

Summer 2011

# The Donner Party and the Rhetoric of Western Expansion

Mary Stuckey

Georgia State University, [mstuckey@gsu.edu](mailto:mstuckey@gsu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/communication\\_facpub](http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/communication_facpub)



Part of the [Communication Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Stuckey, Mary, "The Donner Party and the Rhetoric of Western Expansion" (2011). *Communication Faculty Publications*. 24.  
[http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/communication\\_facpub/24](http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/communication_facpub/24)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Communication at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communication Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gsu.edu).

# THE DONNER PARTY AND THE RHETORIC OF WESTWARD EXPANSION

---

MARY E. STUCKEY

*There have been numerous studies of the frontier myth as it operated in the early republic and throughout our history. As a result of this work, we know a lot about the frontier myth, its history, elements, and ideological functioning. We know less, however, about how that myth developed when its ideological elements met the empirical realities of western emigration. I argue that four specific cultural fictions—erasure, civilization, community, and democracy—are integral elements of the larger fiction of the American frontier myth. By understanding them through the vehicle of the Donner Party narratives, we can deepen our understanding of that myth and the ways in which it operates and resonates throughout the national culture and contributes to the development of American national identity.*

Whatever else one can say about the nature and development of American national identity, the idea of expansion is central to it.<sup>1</sup> The years between 1841 when John Bidwell led the first emigrants west and 1893 when Frederick Jackson Turner declared the frontier closed were especially critical.<sup>2</sup> These were the years of the wagon trains, when hundreds of thousands of people traversed the roughly 2,500 miles between Independence, Missouri, and the West Coast.<sup>3</sup> Many traveled on foot where

---

*MARY E. STUCKEY is Professor of Communication at Georgia State University in Atlanta. The author thanks Chuck and Linda McCarty, whose knowledge of early California history in general and the Donner Party in particular got this essay started and made it smarter. Thanks also go to Sam Perry, David Cheshier, Stephen J. Hartnett, and the anonymous reviewers for their help in improving the essay.*

---

© 2011 Michigan State University Board of Trustees. All rights reserved. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* Vol. 14, No. 2, 2011, pp. 229-260. ISSN 1094-8392.

the average pace was about one mile per hour—the pace dictated by the oxen pulling the heavily laden wagons. The trip took between four and seven months.<sup>4</sup> Given the hardships endured, the fear conquered, and the territory covered, it is no wonder that those who made the trek are remembered as integral to the nation, its history, and its identity.<sup>5</sup> Among the hundreds of caravans that made their way west, no single wagon train has garnered as much attention as the one that became known as the Donner Party.<sup>6</sup>

Certainly the Donner Party is not the typical story of western emigration. And yet, it is also understood as emblematic, a “frontier foundation myth.”<sup>7</sup> Ric Burns, writer, producer, and director of a film version of the Donner Party’s story, said, “The cannibalism becomes like the barker outside the tent. It’s what helps you bring people into the story, but then you end up telling them a story, once inside, that’s actually quite different from what the barker has led people to believe, which is a story of really kind of infinite pain and sorrow and not a story really of immorality and ghoulishness at all, but a story of suffering and stoicism and survival in the face of adversity.”<sup>8</sup> Frank Mullen Jr. agrees, arguing that “the lurid tales of cannibalism first attracted the public’s attention, but in a deeper sense, the emigrants’ two thousand-mile walk remains a metaphor of American history.”<sup>9</sup> Interestingly both unique and typical, the Donner Party is a useful case study through which we can better understand the rhetorical processes that undergirded an important element of that history.

For one thing, the travels and travails of the Donner Party are among the best documented and most well known of the pioneer narratives. We have extensive primary and secondary sources on their experiences.<sup>10</sup> The travels of the Donner Party remain one of the most prominent narratives of the western emigration.<sup>11</sup> Second, the Donner Party served as a weirdly optimistic version of emigration. A widely publicized letter from one of the children who endured that winter in the mountains to a cousin in the east concluded, “we have left everything but i dont cair for that we have got throw with our lives but Dont let this letter dish[e]a[r]ten anybody never take no cutofs and hurry along as fast as you can.”<sup>12</sup> Ostensibly a cautionary tale, the story of the Donners nonetheless urged others west.

Finally and most interestingly, the Donner Party and the western emigration are already collapsed into one another. The Donner Party becomes “a symbol of America’s westward expansion”<sup>13</sup>; moreover, the famous monument standing at Donner Lake is not a commemoration of the Donner Party specifically; it is known as “The Pioneer Monument.”<sup>14</sup> A spectacular homage

to paternalism, the monument depicts a man with a small child clinging to his leg, one arm upraised, shielding his eyes against the western sun while embracing and protecting a woman. She is bent forward, cradling an infant, accepting the man's protection and urging herself west. The entire family is considerably larger than life-sized, as befits those who symbolize the entire western emigration. The Donner Party is integral to the monument only in that the base of the statue is 22 feet high, the presumed depth of snow in the Sierra during the winter of 1846, and buried within the base are artifacts from the various cabins sited on what we now call Donner Lake. The emblematic pioneers literally stand upon the legacy of the Donner Party, whose artifacts are also contained by the greater monument. The statue thus invites us to "remember to forget": remember the heroism of the pioneers, and forget the details of the suffering many of them endured. Those details become abstracted, contained within the larger narrative of success and dominance of the continent.<sup>15</sup> For all of these reasons, the Donner Party can be understood as a single case study that illuminates the rhetorical processes undergirding the development and expansion of the American nation during this critical period.

I argue in this essay that the western emigration, seen here through the lens of the Donner Party, contains several important aspects of the rhetorical development of American national identity.<sup>16</sup> Known for its association with cannibalism, the Donner Party is better understood as a complicated narrative of western emigration that captures both the perils and opportunities of expansion.<sup>17</sup> Even as it acted as a cautionary tale of the perils of emigration, the Donner Party story also sheds light on national arguments regarding expansion and the cultural fictions underpinning those arguments.

I take as my starting point the notion that the frontier myth functions as "America's secular creation story."<sup>18</sup> This myth can be understood as amalgamating many of our national cultural fictions, or the "stories, norms, explanations, icons, justifications, and sustaining myths"<sup>19</sup> created by a society, which are the building blocks of national identity. These fictions are used by different people at different times, to differing political ends.<sup>20</sup> My purpose in this essay is to uncover the ways in which some of these fictions were deployed as the nation expanded in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> I argue that four specific cultural fictions—erasure, civilization, community, and democracy—are integral elements of the larger fiction of the American frontier myth. By understanding them through the vehicle of the Donner Party narratives, we can deepen our understanding of that myth and the

ways in which it operates and resonates throughout the national culture and contributes to the development of national identity.

There have been numerous studies of the frontier myth as it operated in the early republic and throughout our history. As a result of this work, we know a lot about the frontier myth, its history, elements, and ideological functioning.<sup>22</sup> We know less, however, about how that myth developed when its ideological elements met the realities of western emigration. In the Donner Party's story, those ideological elements met specific affirmations and challenges; how those affirmations and challenges were resolved tells us a great deal about the ideological development of the frontier myth and its contribution to national identity.

First, the story involves the erasure of indigenous peoples and other "nonwhites." American Indians are central to the frontier myth but tangential to the Donner story, and do not appear as those whose loss becomes the nation's gain. And of course, the pass itself, once known as Truckee Pass, originally named in (mispronounced) honor of a local Paiute, is now Donner Pass—an erasure accomplished through naming as well as through occupation. This erasure allows non-Indians to claim the continent, which is understood as being "empty" prior to conquest. The empty continent thus becomes a blank slate onto which "American" history can be written.

Second, it is a story of the triumph of civilization. John Tirman has recently defined the frontier myth as "the expansion of American values, the national effort to tame faraway places, the promise of a bounty just over the horizon, and the essential virtue of the American people who explore and settle these frontiers."<sup>23</sup> The frontier myth is rooted in the imperative of spreading American civilization. Even in the wilderness and under the most stressful of situations, in the accounts of the Donner Party the survival of civilization is paramount. If we understand "civilization" as conquering passion by repressing appetite, the Donner Party becomes an important test of America's ability to civilize the frontier.

