879 1st edition of C.F. McGlashan book, *History of the Donner Party*

1887 the **first** commemoration of the Donner Party is thought to be the Donner Cross to mark the Graves-Reed Cabin site near Donner Lake done by the Citizens of Truckee (28 men and at least 2 women donated monies, *Truckee Republican*, Sept. 3, 1887) with plans for three more crosses (which did not come about). The Donner Cross was [visible](#) from the Southern Pacific passenger trains on the Odgen to San Francisco route.

1894 Joseph Marzen constructs major ice pond on Donner Creek
([Sierra Sun article, October 11, 2004](#) Gordon Richards)

1896 Ice carnival article mentions cross in the center of one of the ponds;
[HKG0007](#) image confirms this

1897 Donner Ice Company moves cross further up hill so it isn't in the middle of the ice pond

1904 McGlashan upset at fallen cross

1906 Donner Cross was rotting through, Donner Ice Company (land owners) replaced it with a new 20-foot cross.

1910 Lumber mill on Donner Ice Pond burns

1918 Donner Pioneer Monument erected

- 1919** Graves Cabin Site Plaque (Tablet), NSGW, placed
- 1920** McGlashan, C.F. Breen Cabin Site
The location of site of Breen Cabin; General C.F. McGlashan, Donner Party historian, declares present pioneer monument covers exact spot where hut stood.
- 1924** Peter M. Weddell, with C.F. McGlashan's assistance, started researching the Emigrant / Donner Trail in 1921, and faithfully continued placing appropriate trail signs until his death in 1942. Weddell placed a sign on the Donner Cross, believed to read "Site of Graves Cabin".
- 1927** Captain Charles E. Davis found the Donner Cross burned away at the base from a campfire (*Oakland Tribune*, Volume 107, Number 31, 31 July 1927). Captain Davis is thought to be the first person as an amateur historian to map out the Donner Party route from Illinois to California.
- 1927** Truckee Chamber of Commerce replaced the Donner Cross (COC records burned in 1993).
- 1931** C.F. McGlashan dies
- 1950s** cross moved; Macaulay timeline as Graves Cabin site shows on 1955 USGS map
- 1958** Work to construct a stretch of Interstate 80 through Truckee began and Donner Creek is significantly rechanneled from Donner State Park to Highway 89 (SS Oct. 11, 2004 Gordon Richards article and **Appendix 4**); Donner Cross is moved again
- 1961** National Historic Landmarks in California, Donner Camp Sites #66000218; 1983 NPS Donner Camp Sites Boundaries delineated for all three sites
- 1979** Deed
- 1982** Foley, Doris p. 26, brochure titled "The Pioneer (Donner) Monument. The Origin of a Statue", "The cabin site remains unmarked, and as for the Graves cabin, a white cross placed there by Charles McGlashan was later moved by an ice company (Donner Ice Company) to a point further north and on higher ground to make way for an ice pond."
The cabin site remains unmarked, and as for the Graves cabin, a white cross placed there by Charles McGlashan was later moved by an ice company to a point further north and on higher ground to make way for an ice pond.
- 1983** National Register "Keeper" signs NHL Donner Camp Site Nomination [#66000218](#)
- 1983 - 1984** TDHS requested "spot zoning" for two historical cultural properties to be integrated into the boundaries of Truckee's Historic Preservation Advisory Council of the County of Nevada: Donner Cross (Graves cabin site) and Schaffer grave site. Spot zoning is a legal term that refers to when a

piece of property or groups of property have special zoning laws applied to them that differs from the zoning laws surrounding them.

(https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/spot_zoning)

1985 Partnership Easement Deed Truckee

1988 Donner Cross moved again (July 30, 1988 TDHS letter to NSGW)

1993 Town of Truckee Incorporated

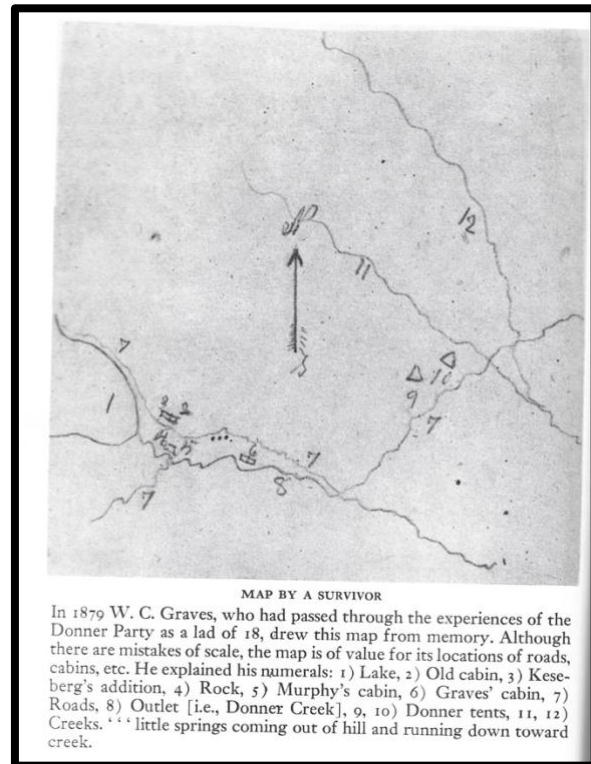
2010 Donner Cross replaced again; see [TDHS 2010 article](#)

When reviewing the expanded timeline, the reader must keep in mind two things: (1) because research looks *backwards*, hopefully reports, maps, newspaper articles and personal accounts accurately reflect the Donner Cross's location; and (2) the shape of the cross over time from squared cut ends to pointed ends helps to pinpoint the approximate decade.

Expanded Timeline with images and maps

I. Original Donner Cross beginnings

The first map we have discovered about the Donner Cross / Graves cabin site is a map redrawn by W.C. Graves in **1879** recalling as best he could the locations of the various Donner sites. This map has been recreated in George R. Stewart's 1964 book, *Donner Pass*. Note the location of number 6, Graves' cabin, is not adjacent to the Murphy cabin but rather on the north side of Donner Creek.



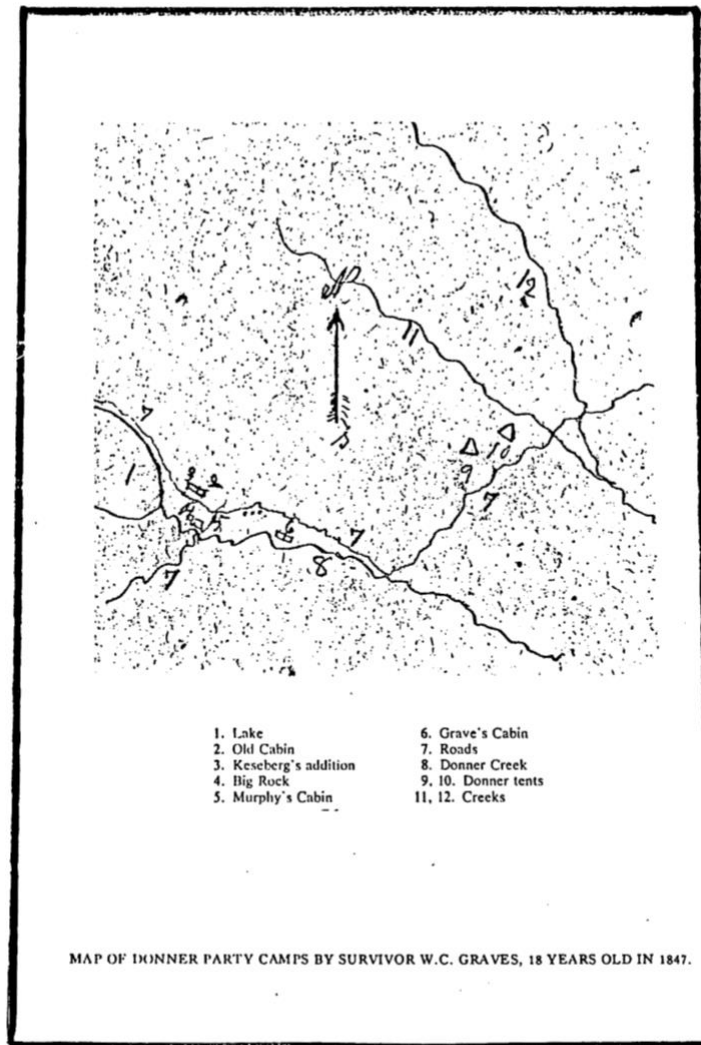


FIGURE 2
(after Reed 1977:39)

In a 1920 *The Location of Site of Breen Cabin* letter, C.F. McGlashan advised Honorable J.R. Knowland, Chairman Historic Landmarks Committee, contesting Chairman of the Donner Monument Committee Dr. C.W. Chapman’s assertion that the Breen cabin was erected some 30 feet (or 52 feet) from the Pioneer Monument. On page 3 of that letter available at this [link](#), McGlashan wrote: “... **The Graves cabin was situated about three-quarters of a mile to the eastward, the Murphy cabin about two hundred yard southeast of the monument ...**” [Emphasis added]

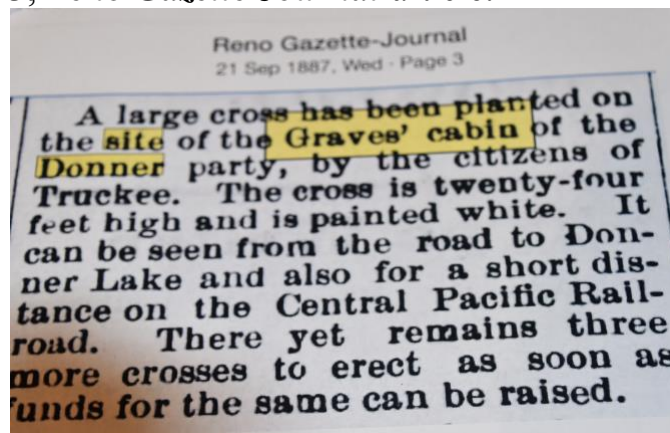
compelled to encamp for the winter. The Graves cabin was situated about three-quarters of a mile to the eastward, the Murphy cabin about two hundred yards southeast of the monument, and

In a *Truckee Republican* article dated September 3, 1887, the title reads: *GOOD WORK: The Erection of Crosses to Mark the sites of the Cabins of the Donner Party.* The article continues: “The situation of the Craves-Reed [sic] [Graves-Reed] cabin is on a flat **in the Donner Meadows**, and is partially concealed from view by the bluff on one side, It has been thought best to **mark this spot with a simple white cross, twenty-four feet high.**” [Emphasis added]. The cross was supposedly set that day. Further, 30 men and at least 2 women contributed to the erection of a Donner Cross.

“The following contributions of money have already been sent or given to the committee”:

Jerome Deasy G.A.R. \$1.00	Jos Marzen, Jr. \$1.00
Harry N. Morse, Pioneer \$1.00	C.F. McGlashan, History of Donner Party \$1.00
H.A. Mason, Ed. Truckee Republican \$1.00	W.B. Tiffany \$1.00
Warren Richardson \$1.00	Herman Meyer \$1.00
J.L. Lewison, Pioneer \$1.00	J.B. Davis \$1.00
AJ Graham \$1.00	N. Reed \$1.00
S.A. Bulfinch \$1.00	Alf Berg \$1.00
Dixon & Fogarty \$2.00	Wm Irwin \$1.00
Wm McDougald \$1.00	Jerome Deasy, 31 Geary St., S.F. \$1.00
Jno F Miller, 31 Geary St., S.F. \$1.00	J Calladan, 714 Montgomery St., \$1.00
Geo Humphrey \$1.00	D B Towner \$1.00
Fay & Lenahan \$1.00	Mrs. E A Keizer \$1.00
Jos Stoll \$.50	Patsy McCue \$1.00
S E Welch \$1.00	B E Dilley \$1.00
G W Dunster \$.50	Jas Sherritt \$1.00
T B Whitney \$1.00	James Stewart \$1.00

September 2, 1887, p. 3, *Reno Gazette Journal* article:



In **2010**, then President of the Truckee-Donner Historical Society (TDHS) Chelsea Walterscheid wrote an article in the [TDHS Summer 2010 newsletter](#), p. 10, stating that Truckee citizens erected the first cross in 1887 to mark the site of the Graves-Reed Cabin at Donner Lake. She quoted an **1887 *Truckee Republican*** article that purportedly said “The Cross is 24’ high and is painted white. It can be seen from the road to Donner Lake.” Apparently, there were also plans to erect three more crosses as soon as funds could be raised, but that does not appear to have materialized.

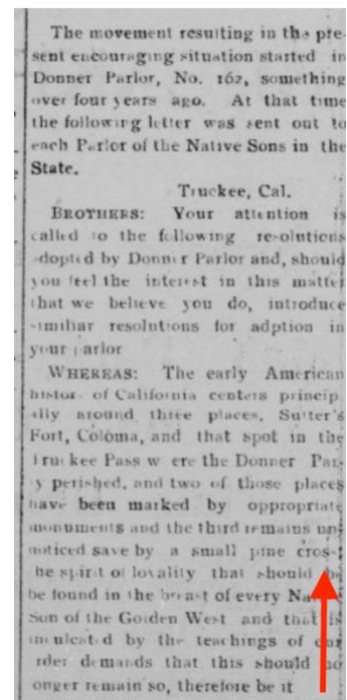
A December 27, **1892 *Truckee Republican*** article mentions that the place where the Graves cabin stood is “too low, and ... subject to inundation.” This makes sense timewise as the Donner Cross that WAS erected in 1887 was in fact in a lower lying meadow and was being used as an ice pond owned by the Donner Ice Company.

In a ***Truckee Republican*** article dated July 12, **1902**, mention is made that the Donner Parlor #162 was encouraging four years ago [1898] that other state Parlors contribute money to fund a suitable Donner Monument. In this Donner Parlor solicitation letter, specific reference to a “**pine cross**” is noted. Thus the “Donner Cross” had to have been originally erected sometime around 1897 in the area near the “Marzen meadow.”

<https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=SSTR19020712.2.2&srpos=16&e=-----190-en--20-SSTR-1--txt-txIN-mcglashan+cross----->, p. 8.

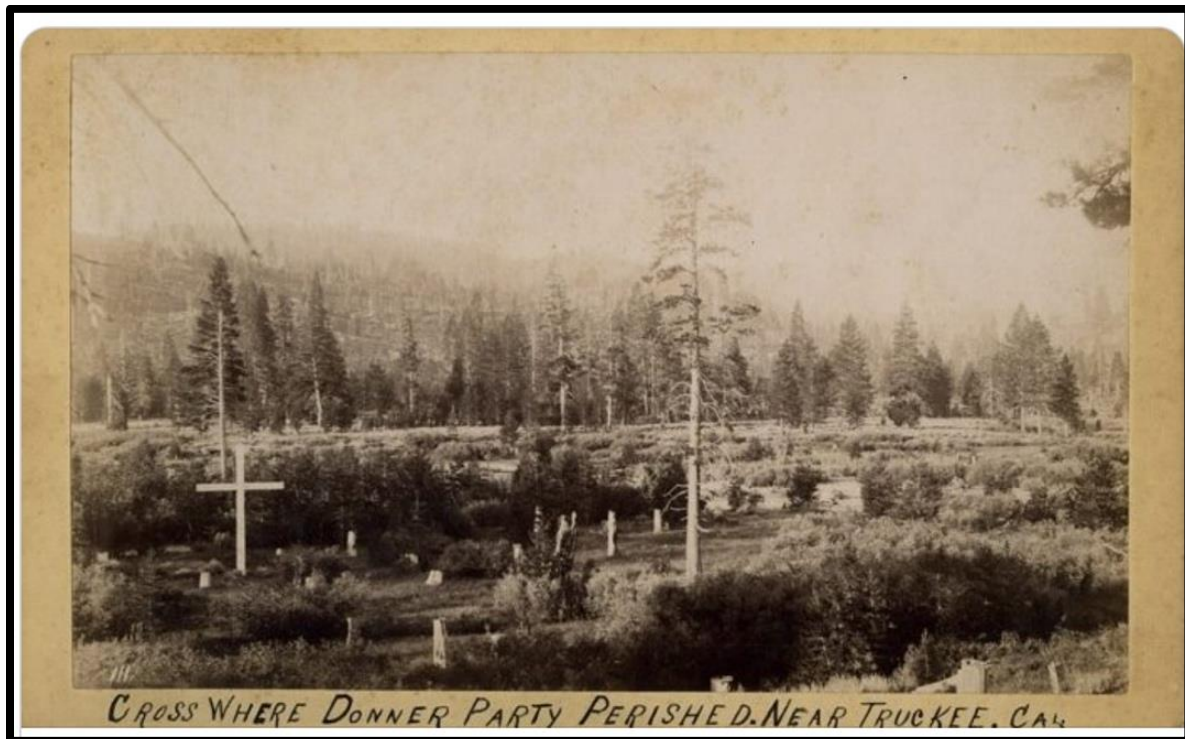
A deed search done by research historian Thomas Macaulay, affectionately known as ‘Reno Iceman’ revealed a November 1, 1895 deed, Book 84, p. 118, Joseph Marzen Jr. to Donner Ice Co., less 1 acre conveyed to C.F. McGlashan for the erection of a monument to the Donner Party, and right of way for road as per November 21, 1884 deed, and excepting gravel by Joseph Marzen to CPRR.

12 July 1902



We believe this is the **FIRST “Donner Cross”** that passengers saw from the train as they headed west along the railroad tracks. This first cross was erected in **1887** and was **24’** high. Note the squared ends of the top *and* horizontal cross post, amid a meadow – as described. Photo believed to be taken looking northward.

Based on the Smithsonian Archives' postcard history – see <https://siarchives.si.edu/history/featured-topics/postcard/postcard-history> - this image can be “dated” somewhere between 1896 – 1915. If only we could see the backside of this postcard, it might assist in identifying a date more readily. Note there may be cut off tree stumps in this same *meadow*, but the image is not any clearer to accurately determine this supposition. Even in this image though the cross is in a lower elevation meadow area.



