

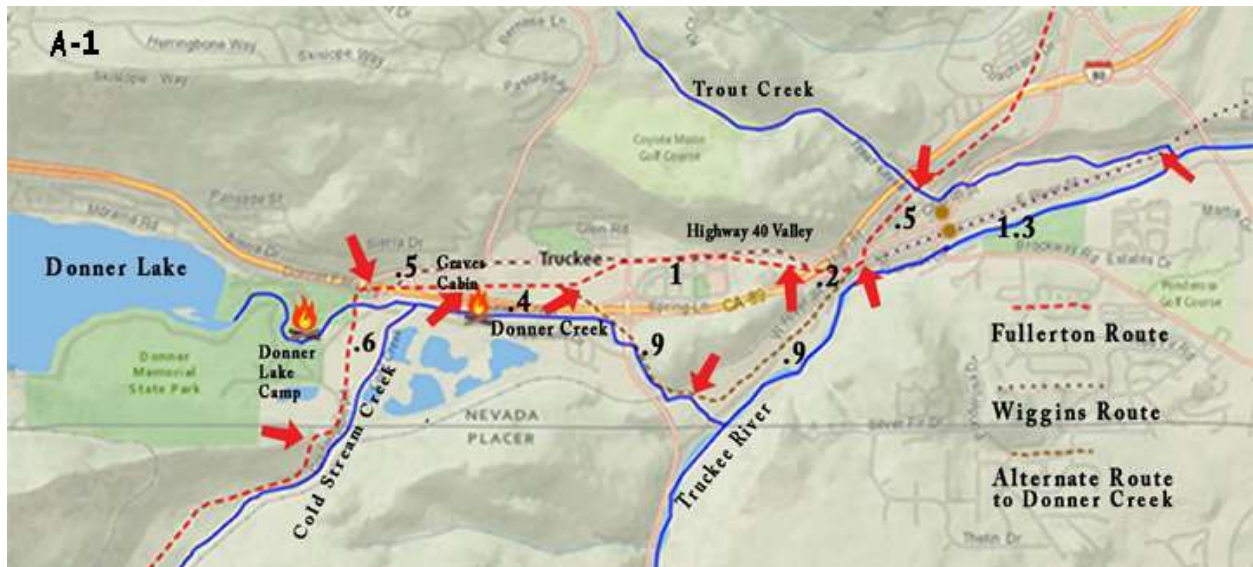
Reconsideration of the Truckee Trail Route: Hoke Valley to the Donner Creek Crossing By David Fullerton

Appendix: 5

Appendix 5: Diary Entries indicating where the Truckee Trail dropped down to the Truckee River bottomland.

Below are the all the diaries I have found that give a description of the relationship between (1) the descent to the Truckee and (2) some other known locations mentioned in the diary. The information can be implicit as when diarists say that they touched the river then turned away to the right. Or the information can be based on mileage to some geographical location that we can identify, such as the entrance to Highway 40 Valley, the western end of Highway 40 Valley where the trail approaches Donner Creek, the confluence of Donner Creek and the Truckee, the Graves Cabins, the crossing of Donner Creek, the Donner Lake camp, and even the entrance to Coldstream Canyon.

Figure A-1 is a schematic of the various approximate mileages. These miles are not as the crow flies but assume a certain sinuosity in the trails making mileage a bit higher than we might think from simply measuring point A to point B.



Edwin Bryant, August 25, 1846. *About one o'clock, P.M., we descended a steep declivity, and struck a stream [the Truckee].... The trail runs along this stream a short distance, and then leaving it on the right hand, winds under a range of high mountainous elevations [Highway 40 Valley], until it strikes again the same watercourse, in a distance of a few miles.*

The Wiggins descent point is about 1.5 miles from Highway 40 Valley. This would not normally be considered a “short distance.” Note that Bryant seems to believe that Donner Creek and the Truckee River are one and the same.

