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ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS  
AT CA-NEV-13/H, Locus F & G,  
DONNER MEMORIAL STATE PARK





**ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS  
AT CA-NEV-13/H, LOCUS F & G  
DONNER MEMORIAL STATE PARK,  
NEVADA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA**



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NEVADA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA**

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Department of Parks and Recreation

Archaeology, History and Museums Division

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Publications in Cultural Heritage, Number 28  
*Archaeological Investigations at CA-NEV-13/H, Locus F & G,  
Donner Memorial State Park, Nevada County, California*

By William W. Bloomer and Denise Jaffke  
Editor, Richard Fitzgerald; Series Editor, Christopher Corey

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Close up of petroglyphs at CA-NEV-4, located on Donner Pass.

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## *PREFACE*

Donner Memorial State Park lies on the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Directly to the west above bucolic Donner Lake is Donner Pass, the principal route to the Central Valley. The Park, the lake, and the pass are all named after the ill-fated Donner party of 1846, the compelling and tragic story of the western bound emigrants that dawdled just enough along the California Trail to have to spend a disastrous winter camped at Donner Lake. This volume number 28 in our series of *Publications in Cultural Heritage* however, is not about the Donner party for which so many books and articles have been written, but rather about the earlier, original inhabitants of the region: the Washoe and their distant ancestors. Contained within is an archaeological study of CA-NEV-13/H, the 60-acre multi-component site with extensive prehistoric deposits, as well as the primary camp site of the Donner Party.

As documented in this report, test excavations in two of the seven site loci (loci F and G) yielded a surprisingly substantial assemblage of tools (projectile points, bifaces, flake tools, and a milling slab), thousands of pieces of basalt debitage, and 48 flakes of obsidian. It is the obsidian that reveals the most interesting angle on the prehistory of the area, as hydration analysis indicates a human occupation that dates perhaps prior to 10,000 years ago and certainly by 7,700 years ago. Moreover, while the geochemical analysis of the basalt artifacts indicated that this important toolstone was collected relatively nearby, the obsidian sourcing analysis indicated ten different sources from across northern California and northwestern Nevada. This diversity of obsidian is atypical of Tahoe Sierran sites and demonstrates, as quoted from this report, “the far reaching cultural interaction sphere of Donner Lake occupants...” (Bloomer and Jaffke 2011:94). The variety of obsidian represented and its general antiquity (ca. 7700-4000 years before present) shows that the Donner area served as a nexus for the well-documented long-distance trade network between California and the Great Basin.

In hindsight, it should come as no surprise that Donner Lake was a hub for trade, for it lies precisely on the east/west route over the central Sierra Nevada, namely Donner Pass. As John Muir observed, “the alp-crossing animals of every kind fall into the same trails... (and more rugged the terrain)... the more surely will the trails of white men, Indians, bears, wild sheep etc., be found converging in the best places” (1894:80). As one ascends the pass from Donner Lake, you quickly become aware of the original nineteenth-century trans-continental railroad to the south and to the north you can hear and see Interstate 80, both attesting to the truth of Muir’s observation. Higher up, just about where a commanding view of Donner Lake can be had, there are several petroglyph panels; a close up of one which is featured on the cover of this volume. These abstract-representational lines are like a road sign and are a gentle yet forceful reminder of how long this passageway was traversed by the original Californians.

Richard Fitzgerald  
*Editorial Advisor*



## *ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS*

This project would not have been realized without the help of several key individuals. First and foremost, I would like to thank John Foster, for providing funding and overall project support for much needed work at CA-NEV-13/H. This large, expansive site has experienced a variety of disturbances, but archaeological excavations within Locus F and G, funded by the Archaeology, History and Museums Division of California State Parks, have shown that the site retains information that is important to answering contemporary prehistoric research questions. Although the importance of the site has long been inferred by the archaeological sensitivity and complexity of the region, the significance of the prehistoric component wasn't realized until 2005.