Above sepia colored image pulled from a [facebook](#) posting May 11, 2015, sometimes referred as the Marzen meadow. Note cross has **both** squared off horizontal ends and square top. Cross appears to have been milled vs. a standard log cross. Attempts to track the image owner of this postcard have proved futile.

seem reluctant to
 the first trip.
 Sleigh-riding is also a very enjoyable
 feature and a ride to the famous lake
 where that party of brave pioneers
 passed the terrible winter of 1846-47
 should not be missed, and is really a
 trip worth taking. On the way, easily
 distinguishable from the roadside, may
 be seen the cross which marks the spot
 where stood the cabins of a portion of
 the Donner party. The ground sur-
 rounding this cross is covered with
 water and now merry parties of skaters
 glide over the spot where scenes of un-
 told suffering were enacted and where
 many lost their precious lives in their
 desire to get to California. It would re-
 quire too much space to give even a
 brief account of the hardships and
 trials this unfortunate party passed
 through, but every interested Califor-
 nian should read the history which has
 been published in connection with it.
 the ice carnival are now

In a *San Francisco Chronicle* January 12, 1896 article entitled "Great Carnival of Ice at Truckee", the reporter notes that the cross was "easily distinguishable from the roadside [Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Road]... The ground surrounding this cross is covered with water and now merry parties of skaters glide over the spot where scenes of untold suffering were enacted."

Truckee Republican, May 7, 1904 mentions that the cross was knocked over, but only the base was damaged.

<https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=SSTR19040507.2.32&srpos=5&e=-----190-en--20-SSTR-1--txt-txIN-mcglashan+cross-----, p. 6>

The big cross erected in memory of the ill-fated Donner party is down, as was mentioned in the Republican some time ago. So far, nothing has been done toward raising it. The wood base decayed and during the Match storms the big monument toppled over. As only the base is injured it would be a simple matter to restore the cross to an upright position.

Heavy timbers should be bolted to it on each four sides and it should be again set up. In this manner it would stand much longer than it has heretofore. The wood should receive a thorough painting and the base should have liberal application of tar to protect the wood. The upright and the arms are apparently unaffected by the weather and would last many years.

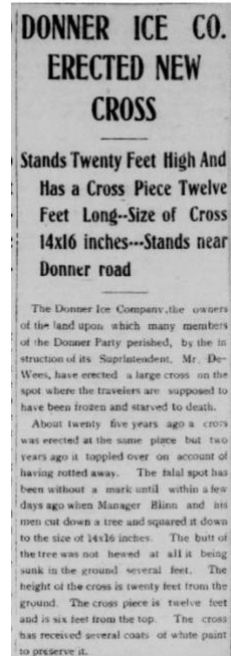
We are informed that the Donner Monument Fund of the Native Sons now contains \$1350. It may take some time to procure the sum figured upon by the Natives, and in the meantime the old cross should mark the scene of the historic event.

General McGlashan holds a deed for the ground wanted for the monument and is anxious to be able to turn it over to the proper authorities elected for the purpose. He believes the information he holds in regard to locations of landmarks in connection with the Donner party tragedy should be made of record by some permanently organized society for preservation and in this he will be supported by all who have any regard for the history of California and early days.

, 7 May 1904

**THE DONNER CROSS
 SHOULD BE ERECTED**
 The Old Monument Should be Placed
 Upright Without Delay.

In a July 28, 1906 *Truckee Republican* article, a NEW 20' Donner Cross is erected. NOTE mention that "About twenty five years ago [circa 1881] a cross was erected at the same place but two years ago it toppled over on account of having rotted away."



In noted author E.B. Scott's book, [*The Saga of Lake Tahoe*](#), on p. 505, there is an undated photo of the Donner Cross, purportedly the "first" cross, which appears to be in a meadow. Note the squared-off ends on the horizontal cross arm.

This image to the right is yet another Donner Cross / Graves Cabin site, in the meadow. (Undated, no details provided). In an impressive collection of photographs, Tom Macaulay summarized this image is a meadow scene with hills in background, some trees, arm high with **square ends**, vertical round pole pointed on top, cross arm square, obvious joint at connection, and black strip on front of vertical. This "black strip" is where a plaque used to be attached.



This replaced Donner Cross with the 1st plaque attached looked like the image below. Remember that it wasn't until 1927 when **BOTH** the top and cross beams were pointed.



Note the black vertical stripe is where a plaque used to be attached. This photo is most probably looking southward toward the straight level ground in the background suggesting the rail lines, AND the Donner Ice Pond directly behind the Cross.

II. The Cross is moved from the meadow closer to the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Road (DFDLWR)

The Ottawa Weekly Times
11 Jun 1896, Thu -Page 2

and most genial gentleman.
Stopped a day in Truckee where it was snowing furiously, and only a few days previous they had a gentle little snow storm with a fall of four feet. Mrs. Elder had a brother there also and to meet him had to wade half a mile of snow, every step of which was above my knees and often to my arm pits. This Mr. Barton is manager of a large ice concern which has an ice house 100 x300 feet and 30 feet high, filled with ice pure as crystal. Close by the ice house is planted the "Donner" cross to mark the mournful tragedy of death by starvation of thirty-four out of eighty-four, led by Donner, bound for California in 1846, but who got caught here in the snows of the following winter and only by the greatest effort did any survive. Donner lake is also close at hand.

A June 11, 1896 *The Ottawa Weekly Times* article makes specific reference to the "Donner" Cross and that it was erected before an ice house was built.

A *Truckee Republican* June 18, 1904 article also mentions that the cross was blown down. This article tells us that the Cross was moved OUT of the Donner Ice Pond to an area closer to the Donner Lake Dutch Flat Wagon Road (DFDLWR).

shine of California's verdant valleys.
For many years a large wooden cross marked the spot where the Donner party camped. It was situated close to Donner creek, the outlet of Donner lake, three miles from Truckee. The cross was, a few years ago, moved to a point high up on the side of a hill. It stood there until last March when one of the heavy storms blew it down and it has not been replaced.

<https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=SSTR19040618.2.3&srpos=3&e=-----190-en--20-SSTR-1--txt-txIN-cross+----1904--->, p. 1. And again January 1, 1908, a “movement” was trying to replace the “wooden cross”.

<https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=SSTR19080101.2.9&srpos=10&e=-----190-en--20-SSTR-1--txt-txIN-cross+----1908--->, p. 1

The above newspaper articles all agree that in the **late 1890s**, the Donner Cross was moved from its original “meadow” location to make room for an Ice Pond by the Donner Ice Company. The photo below is from Herman Kimball Gage, [HKG0007](#), shows the teetering cross in an ice pond – the man in the photo is on skates. The Cross was moved nearer the DFDLWR– Old Highway 40 – Lincoln Highway – today’s Donner Pass Road, and long before Interstate 80 was even conceived. Note the cross still has *square* horizontal cut ends but is now located NOT in the meadow turned ice pond as before, but moved to a location on higher ground nearer the DFDLWR.



The photos of the Donner Cross below were taken by T.C. Wohlbrück (Theodore Clemens Wohlbrück), No. 3029. T.C. Wohlbrück was a San Francisco photographer whose address was 251 Post Street. Given the dates Wohlbrück operated his “canteen” service station “B” at the Pioneer/ Donner Monument [1910-1920], this postcard is dated closer to 1920. [For more details about Wohlbrück’s postcards, see this multi-part Donner Summit Historical Society October 2012 article, and following articles noting the characteristic white lettering at the bottom, some with his TCW initials.

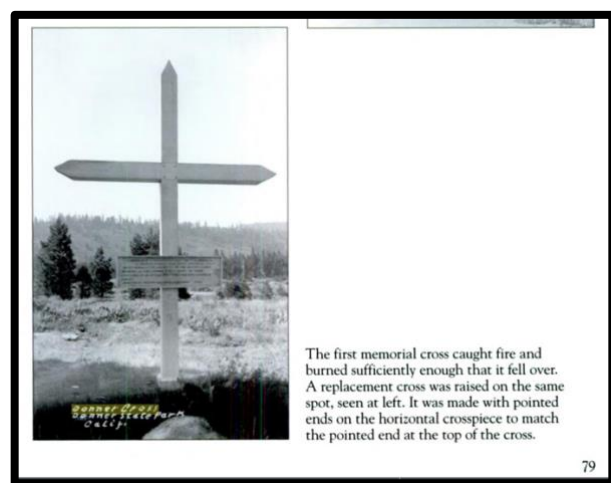
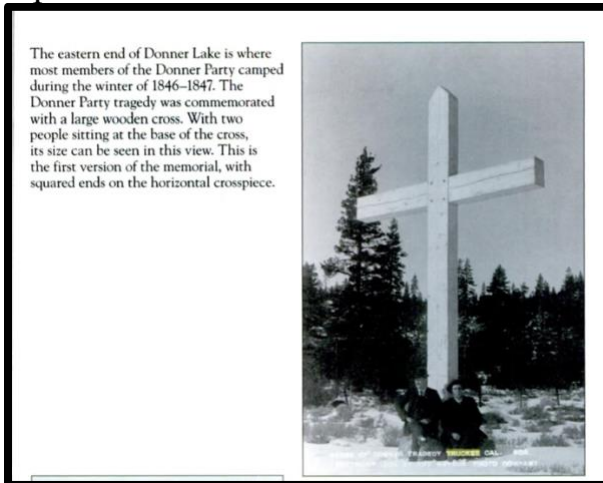
<http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org/PDFs/newsletters/news12/October12.pdf>]. Further, an [ebay posting](#) also offers a RPPC (Real Photo Post Card). Even though it was postmarked in 1930, the postcard is **AFTER** 1918 because of the reference to the Donner Monument [erected in 1918], but [before 1925](#) (when postcards cost 2 cents to mail). This agrees with the later 1927 erection of a NEW Donner Cross by the Truckee Chamber of Commerce when the previous cross fell over again. Note rocks at bottom of cross are the same in THIS no. 8534 photo as in the ebay postcard which has TCW on it.



This T.C. Wohlbrück photo no. 3029 below is the same photo as the no. 8534 above, but in the photo below, Wohlbrück’s initials “T.C.W.” and “S.F.” are clearly visible on the image along with the characteristic white lettering at the bottom. Note also the large smooth stones, probably river rock, placed at the base to further secure the cross’s placement. Also DPM0018, Graves Cross Rennie Collection.



In a much later **2011** book by Art Summers, he posts a photo of the Donner Cross attributing it to be the “original” cross. We believe this is the replacement for the first cross because the first cross had a square top as well. The photo on the left reflects a cross with a pointed top which is the replacement cross. *Post 1927* photos, as in the photo at right, reveal the replacement cross had **BOTH** a pointed top and ends on the horizontal cross beam.

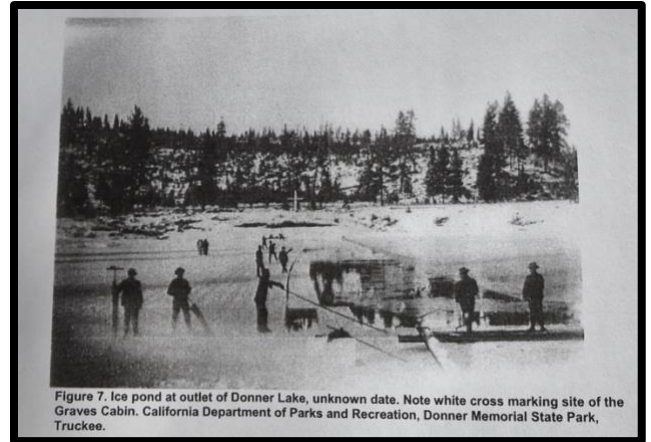


The image to the right substantiates that the Donner Cross was moved to a location *above* the Donner Ice Pond, nearer the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Road.

Figure 7 to the right was taken from a Historic Resources Evaluation Report (HRER), High Sierra Crossings Museum, prepared in September 2007 by Matt Bischoff, Historian III with the California Department of Parks and Recreation.

Bischoff also reported that at that time [late 1800s] that the “only commemoration to the Donner Party was a large wooden cross erected near the location of the Graves Cabin, close to Donner Creek (reportedly placed by McGlashan; see *From the Desk of C.F. McGlashan*, 1986, p. 108: “The Wooden Cross was erected by me at the spot where the Graves’ Cabin stood. It was merely to mark the site of the cabin.”).

Later the cross was moved to a higher spot on the side of a hill by an ice production company [Donner Ice] which used the flat as an ice pond.” In **1903**, this cross was knocked over by heavy winds, and was not replaced for many years. According to TDHS President Walterscheid’s article in Summer 2010 ([Ibid.](#), p. 10), she further noted that by 1906 the Donner Cross was rotting through again and the Donner Ice Company replaced the cross with a new 20’ cross. And in this image from [the California State Library](#), the cross is seen to be propped up before its later 1927 replacement. Note it is no longer IN the ice pond.



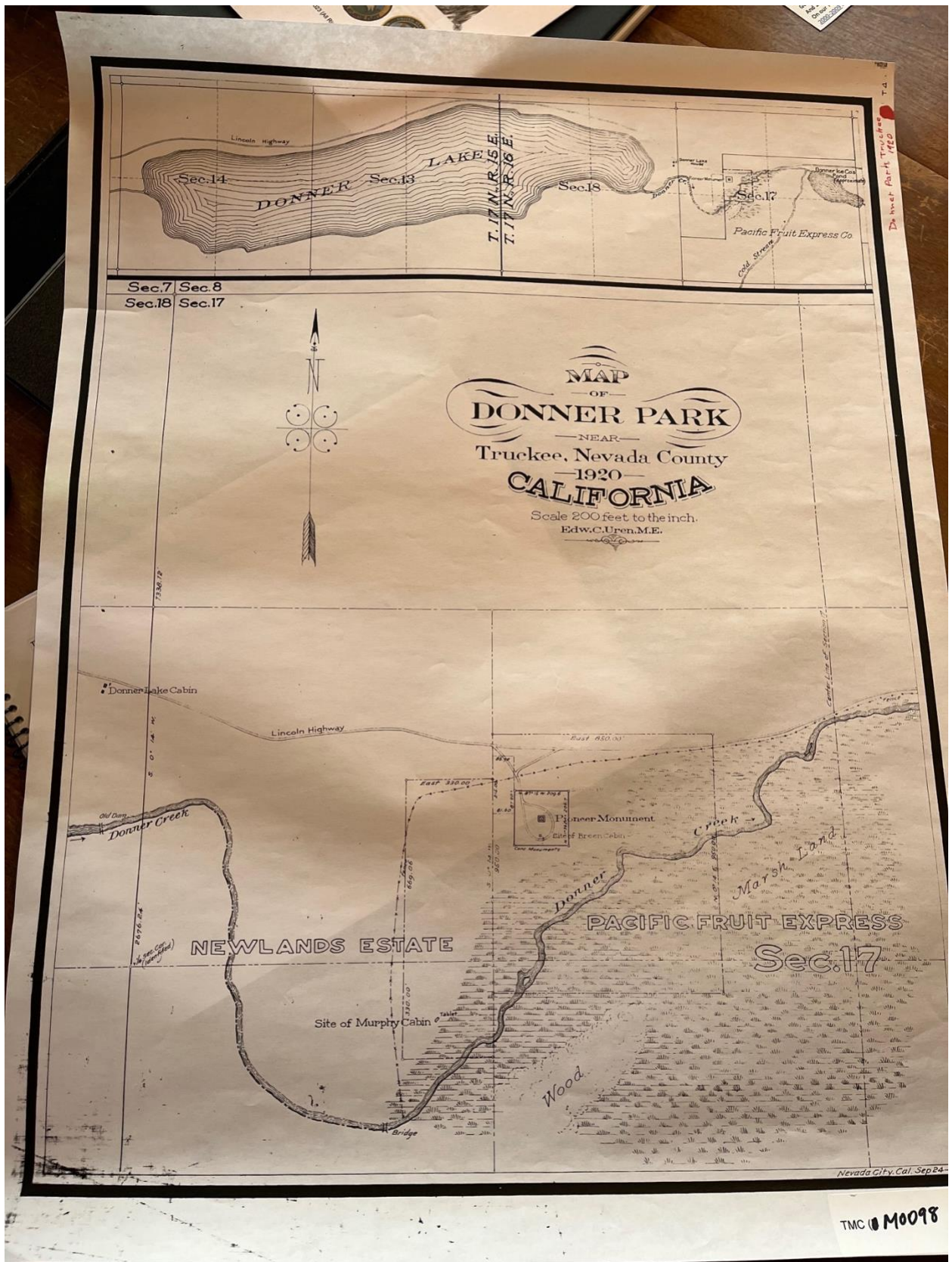
Skaters Having Merry Time on Ice Ponds

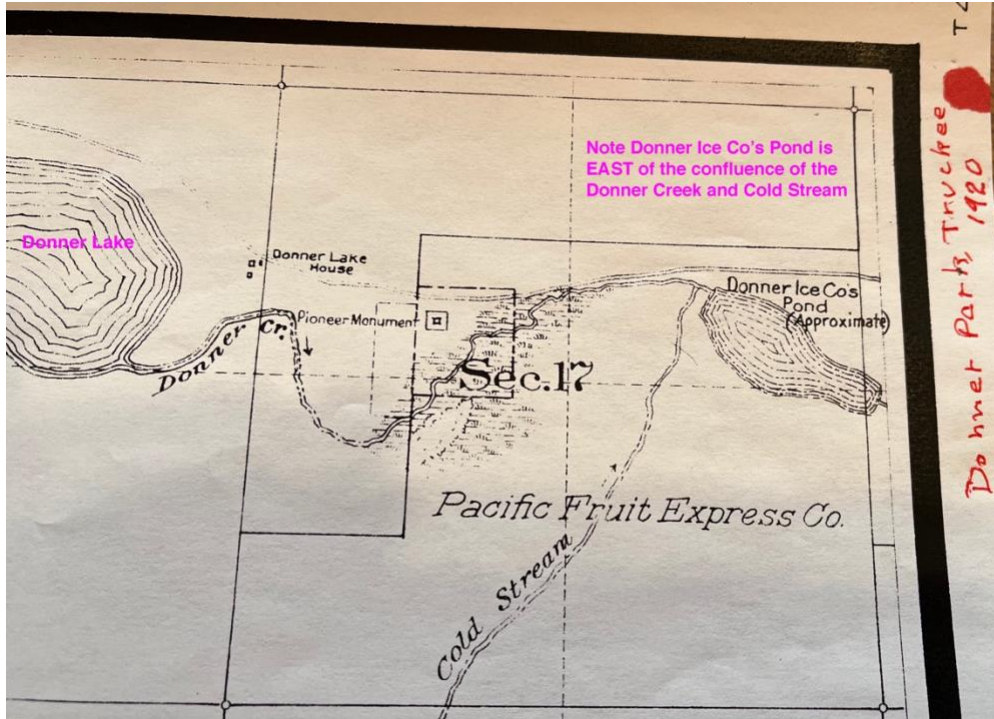
Despite the light snowfall here this year, rendering a snow carnival impossible during the holidays, skating has become a prominent sport with the younger set. Thruout the holiday season Donner Ice pond has been thronged with skaters from Truckee, Boca and Hobart Mills.

