


Westward Expansion and the Donner Party, 1803–1847



William Gilbert Gaul, On the Way to the Summit (The Donner Party), ca. 1891. Oil on canvasboard, 24 x 18.25 in. Collection of the Oakland Museum of California. The Oakland Museum Kahn Collection.

THE GILDER LEHRMAN
INSTITUTE of AMERICAN HISTORY

TL TEACHING LITERACY
TH THROUGH HISTORY



Westward Expansion and the Donner Party, 1803–1847

BY TIM BAILEY (CREATED 2012, REVISED 2025)

Tim Bailey taught middle school and elementary school in Utah for over two decades. Named the 2009 National History Teacher of the Year, he is the Gilder Lehrman Institute's director of curriculum development and instructional design.

UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on primary and secondary sources. These skills will enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate documents of historical significance.

Over the course of four lessons the students will examine the westward expansion of the United States and the dangers of traveling the American West in the mid- to late nineteenth century as described in diary entries written by Patrick Breen, a member of the Donner Party, which met a tragic outcome in their journey to California. In addition, they will investigate an image through which people living elsewhere in the country learned about the Donner Party's journey west. Students will use textual and visual evidence to draw their conclusions and present arguments as directed in each lesson.

Students will be able to

- Use visual evidence to draw a conclusion
- Use a secondary source to gain broad foundational knowledge about a historical event (e.g., the Donner Party)
- Demonstrate understanding of the documents on literal and inferential levels
- Engage in a classroom discussion about historical evidence
- Compare and contrast primary sources using textual evidence to support conclusions

NUMBER OF CLASS PERIODS: Four 45-minute class periods

GRADE LEVEL(S): 3–5

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What encouraged Americans to move westward?
- What obstacles did the Donner Party encounter?
- What did members of the Donner Party do to survive?



COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.1: Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.2: Determine the main idea of a text and explain how it is supported by key details; summarize the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.5.1: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 5 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.


CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.5.1D: Review the key ideas expressed and draw conclusions in light of information and knowledge gained from discussions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.1: Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.

MATERIALS

- Teacher's Resource: "Westward Expansion and the Donner Party" by Mary Stuckey, Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Communication Arts & Sciences, Pennsylvania State University, p. 5
- Source 1: "Westward Expansion," adapted from "Westward Expansion and the Donner Party" by Mary Stuckey, Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Communication Arts & Sciences, Pennsylvania State University
- Activity Sheet 1: Understanding Westward Expansion
- Activity Sheet 2: The Louisiana Purchase Map, with a map from Fort Scott National Historic Site, National Park Service, June 25, 2018, <https://www.nps.gov/media/photo/collection-item.htm?pg=48&cid=305fb7af-a71b-469b-941e-a98b439c882f&id=f975b05d-8601-4b6b-ae52-350b51b43873&sid=51c30979-a4f8-48d9-ab15-7991f462b9f1&p=15&sort=>
- Current map of the United States (not provided)
- Source 2: "The Donner Party," adapted from "Westward Expansion and the Donner Party" by Mary Stuckey, Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Communication Arts & Sciences, Pennsylvania State University
- Activity Sheet 3: Understanding the Donner Party
- Activity Sheet 4: "Starvation Camp: Stumps of Trees cut by the Donner Party in Summit Valley, Placer Co., in 1846" from *Central Pacific Railroad*, by Thomas Houseworth & Co., San Francisco, 1868, New York Public Library Digital Collections, digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e1-f37e-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99

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- Source 4: The Diary of Patrick Breen, excerpts from “The Diary of Patrick Breen, One of the Donner Party,” November 1846–March 1847, The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, patrickbreen.wordpress.com/
 - Activity Sheet 5: Understanding the Diary of Patrick Breen
 - Activity Sheet 6: Going West? Creating a Travel Guide
 - Images of landscapes between the Mississippi and the Pacific Ocean (not provided)



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Westward Expansion and the Donner Party

by Mary Stuckey, Pennsylvania State University

From the earliest days of the US republic, some citizens began to look west. One of the issues dividing the American colonies from Great Britain, for instance, concerned expansion. The colonists wanted British support and military assistance as they sought to expand the size of their colonies, and the British, fearing that this would require a more extensive military commitment than it was worth to them, sought to restrict westward movement. But colonists tended to push the boundaries and borders anyway, which created a certain amount of friction with the mother country and with the Indigenous inhabitants.