I would also like to thank Jim Nelson and Denise Furlong for organizing and executing a successful excavation. They brought together some of the finest archaeologists in the business, including Jerry Doty, Scott Green, Oliver Patsch and Todd Jaffke. Although it first appeared that there were not enough folks to conduct the scheduled work in the allotted time, this highly effective crew, directed by Jim and Bill Bloomer, completed the work...with time to spare. A thanks also goes out to John Foster, Kathie Lindahl and Kelly Long for taking time from their busy schedules to help us out for a few days. Lynda Shoshone, Washoe Representative and Monitor, also deserves special acknowledgement. Lynda participated and provided valuable insight throughout the project. I also appreciate the efforts of Rick Fitzgerald for managing the contract with Furlong Archaeological Consulting.

Denise Jaffkee  
*Author*



*ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS  
AT CA-NEV-13/H  
LOCUS F & G*





## *Summary of Findings*

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California State Parks (Parks) contracted Furlong Archaeological Consulting to conduct archaeological test excavations at multi-component site CA-NEV-13/H, Locus F and G. This large and complex site is located in the northeastern portion of Donner Memorial State Park. Archaeological test investigations at CA-NEV-13/H, Locus F and Locus G, were completed in 11 days, from September 18 to September 28, 2005.

In total, 46 sample units were excavated to varying depths for an excavated volume totaling 13.85 cubic meters.

The prehistoric collection recovered from Locus F is quite substantial and included five basalt projectile points (i.e., Martis corner-notched, Elko corner-notched and lanceolate), 19 bifaces (18 basalt and one cryptocrystalline silicate [CCS]), one CCS drill, two basalt unifaces, seven flake tools (six basalt, one CCS), two basalt edge modified flakes and 2,199 pieces of debitage (2,162 basalt, 24 CCS, 13 obsidian). Hydration rim values from obsidian sampled from Locus F suggests that the area was visited as early as 8,000 years ago, but more consistently occupied from Early Archaic into the Middle Archaic, 6700 to 3600 BP (years before present).

The Locus G prehistoric assemblage is somewhat similar to Locus F and consists of 2,022 items, including two basalt projectile points (Elko corner-notched and lanceolate), 20 bifaces (18 basalt, two obsidian), one CCS drill, three unifaces (one basalt, two CCS), four flake tools (three basalt, one CCS), four basalt edge modified flakes, one CCS core, one piece of *itdemge* (Washoe word for milling slab) and 1,984 debitage (1,892 basalt, 57 CCS, 35 obsidian). It appears, based on obsidian hydration data, that Locus G was occupied during two distinct occupational periods, the earliest represented by a 8.5 hydration rim value and interpreted as Early Holocene, possibly more than 10,000 years ago.

Based on the results of this archaeological investigation at Locus F and G, along with findings from the data recovery effort at Locus F/G (Bloomer and Lindström 2007), the prehistoric component that makes up the western half of CA-NEV-13/H—consisting of Locus F, Locus G and Locus F/G—is significant and meets the criteria for the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP).

The results for this test investigation proved invaluable not only for addressing future project impacts, but also to provide important information regarding the prehistory of the region, most especially concerning our

developing understanding of Early Archaic settlement patterns. The predominance of Early Archaic occupations at CA-NEV-13/H provides a unique temporal context for Tahoe Sierran obsidian studies. Interpretation of geochemical sourcing and hydration data from Locus F and G provide the basis for a discussion of the movement of obsidian through the High Sierran Truckee corridor, from sources as far distant as the North Coast Ranges, east-central California, northwestern Nevada, and northeastern California, with Donner Pass serving as a primary nexus for California and Great Basin interaction. CA-NEV-13/H was likely an integral part of a developing exchange system and remained a part of the system throughout prehistory.

# *Chapter 1: Introduction*

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This report documents the results of archaeological studies conducted at the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) site CA-NEV-13/H, Locus F and G. This site is located within Donner Memorial State Park (Figure 1), T17N, R16E, Section 17 and 18 (Figure 2) and administered by California State Parks (Parks), Sierra District. Parks contracted with Furlong Archaeological Consulting and Lithic Arts to perform archaeological excavation in Locus F and Locus G to determine the overall significance and integrity of prehistoric deposits identified in the western portion of the site.