Third, the story of the Donner Party is a story of the triumph of community as the narrative emphasizes the values that sustained frontier communities. As Janice Hocker Rushing pointed out, the frontier myth includes an important set of tensions between individualism and community.<sup>24</sup> Individual aggression and achievement are acceptable, according to Rushing, when they serve the larger community.<sup>25</sup> The importance of communal values are especially clear in the treatment of the heroes and villains of the story, most notably, Louis Keseberg,<sup>26</sup> Charles Stanton, Tamsen Donner,<sup>27</sup> and

James Reed, all of whom can be understood through the ways they represent frontier virtues or vices.

Finally, the Donner Party is a story of the triumph of democracy and provides examples of the structures necessary for a successful democracy on a continental scale. This story contrasts the democratic urge for mobility with the price of immobility. That is, in a nation that has always sought a solution to its problems in both geographical and ideological expansion, the idea of being trapped had—and continues to have—particular resonance. The structures of American democracy are those that facilitate movement. Inaction carries with it particular sorts of lessons for how the American nation might best be understood.

These four elements—erasure, civilization, community, and democracy—all served the needs of a burgeoning nation. Their place in the Donner narrative reinforced or challenged important cultural fictions, all of which are integral to the frontier myth, helping to justify the conquest of a continent and contributing to the development of American national identity. My argument unfolds in three parts. First, I provide a brief overview of the Donner Party saga. Second, I analyze the narratives of the Donner Party in terms of the four cultural fictions that it offers as way of understanding the larger conversation about the frontier myth and national expansion. I conclude with a discussion about how these fictions help us understand the rhetorics of westward expansion, the frontier myth, and American national identity.

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DONNER PARTY

The two Donner families, headed by George and his brother Jacob, along with the family of John Reed and their hired help, left Springfield, Illinois, in April 1846, and headed for Independence, Missouri, the edge of the frontier. Here, the nation existed in microcosm: a cacophony of languages, classes, ethnicities, and races. As with all wagon trains, the one that would become the Donner Party was a collection of drastically different people: “Mexican frontiersmen and Irish, English, and German emigrants; Catholics, Protestants, and Mormons; elders and infants; and a healthy majority of middle-class Americans.”<sup>28</sup> A mixed group, with little to tie them together, they were united only by the necessity of traveling together if they were to travel safely.<sup>29</sup>

The Donners and Reeds joined a group under the captainship of Colonel William Henry Russell, and left Independence in early May 1846. In June,

Russell resigned as leader, citing ill health. The group then elected former Missouri Governor Lilburn Boggs captain. His leadership lasted until the party's first crucial decision, whether to follow the existing road and head for Fort Hall, bearing north into Oregon and then down into California, or to chance a newer route. That route, promoted by Lansford Hastings, cut south across the Wasatch Mountains to Fort Bridger and below the Great Salt Lake, across the salt flats, and into California over the Truckee (now Donner) Pass. Hastings had never taken this route himself, a fact that did nothing to dim his enthusiasm for it.<sup>30</sup> Despite warnings from those in a position to know, as well as the misgivings of some within his own party, Reed was insistent that the "Hastings cutoff" would be faster and more efficient than the alternative. When Boggs chose to go north through Oregon, the members of the 20 remaining wagons, roughly 85 people, elected George Donner captain and officially became the Donner Party.

The Hastings cutoff was a disastrous choice. Lacking a road, or anything approximating a road, the men of the Donner Party had to cut a new trail through some of the most difficult terrain in the west.<sup>31</sup> Heavily laden wagons had to be pulled through wooded mountain passes, up and down deep and treacherous gorges. The effort exhausted the men, frayed tempers, strained resources, and required valuable time. Yet, having accomplished this feat, the party still had to cross the alkaline desert to the west of what is now Salt Lake City, a distance of some 80 miles without shelter, water, or shade. During the heat of the day, the sun turned the salt flats to mire. When it lacked viscosity, it became dry acidic dust, burning and parching everything it touched. The oxen, desperate for water, eventually stampeded, and nearly forty oxen were lost. Members of the party were forced to abandon their wagons, much impoverished and increasingly desperate. Two men, Charles Stanton and William McCutchen,<sup>32</sup> volunteered to ride ahead to California and bring back sorely needed supplies.

The perils of the cutoff were not yet exhausted, however. The route also involved a circuitous detour around the Ruby Mountains, costing the Party another nine days. Interpersonal relations became increasingly difficult.<sup>33</sup> In the midst of one argument, John Reed struck and accidentally killed another man. Initially, the company wanted to execute Reed, but settled for exiling him—a decision that could very well have been tantamount to a death sentence. Taking only a single companion, and leaving his family behind, Reed headed for Sutter's Fort.

Time was increasingly against the Party. Most emigrants left Missouri

in April or May, as soon as the spring rains stopped and the grass needed to feed the oxen began to grow, and reached Oregon some seven months later, before the snows began in the High Sierra.<sup>34</sup> The Donner Party, delayed in the Wasatch, in the salt flats, and again in the detour around the Ruby Mountains, losing wagons, cattle, horses, and oxen as they made their tortuous trek, were becoming dangerously late as they approached the last obstacle, the Sierra Nevada,<sup>35</sup> the largest single mountain range in the Lower Forty-Eight. The west face of the mountains is difficult enough to travel. From Truckee (now Donner) Pass, which stands at some 7,000 feet, the mountains slope slowly and treacherously down to Bear Valley and the Sacramento Valley. The eastern face, however, is another matter entirely. Steep and forbidding, it rises sharply upward and is both dangerous and difficult to transverse.

Because of an accident to George Donner, both Donner families were forced to winter in Alder Creek Meadows, some six miles from the forward camp, at what is now called Donner Lake.<sup>36</sup> Those in the more forward party met up with Stanton, who had returned with supplies and two Miwok Indians, Luis and Salvador, to help with the mules.<sup>37</sup> Together, this group attempted to cross the pass. But the emigrants were tired, the children were young, the mountain air was thin, and the snow was heavy. Defeated, they turned back to the lake. Within hours, the pass was closed. Unseasonably early, winter arrived in the High Sierra.<sup>38</sup>

The next months were full of attempts by the emigrants to escape the mountains and by the Californians to provide aid. In the most important attempt at escape, called “the Forlorn Hope,”<sup>39</sup> 15 people, including Stanton and the Miwoks, left the lake on snowshoes in a desperate attempt to flee the mountains.<sup>40</sup> They became lost and disoriented, ran out of supplies, and when members of the party died, the survivors cannibalized the dead. Luis and Salvador either died or were killed and were used for food as well. Stanton, snow-blind and exhausted, was left to die alone in the snow. After 23 days of travel and eight deaths, seven people struggled out of the mountains and were safe in California at last.

At no time were the emigrants forgotten by their more fortunate countrymen. Four relief parties risked the Sierra. Reed himself participated in two of them. Some of the rescuers risked the trip because they had left family in the mountains. Others felt morally obligated to do so. Still others did it for the money.<sup>41</sup> All of them reported horrific conditions at both camps—the mutilated bodies of the dead, filthy children dazed with hunger, and unbelievable squalor.<sup>42</sup>



At one point, the Donner Party included 85 people. By the time they became snowbound, there were still 81 left: 25 men, 15 women, and 41 children, six of whom were nursing infants. Barely half of them made it through the winter.<sup>43</sup> It was not the prosperous who lived; the Donner families, among the wealthiest of those trapped, were hit the hardest. Of the 16 Donners who began the trek, all four adults and four of their children died. The nine Breens, on the other hand, among the poorest of the emigrants, all survived. Women survived at greater rates than did men. But one fact stands out most clearly: without family, you died.<sup>44</sup> Authors have not been reluctant to draw a lesson from this fact: “The Donner Party,” writes Ethan Rarick, “is not merely a story of how hard people will struggle to survive, but of how much they need each other if they are going to succeed.”<sup>45</sup> The story of the Donner Party is part of the greater morality tale of western expansion. Its contours tell us a great deal about how that tale unfolded to justify American continental expansion and a sense of identity based on the premises behind that expansion.