Wakeman Bryarly, August 21, 1849. *We rolled in the evening at 2 P.M. The road still the same, except a little rougher. Four miles, the road turned left [i.e., turned to drop down the bluff to the Truckee floodplain]. Here, upon our left, distant some hundred yards from the road was Truckee River in all its glory again, splashing & dashing over the rocks. ... we rolled a mile or so farther & encamped.*

We were informed that the cabins of the Lamentable Donner Party were also on our road, as well as also the Lake but one mile from the present trail. I immediately started off to look for these mournful monuments of human suffering. One [Graves Cabin] was only 150 yds. from our camp upon the left of the trail....After examining this I passed on one mile where the road went to the left in a more southerly direction. The old trail went on straight down the valley to the Lake which was distant one mile.... [August 22] In one mile we crossed a little stream to the left [Donner Creek], which runs from the Lake. Here we stopped, & cut sufficient grass for a feed. After rolling one mile farther we struck the foot of the mountain [i.e., the beginning of Coldstream Canyon].

To summarize, Bryarly travelled 1 mile from where he struck the Truckee River and ended up just 150 yards from the Graves Cabins. The next day he travelled another mile and reached the crossing of Donner Creek. This mileage only works if he struck the Truckee just before the beginning of Highway 40 Valley. We don't know exactly where the Graves Cabins were but certainly they couldn't have been very far west of Highway 40 Valley based on this mileage.

Alexander Love, August 22, 1849. *Drove about 12m [from Little Truckee River] to the main branch of the river [Truckee] and noond. Here is a steep rocky bluff that the road passes down. Started at 3 and drove 4 m. crossd a stream [Donner Creek] and campd.*

The distance of 4 miles from the descent to the Truckee River to the crossing of Donner Creek is higher than the distance from my proposed descent point, but it does fit the Wiggins descent point well. Since I believe that the bulk of the diaries fit my descent point best, then either Love gave an erroneous distance (not uncommon) or he took the alternate trail that followed the Truckee up the confluence with Donner Creek, then up Donner Creek to the crossing. That would give him a mileage of about 2.7 miles for which his 4 mile estimate is high but not impossible.

Edward Willis, August 24, 1849. *...Came again near to S. T. river [Truckee River]. Turned off to right angles from River up small valley. Passed the remains of cabin where Donner family perished in 1846 [Graves Cabins]... Crossed small branch of S. T. river [Donner Creek] about a mile below Truckee Lake & three miles from River...*

Three miles from the Truckee River to the ford of Donner Creek is a bit high if he took Highway 40 Valley, but exactly right if he took the alternate route via Donner Creek. This mileage also fits the Wiggins descent point.

Joseph Wood, August 28, 1849. *We then went on to a point where we again struck the river [Truckee River] but left it again soon and turned to the right [Highway 40 Valley].*

This statement is qualitative. But as with Bryant above the language suggests a very short distance along the river, certainly not a mile and a half.

Charles Parke, August 30, 1849. *Left camp this morning with the rising sun and traveled 4 miles when we came to a stream [Little Truckee River]... We soon left S.T. Valley [Little Truckee River] and traveled 4 miles over a rolling country into another valley where we nooned [Russel Valley]. ... Traveled 10 miles this afternoon, crossed another tributary [Prosser Creek], and reached S. T. [Truckee River] in 9 miles, when we again left the valley, driving over a spur [Highway 40 Valley] and returning in one mile, where we are now camped [Donner Creek]. 18 miles.*

The daily total of 18 miles are all accounted for in the daily account. Four miles to the Little Truckee River, 4 miles to Russel Valley, 10 miles to camp on Donner Creek which includes 9 miles to the Truckee River and 1 mile to Donner Creek. This distance fits my proposed descent point perfectly well but is not consistent with the Wiggins descent point.

John Lewis, September 1, 1849. *Drove 8 miles over a pretty good road, struck Truckees River 1 ½ before camping, the road did not follow it any distance.... We have encamped to night at a little valley where the cabins which were built by the unfortunate doner party, are still standing.*

Lewis puts the mileage from striking the Truckee River to the Graves Cabins at 1.5 miles which is quite accurate for my route but far too low for the Wiggins route.

