

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. This publication can be made available in alternate formats. Contact interp@parks.ca.gov or call (916) 654-2249.

CALIFORNIA STATE PARKS

P.O. Box 942896

Sacramento, CA 94296-0001

For information call: (800) 777-0369

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Discover the many states of California.™

Donner Memorial State Park

12593 Donner Pass Road

Truckee, CA 96161

(530) 582-7892

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*In Donner Memorial
State Park's lush setting,
visitors may camp, picnic,
hike the trails, and play
in the waters of beautiful
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, boat, fish and waterski.

PARK HISTORY

The Washoe People

This area has been the heart of the ancestral Washoe homeland for more than 4,000 years. Resources included Lahontan cutthroat trout, tui chub and mountain whitefish. After the 1848 gold discovery, thousands passed through the area. Many settled here, taking over Washoe lands.

The Washoe peacefully 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

Beginning in 1841, 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, three wagon trains had tried to make the crossing. One, the 1844 Stephens-Murphy-Townsend party, split into two groups. One small mounted party traveling along the Truckee River reached Sutter's fort on December 10.

The larger group left six wagons at Truckee (now Donner) Lake and took another five wagons down steep terrain, crossing the pass on November 25.

Between 1845 and 1848, about 2,600 emigrants traveled west, most using the Truckee-Donner Pass route. A second route north of the Verdi Range rejoined the Truckee above its rugged canyon.

This route was replaced by the Dutch Flat Road and Donner Wagon toll road in 1863. 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

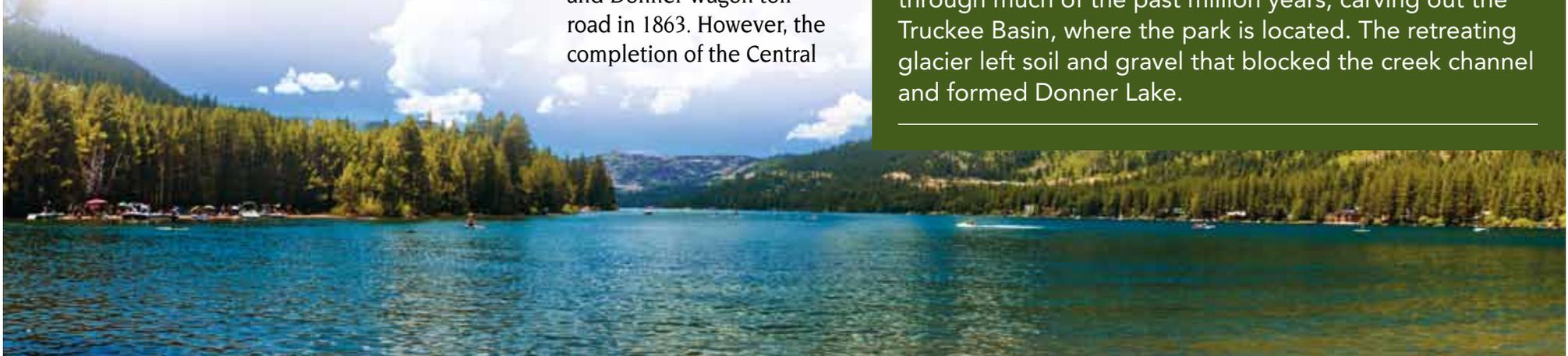
In 1924, the Pacific Fruit Express, successor to the Donner Ice Company, gave 10 acres at the east end of Donner Lake to the Native Sons of the Golden West, who had a concession near the one-acre Donner Monument.

On May 23, 1928, the Native Sons conveyed the 11 acres to the State, making the Donner 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 1841 they were also drawn west by news that it was now possible to travel directly overland to California.

In Illinois, farmers George and Jacob Donner and cabinetmaker James Reed packed up six ox-drawn wagons, and 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.

Unfortunately, Hastings had never traveled—or even seen—the route about which he had written so confidently. He had led a small group along the California Trail (starting at Fort Hall in Idaho, it branched off the Oregon Trail and went southwest to the Humboldt River), hoping to get a look at the “Hastings Cutoff,” but the group decided to use the old trail instead.

Meanwhile, the group of wagons trundled their way down a narrow, dangerous canyon in Utah’s Wasatch Mountains, only to be forced to make their way across the Great Salt Lake Desert—southwest of the Great Salt Lake itself—which had no water sources. Clearing a 36-mile path across the dry terrain cost them three weeks and forced them to abandon many vital supplies and livestock

along the way. Frustration and deprivation brought discord among the group. James Reed, the carpenter, was sent away from the party for knifing a man in an argument. Reed traveled with one companion; his family pressed on with the rest of the group.



Mary Murphy & daughters



George Donner Jr.