This report is organized into nine general sections. In the first of these, project objectives are summarized followed by an overview of the site and loci, specifically. The following section provides contextual background and includes discussion of the modern environment, paleoenvironment, prehistory and Washoe and Euro-American land use. This is followed by a summary of previous archaeology conducted at CA-NEV-13/H and Donner Lake vicinity. The next section, Tahoe Sierra Prehistoric Research Design, provides a synopsis of relevant contemporary research topics in the region. This is followed by a discussion of field and laboratory methods. The Excavation Results section reports on geomorphology and stratigraphy, site structure and assemblage diversity and artifacts recovered during this investigation. The Research Discussion section summarizes and discusses the findings of the test investigations in the context of the research issues presented earlier. The report is then concluded with a brief synopsis of findings, National Register significance recommendations and management protocols for CA-NEV-13/H.

## **PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES**

It is the California State Parks policy to identify, protect and manage cultural resources located on lands managed by Parks and affected by projects, in a spirit of stewardship, for future generations. The objectives for managing cultural resources are to identify, evaluate the importance of, and seek the appropriate protective measures in accordance with existing legal requirements, regulations and professional standards.

Site CA-NEV-13/H is listed on the NRHP (#66000218) under Criterion A for Exploration Settlement and Social History with a period of significance established between 1825 and 1849; in reference to the Donner Party tragedy. The site—as defined since 1988 when boundaries were

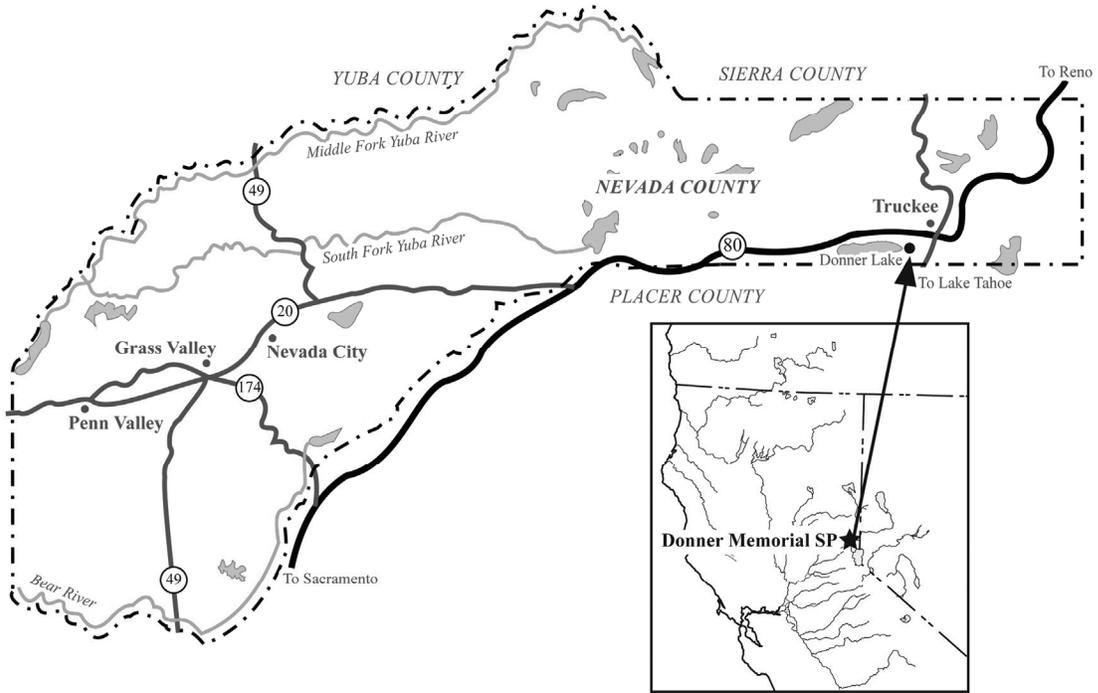


Figure 1. Project Vicinity Map.