After the Revolution, expansion remained both a possibility and a problem. The US government passed the Northwest Ordinance in 1787, which made it clear that new territories could become states and would not become subservient to existing states, but be their equals, making westward migration attractive to potential settlers. Thomas Jefferson, for example, thought of expansion as creating an “empire of liberty,” and argued that as the nation grew, it would bring freedom and democracy with it.¹ Because of this belief, in 1803, he negotiated the “Louisiana Purchase” with France, which is usually (and incorrectly) treated as an actual sale of land.² The Louisiana Purchase gave the US the sole right to negotiate with Indigenous nations for land, which meant that they, and not any European powers, had the ability to explore and occupy land west of the Mississippi.


But not all US Americans wanted to expand. Some, like John Quincy Adams, argued that the US was better off keeping to its original boundaries and working on improving the nation as it already existed.³ But he and his fellow Whigs lost that argument, and between 1803 and the 1930s, many white US Americans began to move west, lured by the promise of freedom from governmental control, the chance to own land, and the opportunity to create new lives for themselves. They were encouraged to do so by numerous authors and land speculators who published travel guides and newspaper articles describing the beauty and opportunities in the West while downplaying the hazards of emigration.

By the 1840s enough people had migrated west that it seemed less dangerous and more attractive than it might otherwise have been, and in 1841, the first wagon trains began to leave places like Independence, Missouri. One such group became known as the “Donner Party,” named after their leader, George Donner. Some, like the two Donner families, were prosperous midwesterners; others, like the Breen family, were less well-off, and traveled west hoping to find less prejudice against their Catholic faith. The party included Irish, German, and English immigrants, Catholics, Protestants, and Mormons. Like the US itself, it was a diverse group of eighty-seven people: twenty-nine men, fifteen women, and forty-three children. Only forty-seven of them survived.

¹ Robert W. Tucker and David C. Hendrickson, *Empire of Liberty: The Statecraft of Thomas Jefferson* (Oxford University Press, 1992).

² See Britannica, [britannica.com/event/Louisiana-Purchase](https://www.britannica.com/event/Louisiana-Purchase).

³ See John Nichols, “Happy Anti-Imperialist Fourth of July,” *The Nation*, July 4, 2023, thenation.com/article/politics/anti-imperialist-fourth-of-july.



The usual route was to cut up to Oregon and then down into California along the Oregon Trail. But the Donner Party chose a different route, trying to take a shortcut that would make the trip to California easier and faster. It was a terrible choice. The route had not yet been clearly marked; they had to cut their own trail through the wilderness; they lost wagons and oxen as they tried to cross the great salt flats; and they became trapped in the high Sierra, where many of them died.⁴

Because both the Spanish and some white US Americans had already moved into California, there were both newspapers and consistent traffic (most of it by sea) between the East and West Coasts. People thus knew about the plight of the Donner Party even as it was happening—four different rescue missions were sent from California to the Donners' encampment. Some in the party, trapped in over twenty feet of snow, with no way to escape, and no food, resorted to cannibalizing the dead. Once the members of the Donner Party were rescued, the story was sensationalized. The story of the suffering the party endured gave way to lurid details focusing on the cannibalism, and downplaying how the members of the community sought to support one another and the heroism of those who mounted rescue attempts, sometimes dying in the process. To defend themselves, several members published their own accounts; one letter, written by one of the children, got significant attention.⁵ In that letter, the child urges others to come west despite the dangers.

People learned a great deal from the story of the Donner Party: that migration entailed hardships; that those who undertook such journeys were courageous; that planning and traveling established routes reduced risks; and that the risks were well worth it. These lessons were persuasive; people continued to move west in very large numbers.