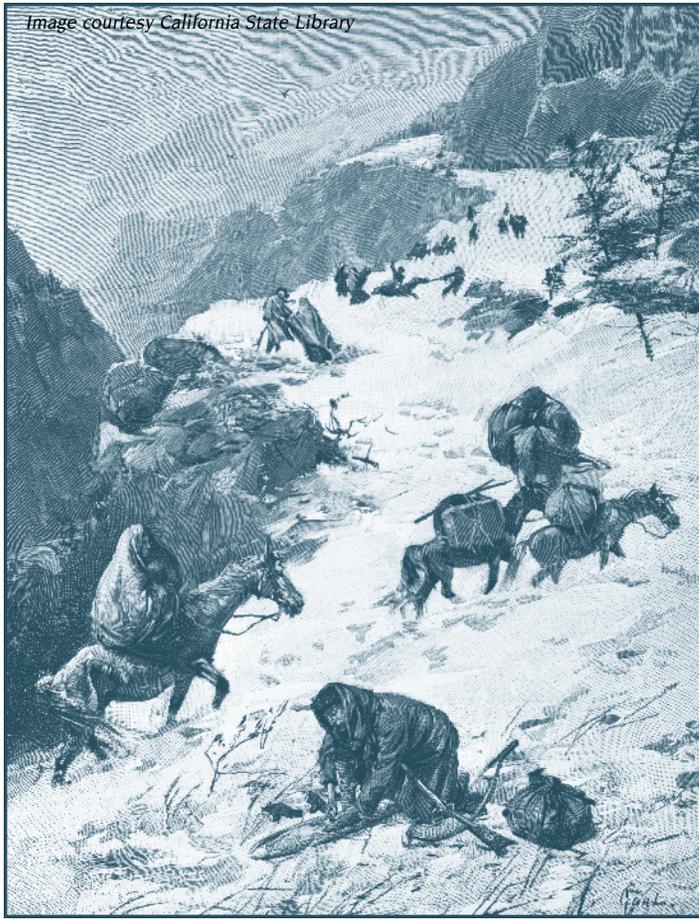
James & Margaret Reed



California Overland Emigrant Trail

- Conventional Trail ———
- Donner Party Trail (blue)
- Hastings Cutoff (yellow)

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 from a trip to Sutter's fort in 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.

When the Donner families got to the lake, there was snow on the ground. Members of the group attempted three times to cross the pass, with no success. The snowbound group settled in for the winter, building makeshift cabins and tents of logs covered with hides. However, attempts to hunt and fish were not successful. Families with any provisions at all refused 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 four members. One month after they set out, two men and the five women returned to the camp. They had survived on a deer they had caught, and on the bodies of their deceased companions.

THE RESCUE

The October storms had brought more than six feet of snow; November storms added nine more feet. In late February, rescuers reached the snow-buried cabins at the lake, to find several dead of starvation. They had already started back to safety when James Reed arrived with the second rescue party. At the camp, 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 sick husband.

Reed and his band of survivors met another group of rescuers on its way to the camp. This group would bring out the rest of the Donner Party, except for Louis

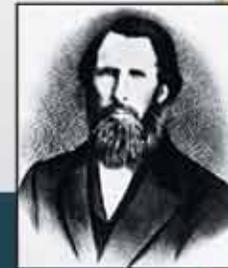
Keseberg, who remained behind, and Tamsen Donner, who once again refused to leave her husband.

In April 1847, one year after the 91-person Donner wagon train had started out, a fourth rescue party brought Keseberg out. Only 49 lived through the harrowing winter.

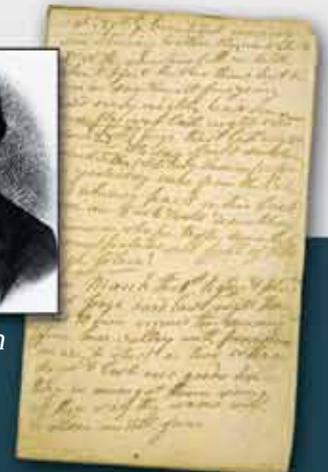
The monument at Donner Lake State Park is dedicated to all the pioneers who came overland to California. Its base stands 22 feet high—to surpass the greatest depth of the snow that may accumulate at the lake.

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

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 Truckee and Reno, Nevada.

The Lumber Industry—By 1867, several lumber mills had been established here. Before logging trains came, horses and oxen hauled lumber to local mill sites. 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 Sierra lakes was used to cool down the extreme heat in the Comstock silver mines. It also refrigerated the produce that California was now shipping East by rail.

FLORA AND FAUNA

Listen for Steller's jays, nuthatches, dark-eyed juncos and mountain chickadees among lodgepole and



Mountain chickadee

Jeffrey pines and white 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 are aggressive hunters, preying 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. Many anglers use the park as a base to visit nearby lakes.

Camping—Open from Memorial Day to mid-October, weather permitting. Campsites have tables and stoves, with restrooms and hot showers 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, drinking water, a sandy beach and walking trails nearby.

Visitor Center—Exhibits and books include the natural history of the Truckee Basin, Native American life, the 1840s emigration, the Donner tragedy, the Chinese railroad builders, and auto travel.