The beautiful weather has contributed largely to the amnsement of the skaters, who found skating at night by the light of the bon fires as interesting as skating by day.

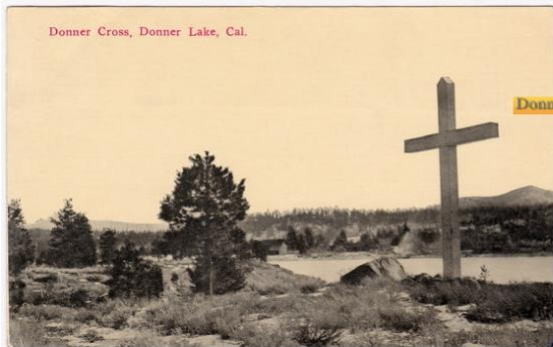
An article in the [*Truckee Republican*](#), 4 January 1911, p. 1, mentions the skaters at the Donner Ice Pond.

Looking at this 1920 Donner Ice Company map, one can see the location of the Donner Ice Pond is clearly *EAST* of the Pioneer/Donner Monument which was erected in 1918.





Below is a photo of the horizontal square-ended Donner Cross and in the distance the Donner Ice Company Ice house, circa 1915. [DSHS0340](#). Macaulay Collection, no. 102. Note the postcard is dated 8-21-17 (8-21-1917) so the Cross had to have been there by then.

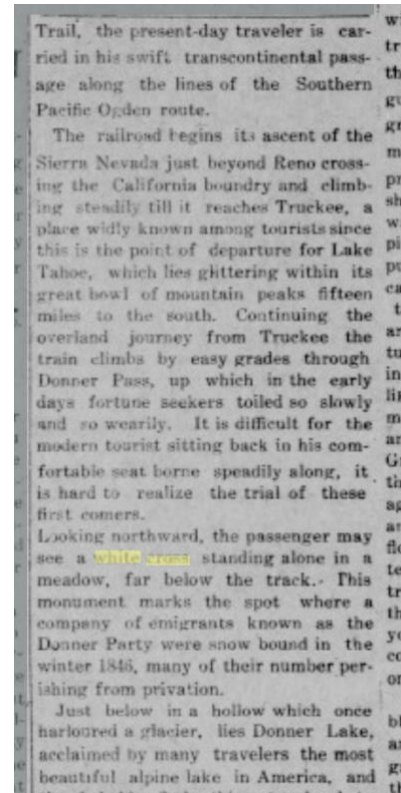


Donner Summit Historical Society
 Donner Cross
 circa 1915, post
 marked 1917.
 JX 8/25/15



Truckee Republican 6 April 1916, p. 1,
<https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=SSTR19160406.2.3&srpos=7&e=-----en--20-SSTR-1--txt-txIN-%22white+cross%22----->

Riding the rails heading westbound, passengers could see “Looking northward, ... a white cross standing alone in a meadow, far below the track.”



Even the 1916 *Guidebook of the Western United States* by Willis Thomas Lee, Ralph Walter Stone, and Hoyt Stoddard Gale mentions the Donner Cross at milepost 206.

<https://archive.org/details/guidebookwester00galegoog/page/n296/mode/2up>

At milepost 206, by looking across Donner Creek, the traveler may see a large white cross at the forward edge of a low terrace on the opposite side of the valley. This is a monument to the Donner party, whose tragic story is told at length in most of the histories of early California emigrations. About half a mile above this cross, in the woods near the lower end of Donner Lake, is a cube of granite inscribed as follows:

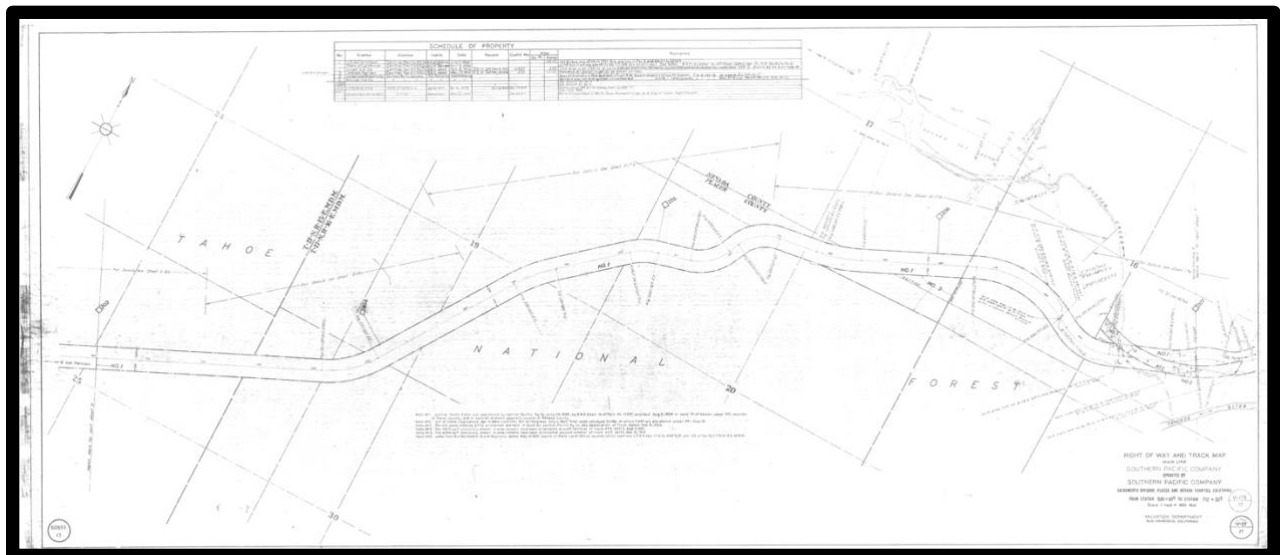
This stone marks the site of the Donner party cabins, where a monument will be erected under the auspices of the N. S. G. W. [Native Sons of the Golden West] to the pioneers who crossed the plains.

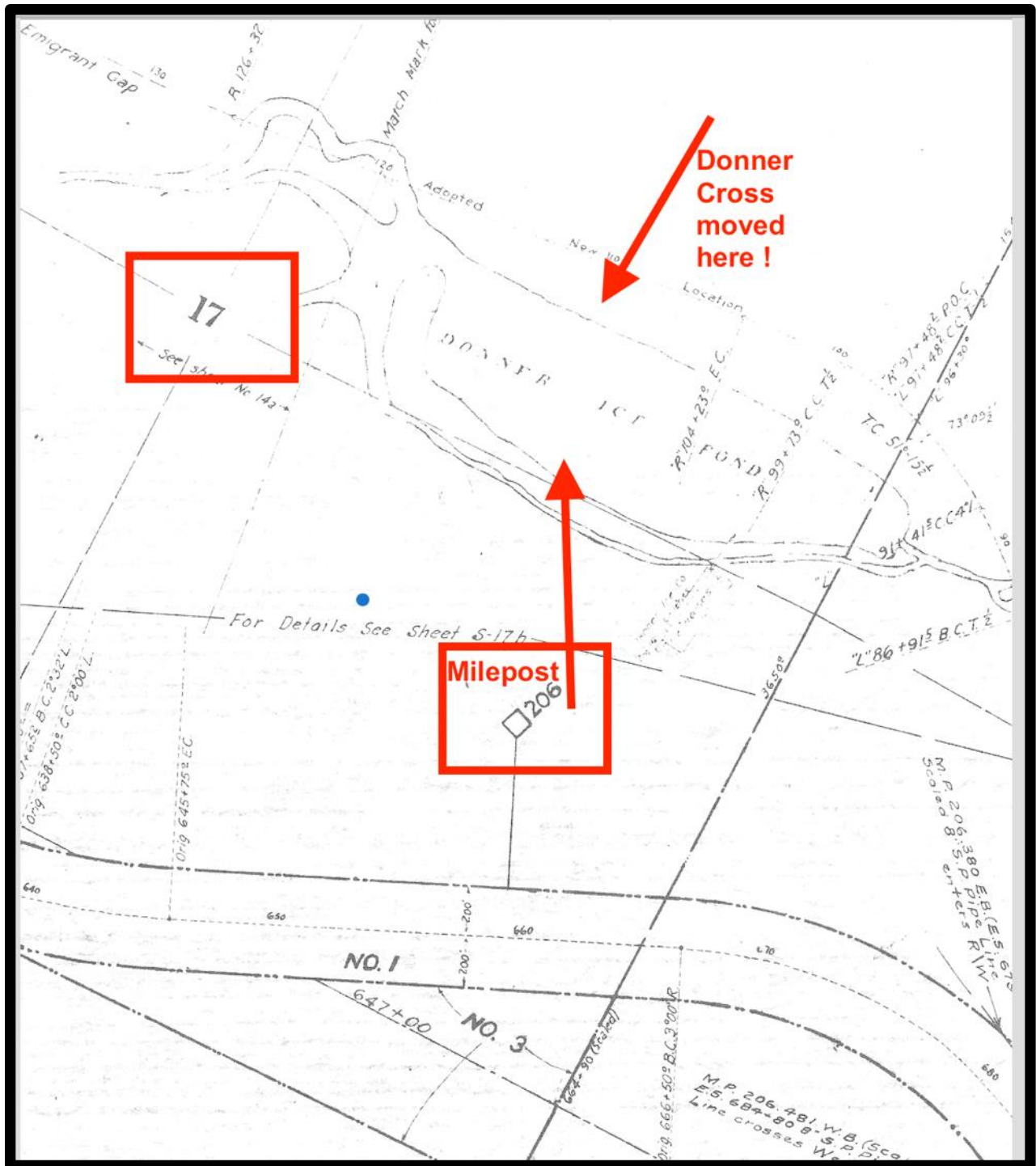
and continuing

<https://archive.org/details/guidebookwester00galegoog/page/n300/mode/2up?q=%22donner+cross%22>

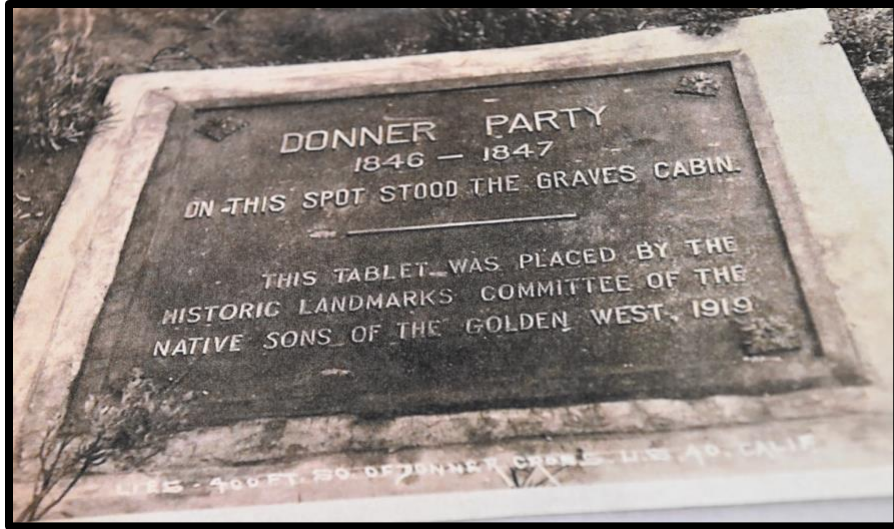
Just beyond the Donner cross and before the first snowsheds are entered, a bit of the lower end of Donner Lake may be seen by looking through the trees up the valley ahead. From this point the train turns southwestward, going up one side of the valley of Cold Creek, and then doubles back again, still climbing, on the other side. As the train rounds the loop in Cold Creek valley the rear platform affords a view of the Sierra crest, culminating in Tinker Knob (9,020 feet), only 2 or 3 miles distant. Along the north side of Cold Creek the snowsheds are almost continuous. They extend from this valley along about 40 miles of the railroad, the last shed being just beyond Blue Canyon, on the west slope. It is unfortunate that no satisfactory plan has yet been devised to protect the tracks from snow without marring the most beautiful part of the route 'over the mountains.

This map below shows the Right of Way and Track Map for Southern Pacific Company dated sometime after 1944. Although the map is much too small to clearly read, the screenshot below will confirm that train passengers travelling westbound could see the Donner Cross at Milepost 206.





The Native Sons of the Golden West (NSGW) placed an in ground Donner Party marker in **1919** stating “On This Spot Stood the Graves Cabin.”



(very bottom of image says: "Lies – 400 ft So. of Donner Cross. U.S. 40, Calif.)

Note too that the Donner Cross had a plaque on it at this time. The second photo below is clearly looking west toward Donner Pass, perhaps taken from the DFDLWR. A viewer can just make out the level area for the railroad. Based on other evidence of T.C. Wohlbrück's photos mentioned above, this second photo is assuredly one of his as well. Hence it has to be dated BEFORE 1925. The vertical black line on the center piece in this image indicates the place where the plaque is attached, and later, when the plaque is gone. It reads: "Site of Graves Cabin ? 1846-7".





In the [1920 Official Automobile Guidebook](#), the Donner Cross is also mentioned as a tourist stop. Keep in mind by this time in **1920**, the Pioneer/Donner Monument had been erected for 2 years.

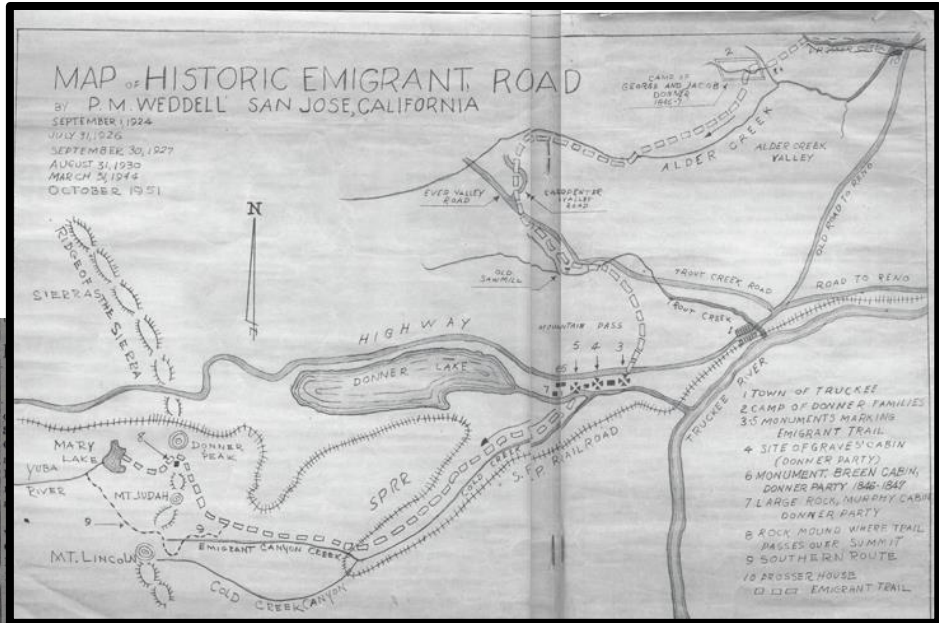
<p>*Truckee, Cal. (pop. 1,500, alt. 5,820 ft.), is picturesquely situated on a bend of the Truckee river, where it flows in from the southwest out of Lake Tahoe. Truckee is the site of a large summer recreation camp. The narrow-gauge line of the Lake Tahoe Railway & Transportation Co. runs south from this city, winding thru the narrow canyon of the Truckee river fifteen miles to Lake Tahoe. Lake Independence, 18 miles north, Donner cross</p>	<p>lake, 3 miles west, and the Rocking Stone Tower are other interesting points. At Hobart, 8 miles north, are immense lumber mills. In 1846-47 a band of pioneers, known as the Donner party, perished near Truckee on account of the heavy snow (20 ft. on level). A \$3,500 monument now marks the spot on which they died, erected by the Native Sons of the Golden West. A little beyond the monument may be seen a plain white wooden</p>
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Starting in **1921**, for many years, a Mr. P.M. Weddell (Peter) of San Jose studied the local trail of the ill-fated Donner Party and traced the trails from Verdi to Donner Summit preparing a map as he identified specific locations. Note item #4 Site of Graves' Cabin (Donner Party). Mr. Weddell's map below reflects the dates of his visits to identify the Emigrant Trail. It should be noted that Weddell also consulted C.F. McGlashan in researching and marking the Donner / Emigrant Trail.

WEDDELL HERE TO MARK OLD TRAILS

P. M. Weddell, of San Jose, who for many years has made an intensive study of the local trail of the ill-fated Donner Party, has arrived to continue his tracing of the old trails from Verdi to Donner summit.

The work is of particular interest this year in as much as an observance marking the 100th year of the tragedy of the Donner Party is being planned by the Chamber of Commerce for next year. Weddell is renewing the signs which he has maintained and hopes to trace the trail from Verdi to Donner Lake before leaving.



Weddell also marked sites as he found them, such as on this tree stump retrieved from the Donner Party Alder Creek site. It is most probably Weddell who erected the sign on the Donner Cross, “Site of Graves Cabin” which was along the Emigrant Trail north of Donner Creek (before it was rechanneled for Interstate 80).



