

# Cannibalizing the Donner Name

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For nineteenth-century American audiences, the name of the Donner Party evoked grisly images of cannibalism on the western frontier. Those same audiences eagerly consumed every artifact to which the party's name could be attached and, in turn, renamed the scene of the 1846-47 winter encampment in its honor. The transformation of the Donner label is traced from individual name to toponymic feature and article of exchange on the open market, with particular attention to the ways in which the party's common identity as "Donners" overwrote the histories of individual party members.

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One hundred fifty-three years ago, on mountain slopes under a twenty-foot mantle of snow, a group of eight men and five women considered their options. They had been lost for two weeks, they had no food, and one of their number had just died from exhaustion and starvation. The conclusion they reached—to feed on the body of their lifeless companion—was a choice that would rescue them from certain death. They would live, and the enormity of their action would inscribe a previously anonymous band of emigrants into the lore of the American West: these were the desperate members of the Donner Party.

Across a safe distance of time and space, it is easy merely to be titillated by the images the Donner Party conjures up today. It is much more interesting to ask why such aura emanates from the Donner name and what its establishment as a cultural icon might mean. For, a century and a half after their gruesome experiences in the Sierra Nevadas, not only has Truckee Gap, now Donner Pass, lost its name to the party, but their campsite, with memorabilia on permanent display, has been preserved at Donner Lake State Park and at the aptly if ironically named Donner Camp Picnic Area in Tahoe National Forest; their story, meanwhile, has been circulated in magazines, cited in textbooks, committed to poetry, choreographed for stage, even served up as family

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fare in a 1994 Disney made-for-TV movie, *One More Mountain*. This profusion of material, stark in its contrast with the privation of that winter, offers two key entry points for an onomastic examination of the Donner phenomenon:

1. Tracking the Donner title from Illinois to California and observing its transformation from individual name to toponymic feature.
2. Analyzing the larger phenomenon behind this permutation, the reconstitution of the Donner name as article of exchange on the American market.

A two-pronged analysis of this type suggests that the collective name, and with it the identity, of these most famous domestic cannibals has itself been cannibalized, commodified, and consumed by an eager American public. The results offer a cautionary tale about onomastic co-option and commodification in a culture where names, individual and corporate, can acquire mythic status.

### Overland with the Donner Name

A thick textual trail makes it easy to track the progress of the Donner name across the American continent from Springfield, Illinois, where, on April 14, 1846, the George and Jacob Donner families began their westward passage. The two patriarchs were brothers of German stock, "tanners" become established farmers. They had already carried their family name through four states: born in North Carolina, they had emigrated in stages to Kentucky, then Indiana, then Illinois—and now, both in their sixties, they were bound for the sunny vales of California.<sup>1</sup>

George Donner had outlived two wives and had fifteen children; the five youngest would accompany him and their mother, Tamsen, his third wife. Jacob and his wife Elizabeth brought an even larger family to the party: five children of their own, plus two of Elizabeth's sons from a previous marriage. The brothers were joined by their friend James Frazier Reed, another prosperous landowner, with his wife Margaret and family of four. Among the many who pulled out of Springfield that season, the Reeds and Donners were met by others along the way, until their wagons were lost among the train of two or three hundred that stretched for two miles as it pulled out of Independence, Missouri, in early May (McGlashan 1947, 19). The Donners, thus far, were merely

an anonymous fraction of the thousands who headed overland beyond the western border of the United States in 1846.

The group that would cohere as “the Donner Party” remained anonymous until it claimed its identity with a fateful decision made on July 20 by the banks of the Little Sandy, just west of the Continental Divide. There the group committed itself to the left-hand turn of the trail, toward the newly-touted cut-off that adventurer Lansford Hastings promised would shave hundreds of miles off their route. The very next day, an informal election named George Donner, the younger of the brothers, party leader. The titular honor held little actual power; the nominee could be deposed—and often was among emigrant trains—simply by calling another vote. But the choice meant one important thing here: the name of the leader became, *ipso facto*, the name of the group. From July 21 on, there was a Donner party.

By July 28 the group had reached Fort Bridger, where George Donner hired a new driver and Reed bought several oxen. The party’s three-day stay at Fort Bridger was the last chance for them to write themselves into history, however, and citizens of the American states would not hear their name again until parts of the group reached the settlements around Sutter’s Fort in California, sixty miles beyond the Sierran range. From the first of August 1846 until the end of March 1847, they would leave only an unofficial record of their journey, sifted later from among ruined cabins, in the form of bills of sale between families desperate for food, signatures on promissory notes that traded horseflesh for the hope of escape, and claims against the dead (Hall 1947).

