

October 1846: First Snow

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DONNER PASS & SIERRA NEVADA

In early October 1846, one of the last westbound wagon trains of that year's emigration to California was crossing the 7,000-foot-high Truckee Pass (later re-named Donner Pass). Like hundreds of other pioneers, James Mathers had endured countless challenges during his 2,000-mile overland trek, but the arduous climb over the Sierra Nevada was the hardest of all. Mathers tackled the high Sierra pass on October 6 and reached Summit Valley the next day.

In the years before the California gold rush, most emigrants departed from the mid-west in late March or early April, usually crossing the Missouri River in early May. The wagon trains traveled through Fort Kearny (Nebraska) and Fort Laramie (Wyoming) during late spring, averaging from 15 to 25 miles per day. The trip was timed to take advantage of the abundant grass in spring and summer, and to avoid late fall or early winter storms in the West. The first pioneers usually started arriving at Sutter's Fort (California) by early September, well before the approach of California's wet winter season.

Emigrant guidebooks had warned that it was important to cross the California Mountains as early as possible and Mathers could see why. It was only October 7, but he wrote in his journal; "The weather was cold and we had frequent squalls of snow..." A couple of days later the early season storm had cleared out, but there was still a brisk chill in the high country. James Mathers probably wondered about the safety of other people farther behind his company, which included the wagon train captained by George Donner.

2 The Donner Party

A week later bad weather once again swept in from the Pacific Ocean and the last pioneers to make it out of the mountains had disturbing news. Samuel Young, who had crossed the pass on October 16, said that snow had been falling there “at a fearful rate” and they had lost one of their wagons when it crashed into an abyss. George Tucker, who had traveled with the Smith Company behind the Donner party until they reached Fort Bridger and then went ahead with a faster group, confirmed that conditions in the mountains were quickly deteriorating: “The day after we left Bear Valley it commenced raining which I think was about the 18th of October. The next day we could see the snow on the mountains behind us. We knew the Donner Company would have trouble.” (Tucker would later play a key roll in the rescue operations.) The Donner party, still miles east of the pass, had no idea that the terrible winter of 1847 was already underway.

CALIFORNIA COAST

It was mid-afternoon on October 15, 1846, but when Dr. Marius Duvall gazed east from the deck of the *U.S.S. Congress*, he could see nothing of the rugged California coast he knew was just a few miles away. Despite wearing a heavy coat, he shivered as he wrote in his journal “thick misty weather and cold.” Three days later, when the *Congress* was anchored in Monterey Bay, Dr. Duvall observed; “The weather thick and calm, exerting a depressing influence upon one’s spirits.”

The *Congress*, an American flagship under the command of Commodore Robert Stockton, was sailing from San Francisco Bay to Monterey in preparation for military action along the southern California coast. A fleet of U. S. warships had been patrolling the ports and harbors of California ever since the breakout of the Mexican-American War about six months before.

Dr. Duvall, a United States Navy Assistant Surgeon, was assigned to several different vessels, including the *U.S.S. Savannah* and the sloop-of-war *U.S.S. Portsmouth*. As part of his daily duties, Dr. Duvall kept a journal of his travels up and down the coast of California and Mexico. He often jotted down weather conditions, specifically focusing on wind speed and direction. The month of October is normally the end of California's dry season, but in 1846, Dr. Duvall noted early winter rains had turned the coastal countryside a "spring green." It was an auspicious start to a fateful winter.

Edwin Bryant, one of the first overland pioneers to arrive in California that year, was safe in Sonoma, but on October 17 he noted, "The last two mornings have been cloudy and cool. The rainy season, it is thought by the weather-wise in this climate, will set in earlier this year than usual. The periodical rains ordinarily commence about the middle of November. It is now a month earlier, and the meteorological phenomena portend 'falling weather.'"



Snow covered Sierra Nevada west slope. Photo by Mark McLaughlin

DONNER PARTY — ON THE TRAIL

The members of the Donner party had already endured more than their fair share of bad luck, poor decisions and organizational collapse. Unfortunately, the worst was yet to come. Comprised of families with young children, single men hired as teamsters to maintain wagons and livestock, and an assortment of late comers, the Donner party would endure much more suffering and death over the next four months.

The westbound emigrants did not reach the Truckee Meadows (near present-day Reno, Nevada) until about October 20. (Some dates associated with the Donner Party are approximate.) The skies were cloudy and the mountains ahead were already white with the season's first snowfall. Worst yet, another storm was brewing. Years later, John Breen recalled his memories of the weather as the Donner wagon train traveled up the Truckee River: "There began to be heavy clouds on the high range of mountains to the west, and this from what we had learned from Captain Frémont was a certain sign of snow on the mountains." Over the next few days, rain developed with snowfall in the upper elevations.

Down along the California coast and in the Sacramento Valley, the next storm had moved onshore. While enroute in a boat from Sonoma to Yerba Buena (San Francisco), Edwin Bryant noted, "The damp raw weather, auguring the near approach of the autumnal rains, continues. A drizzling mist fell on us during the night, and the clouds were not dissipated when we resumed our voyage this morning."

As he approached Sutter's Fort and the end of his long journey, James Mathers wrote that the weather there was cloudy and cool.