## EXPANDING THE NATION

From the earliest days of the republic, the United States was a nation that depended upon growth.<sup>46</sup> Especially in the 1840s, when emigration entailed the sorts of hardship that it did, more than material gain was at stake. This can be best understood by looking at how the Donner Party narratives reveal the cultural fictions at work behind the arguments for national expansion: the erasure of indigenous peoples and others, the notion of citizenship, the importance of community, and the appropriate structures of democracy. Together, these elements constitute the foundation of the frontier myth, and thus contribute to the development of American national identity.

### *THE POLITICS OF ERASURE*

Interestingly, the Donner Party was not beset by those traditional foils of the frontier myth, American Indians. They did have a few encounters with various indigenous peoples on the way west, who served as both minor hindrances and helpers, but by and large, American Indians played a subsidiary role in the Donner story. Some American Indians (probably Paiutes) were presumed to have stolen or killed some of the oxen and cattle belonging to members of the Party, thereby making a difficult situation worse, but there is no suggestion

that indigenous people were responsible for the Party's plight. Indeed, Virginia Reed Murphy remembered suffering "vastly more from fear of the Indians before starting than we did on the plains,"<sup>47</sup> and in general, wagon trains were less likely to be molested than Hollywood would have one believe.<sup>48</sup>

Once leaving the plains, the Donner Party had few encounters with indigenous peoples. One Indian wandered through the lakeside camp, offered a few tubers, and disappeared. Other Indians may have known of the emigrants' presence in the mountains, but were too afraid to offer them help.<sup>49</sup> When one small group of emigrants finally made it out of the mountains, they were found and probably saved by the ministrations of Miwoks, who fed them and helped them to a non-Indian settlement.

By far, the most significant role played by indigenous people in the Donner Party story is that of two Miwoks, Luis and Salvador, sent from Fort Sutter as part of the first relief party. In trying to help the emigrants escape the mountains, they, along with the rest of the party, became lost. They either died of starvation or were killed for food for the emigrants.<sup>50</sup> These American Indians were robbed of their names, replaced with those of their conquerors' choosing. In addition, they were never given a voice. Even in the fictionalized versions of the story, they are rendered mute. American Indians are portrayed as communicating through primitive signs, and even then, they are poorly understood. Throughout the story of the Donner Party, indigenous peoples are seen as primitive (some Plains Indians admire a mirror, much to the Party's condescending amusement), as exotic (on the rare encounters, a good deal is made of their strangeness), and as vaguely threatening (when they came to the winter camp bringing a small amount of food, they frightened the emigrants even as they were frightened by them).<sup>51</sup>

The 1840s were a time of virtually unchallenged belief in white supremacy. The cultural fiction of white superiority was clear in virtually every aspect of American life: its literature, painting, and politics.<sup>52</sup> American Indians were often rendered invisible and were understood as doomed.<sup>53</sup> Importantly, this doom was brought about less by the invidious actions of whites on the frontier and more by the providential actions of a benign God, working in His mysterious ways to clear the continent for white settlement.<sup>54</sup> The narratives of the Donner Party all support this important cultural fiction, rendering American Indians as menial assistants to whites in some cases, vaguely exotic threats in others, but generally understanding the frontier as all but empty, there for the taking by those best suited to conquer and control it.

The frontier myth offers two versions of white American relations with

indigenous peoples. In the first, American Indians are savages, the foil against which the American character was built and tested. In the other, more benign interpretation of the frontier myth, western expansion depends not on the conquest of over 500 distinct nations requiring the expenditure of vast resources over an extended period of time, but on a fiction that the continent was empty prior to the arrival of Americans. The fiction of the “wide open spaces” of the west was confirmed by the Donner story, in that they rarely met American Indians at all. When indigenous people were encountered, they were voiceless, exotic, savage, and in need of the civilizing influences and material goods Americans could bring west. They had little agency and were essentially the background against which the emigration narrative took place.

#### *THE TRIUMPH OF CIVILIZATION: CONTROLLING APPETITES*

Hunger is the most obvious fact and the dominating trope of the Donner Party’s story. Interestingly, when the first accounts of the story were written, the emigrants were portrayed as sympathetic, desperately in need of aid.<sup>55</sup> Once the rescue had been accomplished, however, a different story began to circulate, one that emphasized the more horrific details of cannibalism. As one author put it, “The story of the Donner Party went from paper to paper and mouth to mouth, spreading across the country in a titillating admixture of exaggeration, half-truth, and lie. The tall tales worsened in the retelling, as tall tales always do.”<sup>56</sup> Significantly, these stories featured the loss of humanity among the emigrants. According to these narratives, as the emigrants’ hunger worsened, so did their behavior. They were accused of making cold determinations about the relative merits of their companions as food, and mothers were charged with denying food to children and later feasting upon them.<sup>57</sup> The emigrants fell victim to their hunger, and were thus reviled as negative exemplars of the restraint necessary for civilization.<sup>58</sup>

In the frontier myth, American expansion is in many ways about control—controlling the wilderness, controlling indigenous peoples (and others), and controlling events. To justify such control, some element of self-control had to be demonstrated. Those seeking to establish control over the frontier, then, worked within a cultural fiction that, unlike American Indians, for instance, white Americans were capable of self-control and thus suited to control the continent.<sup>59</sup> The expansion of the American nation was justified on the idea that it was somehow benevolent—the gifts associated with “America” and with its presumptive civilization were to be disseminated

across the continent. This idea has always been part of the justification for conquest and colonization in the Americas<sup>60</sup> and is a vital component of the ideology of empire in general.<sup>61</sup> American Indians, African Americans, and all sorts of Others were castigated and deemed unworthy as participants in the American polity on the grounds of their appetites. Either they were too weak (as in the case of some analyses of indigenous peoples) or too strong (often the case in negative depictions of African Americans).<sup>62</sup> Anglo-Americans, in contrast, had just the right mix—they were passionate enough to want land and to sacrifice to settle it, but not so passionate as to become subservient to their passions. They were masters of their appetites and were thus suited to master the continent.

The Donner Party threatened that cultural fiction at its very roots. The idea that civilization and order depended on the control of appetite goes back at least as far as the founding of the nation. In *Federalist* #15, for instance, Alexander Hamilton asked, “Why has government been instituted at all?” and then answered, “Because the passions of men will not conform to the dictates of reason and justice, without constraint.”<sup>63</sup> Order depended upon the control of passion, and government provided that control. Thus, the expansion of the American polity could be defended on the grounds that through such expansion, order could be extended across the continent.<sup>64</sup> Control—both external and internal—was a dominant theme of the antebellum nation and undergirded conversations about the national character and its relationship to the American continent.

Self-control was considered an important indicator of civilization. Slavery was condemned not least because of the temptations it offered to slave owners,<sup>65</sup> while those slave owners themselves fretted incessantly about the ways and means of controlling slaves.<sup>66</sup> In Northern cities, narratives about inebriation and “demon rum” were among the most popular of the 1840s and 1850s, and dramas like *The Drunkard* played to packed houses.<sup>67</sup> These narratives were also often anti-immigrant, and they displayed both the cultural fear of the Other as well as the idea that those others were appropriately feared because they lacked the self-control needed for democracy. For example, Alexis de Tocqueville associated both murder and mayhem with strong drink, as well as with the “new states of the Southwest,” for civilization had a looser hold as one journeyed south and west, and the frontier was a place where control was often lacking.<sup>68</sup>

Those who were capable of exerting self-control were more likely to be able to exert control over the external environment. They were the ones best able

to convert the “empty wilderness” into a profitable and productive agrarian paradise. Indeed, Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* has a section entitled, “American Democracy’s Power of Self-Control,” in which he explicitly links whiteness, self-control, and the mastery of territory. Contemplating the tendency of American Indian nations to “vanish,” and the equally frequent revolutions and “convulsions” in South America, Tocqueville even wonders if such types would be better served by despotism.<sup>69</sup> Clearly these “primitives” had no business managing the continent. The developing fiction of the frontier, then, combined erasure and white supremacy and insisted that given their superiority, whites were best suited to continental expansion.