Despite scant records, the crucial details of the Donner Party’s skeletal history are easily told. Plagued from the outset by bad trails and worse luck, they did not reach the high Sierras until late fall. Dusk on November 3 caught them exhausted, just three miles below the summit. When a blinding snowstorm that night sealed the highest pass, they had to establish what camp they could on the eastern slope, sixty of them at Truckee Lake and twenty-one at Alder Creek five miles below. There they faced the winter. By the time the last occupants of the camp were finally led to Sutter’s, forty-two had perished, and it was clear that the living had been sustained by the meat of the dead.

So horrific was the story to emerge from the slopes that it leapt swiftly to the Pacific, then ricocheted east over the mountains and across

the plains. Letters from survivors quickly found their way into hometown newspapers, and soon the Donner name appeared not just in periodicals but in hard-bound histories: Edwin Bryant's *What I Saw in California* (1848), Jesse Q. Thornton's *Oregon and California in 1848* (1849), Eliza Farnham's *California In Doors and Out* (1850). America's appetite for everything Donner had been aroused.

Meanwhile, writes George R. Stewart, twentieth-century biographer of the Donners, the individuals of the party were "rapidly absorbed into the population of California" (1983, 280). The Reeds, whose family survived intact, made their way to San Jose; the rest dispersed themselves among the burgeoning coastal communities. Of the fourteen who actually bore the Donner name, just half survived. Both sets of parents perished; alive by April were the three orphaned daughters of Tamsen and Jacob, their two elder half-sisters, and two of their cousins. Only one male survived, George, Jr., nine years of age that winter, during which, by metabolic predilection, women outlived men 2:1.<sup>2</sup> Thus, if the family name was to flourish in the Land of Promise, it would be through the efforts of the lone male survivor.

Yet a curious thing was happening to the celebrated Donner name: at the same time that it was being eclipsed on the census rolls, it began appearing on the land itself. The party's emigration, after all, was part of a westward movement aimed at taming and naming the continent. Soon after 1847 the discovery of gold would lure hundreds of thousands across the same mountains that had all but defeated the Donners, and the Mexican War, which sealed the emigrants' fate by delaying rescue of the camps, would end in an 1850 treaty awarding almost a billion square miles of territory to the United States.<sup>3</sup> The map-making and name-fixing responses stimulated by exploration and conquest merely formalized the impulse toward settlement that wrote the Donners into American history.

The Americanization of California partook of a deliberate movement to fill in the national map, as chroniclers of U.S. place names note. Nineteenth-century America was anxious to assert its Manifest Destiny by controlling the continent on paper as well as in fact. Using its political authority to imbue geography with culture, the newest western state was distinctly self-conscious about its naming-history; when the

first legislature assembled in 1850, it promptly established twenty-seven counties and appointed a committee to report on “the derivation and definition of their names” (Stewart 1958, 346).

Erwin G. Gudde, who estimates that by mid-twentieth century the map of California already bore over 150,000 place names, offers in *California Place Names: The Origin and Etymology of Current Geographical Names* (1998), two entries important for our consideration. First is that of “Truckee,” applied to the pass the Donners attempted to cross and the river and lake by whose banks they camped (400-01). These features had been noted by members of the Stevens-Murphy-Townsend Party of 1844, guided there by a Northern Paiute leader to whom John Frémont, in his explorations of 1842 and 1843-44, had given that name. Although Frémont had called its flowing waters Salmon Trout River, a designation that remained on Bancroft’s map until 1858, Truckee (along with variants Truckey and Truchy) was in general use by 1846, certainly by the time of the Donners’ encampment (401).<sup>4</sup> Yet Truckee’s mark on the mountain was short-lived, readily displaced by the Donner eponym. As Gudde notes in his entry for “Donner,” the new name was no doubt applied by the State Geological Survey under Whitney (1861-73) and appeared in print with the 1874 von Leicht-Hoffman map of the Tahoe region (112). Truckee remains today the name of the town nestled by the river, but the 60,000-foot peak stands as monument to the Donner initiative, as do the lake and pass.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps surprisingly, no other site along the Donner route has come to bear the party’s name. The larger lake near the winter camp remains “Tahoe”—or, redundantly, Lake Tahoe—*Tahoe* being the Washo word for ‘lake’; the mountain range remains “snowed on”—in Spanish, “Sierra Nevada;” and the final passage into Bear Valley commemorates only the collective, as Emigrant Gap (Stewart 1962, 89). After 1846, few wagons ever ventured across Hastings Cut-off; soon it all but disappeared from the map. And, ironically, the road that the Donners cut through the Wasatch Mountains on the first leg of their journey—the work that cost them precious days of summer and probably their biggest achievement—lost all trace of its origin and became instead Pratt’s Cut-off, from the leader of a Mormon expedition who followed in 1848 with a group on its way to Salt Lake City (Stewart 1958, 278).