(Top Left) Article from *Truckee Republican* 1945, July 12, and Weddell’s map (right). (Bottom left) representative sign post erected by P.M. Weddell, photo taken June 2024.

III. Donner Cross replaced at the same site

Donner Cross Menaced By Fire

Some careless person piled a lot of brush near the Donner Cross last Sunday and set it on fire. Prompt action on the Forest Service alone saved the cross from destruction, it being badly scorched before the fire was out.

A May 26, 1926 *Truckee Republican* article mentions that a “careless person” set the Donner Cross on fire by piling brush at its base and alighting it afire.

Later that same year **1926**, September 30, forest fire sparks threatened the Donner Cross.

End an ally oirs two opu are ells up. ven suit son in con- one the of nce rm ned for of on- an- and s into h Oth stay upon are u seize casio slip silng ways spon Al to t part fron in har sol as the var ro

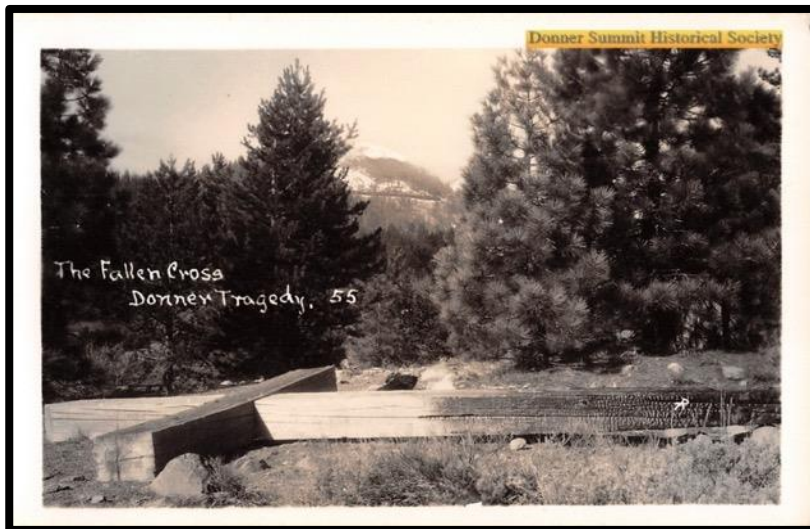
Forest Fire Threatens S. P. Snow Sheds

Tuesday morning a forest fire broke out near Anderson and the Southern Pacific line and fanned by a high wind rapidly spread up and down the mountain side. By evening it had reached shores of Donner Lake near Chilton Cove.

The Southern Pacific Company sent three fire trains and a large number of section men fighting the flames all day in an endeavor to save the snow sheds and also the new \$300,000 tunnel whose east end is at this point.

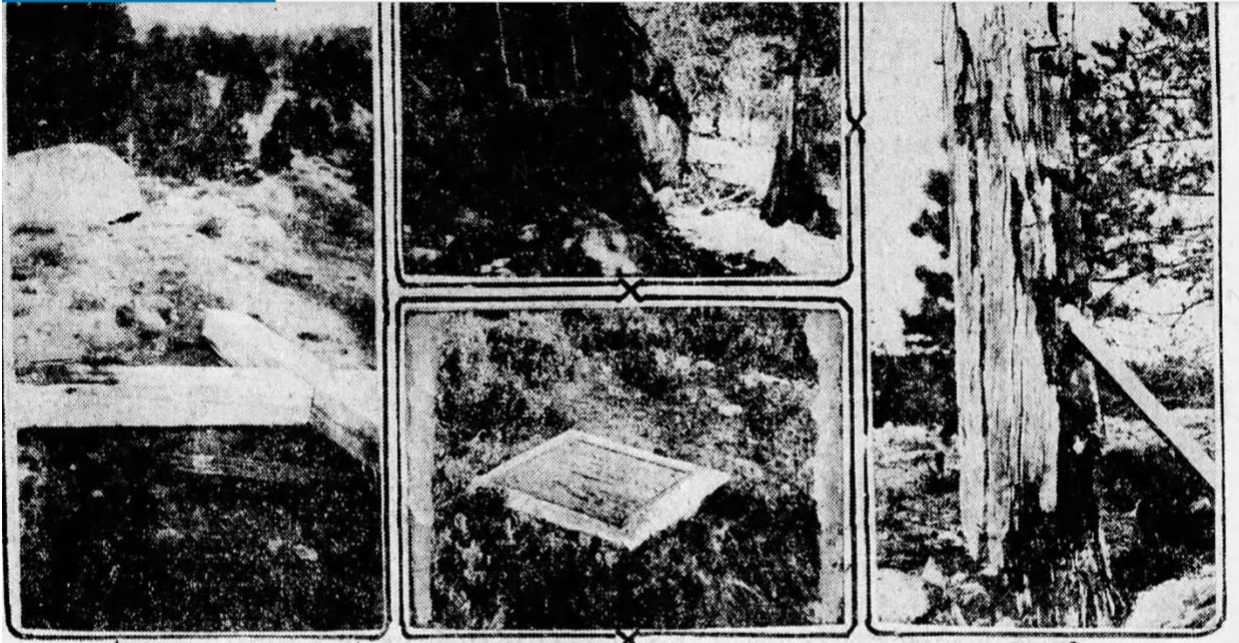
Sparks were carried by the wind for hundreds of yards and the Forest Service was kept busy putting out spot fires. One of these started just north of the Donner Cross and burned over nearly a half an acre.

Late Tuesday night the fire has been brought under control.



Thus, this may very well be a photo of the cross that was burned by some “careless person.” Note you can see in the image on the left the railroad snow sheds in the center top of the image, and the markings of a burnt charcoal Donner Cross with a **square** horizontal cross beam and pointed top. See DSHS1910 at this [link](#).

The article below from June 18, **1927 Sacramento Bee** shows a photo of the Donner Cross knocked down *yet again* on the ground. Sometime between when the cross was first knocked down and it being replaced in 1927 is important because it is in this location that the cross remained until it was moved *yet again* to make room for the construction of Interstate 80 (I-80) sometime in the late 1950s.



—Photos by Captain Charles E. Davis.

ALLOWED spots, carved into California's early day history the heroism and suffering of members of the ill-fated Donner Party, are going into decay at Donner Lake.

The ravages of time and the elements, neglect and even vandalism have left a mark upon these shrines pioneer days. In order that they might not sink into further decay, be lost entirely, Captain Charles Davis, research worker, who has uncovered many valuable Donner Party relics for preservation in Sut-

ter's Fort, is urging that steps be taken for their rehabilitation.

Could Be Attraction.

These places of veneration are included in the objects of interest along the old emigrant trails, about which thousands of Californians and California visitors know little or nothing, yet which could be embraced into a series of attractions for the visit of tens of thousands of tourists.

The photograph at the extreme left is the historic Donner Cross. This marker stood for years, attracting the attention especially of thousands of passengers on South-

ern Pacific Company trains. Captain Davis says vandals built a fire at its base. As a result it is going to pieces on the ground. Yet a few dollars, he says, would restore it.

Directing Signs Needed.

The two center photographs are of cabin markers, which, for want of proper directing signs, are little known to the hundreds of tourists, who now stop daily at the main Donner Monument, just off the highway.

The upper center photograph is where the Murphy cabin stood. The marker in the lower center photograph is on the site of the Graves

cabin. Both cabins are indelibly woven into the history of the Donner Party with the life's blood of most of the members. Both markers are only a short walk from the main monument.

The photograph on the right is of one of the trees, the top of which was burned off at the snow surface by embers of the Donner Party. This tree is on the highway and is passed by thousands, unaware of its significance. Its only attention has been the action of some unidentified person, knowing its association, by placing a prop to save it for a few months longer.

In July 1927, Captain Charles E. Davis, amateur historian of the Donner Party, traced the Donners' trek from Independence, Missouri to Sacramento, California. Davis also recounts the party of campers who burned the cross away at its base.



TRAGIC RELICS OF DONNER PARTY FOUND ALONG 80-YEAR-OLD WAGON TRAIL

Captain CHARLES E. DAVIS (left) retraced the routes of California's pioneers who drove men, teams over the Sierra and in an ongoing found valuable mementoes which shed new light on the Donner tragedy of 1846-47. The second picture in the accompanying group

shows a mountain pass, once a part of the emigrant trail. Picture three shows a sheep camp of 10 feet above ground by a mountain trail. Some-ber whom snow lay deep. As an was found inside the hollow-snow. Picture four is a gruesome discovery made on a summit meadow,

showing that tragedy still stalks men who have that lines in the high-tries above the line. The last picture shows CLYDE J. PENNING-TON, Davis' assistant, exhibiting an axle of a wagon found near Tragedy Mountain by a trail under the snow and on to 20 years before

the eye of man is set on it again. This wagon is a pair of a million of golden years that Davis has traced over to Captain Peterson of Sutter's Fort at Sacramento.



Lost Donner Party Trail Found By State Explorer

By SYL MACDOWELL
A TALL, bronzed man in a wide-brimmed hat and hob-nailed boots has just made an important contribution to early California history. He is Captain Charles E. Davis, the bridge of the open spaces and one of the most picturesque characters in the west.
There, eighty years after, he trailed the humped-back spring to uncover tragic and little-known history of the Donner party. There, eighty years after, he trailed the humped-back spring to uncover tragic and little-known history of the Donner party. There, eighty years after, he trailed the humped-back spring to uncover tragic and little-known history of the Donner party.

80-Year-Old Wagon Tells Mute Story Of Tragedy

reminiscent, according to the story. He said many of the marks of wagon trails were visible on the trail between it and the Donner party. He said many of the marks of wagon trails were visible on the trail between it and the Donner party. He said many of the marks of wagon trails were visible on the trail between it and the Donner party.

Lost Donner Party Trail Found By State Explorer

pack outfit and a field assistant. AUTHOR GIVES AID. C. F. McDowell, author of the book on the Donner party tragedy and a renowned explorer of that subject, gave Davis much aid. He had all the necessary, photos, maps and maps. He had all the necessary, photos, maps and maps. He had all the necessary, photos, maps and maps.

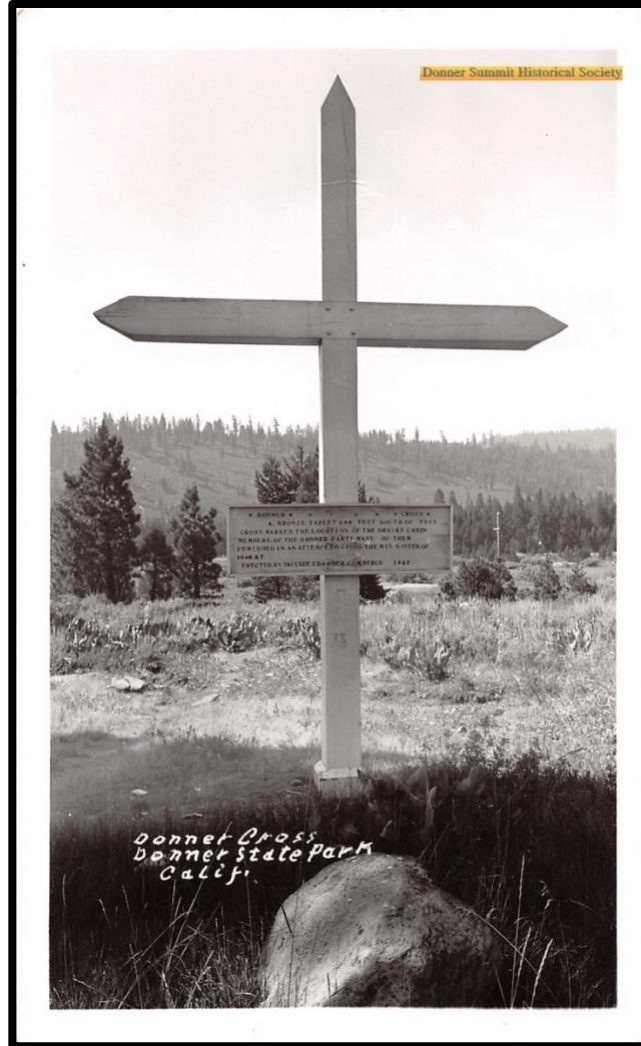
80-Year-Old Wagon Tells Mute Story Of Tragedy

plated, boxes of boots, and other articles made up there that, when found repository in the Fort State for mementoes. CABIN SITE FOUND. In a strange method Davis retraced the route of the Donner party. In a strange method Davis retraced the route of the Donner party. In a strange method Davis retraced the route of the Donner party.

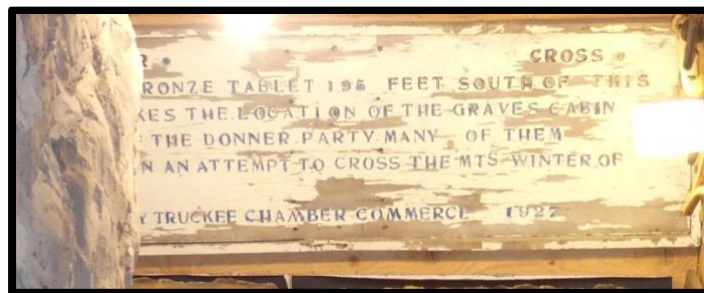
For details about Davis' explorations, see this link (<https://archive.library.unr.edu/public/repositories/2/resources/689>)

Finally, in 1927 after vandals reportedly set fire to the base of the cross, the Truckee Chamber of Commerce replaced it, and they added a plaque which says it was erected by the Chamber in 1927 noting too that "A bronze tablet 193 feet south of this cross marks [sic] the location of the Graves Cabin." (Native Sons of the Golden West, installed 1919)

This is what the Donner Cross looked like after the Chamber replaced it. Note the top and horizontal cross beam now all have pointed ends, not squared-cut ends.



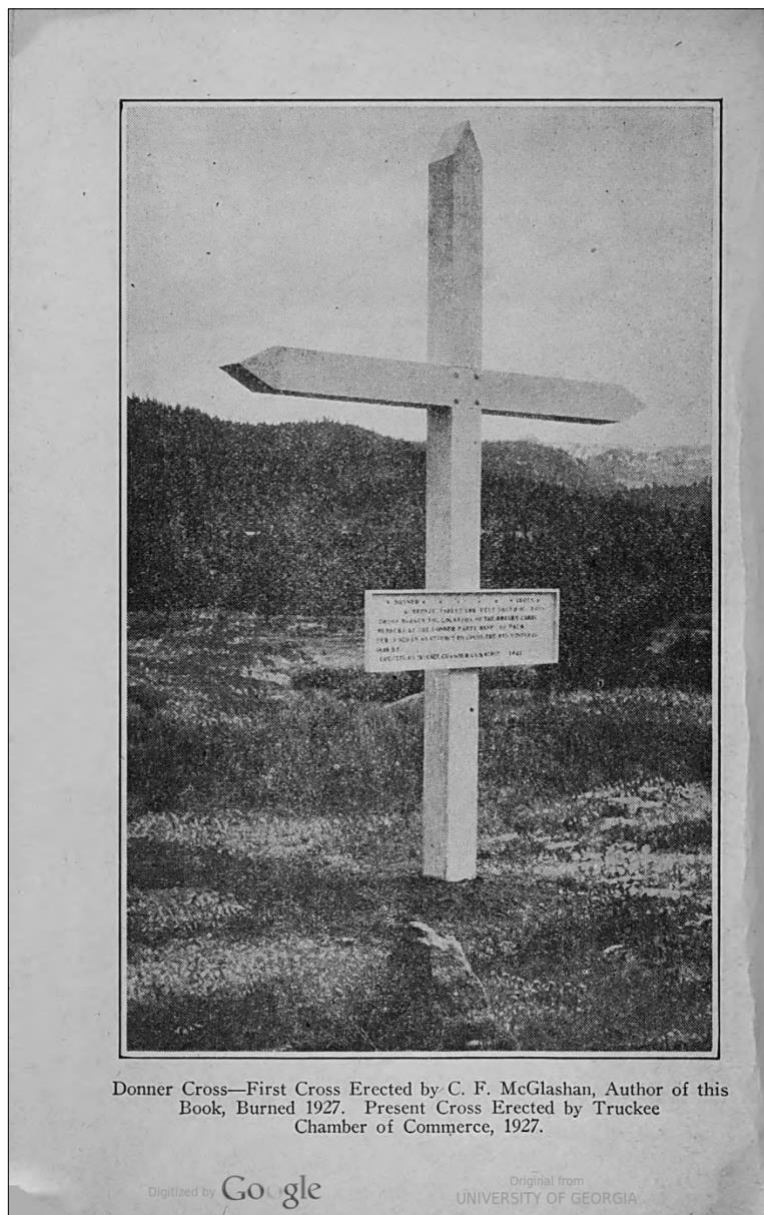
This image below is the ORIGINAL 1927 Donner Cross marker shown in the above image. [DSHS1810](#). This faded original plaque now resides in the Old Truckee Jail Museum.