The Donner Party challenged this cultural fiction of control in two ways. First, there was a materially based problem. Members of the Donner Party were pushed to horrific extremes because of their hunger.<sup>70</sup> Unsatisfied hunger became the dominant fact of their lives. Those who starved in the mountains demonstrated that they were literally out of their element and suffered accordingly. If Americans were going to be able to establish control over the frontier, at a minimum they needed to be able to survive there. The fate of the Donner Party called into question the cultural fiction that on a pragmatic and material level, Americans were a dependably self-reliant people, able to adapt to circumstances and thus better able than their competitors (Americans Indians, the Spanish) to colonize the frontier.

Self-reliance was a dominant theme of the age. How-to manuals were among the most popular books sold during the 1840s.<sup>71</sup> Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, enormously popular during these years, wrote of the “Village Blacksmith,” valorized because “his brow is wet with honest sweat / he earns whate’er he can / and looks the whole world in the face / for he owes not any man.” The Transcendentalists were beginning to write of the importance of self-reliance (Emerson published his essay of that title in 1841<sup>72</sup>) and the need to look to one’s self for moral and political truth. Self-reliance however, depends upon a certain amount of capability: to be self-sufficient, one has to have “know how.”<sup>73</sup> Thoreau’s 1845 experiment at Walden seemed to indicate that such independence was possible even for the most urban of Americans.

But the Donner Party failed at their experiment. They lacked the knowledge to survive in salt flats, and so they lost both oxen and wagons. The emigrants did not know that they needed to pen their oxen, and so they lost what few remained by the time they were trapped. They did not know how to survive a Sierra winter or how to escape once they were trapped in one, and they lacked the knowledge for self-reliance on the frontier. They were thus both

a cautionary tale to those who would attempt continental conquest and a threat to the cultural fictions that supported that conquest.

Beyond the problems posed by the Donner Party as a material matter, there was also a metaphorical problem. Because of their hunger, the members of the Donner Party lost their ability to behave in a civilized manner, and their community rapidly deteriorated. This was the great threat of the frontier—the fear that as the nation expanded, its appetites would become ungovernable and civilization would be lost. This theme was also a prominent one throughout the 1840s. For example, it appears in the popular literature of the day, *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840) and *Typee* (1846), with each offering stark contrasts between civilization and savagery. Such stories also indicated how easy it was for a “civilized” person to be tempted into savagery—not only to witness, but to be seduced by the wilderness. The Donner Party members were certainly not seduced by their version of the savage frontier, but they did come perilously close to falling into savagery themselves, thereby threatening the fiction that whites were bringing civilization to the wilderness.

In the face of that threat, western settlers began to condemn the members of the Donner Party roundly and vociferously, and through that condemnation, demonstrated that they were sensible of the threat and willing to defend the precepts of civilization. By exaggerating the events and then criticizing those who had resorted to cannibalizing the dead, other Californians—and indeed other Americans—could publicly display their own sensibility, their own civilization. Through such display they could preserve the fiction that continental conquest was a benign and civilizing act, brought about by those who were primarily interested in community, not individual material gain.<sup>74</sup>

The frontier myth depended first upon the erasure of the continents’ indigenous people, either by rendering them invisible or by assimilating or exterminating them. Second, it required that Americans be seen as an appropriately masterful and civilizing force, who were both competent to conquer the wilderness and justified in doing so by providing a virtuous alternative to the savage and untamed wilds. Americans did not merely impose order on the continent; they rendered it virtuous through their influence.

#### *THE TRIUMPH OF COMMUNITY: SACRIFICE FOR THE COMMON GOOD*

The Donner Party suffered from the natural fraying of tempers caused by the very fact of having left “civilization” and its attendant structures behind. Emigrants were under almost constant stress, and had few ways to relieve

that stress. The members of the Donner Party had their share of conflict long before they ever got to the High Sierra. In the plethora of narratives of the conflicts they endured, strikingly similar cases are made for categorizing those members as heroes or villains. The accuracy of these portrayals is of less interest than are the characteristics imputed to these heroes and villains, for in these narratives a case is also being made for the kind of character necessary to sustain community in the wilderness. As Tocqueville noted, as a frontier nation the United States was profoundly individualistic. That individualism, however, could degenerate into egoism.<sup>75</sup> The cure for egoism was to involve everyone in a shared public life, to recognize that all citizens had obligations to one another and a common interest.<sup>76</sup> The highest manifestation of this commitment is sacrifice, the willingness to put communitarian interests above self-interest.<sup>77</sup>

One of the most important cultural fictions surrounding western expansion is the idea that those who settled the frontier were essentially virtuous.<sup>78</sup> Westward expansion was justified in some instances as a Christianizing, and thus benevolent, force.<sup>79</sup> James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* (1823–1841) provide contrasting but equally typical examples of the valorization of frontier and woodsman virtues contrasted to those of civilized society. His hero Natty Bumppo is closely allied to native peoples, and thus absorbs their virtues even as he Christianizes and whitens the frontier.<sup>80</sup> Morality tales of all kinds were hugely popular during these years,<sup>81</sup> and the Donner story was often read as another such tale in which the virtuous were rewarded and the guilty punished. The frontier virtues in question are an interesting mixture of self-reliance and individualism accompanied by a willingness to sacrifice for the community.

One of the earliest stories concerning the Donner Party appeared in the *California Star*, a publication out of Yerba Buena (San Francisco). In it, the author clearly finds the members of the party deficient in the qualities necessary for a frontier democracy. Citing a source who “is well-qualified to judge,” the article states, “the whole party might have reached the California valley [Sutter’s Fort] before the first fall of snow, if the men had exerted themselves as they should have done. Nothing but a contrary and contentious disposition on the part of some of the men belonging to the party prevented them from getting in as soon as any of the first companies.”<sup>82</sup> According to this story, the men of the Donner Party lacked the necessary virtues required for the establishment of a frontier empire. They were unwilling to exert themselves, and they were both contrary and contentious. C. F. McGlashan offered a

similar analysis, suggesting “the dissension existing in the company, and the petty differences of opinion and interest, were the fundamental causes of the calamities which befell the Donner Party.”<sup>83</sup> They were not worthy so the land itself punished them.<sup>84</sup>

Other elements of these narratives reveal a more nuanced understanding of how the members of the Donner Party functioned as exemplars of American expansion. These elements reveal that some members of the Party were villainous, others heroic, and still others more complicated. The single feature that clearly distinguishes between these characters is their willingness to sacrifice, to uphold the values of individualism, not of egoism.

■ **THE VILLAINOUS LOUIS KESEBERG.** Without doubt, Louis Keseberg was the most reviled person associated with the Donner Party. Accused of beating his wife and looting a Lakota grave during the journey west, he was accused of far worse at its end.<sup>85</sup> In the most benign versions, he was guilty only of selfish cravenness and of practicing cannibalism. In other versions he was a robber, a multiple murderer, and a madman.<sup>86</sup> Some argued that he participated in the killing of one emigrant for money.<sup>87</sup> Worse, when Tamsen Donner, who had refused to leave her injured husband’s side, was finally widowed, she made her way from the Alder Creek camp to Keseberg’s lean-to by the lake. Delirious and starving, exhausted from the ordeal of her husband’s death and the six-mile hike, she died there. Keseberg cannibalized her body, and he was accused of killing her and stealing what was left of the family money. He was also thought to have murdered children to use them as food.<sup>88</sup> He was further vilified for allegedly boasting of his cannibalism, an allegation made all the more gruesome by the fact, that once safe in California, he opened a restaurant.

