

Donner, George and Jacob ^[1]

Donner, George and Jacob

by [William S. Powell](#) ^[2], 1986

ca. 1784–[26 Mar.?] 1847 (George) and ca. 1781–March or April 1847 (Jacob)

George and Jacob Donner, western immigrants for whom the Donner Pass in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California was named, were born in [Rowan County](#) ^[3], probably in the part that is now southern [Davidson County](#) ^[4], the sons of George Donner, of German descent. The elder Donner was listed in the 1790 census with a family composed of himself, two males under the age of sixteen, and five females; he was made a road overseer in the Flat Swamp-Lick Creek area of the county in 1794. The younger George, who in 1795 inherited some property from his uncle, Jacob Donner of Rowan County, moved by stages from North Carolina to Kentucky (in 1818), Indiana, and Illinois (in 1828); he also spent a year in Texas. Jacob may have followed the same route, but he at least was living in Illinois by the spring of 1846. George was married three times. The name of his first wife is unknown but his second wife was a sister of the second Mrs. Jacob Donner; his third wife was [Tamsen Eustis](#) ^[5], a native of Newburyport, Mass., but a former teacher in Elizabeth City, N.C. The name of Jacob's first wife is unknown, but his second wife, Elizabeth, had been married before to a man named Hook. In 1846, when he was 62, George Donner's children by his present wife, Tamsen, were listed as Frances E., 6, Georgia, 4, and Eliza P., 3; by a former wife there were Elitha Cumi, 14, and Leanna C., 12. Jacob was the father of George, 9, Mary M., 7, Isaac, 5, Samuel, about 4, and Lewis, about 3; by her former husband, Elizabeth Hook Donner was the mother of Solomon E. Hook, 14, and William Hook, 12.

The Donners were pioneer settlers of Sangamon County, Ill., and George's farm was not far from Springfield, the county seat. Printed descriptions of California apparently set the family to thinking about a move. Advertising in a local newspaper, George offered his farm for sale in September 1845 and the following spring sought others who would join a caravan to California. Plans were well made, extensive supplies laid in, and George Donner was elected leader. On 16 Apr. 1846 George and Jacob Donner, their families, a number of other families and individuals, including servants and teamsters—around thirty-two altogether—left Springfield. Their first destination was Independence, Mo., the "jumping off place" for such expeditions. There they joined others who were going to Oregon, but the California-bound immigrants would branch off at Fort Hall, Wyo., and follow [John C. Frémont](#) ^[6]'s trail to the green and fertile lands of California.

All went well across the Great West even though for a part of the way the men had to blaze their own trail (which later proved useful to the Mormons moving through Utah). The trek took longer than anticipated, for the caravan had to stop a number of times to rest the [livestock](#) ^[7] accompanying them as well as the horses and oxen pulling the many wagons. George Donner had three wagons loaded with trade goods and his wife had supplies that she expected to use when she opened a school. The immigrants entered the mountains along the modern boundary between Nevada and California just before the heavy winter snows were due, but they believed they had time to get through the pass. Unfortunately they were caught in the high elevations of the [Sierra Nevada Mountains](#) ^[8]. Sixteen feet of snow covered their makeshift shelters and their supplies, already low, were soon exhausted. Many died. Their presence was known, however, and relief expeditions were sent out from California. The bad weather delayed the rescuers and some of the travelers unwisely set out on foot. George and Jacob Donner and George's wife, Tamsen, were among the victims. Some of the children, however, were rescued as well as some of the others. Donner descendants still live in California and have been noted citizens, particularly of the San Jose area. The mountain pass in which the group was trapped was soon named [Donner Pass and a large bronze monument](#) ^[9] there now commemorates the bravery of all the pioneers who went to the West.

The Donner party has been widely discussed and studied. Several diaries and some letters that they wrote have been preserved; many of the survivors were interviewed at a later time and their story recorded. The fact that cannibalism was resorted to in those desperate days has also attracted attention.

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