Mary Stuckey is Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Communication Arts & Sciences at Pennsylvania State University. She is the author, editor, or co-editor of seventeen books including For the Enjoyment of the People: The Creation of National Identity in American Public Lands (University Press of Kansas Press, 2023).

⁴ There are numerous accounts of this story. I recommend Ric Burns, *The Donner Party* (Hollywood, CA: PBS, *American Experience*, 1992); The diary is reproduced in George R. Stewart, *Ordeal by Hunger: The Story of the Donner Party* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960).

⁵ Virginia Reed Murphy, *Across the Plains in the Donner Party: A Personal Narrative of the Overland Trip to California* (Golden, CO: Outbooks, 1980).

WESTWARD EXPANSION, 1600s–1803

BY TIM BAILEY (CREATED 2012, REVISED 2025)

OVERVIEW

The students will read the secondary source “Westward Expansion,” which is based on the Historical Background by Prof. Mary Stuckey. The reading will be done in chunks and after each chunk, the students will answer comprehension questions that you will use to assess student learning.

Tim Bailey taught middle school and elementary school in Utah for over two decades. Named the 2009 National History Teacher of the Year, he is the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s director of curriculum development and instructional design.

GRADE LEVELS: 3–5

RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: Four 45-minute class periods


UNIT OVERVIEW: This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s Teaching Literacy through History™ resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on primary and secondary sources. Over the course of four lessons the students will examine the westward expansion of the United States and the dangers of traveling the American West in the mid- to late nineteenth century through the experience of the Donner Party.

MATERIALS

- Teacher’s Resource: “Westward Expansion and the Donner Party” by Mary Stuckey, Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Communication Arts & Sciences, Pennsylvania State University, p. 5
- Source 1: “Westward Expansion,” adapted from “Westward Expansion and the Donner Party” by Mary Stuckey, Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Communication Arts & Sciences, Pennsylvania State University
- Activity Sheet 1: Understanding Westward Expansion
- Activity Sheet 2: The Louisiana Purchase Map, with a map from Fort Scott National Historic Site, National Park Service, June 25, 2018, <https://www.nps.gov/media/photo/collection-item.htm?pg=48&cid=305fb7af-a71b-469b-941e-a98b439c882f&id=f975b05d-8601-4b6b-ae52-350b51b43873&sid=51c30979-a4f8-48d9-ab15-7991f462b9f1&p=15&sort=>
- Current map of the United States (not provided)

PROCEDURE

1. You may choose to have the students do the lessons individually, as partners, or in small groups of no more than three or four.
2. Distribute Source 1: Westward Expansion and “share read” the complete essay with the students. Share reading is done by having the students follow along silently while you begin to read aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Then ask the class to join in with the reading after a few sentences while you continue to read aloud, still serving as the model for the class. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English language learners (ELL).

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3. Distribute Activity Sheet 1: Understanding Westward Expansion. Reread the first paragraph with the students and answer the first two questions as a class, demonstrating how to find the answers and underline them in the text. You may choose to have the students complete the second section as a whole class, with a partner, or individually.
 4. Distribute Activity Sheet 2: The Louisiana Purchase Map. Students will use a modern map of the United States to identify the states that are part of the Louisiana Purchase. This will illustrate for students the scale of this land acquisition in 1803.

THE DONNER PARTY, 1846–1847

BY TIM BAILEY (CREATED 2012, REVISED 2025)

OVERVIEW

The students will read the secondary source “The Donner Party,” which is based on the Historical Background by Prof. Mary Stuckey. The reading will be done in chunks, and after each chunk, the students will answer comprehension questions that you will use to assess student learning.

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GRADE LEVELS: 3–5

RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: Four 45-minute class periods


UNIT OVERVIEW: This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s Teaching Literacy through History™ resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on primary and secondary sources. Over the course of four lessons the students will examine the westward expansion of the United States and the dangers of traveling the American West in the mid- to late nineteenth century through the experience of the Donner Party.