Keseberg had not been considered well enough to leave with the third relief party and had been left alone in the midst of terrible squalor waiting for the fourth and final relief effort. Certainly, this experience must have had an impact upon him. Undoubtedly, he cannibalized Tamsen Donner. But not even her own children believed that he murdered her.<sup>89</sup> Yet he was an ideal counterexample of the proper spirit of western empire. He was “foreign,” grasping, selfish, angry, and lazy. He was willing to sacrifice others, but unwilling to sacrifice himself for the community. He offered little to the community but did not hesitate to take—literally—all that its members could offer to him.

Importantly, Keseberg was German. A fairly recent immigrant, he



spoke with an accent and was thus imperfectly assimilated. Others among the party were similarly foreign, leading Tamsen Donner, George's wife, to comment in a letter to her sister, "We have of the best people in our company and some, too, that are not so good."<sup>90</sup> Given the prevalence of racial and ethnic stereotypes, Keseberg may have been one of those considered "not so good"; he was an outsider, alien, an other. Despite his ethnicity, the narratives generally place him outside the community as a result of his own actions rather than because of his ethnic origin. The story of immigration and assimilation is, after all, a story of transformation—by adopting the manners and mores of the new nation, "immigrants" can become "Americans."<sup>91</sup> There was nothing in Keseberg's behavior that indicated a willingness to transform. He was depicted as often angry, alienating James Reed and others by his brutality toward his wife.<sup>92</sup> He abandoned "Old Man" Hardcoop,<sup>93</sup> an elderly member of the party, in the desert crossing and was implicated in the murder of another, Jacob Wolfinger.<sup>94</sup> In the first instance, the ostensible motive was self-preservation—Hardcoop was old and feeble and would have slowed his progress through the desert. In the second instance, it was greed—Wolfinger was robbed. In both cases, Keseberg, associated with the Old World and its values, lacked the virtues necessary for the establishment of a democratic nation on a continental scale. He thought only of himself and not at all of the greater good. He took frontier individualism to the extreme of egoism.

■ **THE HEROIC CHARLES STANTON.** The perfect foil to the Old World Keseberg was Charles Stanton, symbol of New World virtues, and the most obvious and uncomplicated hero of the Donner Party saga. As a cultural fiction, men like him made the expansion of the nation inevitable and reasonable because they exemplified frontier virtues and were both individually self-reliant and dedicated to the greater community. In every account of the Donner Party, Stanton is valorized. In at least one telling, he was held up as the model of the ideal frontier character: "Extremity can bring out the worst in the human character, but there is ample evidence in the story of the Donner Party that extremity can also be a catalyst for courage and faith of heroic proportions. Throughout the diaries and writings of the Donner Party members, one can read of the supreme sacrifices made for the welfare of others. Stanton's willingness to return with supplies to the struggling wagon train even though he had no family amongst the emigrants to relieve is one example."<sup>95</sup> Others were even more poetic: "Through it all, Stanton stood as immutable as the

granite mountains beneath his feet.”<sup>96</sup> According to another, “He is a bachelor without family or goods left on the trail and has no reason to return. No reason but honor.”<sup>97</sup> Another called him “ever-brave, courageous, lion-hearted. . . . He was a hero of the highest, noblest, grandest stamp.”<sup>98</sup>

Stanton’s claim to valor was simple: he volunteered to go ahead to California to bring supplies back—a dangerous undertaking.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, when he set off from Sutter’s Fort with supplies for the remaining members of the wagon train, no member of his family was among them. He had no compelling self-interested motive in returning. In addition, he left Fort Sutter before the worst was known. It was entirely possible that the emigrants had enough cattle and oxen to survive the winter, and it was not clear that such extremes would be called for—snow had yet to close Truckee Pass. He could have been safe, and he chose to risk the trip into the Sierra. That he died in the process only underlines the moral: community cannot survive without sacrifice. Communities will valorize those who make sacrifices for the greater good. Nothing else about Stanton really matters, and he plays a relatively small role in the overall narratives of the Donner Party. His figurative importance lies in the fact that he came back and he died. He represents individualism over egoism, and that representation is at the core of the frontier myth.<sup>100</sup>

■ **FRONTIER HEROINE: TAMSEN DONNER.** Mrs. George Donner is in many ways the female counterpart to Charles Stanton. Although she plays a much greater part in the Donner saga, she too is best remembered for her willingness to die. She was the archetypal frontier woman, a schoolteacher who wanted to bring civilization, in the form of learning, west. She was a botanist and collected specimens of plants along the trail. She kept a journal (which was never recovered), and she was apparently a paragon of all the domestic arts. Before sending her children off with one of the relief parties, she made sure they were well-dressed. And even in the worst of the deprivations at Alder Creek, “Tamzene struggled for a semblance of domesticity. Every morning, she took her daughters in her lap and brushed out their hair. School-teacher to the core, she entertained them with Bible stories as she loosened the tangles. Often she chose Joseph’s faithful persistence through years of slavery or Daniel’s deliverance from the fearsome horrors of the lions’ den—tales of tribulation and perseverance and eventual triumph.”<sup>101</sup> In this telling, Tamsen is the epitome of female virtue. She was a fond mother, committed to the domestic hearth even under impossible circumstances, and she was bringing civilization in the form of learning and religion to the uncivilized

west. Doomed herself, she nevertheless offers hope and perseverance to Americans: “No one will ever read the history of the Donner Party without greatly loving and reverencing the character of this faithful wife.”<sup>102</sup> She was forgiven even her wealth, because unlike James Reed, she and her husband were modest, unassuming, and simple.

Tamsen is consistently portrayed as devoted and steadfast.<sup>103</sup> Initially unwilling to go west, she did not complain once her husband decided on the trip. Moreover, she nursed him throughout the illness caused by his injured arm, and refused to leave him to die alone, even though she knew this choice would likely doom her as well. Forced to choose between her husband and her children, she first did her best to see the children were taken care of and then went back to George. She had all the virtues of a frontier woman: strength, resolve, devotion, and subservience. She served as a model for the traits that were expected of women on the frontier and in the expanding nation.<sup>104</sup>

■ **THE COMPLICATED JAMES REED.** The accounts of James Reed indicate that he combined elements of villainy and heroism, and thus provide examples of both the virtues and vices of an emigrant democrat. Guilty of the sin of pride and of failing to be appropriately democratic at the outset of the trip, he was denied a formal leadership position.<sup>105</sup> One of the group’s more prosperous members, he also had a tendency to flaunt both his wealth and his talents, and created no small amount of resentment as a result.<sup>106</sup> A natural leader, he was also a natural problem for a frontier democracy—he had, perhaps, a little too much civilization as understood in the citified East—he was not quite Western enough. But he was not quite a villain, either.

In most accounts, he is treated as a *de facto* leader, and is thus often blamed for the decision to take the Hastings cutoff.<sup>107</sup> His reply to the warnings of James Clyman, for instance, that, “there is a nigher route,” is one of the more often-quoted pieces of Donner lore, appearing in virtually every retelling of the story. He exemplified a sort of stubborn insistence on the merits of the written word above lived experience and personal judgment that proved both fatal and instructive. Effete city folk—Easterners and Europeans—could afford to rely on “book-learning.” American wisdom was non—if not positively—anti-intellectual.<sup>108</sup> Prototypical American wisdom was practical. Reliance on books—even books about the frontier—rather than the actual experiences of those who knew the land, was considered an inappropriate choice.

But Reed was not entirely without frontier virtues. One author, for instance, notes that he was “full of life and enthusiasm, fearless of danger, he was ready at all times to risk his life for the company’s welfare.”<sup>109</sup> He had the critical trait: the willingness to sacrifice for the community. In addition, when he was exiled from the party, he was able to survive the trek to California. He was thus appropriately self-reliant. Having made it to Sutter’s Fort, he first staked claims to land in his name and in that of his family members. Should they survive the journey, they would be assured of land in California. He then attempted to bring supplies back to those who had banished—and in some cases, sought to execute—him. He was both competent and compassionate.