Van Dorn, September 3, 1849. *Passed on and in 4 miles made the river again [Truckee River]. Nooned here, but no feed. ...Truckee here is rapid, with a rough and rocky bed – 150 to 200 feet about its average width. Remaining here 2 ½ hours we passed into the valley, tolerable roads, and in about 2 ½ or 3 miles we come to Campbell's Cabins at the foot of Truckee Lake [the Donner Lake Camp]... Near the foot, or within a 1/4 of a mile, are the remains of the fated Donner party, or Campbell's Cabins, as they are called.*

This is an accurate distance from the first touch of the Truckee River assuming he took my route. Van Dorn has distorted "cannibal cabins" into "Campbell's Cabins" near Donner Lake.

James Tate, September 8, 1849. Cross a creek in 5 miles [Prosser Creek] good grass[.] in ten miles [from mornings camp] came the river [Truckee River] again and nooned but little grass[.] it is a foaming torrent[.] the road here turns off here to the right through a narrow Valley and leaves the river for good[.]

The language strongly implies that the trail turns off very near to where it first touches the Truckee River.

Augustus Burbank, September 10, 1849. ...Crossed a beautiful mountain Stream 10 feet wide (a tributary of S. Trout) [Prosser Creek]. fair grass here. we passed a fine Spring on 1/2 a mile & to the left. we ascended again & after Some 4 miles we descended to the valley & neared the S. Trout river [Truckee River]. turning Short to the right, passing up an avenue we Came to a fine little Stream [Donner Creek], which is the outlet of Truckey or the mountain Lake

Burbank says the "turned short to the right." I take this to mean that the distance to the right turn was very short.

William Chamberlain, September 11, 1849. ... afternoon passed over several small valleys & came to what we supposed to be the Truckey river . We expected soon to come in sight of the lake but after following the stream 2 or 3 miles the road crossed a mountain [climbed into Coldstream Canyon] & came into another valley through which flowed a small rapid stream [Coldstream Creek].

Chamberlain puts the distance from the touch of the Truckee River to the start of the ascent into Coldstream Canyon as 2-3 miles which is fairly accurate for my route but is not enough miles if he had taken the Wiggins route.

Zimri Garwood, September 16, 1849. Late in the afternoon we struck Truckeys River again. We followed up the stream some two or three miles and camped at the crossing, where the branch has become quite near the spur of a mountain ranging towards the main ridge of the Sieranevada Mountain. This place is within a mile [of] Truckeys lake....

This description would fit either the main road up Highway 40 Valley or the alternate trail that travels all the way up Donner Creek. Given that he says they followed up the stream 2-3 miles I think it is a bit more likely that he took the alternate road. The description does not fit the Wiggins descent point as well.

Justus Lincoln, September 16th, 1849. ...5 Miles more we came to the River[.] g[ood] Camping before arriving to it[.] we descended a very Steep hill[.] after traveling up the River 1 ½ mile we passed Some buildings on the left [Graves Cabins], the houses that were Erected by the unfortunate Donner party... ½ mile More to Our Encampment which is ½ Mile below truckee lake [they are at Donner Creek Crossing]. September 17 Laid Bye... September 18 Our road at this point turns to the left for 1 miles over the point of bluff [start of Coldstream Canyon]

Lincoln records a distance of 1.5 miles from reaching the Truckee to the Graves Cabins, then a half mile more to the vicinity of the Donner Creek Crossing. This fits my routing well if he travels via Highway 40 Valley. His description does not fit the Wiggins route well.

Elisha Lewis, September 16, 1849. *About 3 o'clock descended a steep declivity and struck the main Truckee river[.] traveled up its bottom 1 mile[.] our trail left the river again [and] 1 ½ Miles from this place we camped being within 1/2 mile of the place where the Unfortunate Donner party attempted to winter[.]*

The distance of 1 mile from the first touch of the Truckee to where Lewis left the Truckee would fit the Wiggins descent point better than my proposed descent. However, the bulk of the diaries support my location so I think it likely that Lewis took the alternate route and kept along the Truckee River all the way to the confluence with Donner Creek. This is about a mile.