MATERIALS

- Source 2: “The Donner Party,” adapted from “Westward Expansion and the Donner Party” by Mary Stuckey, Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Communication Arts & Sciences, Pennsylvania State University
- Activity Sheet 3: Understanding the Donner Party
- Activity Sheet 4: “Starvation Camp.’ Stumps of Trees cut by the Donner Party in Summit Valley, Placer Co., in 1846” from *Central Pacific Railroad*, by Thomas Houseworth & Co., San Francisco, 1868, New York Public Library Digital Collections, digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e1-f37e-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99

PROCEDURE

1. You may choose to have the students do the lesson individually, as partners, or in small groups of no more than three or four.
2. Distribute Source 2: The Donner Party and share read the essay with the students as described in Lesson 1.
3. Distribute Activity Sheet 3: Understanding the Donner Party. You may choose to reread the first chunk aloud and answer the first two questions with the class. You may choose to have the students complete the second section as a whole class, with a partner, or individually.

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4. Distribute Activity Sheet 4: “Starvation Camp.” Have the students discuss with a partner or in a small group why the trees are uniformly cut so high from the ground. Have them share their theories based on the evidence of the photograph and the information from the Donner Party essay. The answer: The trapped Donner Party cut down the trees for fuel when the snow was nearly 20’ deep.

The fact that someone photographed this spot and called the photograph “Starvation Camp” suggests that the Donner Party’s experience was widely known and, for some people, learning about it was entertaining.

5. Discuss the relevant material in the Historical Background, but don’t give too much away, so the students discover the meaning of the text they will read in the next lesson.

THE DIARY OF PATRICK BREEN, NOVEMBER 1846–MARCH 1847

BY TIM BAILEY (CREATED 2012, REVISED 2025)

OVERVIEW

The students will read excerpts from the diary of Patrick Breen, a survivor of the Donner Party disaster of 1846–1847. From November 20, 1846, to March 1, 1847, Irish immigrant Patrick Breen kept a diary of his family’s ordeal in the mountains. All seven children and both parents survived. You will assess students’ comprehension of the text through classroom discussion and the completed activity sheet.

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MATERIALS

- Source 4: The Diary of Patrick Breen, excerpts from “The Diary of Patrick Breen, One of the Donner Party,” November 1846–March 1847, The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, patrickbreen.wordpress.com/
- Activity Sheet 5: Understanding the Diary of Patrick Breen

PROCEDURE

1. You may choose to have the students do the lesson individually, as partners, or in small groups of no more than three or four.
2. Distribute Source 4: The Diary of Patrick Breen. Share read the document with the students.
3. Distribute Activity Sheet 5: Understanding the Diary of Patrick Breen. Students will use this activity sheet to analyze key points in the experiences of the Donner Party through the perspective of someone who was there. For each question the students will refer back to Source 4, cite the diary entry date where they found the answer, and then write the answer below that.
4. Second, have the students write a short summary of Patrick Breen’s diary using Source 4 and Activity Sheet 5 as a guide.
5. Class discussion: The tragic events of the Donner Party and their desperate struggle for survival can be quite disturbing. However, focusing on the survivors’ courage and will to survive as well as the courage and sacrifice of the rescuers, several of whom died in the attempt to reach the Donner Party, changes this from not just a tragedy but a triumph of human perseverance.

GOING WEST? A TRAVEL GUIDE, MID-1800S

BY TIM BAILEY (CREATED 2012, REVISED 2025)

OVERVIEW

The students will use the activity sheets and sources from the previous lessons to create a travel guide. This travel guide serves as a summative assessment for this unit by having students use the information that they have learned. This will be demonstrated in their written travel guide and accompanying illustration.

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GRADE LEVELS: 3–5

RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: Four 45-minute class periods

UNIT OVERVIEW: This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History™ resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on primary and secondary sources. Over the course of four lessons the students will examine the westward expansion of the United States and the dangers of traveling the American West in the mid- to late nineteenth century through the experience of the Donner Party.