Pioneer Monument—The monument honors those who risked their lives to reach California during the 1840s. In 1901 the Native Sons of the Golden West bought the site. The Native Sons built a 22-foot stone base to support the bronze statue. It was dedicated June 8, 1918, on the site of the Breen cabin, within 200 yards of the Murphy cabin site.



ACCESSIBLE FEATURES

Seven campsites, a picnic area, paved paths to restrooms, the monument, audio and captioned video are accessible; a beach wheelchair is available.

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

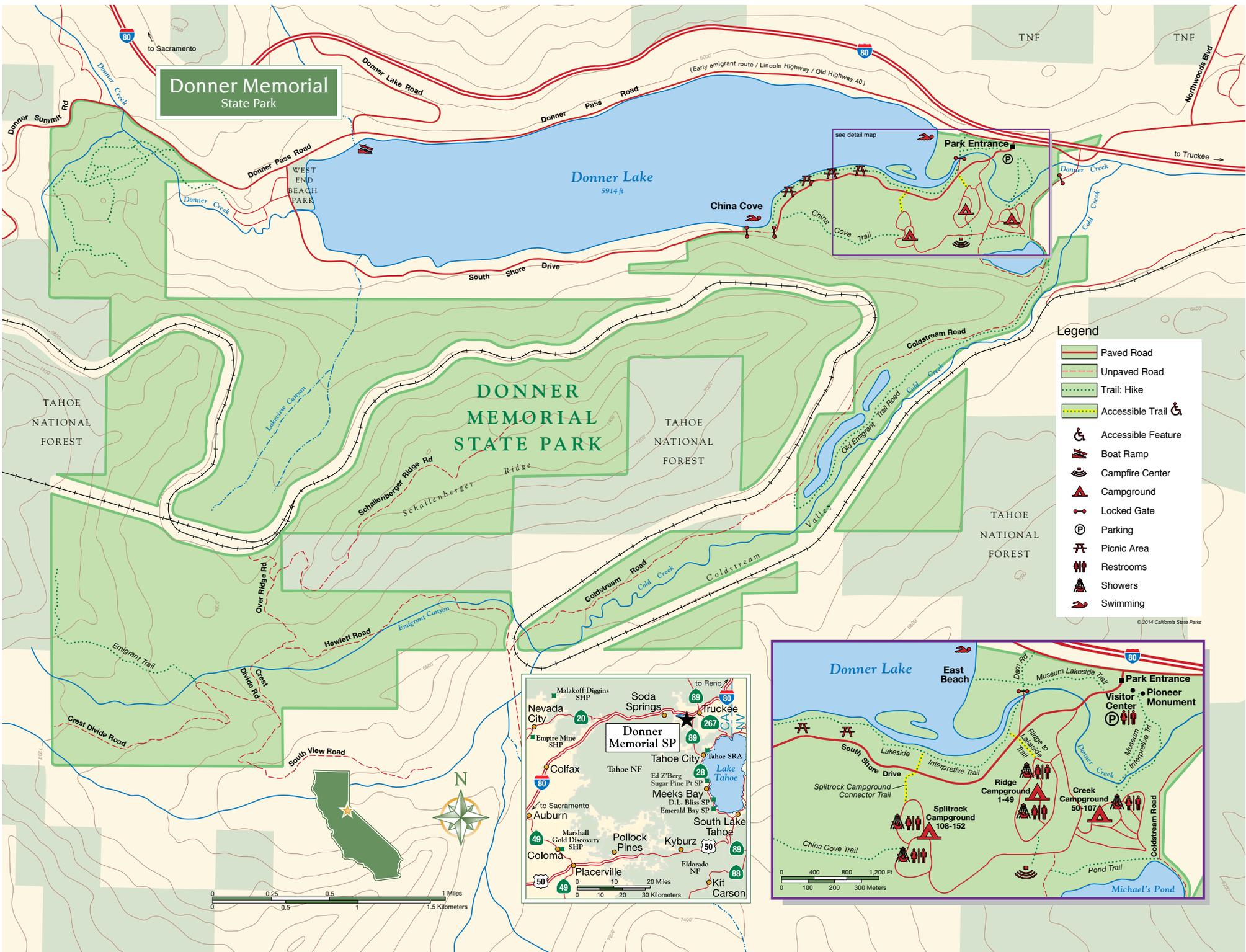
NEARBY STATE PARKS

- Tahoe State Recreation Area
.25 miles east of Tahoe City on Hwy. 28
(530) 525-7232
- 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

This park is supported in part through the Sierra State Parks Foundation
P.O. Box 28, Tahoe City, CA 96145
(530) 583-9911
www.sierrastateparks.org



Donner Memorial State Park



Legend

- Paved Road
- Unpaved Road
- Trail: Hike
- Accessible Trail
- Accessible Feature
- Boat Ramp
- Campfire Center
- Campground
- Locked Gate
- Parking
- Picnic Area
- Restrooms
- Showers
- Swimming