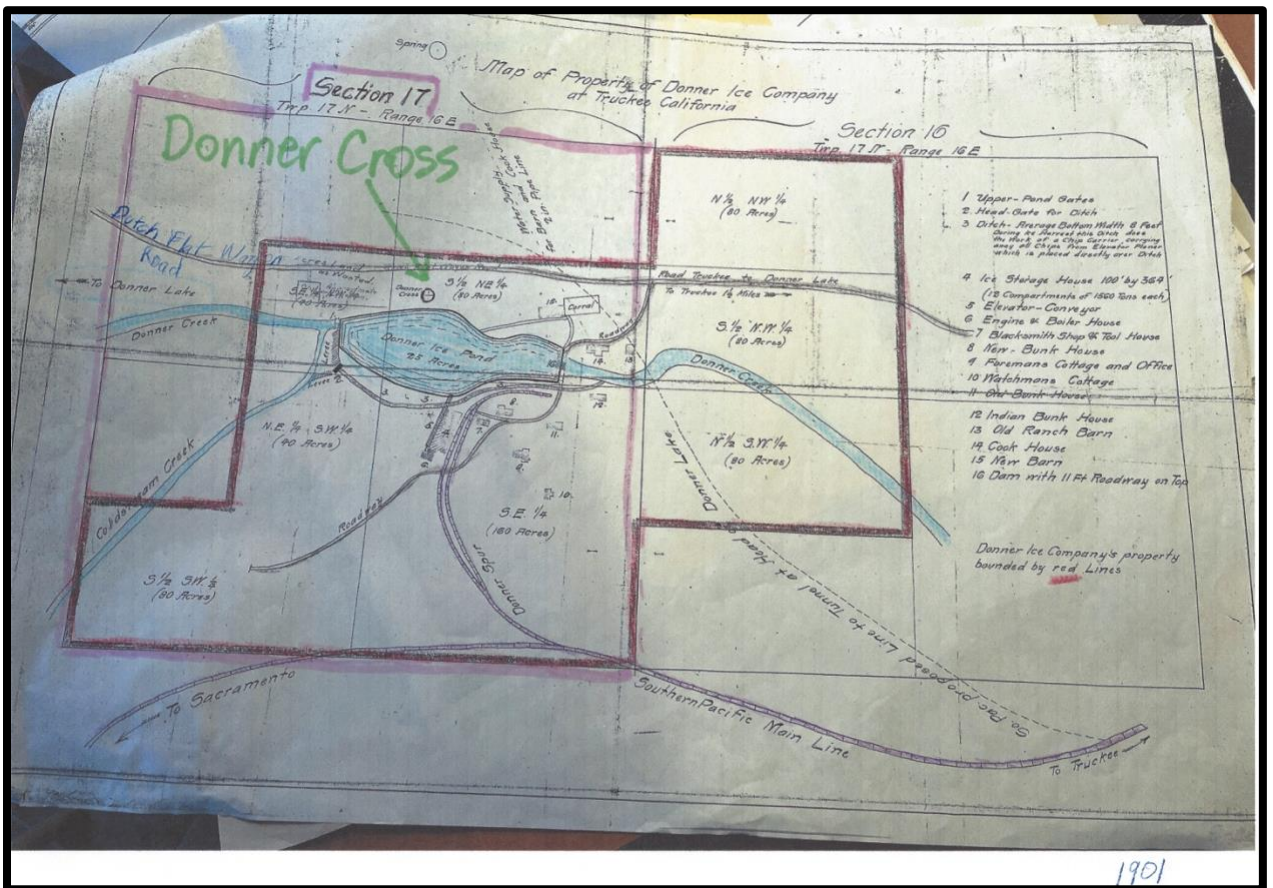
An August 31, 1929 *Sacramento Bee* article confirms that Weddell placed his “picture sign” ... “near which the large white cross is located.” The article continues “Two hundred yards below the sign is a bronze plaque embedded in concrete, marking the site of the Graves cabin.” All of these newspaper articles confirm the story thus far. A later July 4, 1946 *Auburn Journal* article addresses

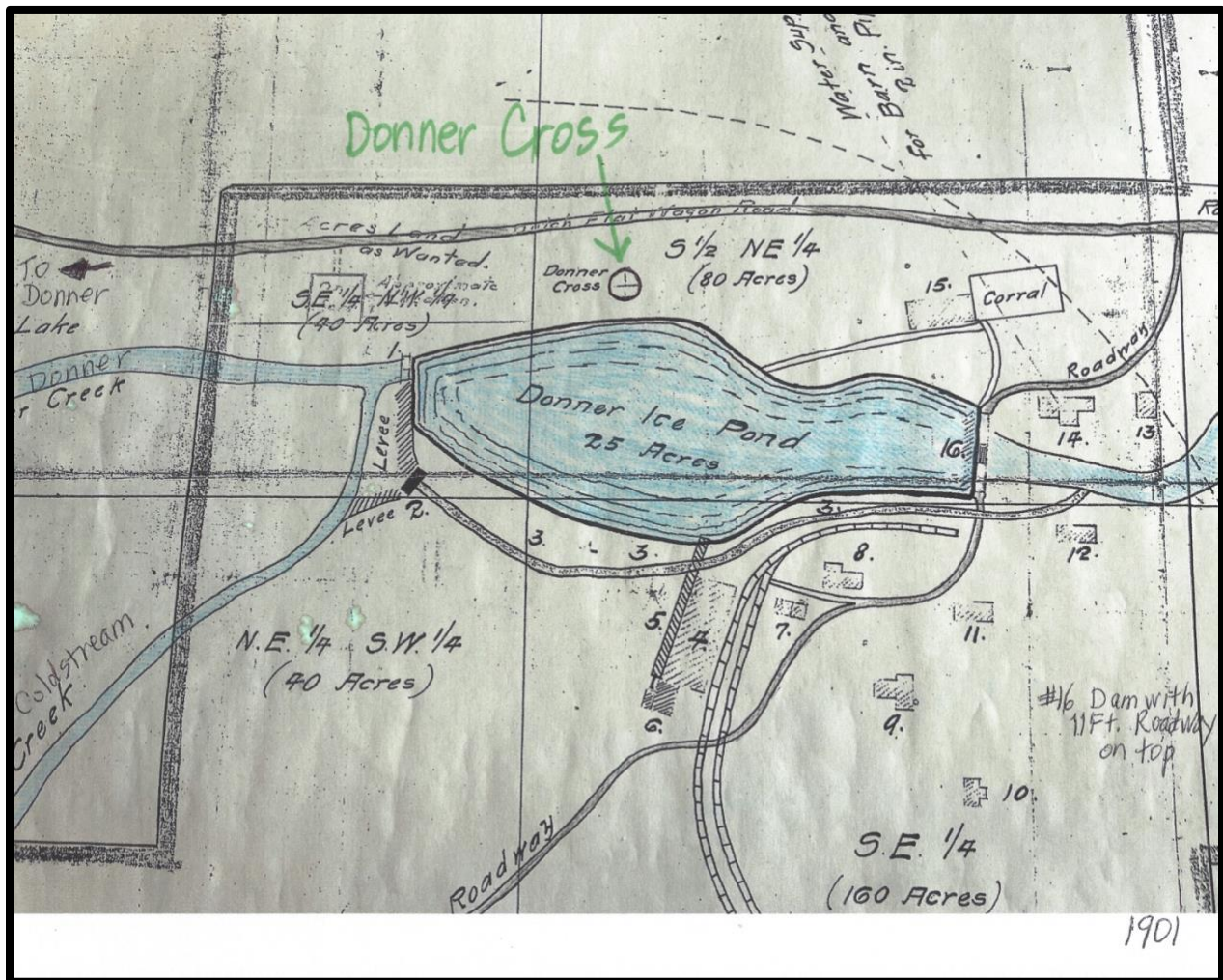
Scouts visiting the Murphy “Rock” and that they “visit the site of the Graves cabin far down stream where another bronze plate is set in concrete flush with the ground.” In a November 2, 1984 *Paradise Post* article, the writer reports that “Today, the site of the Reed-Graves cabin is under Highway 80” [I-80]. All of these articles sync.

We know that the Donner Cross was again replaced by **1931** as Charles F. McGlashan’s definitive book, [*The History of Donner Party*](#), in this *later* 1931 edition, as there is a photo of the replaced cross. McGlashan would most assuredly have known the placement of the cross as he did not pass until January 6, 1931.



A map believed to be **1901**??? shows the location of the Donner Cross just north of the Donner Ice Pond. Notice how CLOSE the Donner Cross is now to the Dutch Flat Wagon Road [Donner Pass Road today, formerly Old US 40, Lincoln Highway]. Full map below and appropriate excerpt showing the location of the Donner Cross. (Coloring added for clarity.) Notice that the Donner Ice Pond was **EAST** of the confluence of the Donner Creek [before rechanneling for I-80] and Coldstream Creek. Examining a [google map today](#) thus places the Donner Ice Pond *near* if not *in* the current Coldstream Development.





So to briefly summarize before we continue the saga of the ever-moving Donner Cross. First it was erected in a low-lying meadow near the Donner Creek. Next it was moved because the Donner Ice Pond was constructed. Third time it was moved along the historic Emigrant Trail on the north side of Donner Creek (before rechanneling). And continuing ...

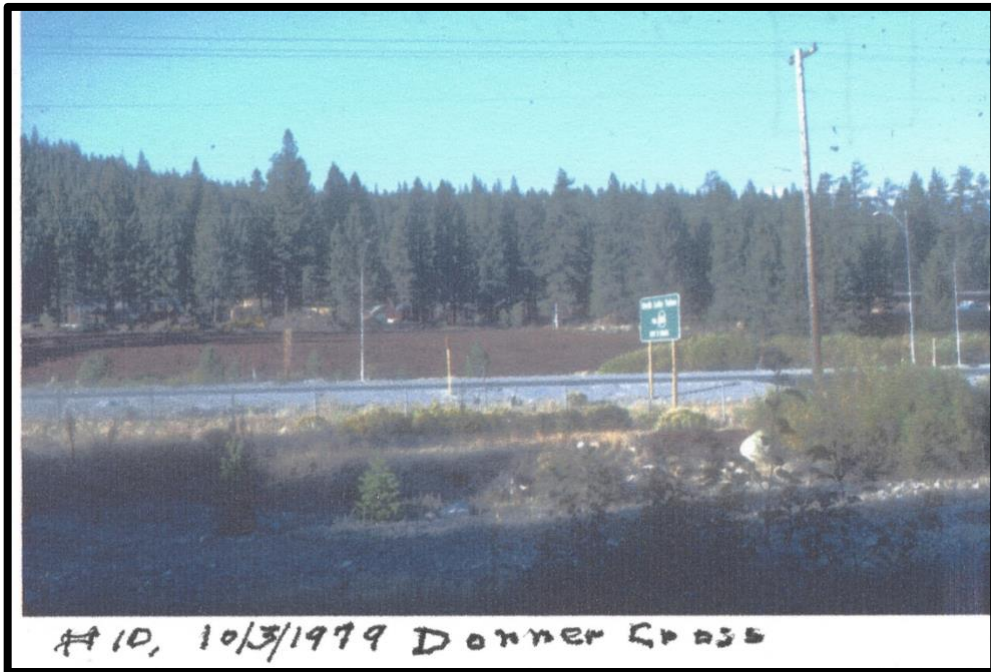
IV. Donner Cross moved to just west of the first California Agricultural Station in Truckee along I-80

Sometime in the late 1950s when I-80 was planned and in the design process, it was decided to move the Donner Cross *yet again* closer to the [first Truckee Agricultural Station](#). Photo below is of the station closest to the Donner Cross which was moved – *yet again* for I-80. Photo Courtesy of cfda.gov, Nick, 2/23/2024.

So when planning occurred for I-80 in the 1950s, the Donner Cross was in the middle of the planned interstate. No surprise here. The Donner Cross had to be moved *yet again*.



Two additional Macaulay Collection photos reveal the location of the white cross in the distance, now **NORTH** of I-80 before the current shopping center, West Truckee Center (fdba Factory Outlet shops, Citizens Bank Plaza, and before that, contemplated in the 1986-8 Trailhouse Square Development.). The Cross was located near the then active Westbound Agricultural Station in the late 1970s.



(the above two photos are from Tom Macaulay's collection but do not necessarily reflect accurate dating)

And below, an incredible John Corbett aerial photograph from the 1970s that distinctly shows near the center of the picture to the left of the cleared dirt area and immediately north of the westbound lanes of I-80, which eventually became

Citizens Bank Plaza/now West Truckee Center, a very faint white cross can be seen. (Original source photograph not yet located, but was scanned at a sub-optimal resolution in the early 2000s.)

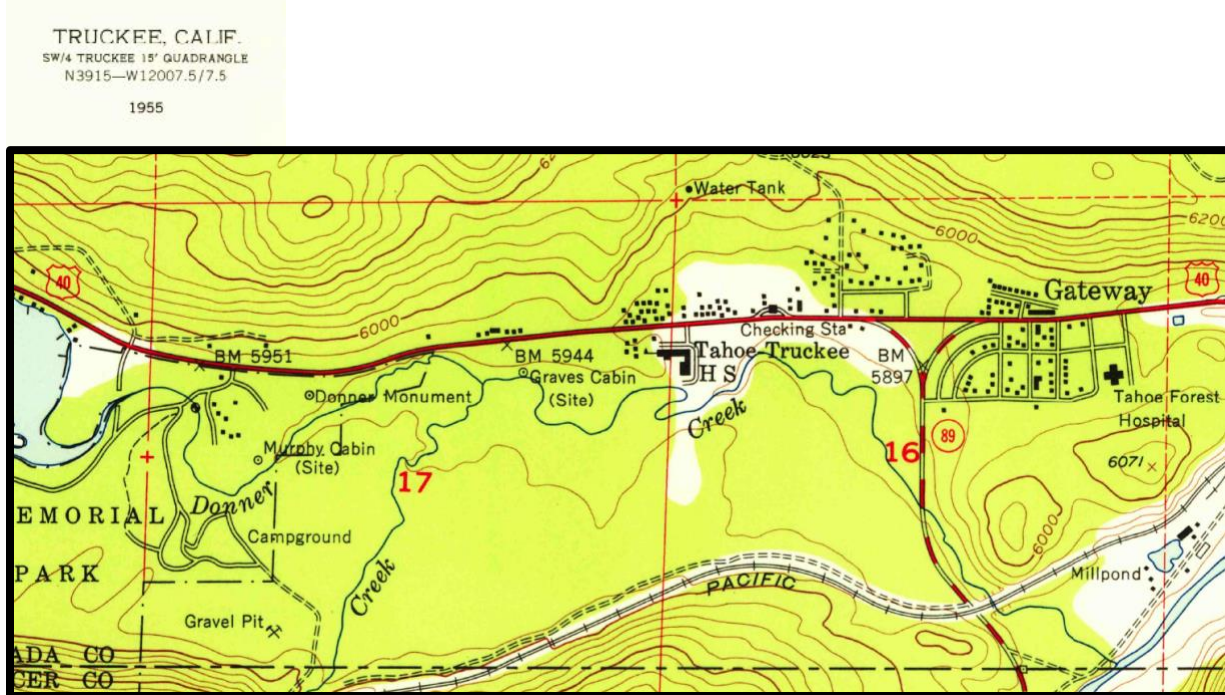


A zoomed in image shows the Donner Cross just north of I-80 before it was moved – again – to make room for the proposed commercial development in the dirt area.



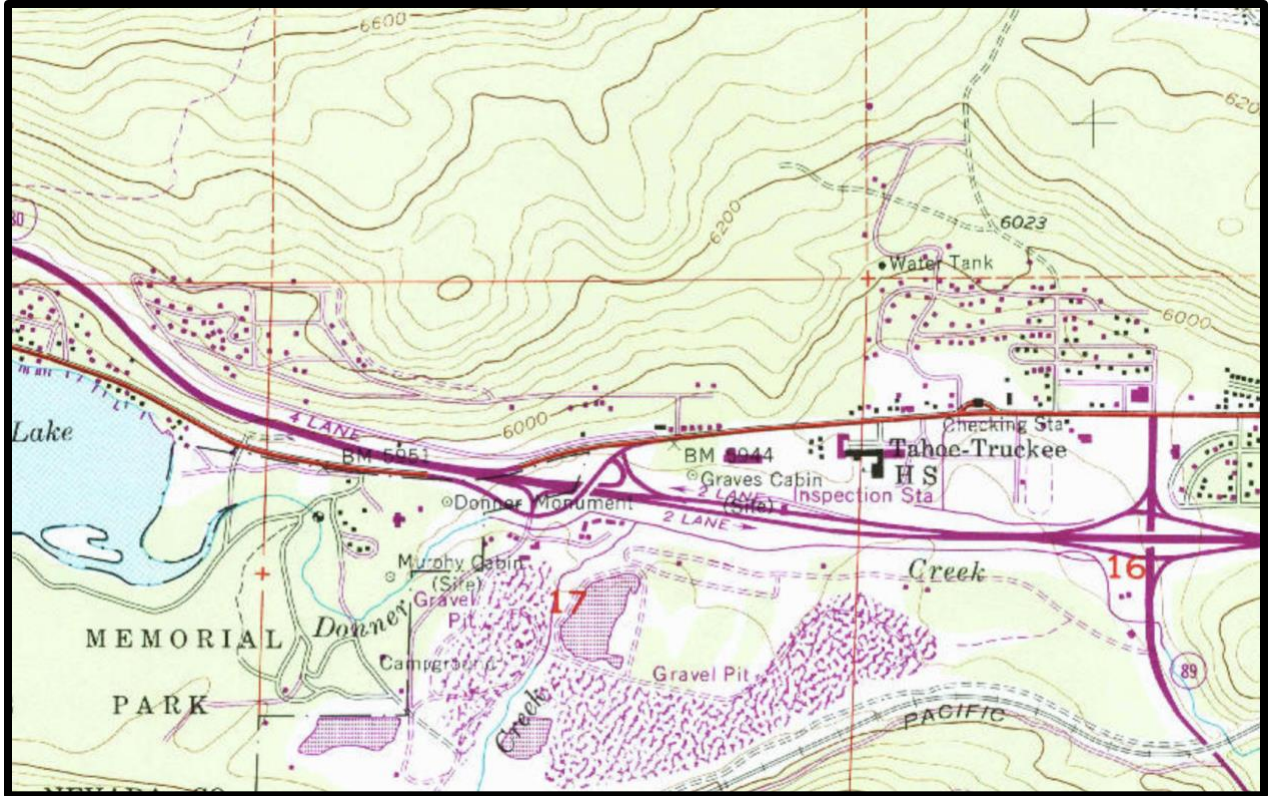
In a 1964 pamphlet entitled *Ponderosa Area* compiled by Bert Troelsen, Lillian Farr, and Dorothy Fordham, and edited by the same John Corbett, there is specific reference to the white cross: “ On Emigrant Way just west of the Truckee Elementary School stands a large, white cross that marks the Donner Trail. Down over the hill by some willows is a bronze plaque, marking the site of the Graves’ cabin, whose family was part of the Donner Party.” Page 36.