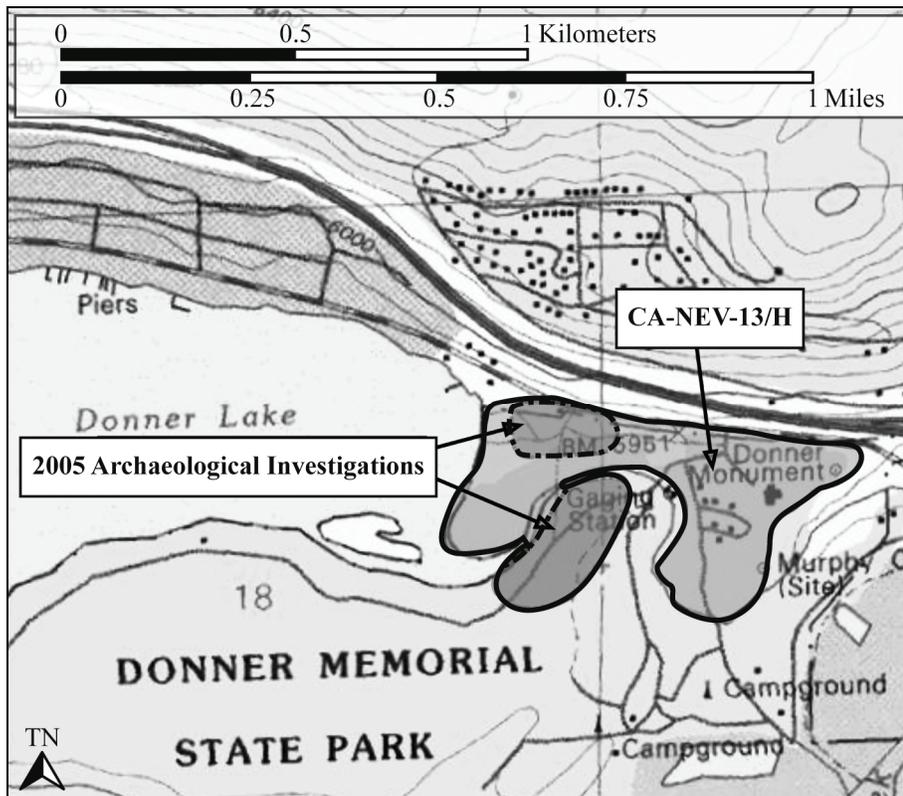


Figure 2. Project Location Map  
(Truckee, CA 1992 7.5-minute USGS Quadrangle).

expanded to include the western areas and sites CA-NEV-12 and -540/H—has never been formally evaluated. Although the site is already listed on the NRHP, it was necessary to further investigate the site’s information potential, especially in regards to regional prehistory.

Limited evaluation testing and subsequent data recovery efforts in 2004—in preparation for a Donner Dam retrofit project—revealed intact features in dateable contexts, an unexpected and rare find in the region. This prompted concern regarding management and protection from the cumulative impacts suffered by various projects within the site. Subsurface investigations at CA-NEV-13/H have been limited in scope and often focused on specific areas with particular research objectives. Due to personnel and funding constraints, the management strategy for this site has historically been to monitor and recover diagnostic artifacts, post-hoc. These collections were often curated with minimal or no analysis or reporting. It has been difficult, if not entirely impossible, to properly assess the cumulative impact of various projects to the site as a whole, and most especially the prehistoric component, without understanding the data and research potential that this site has to offer.

The archaeological investigation at CA-NEV-13/H, Locus F and G was designed to 1) determine whether these areas contain intact subsurface deposits; 2) evaluate the significance and integrity of archaeological deposits pursuant to 36 CFR 800.4; and 3) delineate loci boundaries from the results of subsurface excavation. The archaeological investigation focused on the following management goals:

- Ascertain the depth of the deposits at Locus F and G, the range and characteristics of cultural materials and natural strata present, and date the cultural deposits;
- Determine whether cultural deposits within the study area (see Figure 2) possess the integrity and data potential to address questions important to prehistory or history, thus qualifying them as contributing elements to the NRHP listed property as defined at 36 CFR 60.4 and the California Register of Historic Resources (California Register); and
- Provide management recommendations pertaining to site protection and interpretation.