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Yet this was the same era that peppered the West with *Schall-enberger*, *Cisco*, and *Reno*, so granting toponymic recognition to the famous (and not so famous) was hardly uncommon. This was decades before the institution of the Board on Geographic Names that today, it tells us, values the nameless, “‘elemental wilderness’” and seeks to limit the “‘human impact on the land’” (Kaplan and Bernays 1997, 40). What was unusual, however, was the degree of interest that the Donners aroused almost from the start. The readiness of state and nation to demarcate the Donner encampment on its maps was symptomatic of America’s lurid fascination with these cannibals on its doorstep. They were not, after all, unique in the annals of mountain extremity; they were not the only party to require rescue, not even the only one to succumb to cannibalism. The 1845 Oregon expedition of “Lost Emigrants,” hit by famine and panic in the Cascades, cost nearly twice as many lives as the Donner winter (DeVoto 375). And Frémont’s 1848 attempt to map the Colorado ranges generated a frighteningly similar pattern of starvation, cannibalism, and desperate rescue (DeVoto 481).<sup>6</sup> But the Donners were the largest group to self-report survival on human flesh, and they were the ones acclaimed as “pioneer-martyrs of California,” icons of the westward movement (McGlashan 1947, 16).

Behind the imprint of the Donner name on the map, then, lies an impulse toward iconization, one that can be explained only by way of a second investigation into the constitution of this name as article of exchange on the American market.

### The Donner Name for Hire

The worn survivors who limped out of the mountains carried nothing except a priceless intangible: experience of an unspeakable horror. Their passage behind them, they were transformed from ordinary emigrants into heroes of the western frontier. A nation wanted the Donner story, and they who had trafficked in body parts soon discovered an even more marketable commodity in the reification of their name and narrative. Initiates into alien mysteries, these emigrants partook of the kind of aura that Walter Benjamin associates with premodern authenticity. In nineteenth-century America, however, the exotic means of their survival merely left them prey to an ever-engorging culture industry. Their worst horrors rendered narrative

fodder, members of the Donner Party were about to become victims of onomastic consumption.

Two opposing forces worked in sequence to accomplish this second cannibalization of the Donner Party. The first effected a collapse of multiplicity onto iconographic unity. Forty voices could tell the story of the camps, but soon after rescue they found their individualities subsumed into the anonymity of the collective name. With a new identity that overwrote personal history, survivors were marked henceforth as “members of the Donner Party.” Their chronicles of trauma were valuable only insofar as they subscribed to illusory homogeneity. In possession of a story so personal and so painful that it could hardly be told, they would know firsthand what Jacques Derrida in *On the Name* calls the “wound of writing” (1995, 60). Every attempt to tell the tale would leave them vulnerable to onomastic conscription, the signature of their narrative ever “effaceable” (1995, 61).<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the most resistant to this erasure-by-assimilation were the vocal members of the Reed family. James Reed’s early influence over the party had been effectively terminated by his banishment, in October, 1846, after a confrontation that left one party member dead. Yet this enforced departure enabled Reed to reach Sutter’s before the onset of winter, and it was his subsequent efforts to spearhead rescue that saved the group. Grateful survivors celebrated his name, as did their early historians. Even after their identity had begun to cohere as Donners, Bryant in 1849 was still citing them as the emigrants “‘known as Messrs. Reed and Donner’s Party’” (Stewart 1983, 18). And Virginia Reed Murphy—admittedly, hardly impartial—maintained into old age that her father was the real leader of the company which bore the Donner name (1983, 19).

The refusal of the Reeds to allow effacement of their name serves as marker for the persistence of individuality, the counterforce that asserted itself almost as soon as the onomastic cannibalization of the Donner Party commenced. The original group, after all, comprised eighty-seven men, women, and children, with thirty different surnames, and fixing this disparate lot under a single title would not prove unproblematic. George Donner’s nominal leadership had never solidified into real power, and the extent of their trauma had multiplied a hundredfold the dissension common among overland trains. The circumstances of the winter, moreover, had divided the party into two

separate campsites, then forced it to split further into irregular escape teams. Thus, each survivor carried a different memory out of the mountains.

