The Donner Party

Manifest Destiny
The Route

- Journey began in May 1846 from Springfield Illinois to Independence Missouri
- Beyond Independence lay the “vast unknown”
At Fort Laramie, James Reed disregards the advice of friend and "Mountain Man" James Clyman who urged them to go "the old route"

Instead the party chooses to take the Hastings Cutoff
Hoping to send a tide of Americans flooding west to occupy the province, he published *The Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California*. It painted California as Eden. It advertised a new and faster route across the Great Basin.
Hastings Cutoff

- It left the California Trail at Fort Bridger, WY
- Passed through the Wasatch Mountains, across the Great Salt Lake Desert
- Looped the Ruby Mountains
- rejoined the California Trail about seven miles west of modern Elko, Nevada.
- Saved emigrants 350-450 miles
Hastings letter to all emigrants offers to personally guide them through the cutoff

Most emigrants heed Clyman’s warning. On July 20th, twenty Wagons including the Donner’s and the Reed’s turn toward Fort Bridger

When they arrive, Hastings is gone. He leads another group, but promises to leave instructions for any that wish to follow.
The Cutoff

- For a week they made good time, following the track of Hastings's wagons.
- Then on August 6th, the party came to a halt. Stuck in the top of some sage near the trail was a note. Stating the road ahead was virtually impassable and advised them to wait until Hastings could show them a better way.
- It took James Reed 5 days to find Hastings.
- He refused to come to lead the company himself, pointing out what he thought might be a more manageable route from a high peak instead.
The Wasatch Mountains

- Reed piloted them through the Wasatch Mountains
- They crawled along moving about two miles a day
- They emerged August 22nd with 600 miles to go
- Hastings leaves another note
The Great Salt Lake Desert

- “Two days ... two nights ... hard driving ... across desert ... reach water.”
- Taking on as much grass and water as possible, they started across the plains
- 5 days and 80 miles later they crossed the desert
- It was twice as long as Hastings claimed
- 36 head of oxen and many wagons were lost
After an inventory of the supplies, they discover they will not have enough food to reach California.

William McCutcheon and Charles Stanton ride ahead to bring back relief.

In early September Lansford Hastings rode into Sutter's Fort at the head of a battered train of 80 wagons. Except for the Donner Party, all the emigrants of 1846 had made it safely through to California.
On October 19th, their food was nearly all gone when Charles Stanton finally returned from Sutter's Fort. He brought 7 mules loaded with food, two Indian guides and news that the high pass of the Sierra wouldn't be blocked by snow for another month. They camped for five days 50 miles from the summit. The Donners’ axle breaks and they are delayed.
The Storm

- That night (Oct. 29th) they camped 1000 feet from the summit
- It started to snow, but as they frantically tried to get over the pass, 5 feet had already fallen
- By morning the pass was blocked
- They were only 150 miles from the Safety of Sutter’s Fort
Reed reaches Sutter’s Fort
He attempts to arrange a relief party, but they were forced to turn back due to snow
No other relief was able, as all men went to fight in the Mexican American War
Cannibalism

- Every family resorts to cannibalism except the Reeds in order to survive.
- Of the 87 men, women and children in the Donner Party, 46 survived.
- 41 died: 5 women, 14 children and 22 men.
The Donner Party Memorial

22 feet
Donner State Park

Murphy Cabin Rock
Fireplace

Trees cut off at Donner
Winter Camp
Making Fun . . .