

DONNER MEMORIAL STATE PARK
Following Footsteps in the Sierra

The breathtaking mountains, deep winters and alpine forests hold memories of tragedy and perseverance of the people who have struggled and thrived in this environment.



Local historians and organizations like the Native Sons of the Golden West spearheaded the construction of the Pioneer Monument.

ACTIVITIES & AMENITIES

ESTABLISHED
1928

MOST SEASONAL SNOWFALL AT DONNER SUMMIT
818 inches

One of your 280+ California State Parks



In the late 1800s, snowy Sierra winters made ice-harvesting possible. Ice from Sierra lakes cooled mines and perishables on rail lines.

A LANDSCAPE OF MANY STORIES

The natural beauty and dramatic history of Donner Lake and its surroundings make this park an inspiring place to visit year-round. People of varying backgrounds have left their imprint on this land — some widely chronicled, others often left out of the story.

The Wa·šiw name for Donner Lake is **Behé·ziŋ wí·giya** (beh-heh-zing wee-gee-ah), or **Little Eye**, a description based on the lake's shape when viewed from Donner Summit.

'LITTLE EYE' AND THE WA·ŠIW HOMELAND

Donner Lake and its surrounding shore lie within the traditional territory and ancestral homeland of the Wa·šiw (wa-shu) people, federally recognized as the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California. Their presence in the Tahoe region stretches back at least 12,000 years and continues today. During and after the Gold Rush, newcomers and the government of the new California state displaced many Wa·šiw and took possession of their homelands. Today, the Wa·šiw people still actively care for and shape this landscape through sustainable harvesting and long-held stewardship traditions.

Wa·šiw creation stories, seasonal journeys and ecological practices reflect a deep understanding of weather patterns, wildlife and the rhythms of the Sierra Nevada. These cultural traditions emphasize humility and respect for the mountains, contrasting with the history of westward expansion.

MANIFEST DESTINY AND THE DONNER PARTY

The story of the ill-fated Donner Party is a cautionary tale of human survival in the Sierra. Driven by Manifest Destiny — the widespread belief that Americans were destined to conquer the continent — the group joined the growing number of wagon trains heading west in the 1840s. To make up for lost time, they trusted an untested shortcut. This fateful mistake delayed their crossing of the Sierra. Early snowstorms prevented their wagons from traversing the passes. The emigrants spent the winter of 1846-1847 in crude shelters around what was then called Truckee Lake (now Donner Lake).

Of the more than 80 people trapped, almost half perished from cold and starvation. The fate of the Donner Party captured the imagination of the state's population. News stories spread tales of cannibalism, transforming the survivors into macabre celebrities. For a later generation, the Donner Party became a symbol of both tragedy and the grit of California's "pioneer spirit." After the discovery of gold in the western Sierra foothills in 1849, thousands more would stream over the mountain passes that eluded the Donner Party.

CHINESE WORKERS WHO BUILT THE IRON ROAD

The era of wagon trains ended with the construction of the transcontinental railroad. Roughly 90% of the workers who built the western portion of the railroad from 1864 to 1869 were Chinese. Hundreds, possibly thousands of Chinese workers died in the effort. They labored in the most extreme and dangerous conditions, especially during the construction of dozens of tunnels. This includes the 1,659-foot-long Summit Tunnel near Donner Pass.



A Chinese worker near Tunnel No. 8. Courtesy of California State Library.

These workers persevered against the backdrop of increasing anti-Chinese sentiment, boycotts and riots in California, including in nearby Truckee. Historic anti-Chinese sentiment also meant that the stories of their skills and sacrifice in building the railroad have only more recently been acknowledged and commemorated, including by exhibits in the Donner Memorial State Park Visitor Center.

A MEMORIAL LANDSCAPE

In 1928, the Native Sons of the Golden West donated the Pioneer Monument and 11 acres of surrounding land to the State of California, laying the foundation for Donner Memorial State Park. The bronze family of the monument was meant to symbolize and honor the emigrants who crossed the Sierra. Today, the park and its visitor center commemorate a much wider group of people — sharing a story that encompasses Wa·šiw people, emigrants like the Donner Party, Chinese railroad workers and the many others who left their footprints in this mountain region.



Osprey

DONNER MEMORIAL STATE PARK
12593 Donner Pass Road, Truckee, CA 96161
530-582-7892 (711, TTY Relay Service)

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.

ACCESSIBILITY

California State Parks supports equal access. For accommodation requests including alternative formats, please contact 530-582-7892. For information about accessible features at this park, visit *parks.ca.gov/AccessibleFeatures.*

FOR MORE INFORMATION
parks.ca.gov/DonnerMemorial

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Donner Memorial
State Park

A LANDSCAPE FORGED BY ANCIENT FORCES

This region was once a flat, green expanse before tectonic uplift raised the Sierra Nevada millions of years ago. As tectonic plates collided, immense pressure pushed a massive block of granite skyward, creating the steep eastern slope and more gradual western side we see today. Later, volcanic activity and glaciers sculpted the valleys.

When the most recent glaciers retreated more than 10,000 years ago, a recessional moraine formed at the east end of the valley, creating Donner Lake. These features show how time, ice and stone shaped a landscape that has challenged and inspired humans for countless generations.

CHANGING SEASONS
This composite photo background shows the stark difference between a Sierra winter and summer.



Myotis lucifugus, *or little brown bats, can be spotted as summer days wind down. One bat can eat 1,000 mosquitoes in an hour.*

LIFE AROUND THE LAKE

The park, just east of the Sierra Nevada crest, is surrounded by magnificent alpine scenery. Tall, straight stands of Jeffrey pines, with their gentle-to-the-touch pine cones, surround the lake and are interspersed with quaking aspen groves.

This landscape is home to mule deer, black bears, ospreys, garter snakes, Sierra mountain beavers and more. All of these plants and animals inhabit a landscape that undergoes dramatic seasonal shifts.



The Sierra marten *— a rare, weasel-like carnivore — rests in cavities of mature trees or snags.*