His efforts at relief were at first delayed by the onset of the Bear Flag Rebellion and the war with Mexico. Like nearly all other American men in California, Reed marched south to engage the Mexicans. Once Los Angeles was secure, Reed worked valiantly to relieve both his family members and the rest of the party. In one of the saga’s most touching moments, Reed, as part of the third relief party, found Keseberg, who was among the most eager advocates of Reed’s execution rather than exile from the wagon train. Keseberg had, by this time, been suffering for months. Claiming illness, he had not left his shelter. The stench and accompanying degradation must have been appalling, even in this most appalling context. Reed, who had every reason to wish Keseberg ill, bathed and fed him with his own hands, providing a clear illustration of the sort of supremely civilized behavior that was possible for Americans even in the west.<sup>110</sup>

The Donner Party thus offered examples of the behaviors and attitudes that would underpin continental conquest.<sup>111</sup> Stanton offers us an uncomplicated example of frontier heroism and the best sort of individualism. Keseberg provides an equally uncomplicated example of the failure associated with untrammelled egoism. Donner is an exemplar of frontier and American womanhood, and Reed suggests a more nuanced view of the nature of frontier community—at once proud and grasping, but capable of endurance, sacrifice, and compassion. Pioneers are often honored for their sacrifices and the virtues that served to build the nation and our national identity. Honoring sacrifice is, at root, honoring the common good understood in as wide a context as possible.

*THE TRIUMPH OF DEMOCRACY: THE STRUCTURES OF MOBILITY*

The Donner saga is a complicated tale of struggle against enforced immobility. Most obviously, of course, it is a story of pioneers who went west. A large part of every narrative about the Donners chronicles their journey from Independence, Missouri, to the Sierra Nevada, in ways that highlight the events of that journey. The journey is part of the story, not merely prelude to it.<sup>112</sup> In this sense, the Donner Party is treated as emblematic of western emigration, and Donner Party members become prototypical pioneers. The politics of wagon trains become important here, because they

were remarkably democratic organizations. Out on the open prairie, emigrants were beyond the reach of the law, so to provide some semblance of order they usually formed into companies, electing officers to organize daily progress and settle disputes. . . . But anything created by a show of hands could be undone just as easily. Companies shifted constantly, adding or subtracting members. Smaller groups split off, latecomers joined, individual families decided for whatever reason to change traveling companions. So too could captains be deposed, and thus they were closer to being first-among-equals than commanders of a hierarchy. Still, competition for the honor was fierce, politics carrying into the wilderness even if the law did not.<sup>113</sup>

The politics of western expansion, then, were the politics of mobility.<sup>114</sup> They were a politics of common sense rather than common law, of free and open elections, and fluid leadership.<sup>115</sup> They were a politics at the same time radical and conservative.

These politics could be considered radical because of a certain emphasis on discovery and newness. While on the trail, for instance, emigrants evidenced a remarkable commitment to the forms of law, although of necessity those forms were sometimes truncated and ad hoc. Fairness might, for instance, trump form, and the demands of a given situation would generally be considered more important than established procedures or the possibility of establishing precedent.<sup>116</sup> Members of wagon trains were answerable only to God and one another. Decisions, such as the exile of James Reed, could be brutal, for the radical politics of the frontier were a response to the necessity of survival under harsh and demanding circumstances.

These politics could also be considered conservative, however, because of the emphasis on ties of kinship and honor. Leaders were chosen because

of their standing in the community—just as a John Reed was disqualified as leader because he was understood as “rather arrogant and haughty,”<sup>117</sup> the impoverished and Catholic Patrick Breen would have been equally impossible. Leaders were men like “Uncle” George Donner, paternalistic and benevolent; trustworthy because he exemplified a known and stable type.<sup>118</sup>

The significance of the politics of mobility was affirmed in the narratives once the party became snowbound, when the ideas of mobility and freedom were reinforced through their utter absence. The party fragmented, and the people who had been well known constant companions became “strangers.”<sup>119</sup> The emigrants who remained in camp were robbed of choice and energy. They passively awaited their rescue or their death.<sup>120</sup> Most of them were women or children. Keseberg remained and was excoriated for the manner in which he did so. The Donner men, incapacitated by age or injury, also remained, as did many young men who stayed to protect the women and children. Most of them died. The lesson here is clear: immobility is deadly.

Others, however, choose mobility. They risked the mountains, they suffered horribly, but they were finally delivered into California. The political moral is that those who succeed and prosper are mobile. They conquer the odds or die trying. These are the pioneers we valorize.<sup>121</sup> In *Federalist #10*, James Madison defended the idea of a large republic, a defense that was premised on mobility. He argued that rather than causing problems, territorial expansion offered the best solution to political problems; Americans could expand their problems away. He wrote, “Extend the sphere, and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens; or if such a common motive exists, it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength, and to act in unison with each other.”<sup>122</sup> Expansion, growth, and the movement that accompanied them were not, Madison argued, causes of instability, but were better understood as stabilizing factors. American national politics depended upon movement and was stymied and destabilized by immobility.

Ten years before the Donner Party left Missouri, Tocqueville wrote at eloquent length about the restlessness of the American spirit.<sup>123</sup> Others have also observed this characteristic, equating it with optimism and idealism.<sup>124</sup> This restlessness reached a peak in the early-to- mid 1800s, when it was easy to see “God’s Hand in America.”<sup>125</sup> Describing these years, Daniel Boorstin began his major work, *The Americans*, this way: “America grew in the search for community. Between the Revolution and the Civil War the young

nation flourished not in discovery but in search. It prospered not from the perfection of its ways but from their fluidity. It lived with the constant belief that something else or something better might turn up. . . . Americans were glad enough to keep things growing and moving. When before had men put so much faith in the unexpected?"<sup>126</sup> Americans could have "faith in the unexpected" because of the cultural fiction that the unexpected generally worked to both individual and national advantage.

The Donner Party became entrapped in the winter of 1846–1847, the same year of the Bear Flag Rebellion, when Mexican imperial control (such as it was) of California was replaced with the promise of American statehood. The strict hierarchy associated with Spanish colonization gave way to a democratic nation, based on individual enterprise and modernity.<sup>127</sup> The "golden west" offered free land<sup>128</sup> and unlimited opportunity for those with the initiative and the resources to take advantage of it.<sup>129</sup> This optimism of mobility underpinned the settlement of the west from its earliest moments through the frenetic emigration of the Gold Rush and the more staid travels since. The frontier myth is so central to our national self-understanding because moving west—moving in general—has been understood as panacea to all of our political ailments. To suffer immobility—to fail to progress—has always been a sign of political death. Nowhere has that been more clearly illustrated than in the case of the Donner Party.

These four cultural fictions—the erasure of indigenous peoples, the belief in the civilizing force of American emigration, the commitment to the idea of the virtuous pioneer, and the importance of mobility—combine to create and support the frontier myth. That myth, so central to American identity, has proven resilient because of the ways these elements interact with one another, allowing the overarching narrative to retain its narrative force even when one or another element is challenged.

### **THE DONNER PARTY, THE FRONTIER MYTH, AND AMERICAN NATIONAL IDENTITY**

Settler nations are not only created by the conquest of land and its occupants, but are also invented, justified, and sustained rhetorically. As this example indicates, there are at least four important elements rhetorically underpinning American continental conquest and the frontier myth that sustained

and grew from that conquest: the erasure of its previous inhabitants, the capacity for controlling one's appetites, the willingness to sacrifice for the greater national good, and the persistence of democratic structures that enable both physical and social mobility. Stories like that of the Donner Party continue to be told because they continue to have some sort of utility for their audiences. Americans continue to rely on the frontier and the fictions it generates in understanding ourselves. We can delve into these stories for lessons about how our past and thus our present were and are constructed. Pioneers are understood in specific ways: as heroic, self-sacrificing, brave, and enduring. To the extent that we rely upon their example in building our internal picture of our national identity, we tell stories that valorize those elements of our national character.