MATERIALS

- Source 1: “Westward Expansion”
- Activity Sheet 1: Understanding Westward Expansion
- Activity Sheet 2: The Louisiana Purchase Map
- Source 2: “The Donner Party”
- Activity Sheet 3: Understanding the Donner Party
- Activity Sheet 4: “Starvation Camp”
- Source 4: The Diary of Patrick Breen
- Activity Sheet 5: Understanding the Diary of Patrick Breen
- Activity Sheet 6: Going West? Creating a Travel Guide
- Images of landscapes between the Mississippi River and the Pacific Ocean (not provided)

PROCEDURE

1. You may choose to have the students do the lesson individually or with a partner.
2. Make sure that students have access to the sources and activity sheets from Lessons 1–3. These will serve as source materials for the lesson.
3. Distribute Activity Sheet 6. Read the instructions at the top of the Activity Sheet to the students and encourage them to write their guide as if they are writing for travelers heading west in a wagon train in the mid-1800s following the events of the Donner Party. They will then draw an illustration of what travelers may see on such a journey. Show students pictures of the grasslands, deserts, mountains, rivers, forests, and even the Pacific Ocean so that they have a good idea of what travelers would see.
4. After students have completed their guide they can share them with the class or you can post them for



Source 1: Westward Expansion

From the earliest days of what would be called the United States, some people living in the American colonies wanted to move farther west. This caused arguments between Great Britain and the colonists. The colonists wanted more land, and they wanted the British to protect them. The British didn't want to pay for more soldiers to protect the colonists from the dangers of moving west. But some of the colonists ignored the British and moved west anyway. This led to problems with the British and with the Native Americans living in the West. The colonists were moving onto the Native Americans' land.

After the American Revolution, the US government passed the Northwest Ordinance, a law that made it easier to move west and settle the land. President Thomas Jefferson believed in Westward Expansion and thought that as the nation grew, it would bring liberty and democracy to the newly settled lands. He wrote that this land would become an "empire of liberty." In 1803 President Jefferson made a deal with the leader of France to buy the "Louisiana Purchase." The Louisiana Purchase doubled the size of the United States. France agreed to give up its claim to the land and to give the United States its right to explore and live on much of the land west of the Mississippi River. However, there were Native Americans already living on that land.

Source: Adapted from "Westward Expansion and the Donner Party" by Professor Mary Stuckey, Pennsylvania State University.



Name _____ Period _____ Date _____

Activity Sheet 1: Understanding Westward Expansion

Instructions: Carefully read these paragraphs from “Westward Expansion.” Answer the two questions below each paragraph. Underline where you found the answers in the paragraph.

1.

From the earliest days of what would be called the United States, some people living in the American colonies wanted to move farther west. This caused arguments between Great Britain and the colonists. The colonists wanted more land, and they wanted the British to protect them. The British didn’t want to pay for more soldiers to protect the colonists from the dangers of moving west. But some of the colonists ignored the British and moved west anyway. This led to problems with the British and with the Native Americans living in the West. The colonists were moving onto the Native Americans’ land.

A. Why did American colonists want to move west?

B. Why did it cause problems when American colonists moved west?



Name _____ Period _____ Date _____

2.

After the American Revolution, the US government passed the Northwest Ordinance, a law that made it easier to move west and settle the land. President Thomas Jefferson believed in Westward Expansion and thought that as the nation grew, it would bring liberty and democracy to the newly settled lands. He wrote that this land would become an “empire of liberty.” In 1803 President Jefferson made a deal with the leader of France to buy the “Louisiana Purchase.” The Louisiana Purchase doubled the size of the United States. France agreed to give up its claim to the land and to give the United States its right to explore and live on much of the land west of the Mississippi River. However, there were Native Americans already living on that land.