## **CA-NEV-13/H SITE DESCRIPTION**

Site CA-NEV-13/H is a large multi-component site with prehistoric and historic deposits spread over more than 60 acres across Sections 17 and 18 of Township 17 North, Range 16 East within Donner Memorial State Park (see Figure 2). Donner Creek courses through the site, cutting around remnant moraines and flowing between broad flat glacial terraces. The prehistoric component is evident north and south of the creek, while the historic component is primarily evident to the north. CA-NEV-13/H was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978 because of its association with the historic Donner Party.

The historic component, primarily recorded within Locus A and Loci C–F (Figure 3), includes the Murphy Cabin site, the Pioneer Monument, blacksmith shop remains, telegraph features, the dam and bridge, several trash dumps and numerous artifacts (Brooke 2005; Gilbert et al. 2001; Schwaderer et al. 1987). Most are well documented and reflects a rich history beginning during the winter of 1846–1847 with the ill-fated Donner Party and continuing into the early twentieth century.

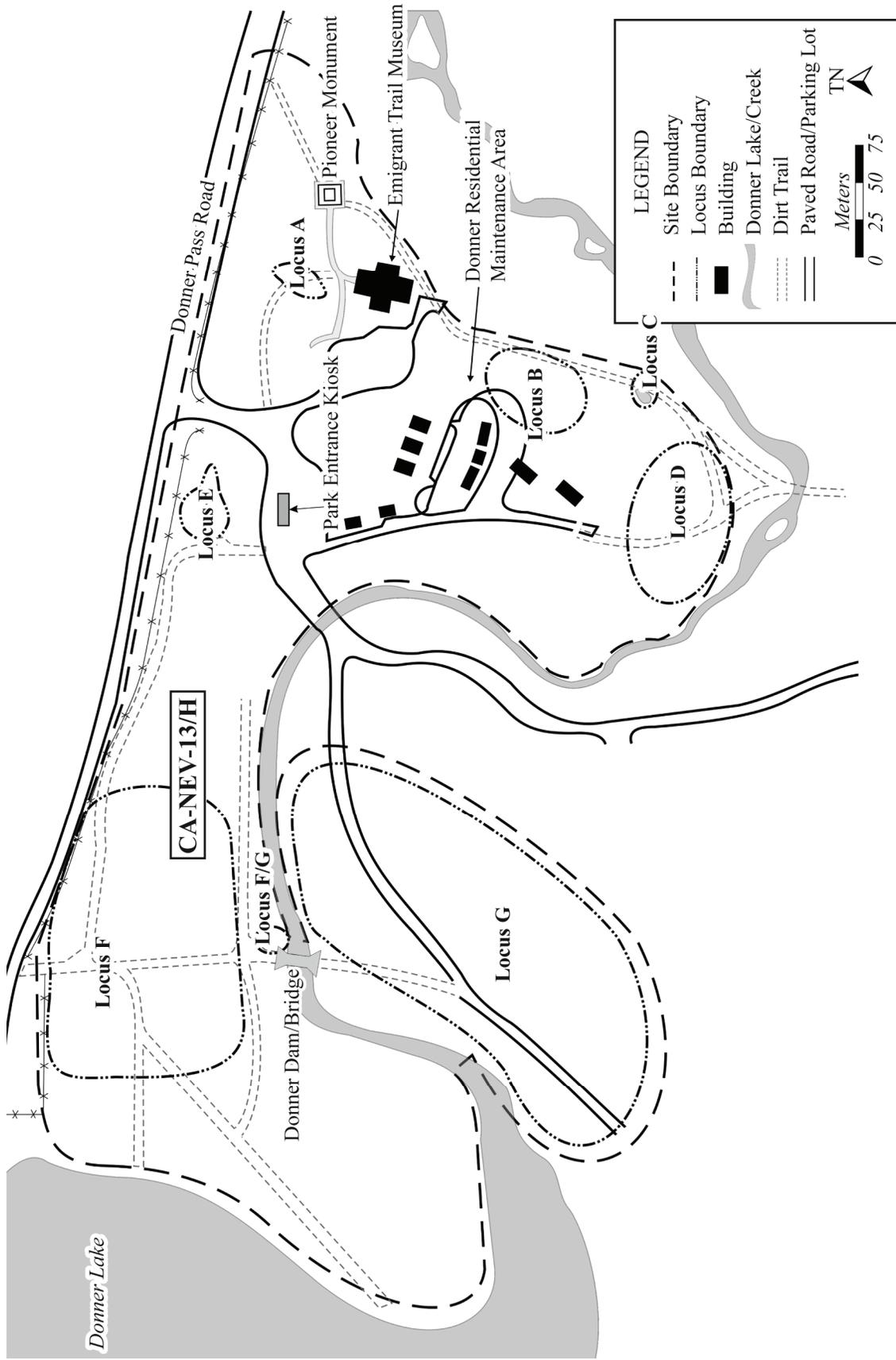


Figure 3. Multi-component Site CA-NEV-13/H, Donner Memorial State Park.

Prehistoric artifacts representing occupations from more than 6,000 years ago to historic contact have been noted throughout the site area with concentrations recorded at Locus A, B, F, F/G and G (see Figure 3; Bloomer and Lindström 2006a; Brooke 2005; Gilbert et al. 2001; Schwaderer et al. 1987). The prehistoric component is characterized by an abundance of basalt debitage and numerous bifacial tools. Obsidian, chert, quartzite and metavolcanic debitage are present in lesser quantities. Prior to the test investigations reported here, milling equipment such as portable milling slabs (*itdemge* – Washoe word) and bedrock milling stations (*lam*) with mortars and/or slicks had gone largely undiscovered. One *lam* with several large mortars sits at the north end of the Emigrant Trail Museum, but it was probably moved there from an unknown location. Our current test investigation is primarily concerned with Locus F and Locus G. Our results provide resolution to the interpretations of Bloomer and Lindström's (2006a) Locus F/ G investigation.