Importantly, American expansion in these years can be understood as nationalistic as well as imperial.<sup>130</sup> Americans of the 1840s sought to extend their own nation, not to collect colonies as an addendum to it. This meant that the civilizing mission of Manifest Destiny had to involve the emigration of Americans across the frontier. And that emigration was understood in nationalistic terms, as the expansion of order and Americanism. The stories of pioneers like the Donner Party were integral to the development and dissemination of that understanding. They provided morality tales of how conquest could be both accomplished and justified.

The frontier myth is integral to our national self-understanding, and it continues to operate as a text and subtext in much of our political rhetoric. That myth is itself an amalgam of other cultural fictions, and those foundational fictions are also integral to our national identity. Different variations of the frontier myth may depend to a greater or lesser extent on one or another of those supporting fictions, allowing important adaptability in the larger myth.

It is, for instance, increasingly difficult for presidents and other political rhetors to argue that the continent was empty when the emigrants traveled west, and narratives of national expansion are now more likely to include at least some recognition of the complex relations between Anglo-Americans and indigenous peoples. That has, in turn, altered the ways in which we understand frontier virtues. But the diminishment of the erasure aspect of the frontier myth has not lessened the power of that myth. Instead, the other fictions can be deployed differently: rather than understanding a virtuous pioneer as an "Indian Fighter," we may be more likely to define virtue as residing in one who treated indigenous peoples with respect. But the concept



of virtue remains tied to the image of a pioneer. In this way, the foundational nature of the frontier myth for our national identity remains, even while the content is, within certain limits, flexible.

By understanding the frontier myth as composed of various cultural fictions, and by analyzing the ways in which those fictions interact with the overarching myth in terms of a specific case, we are able to examine the complex ways in which cultural fictions intersect with empirical realities and deepen our understanding of the narratives that arise from that intersection. There is much about the Donner Party, their heroism, and their suffering that we can never understand. But their story continues to be told because its various permutations continue to inform American audiences about who we were and who we have become.

## NOTES

1. Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation: America's Foreign Policy from Its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Vintage, 2006), 3–4.
2. Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in *The Eloquence of Frederick Jackson Turner*, ed. Ronald H. Carpenter (San Marino, CA: The Huntington Library, 1983), 193–218; see also Ronald H. Carpenter, “Frederick Jackson Turner and the Rhetorical Impact of the Frontier Thesis,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 63 (1977): 117–29.
3. It is estimated that between 1841 and 1860, some 300,000 emigrants made their way west to Utah, Oregon, and California. See Donald L. Hardesty, *The Archaeology of the Donner Party* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1997), 9.
4. For a good discussion of life as lived on wagon trains, see Keith Heyer Meldahl, *Hard Road West: History and Geology Along the Gold Rush Trail* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
5. On the significance of the frontier myth to American national identity, see, among many others, Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997); Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956); James Oliver Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1980); Ronald Takaki, “The Tempest in the Wilderness: The Racialization of Savagery,” *Journal of American History* 79 (1992): 892–912; John Tirman, “The Future of the American Frontier,” *The American Scholar* 78 (2009): 30–40.

6. As with any historical narrative, there are some disputes about exact dates, the spelling of certain names, and some of the “facts” of the emigrants’ experiences. I have included only material that is generally agreed upon unless otherwise noted.
7. Dana Goodyear, “The Archaeology of Hunger: A History of the Donner Party Incorporates New Scientific Evidence,” *New York Times Book Review*, February 3, 2008, 12.
8. Ric Burns, “Interview” (n.d.), *The American Experience*, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/interview/donner-ric-burns/> (accessed January 2011).
9. Frank Mullen, Jr., *The Donner Party Chronicles: A Day-By-Day Account of a Doomed Wagon Train 1846–1847* (Reno: Halycon Imprint, Nevada Humanities Committee, 1997), 10.
10. Both Virginia Reed and her father published their versions of the story after the event. James Reed’s account relied, in part, on a diary he kept during the trek west. The diary is reproduced in George R. Stewart, *Ordeal by Hunger: The Story of the Donner Party* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 336–47, and is archived at Sutter’s Fort in Sacramento. His daughter’s version is available as Virginia Reed Murphy, *Across the Plains in the Donner Party: A Personal Narrative of the Overland Trip to California* (Golden, CO: Outbooks, 1980). Eliza Donner Houghton, who worked closely with McGlashan in compiling his book, published one under her own name as well in 1911. It is now available as Eliza P. Donner Houghton, *The Expedition of the Donner Party and Its Tragic Fate* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997). Patrick Breen began a diary at the lake. It is available as a pamphlet: Frederick J. Teggart, ed., *Diary of Patrick Breen: One of the Donner Party* (Silverthorne, CO: Vistabooks, 1996). One of Reed’s hired hands, Hiram Miller, wrote the only surviving diary of the early part of the journey; see Ethan Rarick, *Desperate Passage: The Donner Party’s Perilous Journey West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 34. There are also a multitude of secondary sources. The bibliography of Mullen’s *Donner Party Chronicles* contains the best list of them, 368–70.
11. There are factual, fictional, and adapted versions of the story. There are even children’s books dedicated to it. For a sampling, see Hoffman Birney, *Grim Journey: The Story of the Adventures of the Emigrating Company Known as the Donner Party* (New York: Burt, 1934); Ric Burns, *The Donner Party* (Hollywood, CA: PBS, *American Experience*, 1992); Marian Calabro, *The Perilous Journey of the Donner Party* (New York: Clarion Books, 1999); Kristin Johnson, *Unfortunate Emigrants: Narratives of the Donner Party* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1996); Joseph A. King, *Winter of Entrapment: A New Look at the Donner Party* (Toronto, CA: P. D. Meany, 1992); Rachel K. Laurgaard, *Patty Reed’s Doll: The Story of the Donner Party* (Sacramento, CA: Tomato Enterprises, 1989); Jeanette Gould Maino, *Left Hand Turn: A Story of the Donner Party Women* (Modesto, CA: Dry Creek Books, 1987); Marilyn W. Seguin, *One Eternal Winter: The Story of What Happened at Donner Pass, Winter 1846–47* (Wellesley, MA: Branden Books, 2001); and

- Ruth Whitman, *Tamsen Donner: A Woman's Journey* (Cambridge, MA: Alice James Books, 1977).
12. "Letter of Virginia Reed," quoted in Stewart, *Ordeal by Hunger*, 361.
  13. Hardesty, *Archaeology of the Donner Party*, 3.
  14. For details on how the Donner Memorial became the Pioneer Monument, see Doris Foley, *The Pioneer (Donner) Monument: The Origin of a Statue* (Nevada City, CA: Nevada County Historical Society, 2000).
  15. Pictures of the monument are available at the Donner Memorial State Park website, [http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page\\_id=503](http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=503). The monument itself is IMG\_6827lowres.jpg (accessed January 2011).
  16. Will Bagley, "Foreword," in Mullen, *Donner Party Chronicles*, 6–8. On the importance of understanding the rhetoric of empire, see Raka Shome, "Postcolonial Interventions in the Rhetorical Canon: An 'Other' View," *Communication Theory* 6 (1996): 40–59; Radha S. Hegde, "A View from Elsewhere: Locating Difference and the Politics of Representation from a Transnational Feminist Perspective," *Communication Theory* 8 (1998): 271–97; Mary E. Stuckey and John M. Murphy, "By Any Other Name: Rhetorical Colonialism in North America," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 25 (2001): 71–98.
  17. Scholars continue to debate the question of whether members of the Donner Party resorted to cannibalism. In April 2010, for instance, MSNBC publicized a study in which a "detailed analysis" of bone fragments at the site did not reveal any human bones. The scientists concluded "there is no evidence for cannibalism." See, Jennifer Viegas, "Donners Ate Dog, Maybe Not People," <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/36574673> (accessed January 2011).
  18. Mark Cronlund Anderson, "The Mythical Frontier, the Mexican Revolution, and the Press: An Imperial Subplot," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 37 (2007): 1–22, quote at 1.
  19. Stephen John Hartnett, *Democratic Dissent and the Cultural Fictions of Antebellum America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 2.
  20. Hartnett, *Democratic Dissent*, 8.
  21. In this, my enterprise is similar to that engaged in by Ronald H. Carpenter, "America's Tragic Metaphor: Our Twentieth-Century Combatants as Frontiersmen," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 76 (1990): 1–22.
  22. See, among many others, Ross F. Collins, "Cattle Barons and Ink Slingers: How Cow Country Journalists Created a Great American Myth," *American Journalism* 24 (2007): 7–29; Greg Dickinson, Brian L. Ott, and Eric Aoki, "Memory and Myth at the Buffalo Bill Museum," *Western Journal of Communication* 69 (2005): 85–108; Leroy G. Dorsey, "The Frontier Myth in Presidential Rhetoric: Theodore Roosevelt's Campaign for