A much more powerful winter storm slammed into the mountains during the evening of October 28. James Reed

arrived at Sutter's Fort just before the rain began — rain that turned to snow in the mountains where his family struggled up the steep slope of the Sierra Nevada. Reed had stabbed to death teamster John Snyder along the Humboldt River during a fight. He was banished from the wagon train as a result, which gave him the opportunity to ride ahead to California to acquire provisions from John Sutter. Two other members of the Donner party, Charles Stanton and William McCutchen, had already left the company before the murder to get help at Sutter's Fort. McCutchen fell ill once they arrived at the fort, but Stanton was able to procure seven mules laden with supplies from Sutter and “borrowed” two American Indians, Luis and Salvador, to act as guides for the struggling wagon train. Maintaining a brisk pace, Stanton, Luis, and Salvador made it over the pass before the snow became too deep.

While descending the Sierra west slope into California, Reed had passed the eastbound Stanton and told him that he would be following close behind with more provisions.



Bear Valley on Sierra west slope. Photo by Mark McLaughlin

6 The Donner Party

James Reed was very determined; after all, his wife and four children were still back on the trail with the others, but this third October snowstorm would stymie his valiant efforts to return to his family.

At Sutter's Fort the rain fell heavily and steadily for about 12 hours, with the clouds clearing out during the afternoon of October 29. Edwin Bryant reported that when the storm ended, the weather and temperature "were delightful." The rain was over in the valley, but the respite would be brief. A long rainy period would soon set in on the evening of October 31.

Onboard the *U.S.S. Portsmouth*, which was anchored in Monterey Bay, the morning weather observer on October 29 noted in the ship's deck log that the barometric pressure was falling, and the winds moderate from the southwest with heavy rains. The sun came out again on the 30th, but by the following day the *Portsmouth* was again reporting southwest winds with clouds and rain.



Fifty inches of snow fell on Donner Pass in October 2004. Photo by Mark McLaughlin

The wet weather was even having an effect on the American military's efforts to defeat the Mexican army. On October 31, *The Californian* newspaper reported "Last account from General Taylor he was in Monterey with 5,000 men, intended not to advance farther south on account of the rains."



View of Donner Lake looking east from Donner Pass. Photo by Mark McLaughlin

In the mountains, however, weather conditions were much more serious. Snow was beginning to accumulate on the trail east of the Sierra crest as the Donner party hurried along as best they could through the Alder Creek Valley. In their rush to reach the pass, the emigrants had split into three groups as some traveled faster than others. The Donner families had fallen behind the other emigrants who reached Donner Lake by the end of the month. Years later pioneer William C. Graves remembered: "On the 30th of October 1846, we camped in a pretty little valley about five miles from Donner Lake; that night it snowed about eight inches deep."



First snow on Alder Creek Valley. Photo by Mark McLaughlin

At the end of October, the vanguard of the wagon train moved out quickly and hurried along the north shore of Donner Lake toward the summit. They wanted to reach the pass as soon as possible before another storm closed it for good, but they were already too late. Patrick Breen, one of the pioneers in the lead, later recounted their futile attempts to cross the summit and that the snow on Donner Pass was so deep that they could not find the road.

William Graves said the same thing: “We got about four miles past the lower end of the lake, but could not go any further because the snow was about four feet deep. We were within one mile of the top, when some were obliged to give it up and go back to the lake.” The pioneers were actually fortunate that they did not succeed in crossing the summit because an extended storm period was just about to set in and the conditions in the high country west of Donner Pass would be much worse than at Donner Lake.

Californian historian Hubert H. Bancroft later wrote: “They reached the eastern base of the Sierra, which loomed before them high into the heavens, a white wall glistening with frosted pines. Climbing upward as far as they could go, they found the top of Truckee pass five feet under snow.” For a historian, Bancroft certainly wrote with a flourish: “They ascended to within three miles of the summit, where they now found ten feet of snow, each moment thickened by the clouds. It was very cold. The wind howled round the crags, and the whirling snow blinded, and every moment threatened to engulf them. They saw how impossible it was to proceed farther, so returning to the cabin, they made preparations to winter there, near what is now called Donner Lake.” (The cabin was built by members of the Stephens Party in 1844.)

SACRAMENTO VALLEY

Meanwhile, down at Sutter’s Fort, James Reed was anxious to return to the mountains to help rescue his family and friends. By now, William McCutchen had regained his strength and was also ready to help. Unfortunately, it was too late for ev-



Donner Party caught in early season snowstorm.

everyone concerned. Reed later described his attempt to cross the mountains: “The second night [Oct. 30] after my arrival at Captain Sutter’s, we had light rain; next morning we could see snow on the mountains. The Captain stated that it was low down and heavy for the first fall of the season. The next day I started on my return with what horses and saddles Capt. Sutter had to spare...” Despite Sutter’s warnings that it would be impossible to traverse the mountains, Reed and McCutchen headed east toward the high country.



James Frazier Reed. Courtesy California State Parks. Sutter’s Fort Archives

The late October storm in 1846 was cold enough to cover the lower elevations east of the pass with a few inches of snow, enough to slow the progress of the rear guard of settlers that included the two Donner families. After one of George Donner’s wagons broke an axle and flipped over, they were forced to stop for repairs in Alder Creek Valley. The Donners and their hired teamsters were now stuck at Alder Creek while the lead members of the wagon train were getting ready to build “temporary quarters” at the lake.