Below a USGS 1955 map shows the “Checking Sta” and the Graves’ Cabin site BEFORE I-80 was constructed. Excerpt from a USGS 1955 CA_Truckee_3000962_1955_24000_geo.pdf map available at this [link](https://ngmdb.usgs.gov/topoview/viewer/#12/39.3518/-120.1896), <https://ngmdb.usgs.gov/topoview/viewer/#12/39.3518/-120.1896> . Note the Graves’ Cabin (Site) is very near BM 5944 (USGS Benchmark).

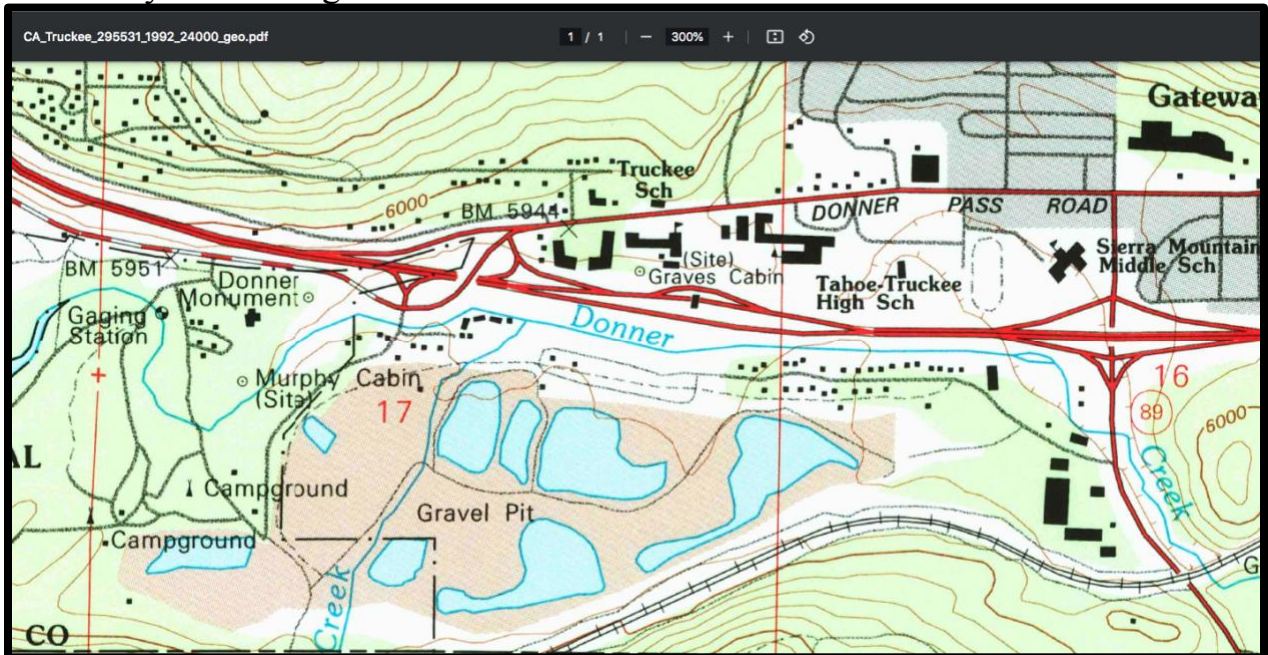


However, a USGS 1955 map (revised 1969, 1986) shows the precise location of the “Inspection Sta” and the “Graves Cabin (site)” (Donner Cross) site.





Compare with USGS 1992 Truckee map below. Note the Graves Cabin (Site) is in a *different* location than it was just 37 years earlier. Recall I-80 was built in the late 1950s and early 1960s and the Donner Cross had to be moved for construction. Note the distance between the same BM 5944 and the Graves Cabin site marker now. They are no longer near each other.



An [October 17, 2006 Sierra Sun](#) article reflected that the “Old Agricultural Inspection Station” would be gone by the end of 2006. Unclear WHY the Inspection Sta. is not reflected on this earlier 1992 USGS map because it *does* surprisingly appear on the earlier 1955 revised 1986 USGS map above.

In June **1981**, the Truckee-Donner Historical Society hosted members and Nevada County Historical Society’s guests on a tour of the Donner Memorial State Park Museum and the Murphy Cabin site and drove past the Donner Cross. A summary sheet of the intended visit was prepared by then TDHS President Dwayne Haddock who reported that on the road heading *from* Donner Memorial State Park going *eastbound* on Old US 40, just after the overpass, Shell gas station and grading, is a WHITE CROSS. The author mentioned that it was Dr. Weddell who erected the cross at that site as he was searching for the markings of the Emigrant Trail. Haddock added that the cross originally stood where the present [1981] Agricultural Station is located. Thus, the Donner Cross was moved *yet again*. They should have mounted wheels on the Donner Cross with the number of times it has been shamelessly relocated in the name of progress. Macaulay’s Notes June 13, 1981.

In an [August 25, 1983](#) article in the *Sierra Sun* entitled “Taking another look at Truckee’s winter carnival of **1896**”, specific reference is made by author Doug Barrett to the ice skating ponds noting that Joe Marzen generously set aside about 10 acres of his field, 1.5 miles west of town, for the pleasure of skaters. Barrett continues: “Protruding from the center of one of the ponds was an immense cross, put up the year before [**1895 – really 1897**] in Marzen’s meadow, marking the historic spot where the Donner Party perished.” Recall Truckee photographer Gage’s photo showing the giant cross leaning precariously in a field of ice [HKG0007](#).

In October of **1983** the Keeper of the National Register of Historic Landmarks included this Donner Cross property in the National Register. See # [NPS Gallery \(Appendix 1](#) – two (2) maps are included that are not in the NPS NRHP online link - <https://npgallery.nps.gov/NRHP/GetAsset/dfd05840-4f5c-493e-a513-3ea7e4f706e7>). This “property” included all *three* non-contiguous sites, *including* the Graves Cabin Site, and in item no. 10, p. 1 of this Inventory, the Graves cabin site is well defined.

2. Graves Cabin Site. The verbal boundary description is keyed to USGS Truckee 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.

The two accompanying maps detail the location of the Donner Camp sites that were accepted as National Register Historic Places (NRHP) in this nomination. Further, in the same NRHP approved submission, item no. 10, p. 2 details the boundary justification.

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.

The Donner camp sites, *including* the Graves Cabin site, were designated a National Historic Landmark in **1961** *without boundaries*. And further, the Graves Cabin site *is included as a "non-contiguous unit" of the Donner Camp Site National Historic Landmark.* [The Donner Pioneer Monument reflects the location of the Breen Cabin site. 1920 The Location of Site of Breen Cabin letter, C.F. McGlashan]

The fact that the Donner Cross has *not* been so protected since 1961 from perpetual relocation is a true travesty of the original NATIONAL HISTORIC landmark for the Donner Party. Bischoff, *op. cit.*, p. 2, concludes: "By virtue of being an NHL, the Murphy, Graves, and Breen Cabin Sites are *automatically listed* on the NRHP." (emphasis added). Because the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) wasn't passed until 1966 (a federal law that protects archaeological resources in the United States), I-80 was built BEFORE the NHPA of 1966. Not surprisingly, some historical records, sites, and maps may never be untangled. In addition, the Truckee-Donner Historical Society was not founded until 1968 – a decade after the Donner Cross was moved from I-80's path to near the westbound "Bug Station."

Hence Truckee-Donner Historical Society's efforts in late 1983 and 1984 to get the Donner Cross included in the Truckee Historic Preservation District. In a January 1984 TDHS newsletter there is reference requesting volunteers to assist in relocating the Donner Cross. In June 1984, TDHS requested HPAC to have the Donner Cross included in Truckee's Historic District. And the Nevada County Historical Landmarks Commission wrote a letter to the Board of Supervisors on April 17, 1984 supporting TDHS's efforts to include the Graves Cabin Site in the Spot Zoning. (Appendix 5). See also September 1990 TDHS newsletter (p. 428 combined) mentioning that the Graves cabin is south side Highway 40 and a white cross so marks the spot. A Spring 2006 TDHS newsletter (p. 722 combined) mentions the location of the Donner Cross once again.

The HPAC has asked the Society to do studies concerning areas that may be included within Truckee's Historic District. We have also been working with the Supervisors, the Planning Department, as well as the Planning Commission to have the Schafer grave site and the Donner Cross annexed to the Historic District.

their tent and spent the winter. The Graves family cabin site is on the south side of Old Highway 40 just past the Truckee Elementary School and just over the fence from the Interstate 80 "bug station." The spot is marked by a huge white cross. The Donner Memorial State Park, just

And

????????DID YOU KNOW????????

The Society owns the white wooden Donner-Graves Family Cross and plaque at the east end the Factory Outlet Stores along Donner Pass Road, next to Truckee Elementary School. It could use a coat of paint and the plaque polishing if any member is interested in volunteering.

??

And finally, location #5.

V. Present location of the Donner Cross

CalTrans moved the Donner Cross from near the Agricultural Station just up the hill to where the Trailhouse Square / Citizens Bank / Factory Outlet / West Truckee Center shopping center is today to make room for the new I-80.

(Appendix 3 - 12/08/1975 TDHS summary location Graves Cabin Marker relative to Donner Cross – 195' SOUTH of present location of Donner Cross; Appendix 4, 4/2/1976 letter from California Department of Transportation to TDHS WITH map

with 2 red “x”s). In this last 1976 letter reference, the Department of Transportation wrote this:

“ The marker [Graves Cabin site plaque] was moved in an early stage of freeway construction.... Extra money was added to the contract to permit removal of the plaque to a point where it could be preserved.” The plaque was moved by CalTrans in the I-80 construction. Regrettably, no pictures were found in CalTrans records. So where was the Donner Cross at this point? The letter continues:

“The plaque is now mounted at ground level on the north side of the freeway.... Near the school there is an empty parcel on which stands a cross. Walk due south of the cross toward the freeway about 150 yards. You should find the marker set in the ground at that point [on a boulder].”

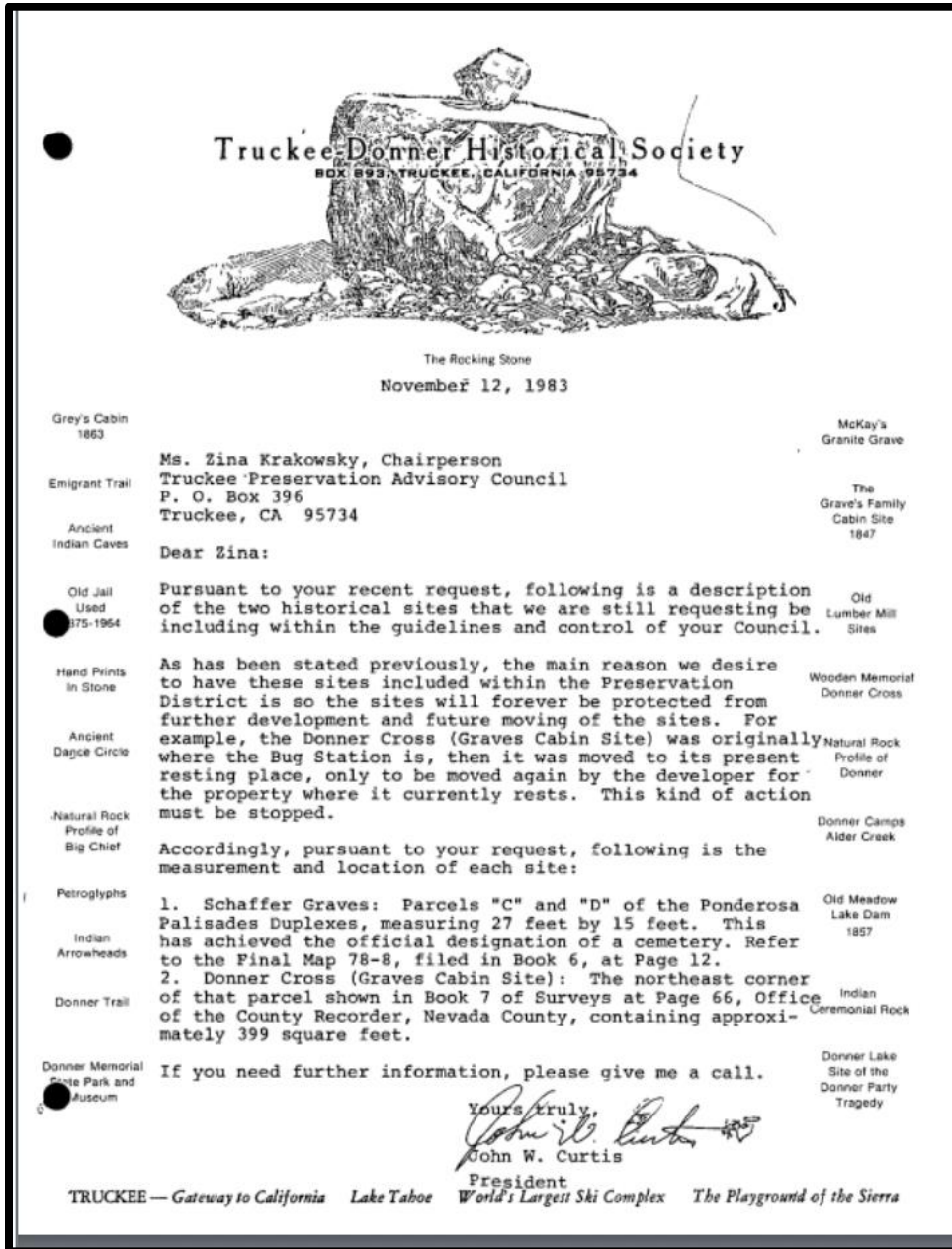
So the Graves Cabin site marker / plaque was relocated to just north of the freeway AND the Donner Cross is atop the hill near the Bug Station.

A few years go by and in the 1980s Truckee Investors contemplated building Trailhouse Square shopping center. But once **again** the Donner Cross had to be moved from that prime real estate so the developers of the shopping center could make room for the almost 28,000 square foot commercial complex. Fortunately, by the 1980s, TDHS was very involved and then TDHS President Dwayne Haddock made amicable arrangements with Jim Bezzarides of Bezzco, Inc., the Trailhouse shopping center developer, to move the Donner Cross from near I-80 on the hill to a 20' x 20' dedicated easement of 399 square feet at the front east end of the property, near the Truckee Elementary School today.

As of this date, June 21 **2024**, the Donner Cross presently stands in the front of the Donner Pass Road West Truckee / Citizens Bank Plaza (Factory Outlet Stores) on Donner Pass Road. In the spring of **2010** however, the cross succumbed yet again to the Sierra winters, rotting through and falling down. Courtesy of local contractors, the cross was replaced ensuring that residents and visitors continue to remember the story of the Donner Party. The Donner Cross and the Graves Cabin Site bronze plaque were laid in land between Truckee Elementary and the factory stores on an **Easement** granted to the Truckee-Donner Historical Society in **1985**. It was recorded May 8, 1985. (**Appendix 2**)

TDHS seeks to recognize and make permanent this (hopefully) last location of the Donner Cross, and commemorate it by landmarking status. Since 1984, TDHS has sought to keep the Donner Cross in a permanent location instead of moving it around the Town at the whims of development. See the 1983 letter from TDHS's then President John Curtis to the Truckee Preservation Advisory Council (TPAC)

beseeking TPAC to recognize the importance of the Donner Cross and its location.



Gratefully, on July 30, 1984, the Nevada County Board of Supervisors Planning Department **APPROVED** the Donner Cross parcel be included in the "HP" Historic Preservation District. See the full text of the July 30, 1984 minutes available at this [link](#) pp. 6-9.

<https://nevco.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6065165&GUID=F0BD5AD1-EB99-4FD7-AF58-A795060ACBC0&Options=Text%7CAttachments%7COther%7C&Search=donner+cross>

County of Nevada
Board of Supervisors Minutes

III. SPECIAL ORDERS: 9:30 A.M. COUNTY OF NEVADA
(1) BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
PLANNING DEPARTMENT
ADDENDUM AGENDA
July 30, 1984

SUPERVISORIAL DISTRICT: V

Item No. 1 Public hearing on an amendment to Zoning District Maps No. 134 and 129 to extend the "HP" Historic Preservation Combining District to include a portion of Hilltop Ski Hill, the Catholic Cemetery, the Donner Cross Site and the Shaffer Grave Site - (Z84-4)

...

Motion made by Supervisor Sutton, seconded by Supervisor Rood, to approve the recommendations of the Planning Commission regarding the amendments to the zoning district maps, within the "HP" Combining District, which includes a portion of Hilltop, the Old Truckee Cemetery, and the Donner Cross Site, and the Old Schaeffer Grave Site. Supervisor Sutton clarified that the portion of Hilltop referred to, includes the area on the map that is up to the ridge line and includes some Public Utility District property, as shown on the exhibit accompanying the ordinance, and that the Board reaffirms that the project qualifies under Section 15060 of the California Environmental Quality Act.