- Conservation,” *Western Journal of Communication* 59 (1995): 1–19; Leroy G. Dorsey, “The Myth of War and Peace in Presidential Discourse: John F. Kennedy’s ‘New Frontier’ Myth and the Peace Corps,” *Southern Communication Journal* 62 (1996): 42–55; Janice Hocker Rushing, “The Rhetoric of the American Western Myth,” *Communication Monographs* 50 (1983): 14–32; Janice Hocker Rushing, “Mythic Evolution of ‘The New Frontier’ in Mass Mediated Rhetoric,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 3 (1986): 265–96; Mark West and Chris Carey, “(Re)Enacting Frontier Justice: The Bush Administration’s Tactical Narration of the Old West Fantasy After September 11,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92 (2006): 379–412.
23. Tirman, “Future of American Frontier,” 30.
  24. Rushing, “Rhetoric of the American Western Myth.”
  25. See also the discussion in Ronald H. Carpenter, “Revisiting Janice Rushing About ‘The Western Myth’ (*More Important Than Ever Before*),” *Southern Communication Journal* 71 (2006): 179–182.
  26. Some sources spell his name “Lewis.”
  27. Some sources spell her name “Tamzen” or “Tamzene.”
  28. Bagley, “Foreword,” 7.
  29. For a discussion of how the Donner Party compares to other emigrant wagon trains, see Hardesty, *Archaeology of the Donner Party*, 19–22.
  30. See Lansford W. Hastings, *The Emigrants’ Guide to Oregon and California* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007). The original version was published in 1845.
  31. This road later made it possible for the Mormons to cross the same country with considerably less difficulty. See Stewart, *Ordeal By Hunger*, 278.
  32. His name is sometimes spelled “McCutchan.”
  33. So difficult in fact, that Reed wrote, “all the women are ‘mad with anger’”; Mullen, *Donner Party Chronicles*, 148. Relations continued to deteriorate until families began to travel alone and at their own pace, only collecting in the evenings; Mullen, *Donner Party Chronicles*, 152, 154.
  34. Mark McLaughlin, *The Donner Party: Weathering the Storm* (Carnelian Bay, CA: Mic Mac Publishing, 2008), 1.
  35. A name, ominously enough, that translates as “snowy mountains.”
  36. The lake sits at about 6,000 feet and often freezes in the winter; it did so in 1846.
  37. “Luis” is sometimes rendered “Lewis”; McCutchen fell ill and remained behind at Sutter’s Fort. Later he joined one of the relief parties.
  38. According to McLaughlin, things would have been no better had they made it over the pass because the storm that trapped them at the lake would have caused even worse conditions in the western high country than at the lake and Alder Creek; see *Donner Party*, 8.

39. According to one source, the term is not reflective of the desperation behind the escape attempt, but is “a term derived from Dutch meaning the ‘lost troop’”; see Goodyear, “The Archaeology of Hunger.”
40. The party initially included 17 people, but two of them turned back the first day and returned to the lake.
41. McLaughlin, *Donner Party*, 11–113; Rarick, *Desperate Passage*, 207.
42. For descriptions, see Hardesty, *Archaeology of the Donner Party*, 32–33; Rarick, *Desperate Passage*, 155, 170, 191.
43. For a list of the emigrants, their ages, and their various fates, see Hardesty, *Archaeology of the Donner Party*, 16–18.
44. For discussions of the mortality rates and causes of death among the Donner Party, see Donald K. Grayson, “Donner Party Deaths: A Demographic Assessment,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 46 (1990): 223–42.
45. Rarick, *Desperate Passage*, 239.
46. See Kagan, *Dangerous Nation*; Richard Kluger, *Seizing Destiny: The Relentless Expansion of American Territory* (New York: Vintage, 2007); Walter Nugent, *Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).
47. Quoted in Hardesty, *Archaeology of the Donner Party*, 26.
48. See Rarick, *Desperate Passage*, 91–95.
49. See Hardesty, *Archaeology of the Donner Party*, 13.
50. See Mullen, *Donner Party Chronicles*, 252; Stewart, *Ordeal by Hunger*, 142–47.
51. See, for examples, Birney, *Grim Journey*; Daniel James Brown, *The Indifferent Stars Above: The Harrowing Saga of a Donner Party Bride* (New York: William Morrow, 2009); Burns, *The Donner Party*; Calabro, *Perilous Journey*; Laurgaard, *Patty Reed’s Doll*; Maino, *Left Hand Turn*; Seguin, *One Eternal Winter*; and Whitman, *Tamsen Donner*.
52. See Hartnett, *Democratic Dissent*; see also David M. Lubin, *Picturing a Nation: Art and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), especially chaps. 1 and 2.
53. Mary E. Stuckey, *Defining Americans: The Presidency and National Identity* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), chap. 1.
54. See, among many others, Reginald Horsman, “*Expansion and American Indian Policy, 1783–1812* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967); Bruce E. Johansen, *Debating Democracy: Native American Legacy of Freedom* (Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light, 1998); Judith Nies, *Native American History* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996); David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Ian K. Steele, *Warpaths: Invasions of North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).
55. The text of the original story from the *California Star* can be found in C. F. McGlashan,

- History of the Donner Party: A Tragedy of the Sierra* ((1947) 1993. Reprint, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press), 119–20.
56. Rarick, *Desperate Passage*, 241.
  57. Rarick, *Desperate Passage*, 240–41; see also Houghton, *Expedition of the Donner Party*, 336–42.
  58. See Mullen, *Donner Party Chronicles*, 328–29.
  59. Susan Scheckel, *The Insistence of the Indian: Race and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).
  60. Robertson, *American Myth*, 34.
  61. See, for instance, Edward W. Said, “Introduction,” in Rudyard Kipling, *Kim*, ed. Edward W. Said (New York: Penguin, 1987), 23–28.
  62. For an example of the stereotypes of African Americans, see Thomas Jefferson, “Notes on the State of Virginia,” in *Documents of American Prejudice: An Anthology of Writings on Race from Thomas Jefferson to David Duke*, ed. S. T. Joshi (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 3–11. American Indians as “savages” were often portrayed as exercising considerable (and malevolent) agency. In what I am referring to here as the benign version of the frontier myth, however, their tendency to “vanish” indicated a lack of the proper ambition and energy necessary for survival on the frontier. See Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1982). For an example of how they were portrayed on this context, see Samuel George Morton, “Crania Americana,” 242–46; Joshi, *Documents of American Prejudice*; Stuckey, *Defining Americans*, 37–43.
  63. Alexander Hamilton, “Federalist #15,” in *Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York: Mentor, 1961), 86–95, 92.
  64. James Madison, “Federalist #14,” *Federalist Papers*, 79–85.
  65. Hartnett, *Democratic Dissent*, 21–22.
  66. See, for example, