

Donner Memorial State Park



Our Mission

The mission of California State Parks is to provide for the health, inspiration and education of the people of California by helping to preserve the state's extraordinary biological diversity, protecting its most valued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation.



California State Parks supports equal access. Prior to arrival, visitors with disabilities who need assistance should contact the park at **(530) 582-7892**. If you need this publication in an alternate format, contact interp@parks.ca.gov.

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Donner Memorial State Park
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(530) 582-7892

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In Donner Memorial State Park's lush setting, visitors may camp, picnic, hike, bike, snowshoe, or play in the waters of scenic Donner Lake—surrounded by majestic lodgepole pines, Jeffrey pines, and white firs.



Donner Memorial State Park, located east of Donner Pass in the Sierra Nevada, is surrounded by magnificent alpine scenery at an elevation of 6,000 feet. The crisp, pine-scented air entices visitors to camp, picnic, hike, fish, boat, water-ski, and paddleboard.

PARK HISTORY

The Washoe People

This area has been the heart of the ancestral Washoe homeland for more than 9,000 years. Semi-nomadic, the Washoe spent summers hunting game and gathering fish and pine nuts. After the 1848 gold discovery, thousands of newcomers passed through the area. Many of them settled here, taking over Washoe lands.

The Washoe adapted to new living restrictions, working for ranchers and in settlers' homes and selling fish and game catches to restaurants.

The government promised land, but the Washoe were often given logged-over areas with no water. Still, they built communities.

Today's Washoe have revived their languages, advocating conservation and reintroducing once-depleted resources.

EARLY SETTLEMENT

After 1844, emigrants began to enter California in large numbers. Their last major challenge took them over the Sierra Nevada and down into the Central Valley.

Prior to 1844, only two wagon trains had ever tried to cross the Sierra Nevada. In 1844, the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party succeeded. The group left six wagons at the lake the Washoe called *Datsa' shut*, which the party renamed Truckee Lake, and took another five wagons up steep terrain, crossing the pass on November 25, 1844.

Between 1845 and 1848, about 2,600 emigrants came west—most traveling north of the Verdi Range, rejoining the Truckee river above its rugged canyon, and crossing through Coldstream Canyon, south of Donner Pass.

This route was replaced by the Dutch Flat/Donner Lake Toll Road in 1864. However, the completion of the Central Pacific Railroad would ease the way for travelers and end the need for a toll road.

A MEMORIAL PARK IS BORN

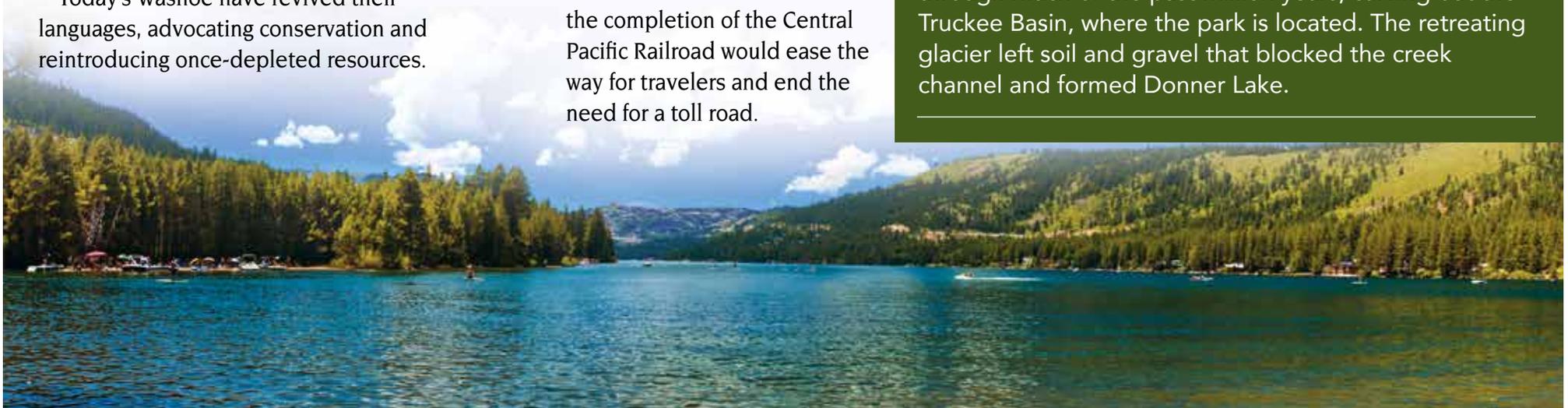
In 1924, the Pacific Fruit Express, successor to the Donner Ice Company, gave 10 acres at the east end of Donner Lake to the Native Sons of the Golden West, who had a concession near the one-acre Pioneer Monument.

On May 23, 1928, the Native Sons conveyed the 11 acres to the State, making the Pioneer Memorial publicly accessible. Later, another 5.1 acres were added, and 16.1 acres were transferred from California's Department of Finance to the new Division of Beaches and Parks.

GEOLOGY

The eastern face of the Sierra was formed over the last few million years by the tilting upward of a massive section of the Earth's crust. This huge granite block tipped up on the east and down on the west, subducting (disappearing) beneath the sediments that form the Sacramento Valley.

Glaciers dominated the crest of the Sierra Nevada through much of the past million years, carving out the Truckee Basin, where the park is located. The retreating glacier left soil and gravel that blocked the creek channel and formed Donner Lake.



THE DONNER PARTY

In the 1830s, travelers who had gone west to California were talking about its wonders and opportunities. The notion of “manifest destiny” had taken hold, and many believed that America was destined to stretch “from sea to shining sea.” By 1845 they were also drawn west by news that it was possible to travel directly overland to California.

In Illinois, farmers George and Jacob Donner and cabinetmaker James Reed packed up nine ox-drawn wagons; in April 1846, they headed west with their families. That summer, George’s wife Tamsen wrote to a friend, describing beautiful weather and a pleasant journey. When the wagon train reached a fork in the trail, the emigrants split into two groups. The Donner, Breen, Murphy, Eddy, Graves, and Keseberg families chose an alternate route instead of the traditional one. Recommended in *The Emigrants’ Guide to Oregon and California*, a book written in 1845 by Ohio attorney Lansford W. Hastings, the “shortcut” was said to save 300 miles (or 30-60 days of travel).

Unfortunately, Hastings had never taken—nor even seen—the shortcut he had touted until 1846, when he returned from California to map it. He then led one small group along his route, but he left messages that following wagons should avoid this “shorter” route. He had also underestimated the distance across the salt lake desert by 40 miles.

Taking Hastings’ alternate route, the Donner wagons trundled their way down a narrow, dangerous canyon in Utah’s Wasatch Mountains, clearing a 36-mile path that cost them three weeks. When they finally emerged, the families had to walk across 80 miles of the Great Salt Lake Desert (Lake Bonneville), where they were forced to abandon vital supplies and livestock.

Frustration and deprivation brought discord among the group. James Reed was sent away from the party for knifing a man in an argument. Traveling with one companion, Reed barely made it to Sutter’s fort in Sacramento; his family was left to press on with the rest of the group.



Mary Murphy & daughters



George Donner Jr.



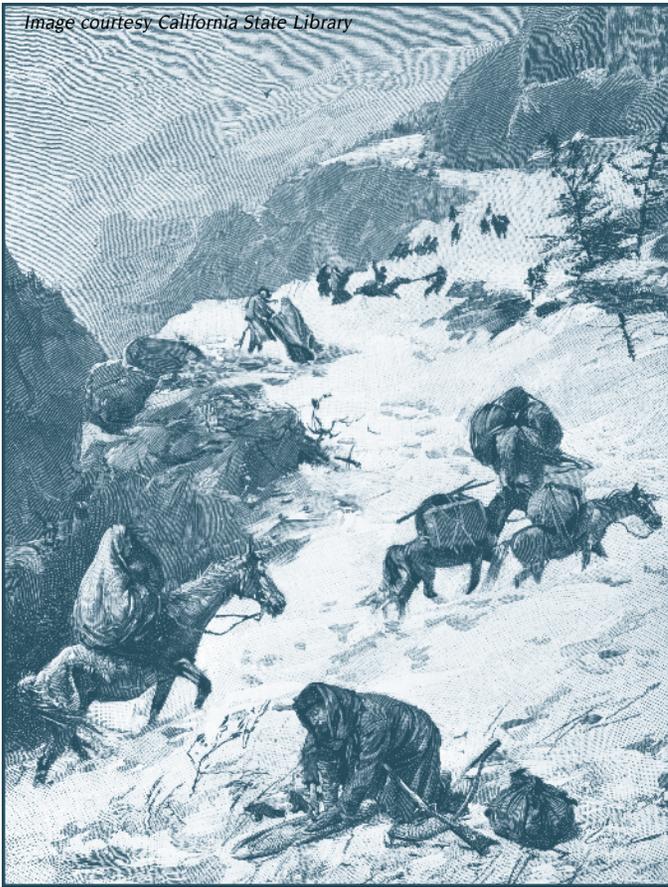
James & Margaret Reed



California Overland Emigrant Trail

- Conventional Trail ———
- Donner Party Trail (blue dots)
- Hastings Cutoff (orange dots)

Image courtesy California State Library



THE WINTER OF 1846

In late October, the Donner group arrived in Truckee Meadows, near today's Reno, Nevada. Here, they ran into Charles Stanton, returning to the party from a supply trip to Sacramento. Stanton told George Donner that the way ahead would be extremely difficult. The exhausted group chose to rest and gather strength, a six-day delay that would prove fateful—and fatal.

The Donner family itself never made it to Truckee Lake; they camped about five miles shy at Alder Creek. When the other families got to the lake, snow was on the ground. Members of the group attempted three times to cross the pass, with no success. The snowbound party settled in for the winter, erecting tents and building makeshift cabins of logs covered with hides. Attempts to hunt and fish were not successful. Families with any provisions at all were reluctant to share what little they had.

In December, 15 members of the party—including Charles Stanton—tried in desperation to reach Sutter's fort. Carrying barely enough rations for six days, they left camp on crude snowshoes. Stanton became snowblind a few days out; to avoid holding up the others, he stayed behind and perished in the snow. Those who marched on could not find their way. Overtaken by a three-day storm, the group lost seven members. One month after they set out, two men and five women made it to a ranch 40 miles north of Sutter's fort. They had survived on a deer they shot, and on the bodies of their deceased companions.

THE RESCUE

By January, snow was over 10 feet deep. In mid-February, rescuers reached the snow-buried cabins at the lake, finding several dead of starvation. Rescuers had already started back to safety when James Reed arrived with the second rescue party. At Alder Creek, Reed saw George Donner dying from an infection and noted evidence of cannibalism. Reed started back with several survivors, though Tamsen Donner elected to stay behind with her husband George.

Reed and his band of survivors met another group of rescuers on its way to the lake camps. This group would bring out the rest of the Donner party, except for Lewis Keseberg, unable to walk, and Tamsen Donner, who again refused to leave and eventually perished.

In April 1847, one year after the 91-person Donner wagon train had started out, a salvage party brought Keseberg out. Only 45 had lived through the harrowing winter. Truckee Lake and the snowy pass were renamed Donner, after the ill-fated group's elected leader.

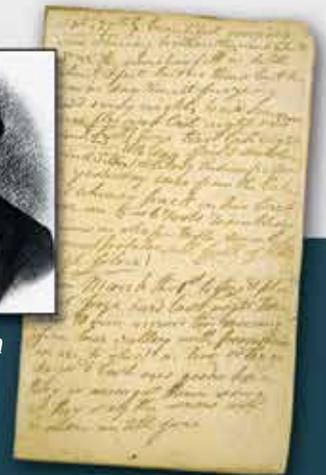
The monument at Donner Memorial State Park is dedicated to all the pioneers who came overland to California. Its base stands 22 feet high—to surpass the greatest depth of snow that may accumulate at the lake.

FROM THE DIARY OF **PATRICK BREEN:**

Sund. 28th froze hard last night to day fair & sunshine wind S.E. 1 Solitary Indian passed by yesterday come from the lake had a heavy pack on his back gave me 5 or 6 roots resembling Onions in shape taste some like a sweet potato, all full of little tough fibers. Mond. March the 1st to fine & pleasant froze hard last night there has 10 men arrived this morning from bear valley with provisions we are to start in two or three days & Cash our goods here there is amongst them some old they say the snow will be here untill June.



Patrick Breen





Ice harvesting ca. 1880s

MAKING A LIVING

The Central Pacific Railroad—In 1863, Leland Stanford, Collis P. Huntington, Mark Hopkins, and Charles Crocker financed construction of the Central Pacific Railroad. Railroad gangs, including thousands of Chinese immigrants, helped create a boom in the area’s economy as they labored on the railroad between Donner Summit and Reno, Nevada.

The Lumber Industry—By 1867, several lumber mills had been established here. The mills produced railroad ties and lumber for snow sheds and local communities. Very quickly, the hillsides were logged down to stumps. Loggers were seeking other work by 1880.

Ice Harvesting—Winter ice harvesting was a boon to unemployed lumbermen. The crystal-clear ice cut from the lumber mill ponds and Sierra lakes was used to cool down the extreme heat in the Comstock silver mines. Ice was also shipped across the country by rail, to cool perishables.

FLORA AND FAUNA

Listen for Steller’s jays, nuthatches, dark-eyed juncos, and mountain chickadees among lodgepole and Jeffrey pines and white



Mountain chickadee

fir. Stands of aspen can be found in interior areas of the park. Along Donner Lake and Donner Creek, Canada geese, mallards, and mergansers congregate among the mountain alders. Raptors overhead include osprey and bald eagles.

Mule deer and bears are among the larger mammals in the park. Coyotes prey on ground squirrels, chipmunks, and anything else they can catch. At night, bats will venture out seeking insects.

RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Fishing—Kokanee salmon and trout are planted periodically. Without docks, anglers fish the lake from its beaches.

Camping—Open from Memorial Day to mid-October, weather permitting. Campsites have tables and fire grates; restrooms and hot showers are nearby. There are no hookups. Reserve a site at www.parks.ca.gov or call (800) 444-7275.

Picnicking/Swimming—The picnic area has tables, restrooms, water faucets, a sandy beach, and walking trails nearby.

Visitor Center—Exhibits include Washoe life, the 1840s emigration, the Donner tragedy, the Chinese railroad builders, and early auto travel over the summit. Enhanced audio and captioned videos are available to visitors.

Pioneer Monument—The monument honors those who risked their lives to reach California during the 1840s. Historian Charles McGlashan and the Native Sons of the Golden West raised funds to build the marker on the Breen cabin site in 1901. The monument’s stone base and bronze statue were dedicated on June 6, 1918; three Donner Party survivors attended.



ACCESSIBLE FEATURES

Parking, restrooms, and ten paved campsites are accessible. Paths to the restrooms, lake, picnic area, and monument are hard-packed.

Accessibility in parks is continually improving. For details and accessibility updates, visit <http://access.parks.ca.gov>.