John McCarty, September 19, 1849. ... *5 miles from where we started, we came to the river [Truckee River], somewhat reduced in size with impetuous current dashing its foaming waters among large rocks of granite. We followed it for 1/2 mile, then bade adieu to salmon trout forever, leaving it to the left, passing up a pretty valley to the right. 2 miles from the river to the left of the road in a beautiful, thick grove of fir stands part of the first cabin built by the unfortunate Donner and Party, who were overtaken on the night of the 31st of Oct., 1846... This is a lovely and interesting place, indeed. 1 mile above this cabin is Truckee's Lake, ½ mile from which we commence ascending the Sierra...*

McCarty puts the distance from touching the Truckee to Highway 40 Valley at .5 miles. This is a bit more than I would expect given the references in the other diaries but perhaps he is rounding up. However, it is unlikely McCarty would write .5 miles if the actual distance were more like 1.5 miles (as required for the Wiggins route). It is also possible that he took the alternate route up Donner Creek.

Joel Cook, July 11 and 12, 1850. *Drove 26 miles and camped on the river bottom [summary of entire day. He camps on Truckee bottomland]... After traveling 12 miles we came to a large creek which we had to swim [Little Truckee River]. Six miles from there we came to one more creek but not so large [Prosser Creek]. Here I waded it and it came up to my arm pits. Good roads and plenty of clover for the horses. July 12th... Three miles from camp this morning we came to where the Donner party perished in the winter of 1846.*

On July 11 Cook must have camped on the Truckee near the Highway 40 Valley. Either descent would fit his description.

William Thompson, August 25 & 26, 1850. *Drove 4 miles and struck the main branch of truckie then drove 3 miles up it and then encamp close by an old Cabin [Graves Cabins] that was built by the emigrants 4 years ago... August 26. We started and crossed one branch [Donner Creek] drove half a Mile and came to a nother branch [Coldstream Creek]...*

The distance of three miles from reaching the Truckee River to a camp near the Graves Cabins fits the Wiggins descent point better than my proposed descent. I suggest that either Thompson was in error about his mileage or he took the alternate trail in which case his mileage would still be high but not by so much. Note that he does not mention any mileage before crossing Donner Creek on August 26th which might suggest that his camp was nearer to the Donner Crossing than to the Graves Cabins.

Cyrus Loveland, September 12, 1850. *After leaving this [i.e., Prosser Creek], three and a half miles to another little valley with a small branch running down a ravine to the right [Trout Creek]. One half mile up this valley to a large creek, which probably is the main fork of the Truckee. Here we left this creek and valley to the left and took up a very*

narrow valley to the right [Highway 40 Valley]. Four miles more to a considerable creek in a bottom and camped [Donner Creek]... This place is called Cannibal Cabin...One mile back of this we passed a cabin still standing, said to have been built by the same party.

Loveland's mileage of 4 miles from the start of Highway 40 Valley to the Donner Lake camp is too high. A more reasonable mileage would be 2.5 miles.

John Steele, September 15, 1850. I quote from the trail guide quoted in the Wiggins report. However, I could not find this trail guide anywhere else. The actual John Steele journal is not helpful in determining the route in this area. I give the date from the journal]. ...*After leaving this [Prosser Creek] the road is level, with the exception of the descent into the next valley [i.e., the Truckee River], which is very steep [to] Rock Valley 5 [miles] [Truckee River] You follow up this valley a short distance, then turn to right up a ravine [Highway 40 Valley] and strike the valley near Donner's Cabin 3 ½ [miles] [Graves Cabins] [to] last crossing of Truckie's River 1 [mile].*

On the one hand Steele says that the turn into Highway 40 Valley is only a short distance up the Truckee River. On the other hand he lists the mileage to the Graves Cabins as 3.5 miles which is far too high for my descent point, even assuming he took the alternate road. The mileage is even too high for the Wiggins descent point. I can only assume that the mileage is incorrect.

Micajah Littleton, September 27, 1850. ... *6 miles more you come within less than 100 yards of T River again and take of to the right up a little valey and come over into the valey where Doner and his company wintered and Suffered and Starved ...*

Littleton implies, as do so many other diarists that the turn into Highway 40 Valley occurs soon after reaching the Truckee River.