If these individual escapees intuited what Elaine Scarry calls the “unsharability” of pain, still they exhibited something of a confessional urgency (1985, 4). They appeared eager to divulge the grisliest details of their winter, in narratives issued by the dozens over the course of succeeding decades. And from the start these wounded signatories, all claiming the Donner name, fought for title to the “real” story. Rivalry grew fierce as letters, lectures, and memoirs multiplied. In the absence of a unitary narrative, biography constantly overwrote autobiography amid competing, overlapping chronicles.

Nor were rights to the Donner tale claimed only by its principals. If the story of day-to-day survival belonged to the emigrants in camp, the story of escape was one they shared with their rescuers from Sutter’s Fort. The resulting proliferation of accounts added yet another layer of narrative as various interpreters and redactors attempted to reconcile accounts. The Donner name, of course, remained the stamp of authenticity for all emendations. Having passed from individual to group ownership, it had become the reproducible icon of textual authority in the chronicle of their migration.

By the time Charles F. McGlashan, attorney, printer, and publisher of the *Truckee Republican*, undertook the editorial mission of collating all the Donner histories into a coherent whole in 1879, one of his key functions was to mediate between legitimate and spurious claimants to this Donner name. As he related:

With much bitterness and severity it is alleged by some of the survivors of the dreadful tragedy that certain impostors and falsifiers claim to have been members of the Donner Party, and as such have written untruthful and exaggerated accounts of the sufferings of the party (1947, 19).<sup>8</sup>

In his search for the elusive “true” Donner story, McGlashan would succeed in contacting twenty-four of the twenty-six still-living party members and, ultimately, produce in *History of the Donner Party: A Tragedy of the Sierras* a foundational text in Donner history. Among bickering survivors, however, he did not find his efforts uniformly rewarded. He was vilified as a counterfeit and liar, even sued by Elitha C. Donner Wilder (one of the orphans of George and Tamsen Donner)



and her husband Benjamin, who argued that the “false and untrue” recitals in McGlashan’s publication exposed them to “reproach, ridicule and contempt” and caused them to be “shunned and avoided” (*Truckee Republican* 1879). Official bearers of the Donner name (her husband only at secondhand, of course), they denounced this outsider’s attempt to tamper with their story.

Eliza P. Donner Houghton, at age one the youngest of the party to be carried out of the mountains, herself championed McGlashan’s project. She wrote to her sister and brother-in-law in the editor’s defense:

I have doubtless heard more exaggerated, distorted, and horrible [sic] accounts of the suffering of those unfortunates than other members of the party. Years ago I resolved, if ever an opportunity occurred when the survivors could give thier [sic] version to a writer who would take the trouble to compare and reconcile conflicting statements... I would not only be willing to tell what I knew but would use what influence I had to lead others to do likewise (Ms. HOU 49).

A woman of twenty-six, this Donner-become-Houghton recognized that the winter’s tale was not a private possession; that those who bore the Donner name had little control over its application. Her realism made her blunt: “The entire vote of the survivors could not stop the publication of the History even if we should desire it” (Ms. HOU 49). Better, she reasoned, to offer constructive contributions toward a book that would be “as near true as [can] ever be written” (Ms. HOU 49).

Ironically, Houghton herself would continue to probe the mountains for “truth,” in lifelong pursuit of the details of her parents’ deaths. And her quest would uncover perhaps one of the most vulnerable Donner survivors, Jean Baptiste Tribodo. This lone emigrant had already appeared in various textual guises: party member Patrick Breen had written him into his cabin diary as John Battice (1979, 11); Bryant had rendered him John Battiste (1848, 261); Thornton (1849, 98) and McGlashan had transformed him into John Baptiste.<sup>9</sup> Born in what would become New Mexico, the man bore in his name the mark of a hybridized heritage: his mother was of Spanish and native descent; his father, French. Sixteen years old in 1846, Tribodo was hired by George Donner at Fort Bridger to replace a departing teamster. Thus fatefully enrolled in the party, he spent the winter at Alder Creek where he was

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denied passage with the first two relief parties, both insisting that he remain in camp to care for the weak.

When an aging Tribodo paid Houghton a visit in November 1884, she recorded the details of their conversation in "Notes to 'My Children'" (Ms. #1738). During what she called an "emotional" second afternoon, he asked Houghton to begin reading from the McGlashan text. At last he pronounced, "The book is true what there is of it' but, it does not tell who got the food, and kept the fire for the two camps that winter. '*I was the man, I did it* [sic].'" Tribodo had just witnessed the erasure of his name from Donner history.