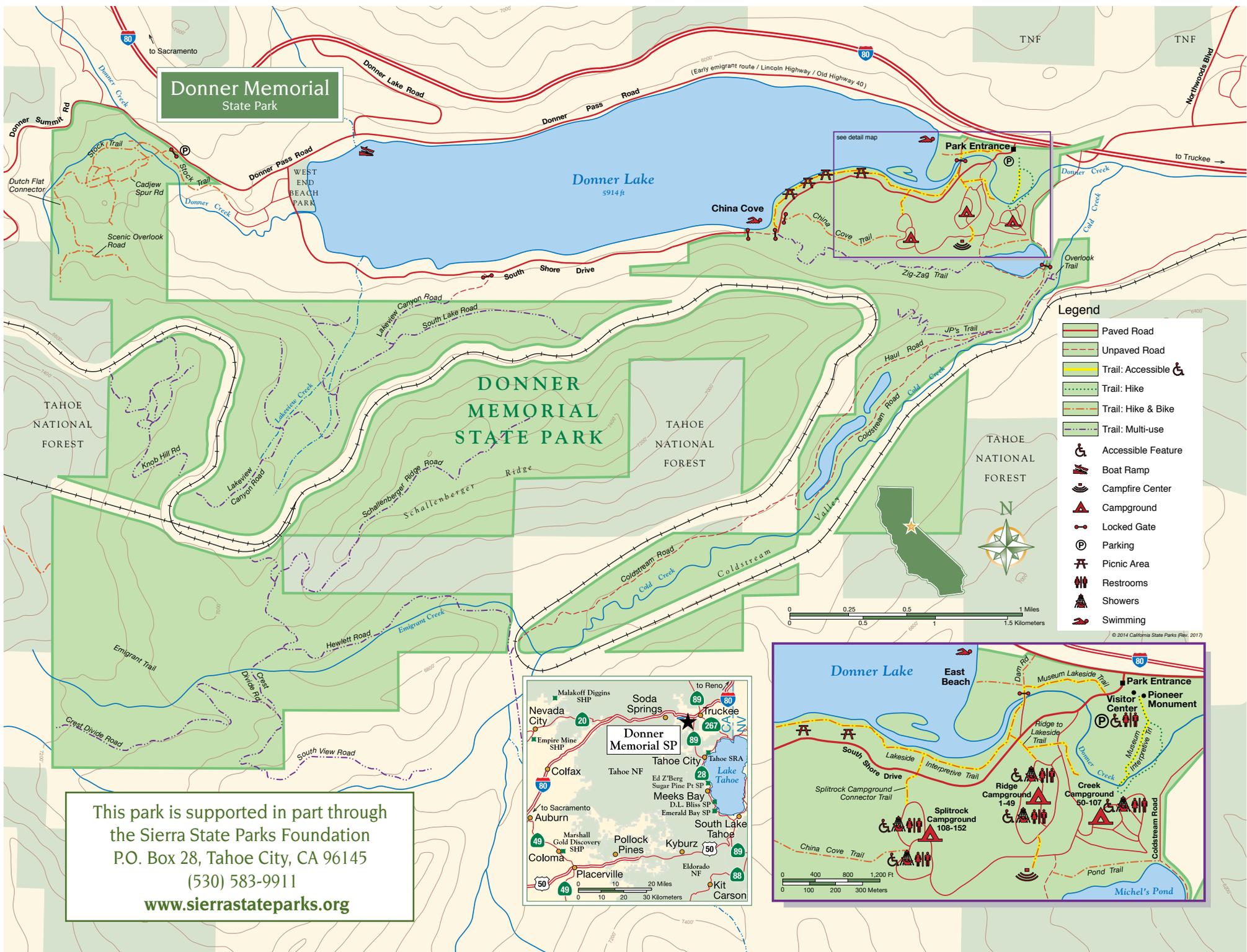
NEARBY STATE PARKS

- Ed Z’berg Sugar Pine Point SP
10 miles south of Tahoe City on Hwy. 89
(530) 525-7982
- D.L. Bliss State Park
17 miles south of Tahoe City on Hwy. 89
(530) 525-7277

PLEASE REMEMBER

- **Warning: Black bears** inhabit the area. Keep all trash, food, and scented items in approved containers.
- Stay away from railroad tracks/property.
- All natural and cultural features are protected by law and may not be disturbed nor removed.
- Leashed dogs are allowed on trails. Except for service animals, no dogs are allowed at China Cove.



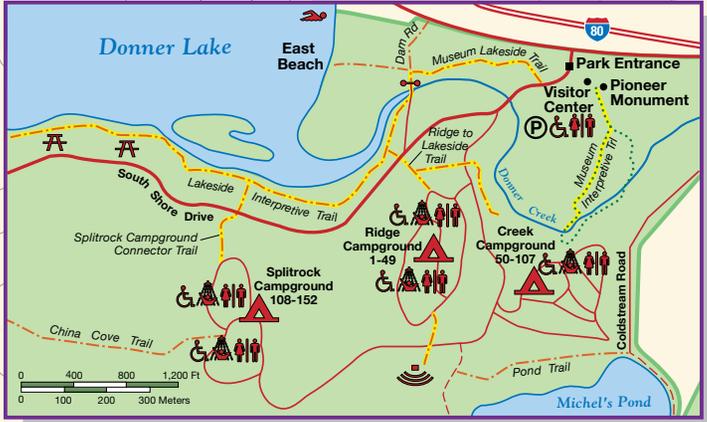
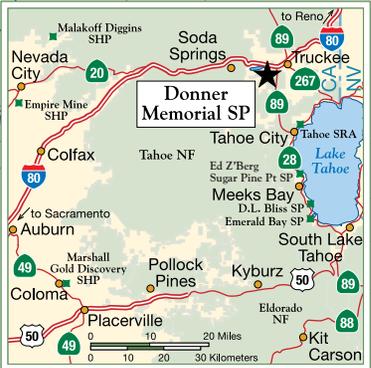


Donner Memorial State Park

DONNER MEMORIAL STATE PARK

- Legend**
- Paved Road
 - Unpaved Road
 - Trail: Accessible &
 - Trail: Hike
 - Trail: Hike & Bike
 - Trail: Multi-use
 - Accessible Feature
 - Boat Ramp
 - Campfire Center
 - Campground
 - Locked Gate
 - Parking
 - Picnic Area
 - Restrooms
 - Showers
 - Swimming

This park is supported in part through the Sierra State Parks Foundation
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www.sierrastateparks.org



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