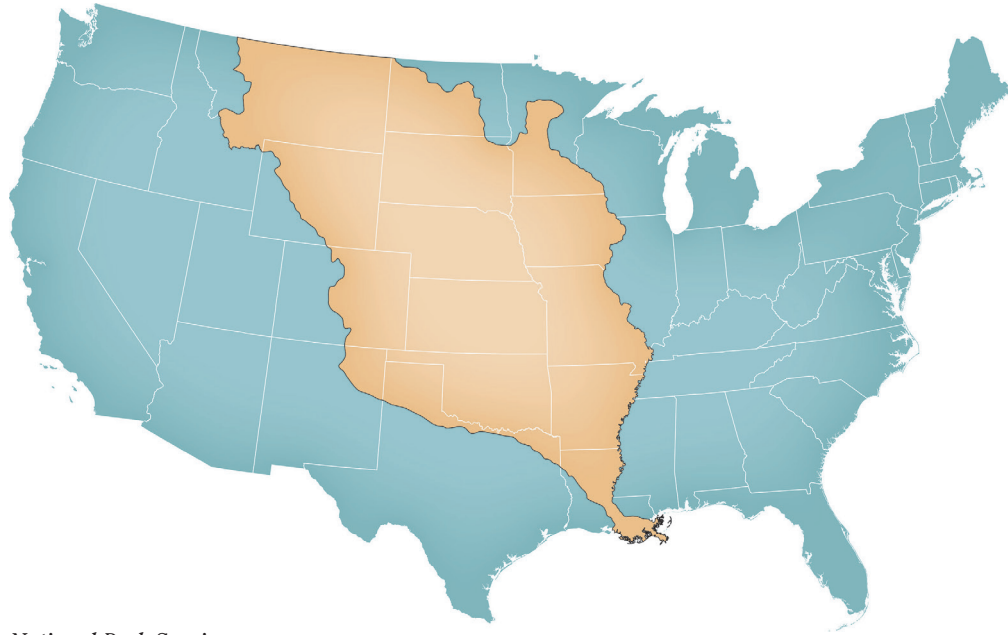
A. What law made it easier for people to move west?

B. What was the Louisiana Purchase?



Name _____ Period _____ Date _____

Activity Sheet 2: The Louisiana Purchase Map



National Park Service

Instructions: Using a current map of the United States, list the states that are part of the Louisiana Purchase.

- | | |
|----------|-----------|
| 1. _____ | 9. _____ |
| 2. _____ | 10. _____ |
| 3. _____ | 11. _____ |
| 4. _____ | 12. _____ |
| 5. _____ | 13. _____ |
| 6. _____ | 14. _____ |
| 7. _____ | 15. _____ |
| 8. _____ | |



Source 2: The Donner Party

In the mid-1800s many Americans began to move west for the chance to own land and make a new life for themselves. Many travel guides and newspaper articles described the beauty and opportunities in the West but didn't write about how dangerous it could be to get there. By the 1840s enough people had moved west that it seemed less dangerous. In 1846, one such group became known as the "Donner Party," named after their leader, George Donner. The Donner Party was made up of a number of different families traveling together. It was a group of eighty-seven men, women, and children. Only forty-seven of them survived the journey.

The usual route to California was to travel to Oregon and then down into California along the Oregon Trail. But the Donner Party chose a different route, trying to take a shortcut that would make the trip to California easier and faster. It was a terrible choice. The trail had not yet been clearly marked. They had to cut their own trail through the wilderness, and they became trapped by snow in the high Sierra Nevada mountains.

The families were trapped in up to twenty feet of snow with no way to escape and little food. Some of them resorted to cannibalizing [eating] people who had died. Four different rescue missions were sent from California to where the Donner Party was camped. Once the members of the Donner Party were rescued, the newspaper stories wrote about the cannibalism, and not the heroism of those who mounted rescue attempts or the courage of the survivors. Several members of the Donner Party published their own stories. One letter, written by one of the children, urges others to come west despite the dangers.

Source: Adapted from "Westward Expansion and the Donner Party" by Professor Mary Stuckey, Pennsylvania State University.

Activity Sheet 3: Understanding the Donner Party

Instructions: Carefully read these paragraphs from "The Donner Party." Answer the two questions below each paragraph. Underline where you found the answers in the paragraph.

1.

In the mid-1800s many Americans began to move west for the chance to own land and make a new life for themselves. Many travel guides and newspaper articles described the beauty and opportunities in the West but didn't write about how dangerous it could be to get there. By the 1840s enough people had moved west that it seemed less dangerous. In 1846, one such group became known as the "Donner Party," named after their leader, George Donner. The Donner Party was made up of a number of different families traveling together. It was a group of eighty-seven men, women, and children. Only forty-seven of them survived the journey.