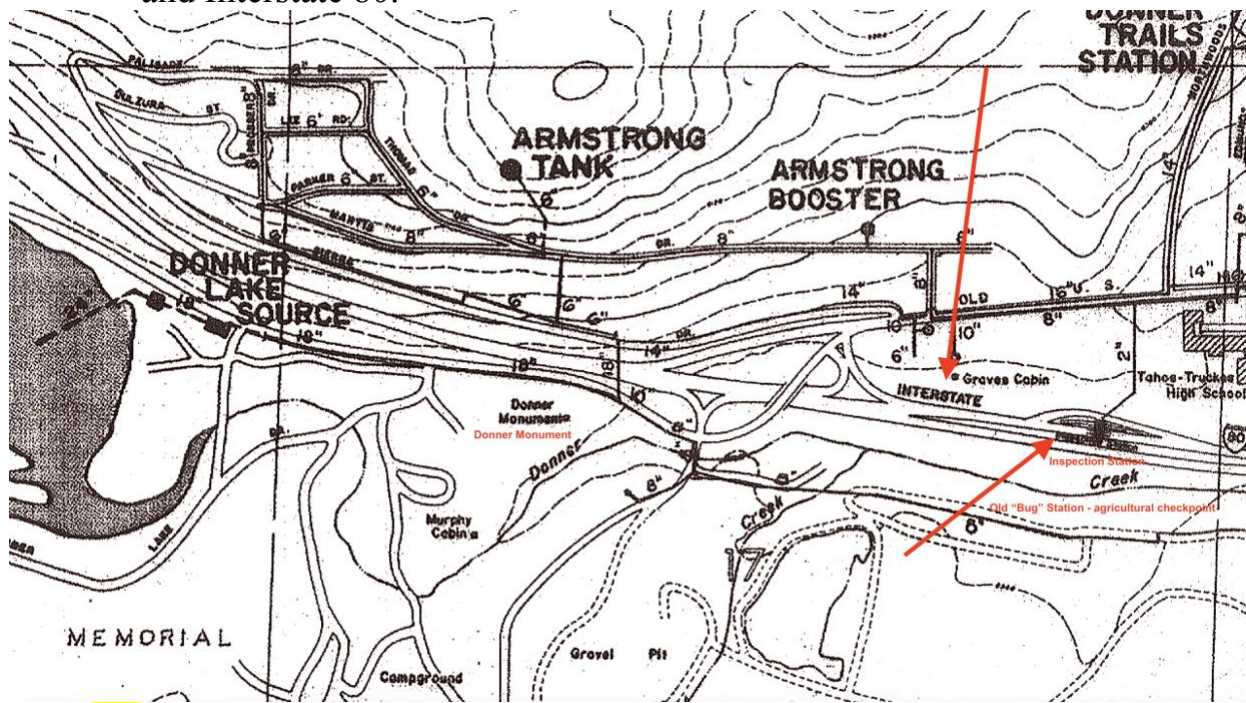
...

On a roll call vote, the motion passed as follows: Ayes: Supervisors Rood, Sutton and Barnhart. Noes: Supervisor Wilder and Hansen.

Maps

1. 1879 Graves Cabin site (hand drawn from memory)
2. Right of Way and Track Map, Southern Pacific Company, after 1944
3. 1955, rev'd USGS map showing Donner Cross still by I-80 wayside
4. 9/30/1976, revised 6/22/1981 and 5/11/1983. Cook Associates drawing sheet titled Truckee-Donner Public Utility District Existing Water System. Shows **old inspection station I-80**, and **Graves Cabin**, Armstrong Tank,

McGlashan Springs (misspelled McGlasson and McGlashen). [Map No. 1-280L](#) (5th box). Excerpt of relevant area below. **Note** the relative distances between the Donner Monument and the Gravel Pit areas (in previous maps, owned by Pacific Fruit & Express (PF&E), and noted as a meadow, the Donner Monument and Graves Cabin, and between the Inspection Station (the old “Bug Station” agricultural checkpoint) and Graves Cabin, and Interstate 80.



5. 1992 USGS map showing Donner Cross (Graves Cabin Site), and the Inspection Sta.

In March 2024, TDHS contacted the USGS.gov map center to obtain the exact coordinates from their records of where BM 5944 is. Locating this benchmark may assist in determining just how many times the Donner Cross and or the Graves Cabin (site) may have been moved. Compare the 1955, 1986, and 1982 USGS maps to see the different locations of this benchmark. Correspondence with the USGS revealed that they could NOT locate the benchmark as late as 1989. They also provided the coordinates for the last known location of the benchmark: 39° 19' 31" N, 120° 13' 22" W . Note that this is NOT the present location of the Donner Cross. (BM 5944 now referred to as [KS0118](#)).

6. Present location of Donner Cross ([maps.google.com](https://www.google.com/maps/@39.3202942,-120.2222091,1341m/data=!3m1!1e3?entry=ttu));
<https://www.google.com/maps/@39.3202942,-120.2222091,1341m/data=!3m1!1e3?entry=ttu>

Coordinates: 39.325476, -120.221522



(above image from google maps showing the CURRENT June 2024 “easement” site of the Donner Cross and accompanying boulder [where the plaque has been placed but temporarily removed for safekeeping from vandalism, winter weather and sidewalk construction work]

Summary

The Donner Cross was the first monument to the ill-fated Donner Party erected by the citizens of Truckee in 1887 to mark the site of the Graves Cabin in a low meadow. The first Donner Cross and its immediate replacements had squared-ends on the top and horizontal cross beam. The cross was moved to make room for an ice pond, and those crosses had a pointed top, but still squared-off horizontal cross beam. The Donner Monument was built in 1918. The cross remained near the ice pond until it succumbed to the Sierra winters. Crosses built *after* 1927 have *both* pointed horizontal cross beam and top. The Donner Cross was burned by vandals and campers, replaced again in 1927, with a plaque, only to be moved yet again when Interstate 80 was being planned. Moved again to the West Truckee / Citizens' Bank Plaza / Factory Stores in the mid 1980s, only to be moved yet again to Donner Pass Road in 1988. It remained there until it too rotted and thankfully was replaced in 2010. This repetitive "relocation" of a historical object has got to stop. The Donner Cross is far away enough from the Donner Monument that one has to know that it is there. It is easily missed.

Granting landmark status for the Donner Cross by the Nevada County Historical Landmarks Commission means it is much less likely that it will be moved yet again.

The Donner Cross saga remains convoluted, not fully understood or recognized as the other two Donner Party sites found at the California State Donner Memorial State Park (the Murphy Cabin and Breen Cabin sites) and the Tahoe National Forest-Donner Camp Picnic Site and Interpretive Trail at Alder Creek, site of the Donner families.

Why the Donner Cross has not been recognized before now as a public historical landmark – indeed conferred National Register Historic Place status - remains a mystery. And a true travesty. Hopefully, landmarking by the Nevada County Historical Landmarks Commission will add clarity to the tragic story of the Donner Party and the public's desire for remembrance for all *three* recognized National Register Historic Places sites.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – National Register Historic Places Keeper of the National Register signed Oct. 1983 for NRHP with accompanying 2 maps

Appendix 2 - April 1985 **Partnership Easement Deed** declaring the Donner Cross / Graves Cabin (Site) to be of historical significance to be displayed with right of public access (Parcel No. 18-500-13), including the property description Exhibit “A”

Appendix 3 - 12/08/1975 TDHS summary location Graves Cabin Marker relative to the Donner Cross – 195’ SOUTH of present location of Donner Cross

Appendix 4 - 4/2/1976 letter from California Department of Transportation to TDHS WITH map with 2 **red** Xs’ marking the location of the Graves Cabin site marker

Appendix 5 – April 17, 1984 letter from Nevada County Historical Landmarks Commission to the Nevada County Board of Supervisors supporting TDHS’ efforts to have the Donner Cross included in Spot Zoning approval.

Application Preparation:

Heidi Sproat, TDHS Chief Editor, Volunteer Researcher
Chaun Owens-Mortier, TDHS Vice-President and Researcher
Gregory P. Zirbel, TDHS President

NCHLC Application sponsored by Barbara Shelden Czerwinski, Ph.D., Nevada County Historical Landmarks Commissioner, District 5, 2013-2024.

Appendix 1 –

National Register Historic Places Keeper of the
National Register
signed Oct. 1983 for NRHP with accompanying
2 maps

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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DATE ENTERED

**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 LOCAL

DEPOSITORY 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
C	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING

B	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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Donner Camp Sites

CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 7 PAGE 2

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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Donner Camp Sites

CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 2

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, entwined 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.

(Continued)

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Donner Camp Sites

CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 3

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

(Continued)

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INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

Donner Camp Sites

CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 4

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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CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 9 PAGE 1

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).

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED

DATE ENTERED

Donner Camp Sites

CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 10 PAGE 1

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.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

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DATE ENTERED

Donner Camp Sites

CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 10

PAGE 2

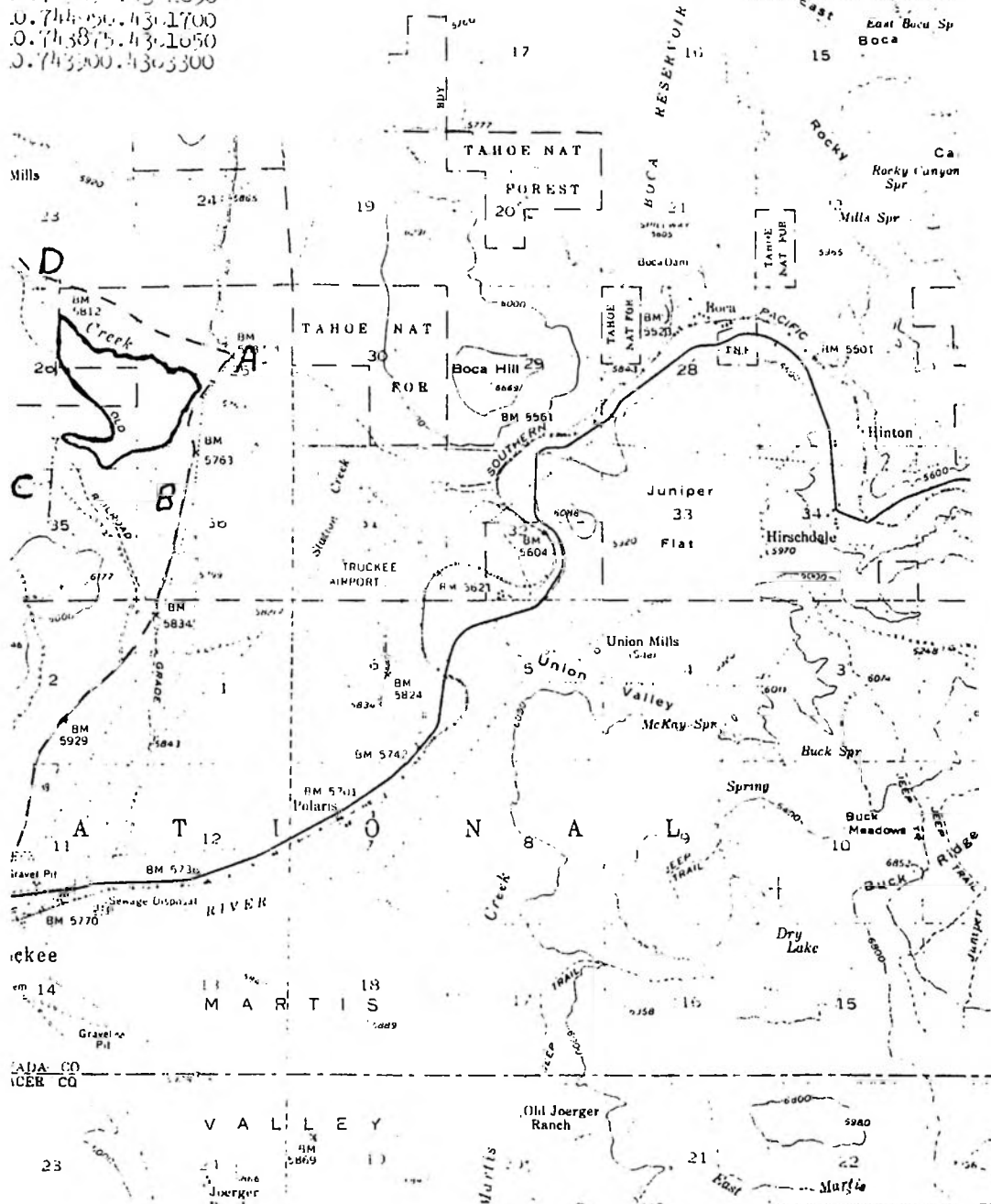
Verbal Boundary Description (continued).

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.

0.74450.43.1700
 0.743875.43.1050
 0.743200.43.3300



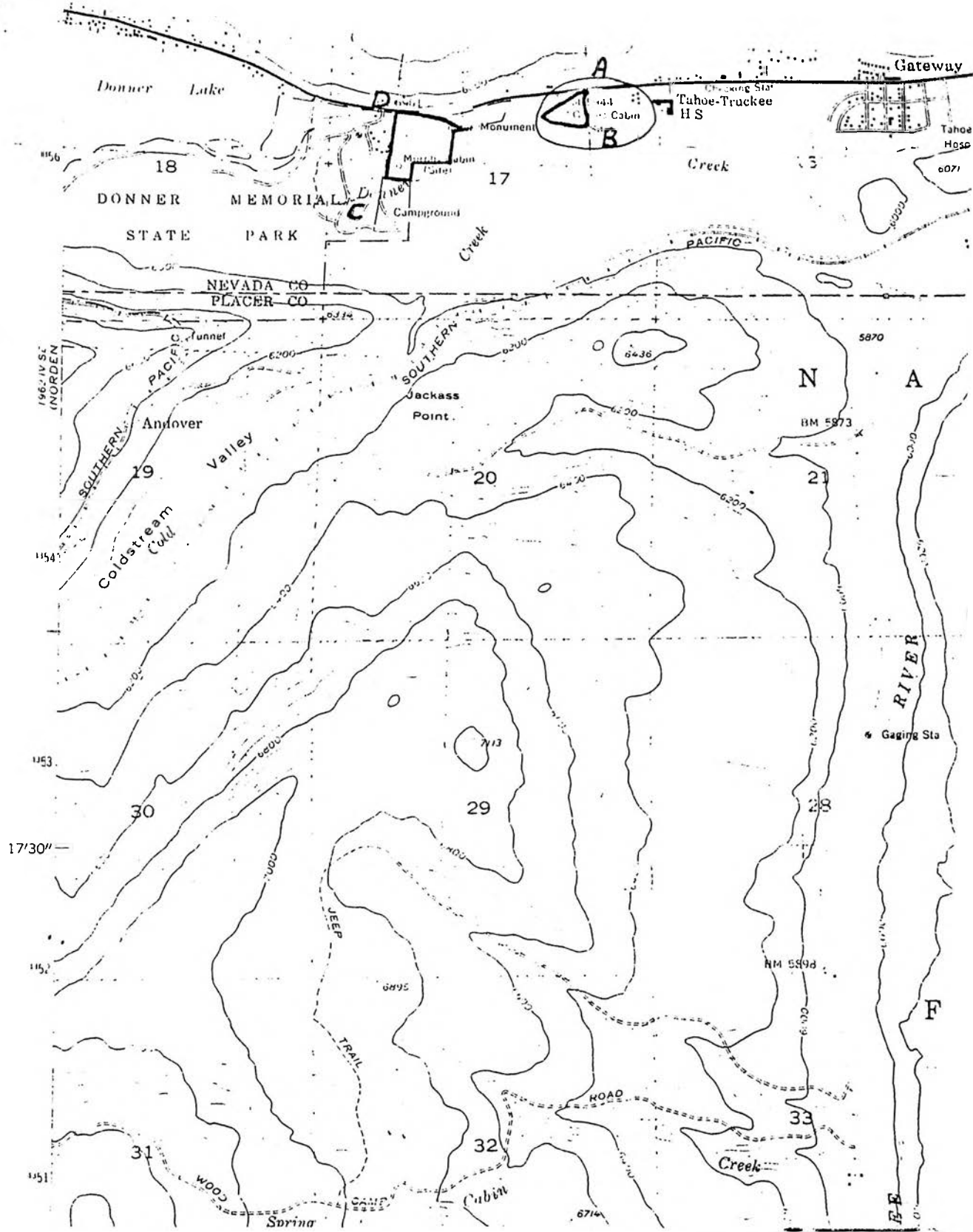
CALADA CO
 WYOMING CO

V A L L E Y

Joerger

Old Joerger Ranch





Donner Lake

1156

18

DONNER MEMORIAL STATE PARK

17

Creek

1155

Gateway

Tahoe-Truckee H.S.

Tahoe Hosp

6071

NEVADA CO
PLACER CO

1962 14 SE
(NORDEN)

SOUTHERN PACIFIC

Andover Valley

SOUTHERN
Jackass Point

5870

N A

BM 5873

Coldstream Cold

19

20

21

1154

1153

30

29

28

17°30'

1152

JEEP TRAIL

NM 5594

F

31

32

33

1151

Spring

Cabin

6714

Creek

FE

Appendix 2 –

April 1985 Partnership Easement Deed
declaring the Donner
Cross / Graves Cabin (Site) to be of historical
significance to be displayed with
right of public access (Parcel No. 18-500-13),
including the property description
Exhibit “A”

RECORDING REQUESTED BY

Truckee Investors

Easement to Donner Cross and Graves cabin site

OFFICIAL RECORDS REQUESTED BY

85 10213 Truckee Investors

1985 MAY -8 AM 9:12

BRUCE C. BOLLINGER NEVADA COUNTY RECORDER

7.00 pd

AND WHEN RECORDED MAIL TO

Name Truckee Donner Historical Society
Street Address P.O. Box 893
City & State Truckee, CA 95734

MAIL TAX STATEMENTS TO

Name Not Applicable

SPACE ABOVE THIS LINE FOR RECORDER'S USE

Partnership Grant Deed

EASEMENT

THIS FORM FURNISHED BY TICOR TITLE INSURERS

A. P. N.

65526TR

TO 1925 CA (12-76)

The undersigned grantor(s) declare(s):

Documentary transfer tax is \$ none

(X) computed on full value of property conveyed, or

() computed on full value less value of liens and encumbrances remaining at time of sale.

(X) Unincorporated area: () City of , and

FOR A VALUABLE CONSIDERATION, receipt of which is hereby acknowledged,

TRUCKEE INVESTORS

a General partnership organized under the laws of the State of California hereby GRANTS to

TRUCKEE-DONNER HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF TRUCKEE, CALIFORNIA

the following described real property in the unincorporated area County of Nevada, State of California:

SEE EXHIBIT "A" ATTACHED HERETO FOR LEGAL DESCRIPTION HEREBY MADE A PART HEREOF.

Parcel No. 18-500-13

Dated: April 25, 1985

TRUCKEE INVESTORS

STATE OF CALIFORNIA }
COUNTY OF Sacramento } SS.

On April 30, 1985 before me, the undersigned, a Notary Public in and for said State, personally appeared James P. Bezzerides

By James P. Bezzerides Partner

By James C. Belda Partner

proved to me on the basis of satisfactory evidence known to me to be one of the partners of the partnership that executed the within instrument, and acknowledged to me that such partnership executed the same. WITNESS my hand and official seal.