Admittedly, the man was not entirely proud of his record. Four decades later, he deeply regretted his desertion of the dying George Donner when the third escape party finally consented to Tribodo's departure: "I'll tell you Eliza what was the worst and, what looked so bad in us was. We came away and left your mother there *alone* with your father. Yes, strong able men marched away when they might have saved them both [sic]." Nor did Tribodo romanticize that gruesome episode: "I am poor but offer me half the State of California to pass another such winter as that was and I would say *no* [sic]." Fortunately, this rugged survivor had made his peace with the present as well as the past. He was content to be left without record, his role elided and his identity obscured. He was a Donnerite hidden behind the anonymity of his onomastic marker.

All "baptized" into textual uncertainty, members of the Donner Party were consumed even as survivors. Those more prosperous than Tribodo were no less susceptible; if they appeared to become power brokers in the culture industry, it was at the cost of personal identity. In fact, their post-mountain experience proved an object lesson in onomastic cannibalism. Amid continued efforts of the living to re-establish individual history and of various redactors to fix the "real" story of that winter, a growing national market competed for every tangible fragment of Donner aura: spoons from the cabins, bones from the campsites, precious oral histories, the verses that one victim penned as he died, the first letters that survivors carried out of the mountains. Belated casualties of that winter, both living and dead became victims of the fetishized, cannibalized Donner name.<sup>10</sup>

If the reified Donner identity sold newspapers and packed lecture halls in the golden age of the American West, it also begat the tourist

industry of twentieth-century Truckee. And it continues to drive booksellers, playwrights, poets, and cartoonists who recognize that what can be Donnerized will be consumed. The autobiographical "epic" of eighty luckless emigrants has become a cultural possession; the Donners gave their name to history and lost title to their own story. This onomastic morality play is a powerful reminder that names bear ethical weight. If the Donner Party's identity has become synonymous with their cannibal fate, their legacy remains witness to the cannibalizing impulse behind the power of a name.

### Notes

1. Several histories of the party offer family background on George and Jacob Donner. See in particular Stewart (1983), 14-16. H. H. Donner traces the wider family's American history to the early 1700s when brothers Michael and Jacob emigrated from Germany and settled in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania (35).

2. For the demographics of party survival, see Grayson (1990) or McCurdy (1994).

3. Although word of the emigrants' distress had reached Sutter's by late October, the First Relief party could not be assembled for departure until February 4, because all able-bodied American males were engaged in the war with Mexico and rescue had to wait for a break in the hostilities.

4. Gudde had speculated earlier that Frémont's choice of name may have betrayed the explorer's confusion of Truckee with the frontier pronunciation of *trucha*, Spanish for "trout" (1949, 369).

5. The town itself sprang up when the Central Pacific Railroad surveyed the area in 1863-64 and made it a stage stop. Originally called Coburn Station after the local saloon owner, it was renamed Truckee, after the river, when the station burned down in 1868 (Gudde 1998, 401).

6. Nor should we overlook the cannibal history of Alfred (often rendered "Alferd") Packer of the San Juans, for whom the student cafeteria at the University of Colorado at Boulder is named (and where campus diners have been sighted sporting sweatshirts with the slogans "Keep Your Eyes on Your Thighs" and "Serving All Mankind"). For a synopsis of the case against Packer in the 1874 deaths of his five snowbound companions, now buried on Cannibal Plateau, see Wolle (1974, 342-43) or Nash (1992, 250-51).

7. For a very helpful entry into Derrida's essay, see the review by Christian Moraru (1997) in *Names* 45: 67-72.

8. The 1947 text provides a photographic reproduction of the second edition of McGlashan's *History of the Donner Party: A Tragedy of the Sierras*, published in 1880 as the first complete bound text. Serial publication in the *Truckee Republican* had begun in the spring of 1879.

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9. Tribodo's name continues to be variously construed. Stewart (1983) calls him Jean Baptiste in the text but lists him as "Trubode, J.B." in the index; Grayson, following Stewart, cites him as J.B. Trubode (1990, 227).

10. At least some collateral members of the Donner family have taken refuge in deliberately sought ambiguity. My home in Cleveland is about an hour's drive from Doylestown, Ohio, where an eastern branch of the family settled, leaving their mark on Dohner Cemetery and Dohner Lake. While genealogists note that Anglicized variants of the name, such as Donner, Dohner, Downer, and Tanner, date from the family's arrival in America (H. H. Dohner, 7), lore at least four generations old suggests some branches of the family found protective distance in a "de-Donnerization" that changed both the spelling and pronunciation (from [danər] to [donər]) of their name (Stephen J. Dohner, 1998).

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