A. What did travel guides and newspapers say about going west?

What didn't they say?

B. Who was George Donner?



Name _____ Period _____ Date _____

2.

The usual route to California was to travel to Oregon and then down into California along the Oregon Trail. But the Donner Party chose a different route, trying to take a shortcut that would make the trip to California easier and faster. It was a terrible choice. The trail had not yet been clearly marked. They had to cut their own trail through the wilderness, and they became trapped by snow in the high Sierra Nevada mountains.

The families were trapped in up to twenty feet of snow with no way to escape and little food. Some of them resorted to cannibalizing [eating] people who had died. Four different rescue missions were sent from California to where the Donner Party was camped. Once the members of the Donner Party were rescued, the newspaper stories wrote about the cannibalism, and not the heroism of those who mounted rescue attempts or the courage of the survivors. Several members of the Donner Party published their own stories. One letter, written by one of the children, urges others to come west despite the dangers.

A. Why did the Donner Party choose to take a different trail to California?

B. How did some of the people survive after they ran out of food?

Activity Sheet 4: "Starvation Camp"



New York Public Library Digital Collections

This is a photograph of where the Donner Party camped in the winter of 1846–1847. Look at the man sitting on a log next to the trees that have been cut. Use evidence from the photograph and from Source 2: The Donner Party to answer the questions.

A. Why is the photograph titled "Starvation Camp"?

B. Why were the trees cut so high off of the ground?



Source 4: The Diary of Patrick Breen

Patrick Breen was a member of the Donner Party. He was traveling with his wife and children. They were all rescued in 1847.

November 20, 1846

"came to this place on the 31st of last month . . . the snow so deep we were unable to find the road, when within 3 miles of the summit . . . made another unsuccessful attempt to cross . . . returned to the shanty [small cabin] it continuing to snow all the time we were here we now have killed most part of our cattle having to stay here until next spring & live on poor beef without bread or salt"

November 29, 1846

"still snowing now about 3 feet deep . . . killed my last oxen today will skin them tomorrow"

December 1, 1846

". . . snow about 5 ½ feet or 6 deep difficult to get wood no going from the house completely housed up looks as likely for snow as when it commenced, our cattle all killed but three or four them, the horses & mules gone & cattle suppose lost in the Snow no hopes of finding them alive"

January 17, 1847

". . . Keyburg sent bill to get hides off his shanty . . . scarce hides are the only article we depend on, we have a little meat yet, may God send us help"

February 5, 1847

". . . Peggy very uneasy for fear we shall all perish with hunger we have but a little meat left & only part of 3 hides has to support Mrs. Reid she has nothing left but one hide . . ."

February 10, 1847

". . . J Denton trying to borrow meat . . . had none to give they have nothing but hides all are entirely out of meat but a little we have our hides are nearly all eat up but with God's help spring will soon smile upon us"

February 26, 1847

". . . The Donners told the California folks that they commence to eat the dead people 4 days ago, if they did not succeed that day or next in finding their cattle then under ten or twelve feet of snow . . ."



March 1, 1847

“. . . 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 until June”

Source: “The Diary of Patrick Breen, One of the Donner Party,” November 1846–March 1847, The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, patrickbreen.wordpress.com/.

Activity Sheet 5: Understanding the Diary of Patrick Breen

Write the date of the journal entry where you found the answer.

1. What did the Donners tell the rescuers from California about why they began eating dead people?

Date: _____

Answer:

2. What were most people using for food after their meat began to run out?

Date: _____

Answer:

3. Why was it difficult to get wood?

Date: _____

Answer:



Name _____ Period _____ Date _____

Activity Sheet 6: Going West? Creating a Travel Guide

During the 1800s many guidebooks were written about traveling west. Unfortunately, many of those guidebooks gave travelers bad information and poor advice. Using facts from your studies, write a short guide that tells travelers in the mid-1800s why they should travel west and gives them advice to help them make a safe journey. You will then draw an illustration for your guidebook of what they might see on their travels west.

A Guide to Traveling West