### **Locus F**

Locus F is a loose association of prehistoric and historic artifact deposits covering a relatively large area in the northwestern corner of the site. The Locus F boundary was not previously defined. Most of the locus area is covered by a large prehistoric lithic concentration of basalt debitage and tools. Surface artifact density varies with clusters of debitage in open areas, but probably averages 1:1 square meter. Three historic artifact concentrations are also associated with Locus F; two within the prehistoric concentration. The historic remains at Locus F may be related to several historic structures reported in this area, including two hotels, a store, a blacksmith shop, a butcher shop, an express office and several dwellings (Lindström 1987:25–28).

### **Locus G**

Locus G is an expansive prehistoric deposit covering most of the horseshoe bend terrace on the south side of Donner Creek. Basalt tools and debitage are the predominant artifacts. Projectile points, bifaces and cores have been reported and surface collected (Gilbert et al. 2001). One possible Humboldt Basal-notched projectile point indicated Locus G was occupied as early as 5000–3000 BP. Recent archaeological data recovery excavations in the dam road, south of Donner dam, have uncovered a basalt biface reduction deposit and *itdemge* near the creek (Bloomer and Lindström 2006a).

### **Locus F/G**

Locus F/G is a small (approximately 400 square meters) patch of rocky ground on the north bank of Donner Creek where prehistoric artifacts are visible at the forest edge. This tight cluster of artifacts is bounded on the west by a wide foot path (the historic Donner Dam road) and by thick forest duff to the north and east. Locus F/G was identified as a lithic scatter by Susan Lindström during a survey for the Truckee Meadows Water Authority (TMWA) improvement upgrade of Donner Dam (Lindström and Marvin 2004).

Archaeological test investigations conducted by State Parks archaeologists suggested Locus F/G was a contributing element to the larger NRHP eligible site area (Jaffke 2005). Data recovery investigations conducted to mitigate the impacts from the dam upgrade project discovered a rich basalt artifact assemblage and two intact hearths (Bloomer and Lindström 2006a). Obsidian hydration data indicated Locus F/G was occupied discontinuously for about 6,000 years, from 6500 to 600 BP.