Signature Wm. Bengochea

(This area for official notarial seal)

Title Order No.

Escrow or Loan No.

EXHIBIT "A"

An Easement hereby dedicated to the Truckee-Donner Historical Society of Truckee, California for purposes of displaying the historical Donner Trail Cross and Graves' Cabin Marker and more particularly described as follows:

BEGINNING at the northeast corner of that parcel shown in Book 7 of Surveys at Page 66 in the office of the Recorder of the County of Nevada, thence South 83° 25' 40" West, 20.00 feet along the northerly line of said parcel; thence South 01° 58' 05" East, 20.00 feet; thence North 83° 25' 40" East, 20.00 feet to the easterly line of said parcel; thence North 10° 58' 05" West, 20.00 feet to the Point of Beginning. Containing 399 square feet, more or less.

Together with the right of public access to these facilities, said access to be from Donner Pass Road adjacent to the above described parcel, said easement shall be abandoned if the referenced monuments are officially removed by the Truckee-Donner Historical Society.

Parcel No. 18-500-13

JLB

(Partnership)

STATE OF CALIFORNIA }
COUNTY OF Solano } SS.

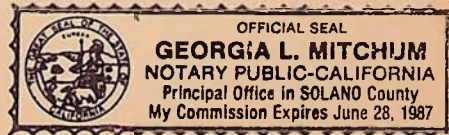
ATICOR COMPANY

On May 3, 1985 before me, the undersigned, a Notary Public in and for said State, personally appeared James C. Belda

↑ STAPLE HERE ↓

_____, personally known to me or proved to me on the basis of satisfactory evidence to be the person who executed the within instrument as one of the partners of the partnership that executed the within instrument, and acknowledged to me that such partnership executed the same. WITNESS my hand and official seal.

Signature *Georgia L. Mitchum*



(This area for official notarial seal)

RECORDING REQUESTED BY

AND WHEN RECORDED MAIL TO

1049 404
OFFICIAL RECORDS
RECORDED AT REQUEST OF
INTER-COUNTY TITLE CO.

JUN 13 1979

AT MIN. PAST 9 O'CLOCK A.M.
NEVADA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA
FEE: 3.80
RECORDER

Name TRUCKEE DONNER HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Street Address P. O. Box 893
Truckee, Calif. 95734
City & State 65526-tr

17823

The undersigned grantor(s) declare(s):
Documentary transfer tax is \$ none

SPACE ABOVE THIS LINE FOR RECORDER'S USE

(X) computed on full value of property conveyed, or
() computed on full value less value of liens and encumbrances remaining at time of sale.

Grant Deed

ORDER No.

FOR A VALUABLE CONSIDERATION, receipt of which is hereby acknowledged,
Truckee Investors, a partnership

hereby GRANT(S) to
Truckee-Donner Historical Society of Truckee, California

the following described real property in the
County of Nevada, State of California:

An Easement hereby dedicated to the Truckee-Donner Historical Society of Truckee, California for purposes of displaying the historical Donner Trail Cross and Graves' Cabin Marker and more particularly described as follows:

BEGINNING at the northeast corner of that parcel shown in Book 7 of Surveys at Page 66 in the office of the Recorder of the County of Nevada; thence South 83° 25' 40" West, 20.00 feet along the northerly line of said parcel; thence South 01° 58' 05" East, 20.00 feet; thence North 83° 25' 40" East, 20.00 feet to the easterly line of said parcel; thence North 10° 58' 05" West, 20.00 feet to the Point of Beginning. Containing 399 square feet, more or less.

Together with the right of public access to these facilities, said access to be from Donner Pass Road adjacent to the above described parcel, said easement shall be abandoned if the referenced monument is officially removed by the Truckee-Donner Historical Society.

STATE OF CALIFORNIA }
COUNTY OF Nevada } SS.

On June 4, 1979

before me, the undersigned, a Notary Public in and for said State, personally appeared
James P. Bezzerides

known to me
to be one of the partners of the partnership
that executed the within instrument, and acknowledged to me
that such partnership executed the same.

WITNESS my hand and official seal.

Signature *Patricia E. Chatfield*

Dated June 4, 1979

Truckee Investors, by: <

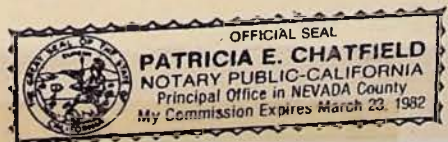
James P. Bezzerides
Partner

COUNTY OF _____
On _____ before me, the under-
signed, a Notary Public in and for said State, personally appeared

known to me
to be the person whose name _____ subscribed to the
within instrument and acknowledged that _____ executed
the same.

WITNESS my hand and official seal.

Signature _____



VOL. PAGE H.

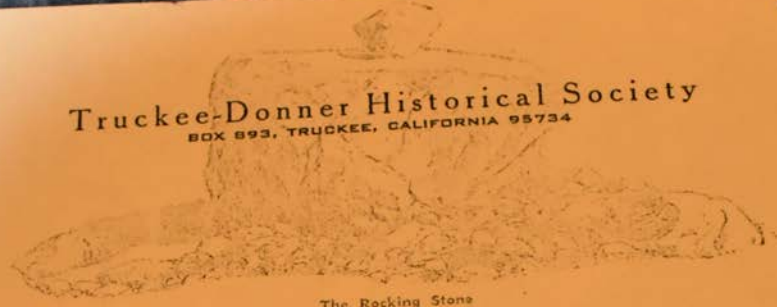
Appendix 3 –

12/08/1975 TDHS summary location Graves
Cabin Marker relative
to the Donner Cross – 195' SOUTH of present
location of Donner Cross

1975

Truckee-Donner Historical Society

BOX 893, TRUCKEE, CALIFORNIA 95734



The Rocking Stone

Grey's Cabin
1853

Truckee, California
December 8, 1975

McKay's
Granite Grave

Emigrant Trail

WORDING ON THE DONNER CROSS LOCATED ON OLD HWY 40

The
Grave's Family
Cabin Site
1847

Ancient
Indian Caves

Donner Cross

Old
Lumber Mill
Sites

Old Jail
Used
1875-1964

A bronze tablet 195 feet south of this
Cross marks the location of the Graves cabin
Members of the Donner Party. Many of them
Perished in an attempt to cross the Mts winter of
1846 & 7.

Wooden Memorial
Donner Cross

Hand Prints
in Stone

Erected by Truckee Chamber Commerce 1927

(Wording on small wooden plaque below above sign)

Ancient
Dance Circle

This picture sign marks
The Old Emigrant Trail

Natural Rock
Profile of
Donner

Natural Rock
Profile of
Big Chief

Which passes at this point.

Donner Camps
Alder Creek

Trail located and marked by P. N. Waddell 1924

Old Meadow
Lake Dam
1857

Petroglyphs

Indian

Indian
Arrowheads

Donner Trail

Donner Lake
Site of the
Donner Party
Tragedy

Donner Memorial
State Park and
Museum

TRUCKEE — Gateway to California Lake Tahoe World's Largest *Sierra*

Appendix 4 –

4/2/1976 letter from California Department of
Transportation to
TDHS WITH map with 2 red Xs' marking the
location of the Graves Cabin site
marker

APR. 6 1976

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

DISTRICT 3

P. O. BOX 911, MARYSVILLE 95901



April 2, 1976

Mrs. Marjorie Hammers
Secretary
Truckee-Donner Historical Society
Box 893
Truckee, California 95734

Dear Mrs. Hammers:

It is nice to know the Truckee-Donner Historical Society is active in preserving some of this state's heritage and it is a pleasure to assist you in your search for the Reed/Graves cabin site marker.

The marker was moved in an early stage of freeway construction. A contract to build eight miles of freeway, now called Interstate 80, was begun in January of 1958 and completed in December of 1959. This project extended from the interchange with Donner Pass Road east of Donner Park (referred to as the Donner Lake interchange) east to Boca. Extra money was added to the contract to permit removal of the plaque to a point where it could be preserved. The plaque, originally placed in 1919, I am told, was 200 to 400 feet west of the present agricultural inspection station immediately north of Donner Creek before it was rechanneled by the contractor. I am enclosing a map. The post with the plaque was mounted at one of the two spots marked by a red X on the plans, according to the recall of a man here who worked on that project.

The plaque is now mounted at ground level on the north side of the freeway. Although I am sure you know where it is, I will include this information for the written record. It can be found by driving east toward Truckee on Donner Pass Road (old U.S. 40) to a point near the elementary school located there. Near the school there is an empty parcel on which stands a cross. Walk due south of the cross toward the freeway about 150 yards. You should find the marker set in the ground at that point.

Steve Moore is one of the rangers at Donner Memorial Park. His telephone number is 587-3789. I have checked with him and he offers to walk to the present marker site and help you calculate the precise cabin location if you want to do that.

Although we have pictures of construction work in that area, I am not able to find pictures of the plaque in the ground before it was moved. I regret not being able to supply you with

Mrs. Marjorie Hammers

Page 2

April 2, 1976

a photo as I am sure that would add a great deal to your historical record. Nevertheless, I will keep your request in mind and if some agency other than our own ever had the picture, we'll forward the information on. Sometimes historical records have a way of surfacing after the original research, such as yours, has stimulated the thinking of people involved.

Cordially,

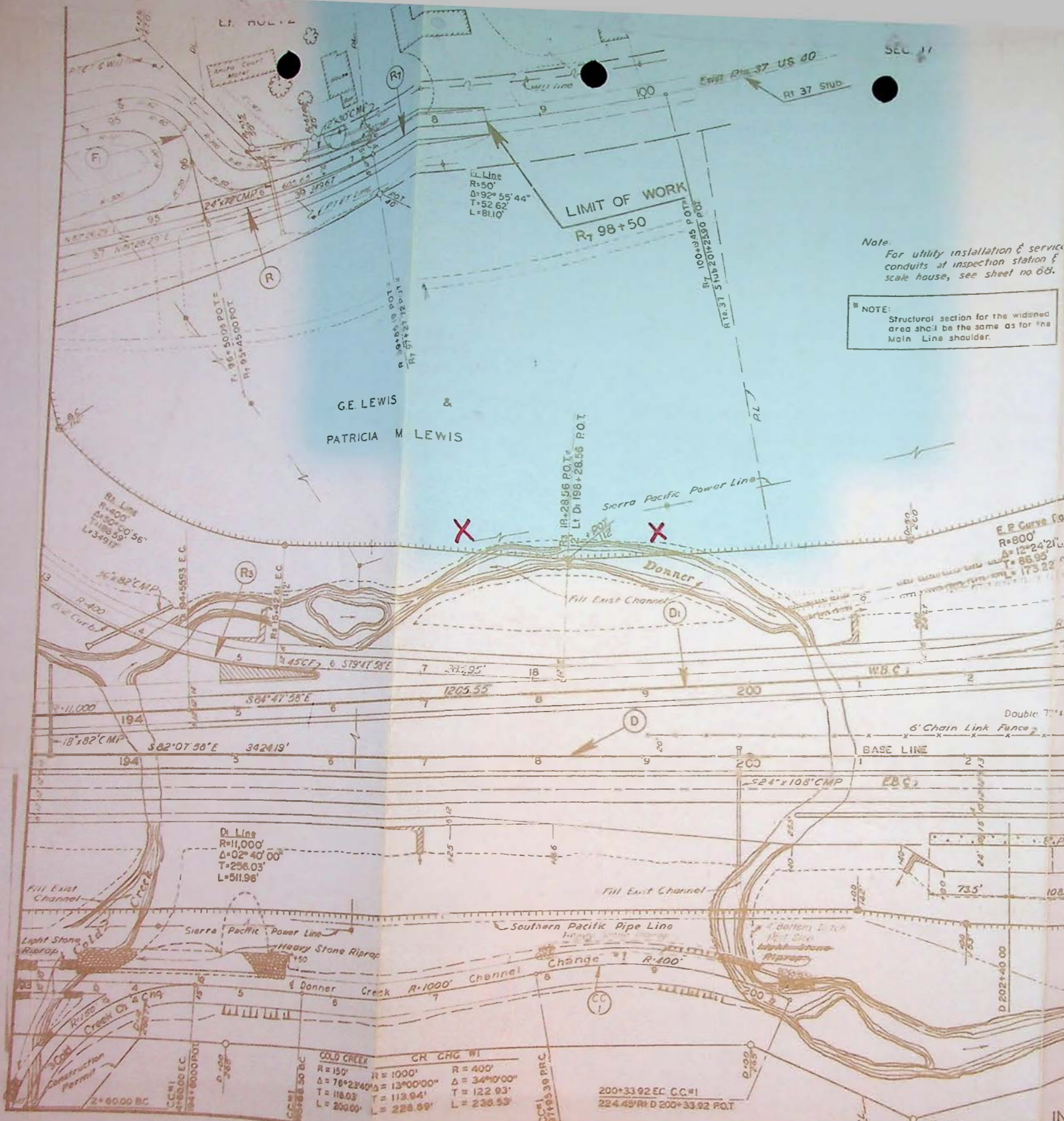
Alice L. Wygant

Alice L. Wygant
District Information Officer

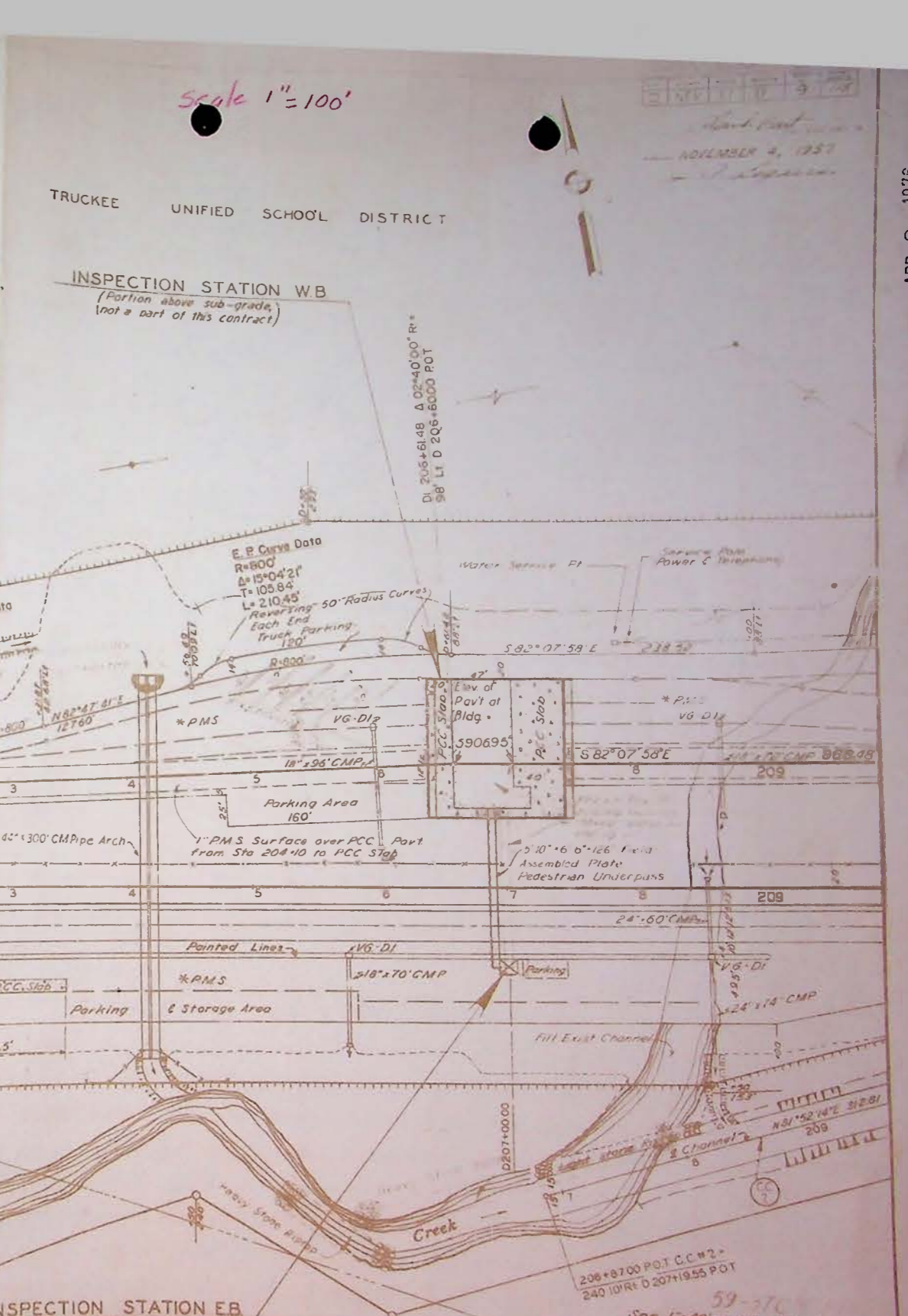
ALW:pm

Enc.

Date Completed
Document No 30000 704



X = Cabin marker at one of these two locations



APR. 6 1976

12 6
DONNER PARTY

1846 — 1847

ON THIS SPOT STOOD THE GRAVES CABIN.

THIS TABLET WAS PLACED BY THE
HISTORIC LANDMARKS COMMITTEE OF THE
NATIVE SONS OF THE GOLDEN WEST, 1918

7110

Appendix 5 –

April 17, 1984 letter from Nevada County
Historical Landmarks
Commission to the Nevada County Board of
Supervisors supporting TDHS' efforts
to have the Donner Cross included in Spot
Zoning approval.

April 17, 1984

Board of Supervisors
201 Church St.
Nevada City, CA 95959

Honorable Members:

The Nevada County Historical Landmarks Commission wishes to offer assistance and support to the Truckee-Donner Historical Society in its request for the protection of two very historical sites under Spot Zoning. These sites are:

1. The Franklin Graves Cabin Site
2. The George Schaffer Grave Site

Sincerely,

Marian Conway, Chairman

cc: John Curtis
(Pres. Truckee-Donner
Historical Society)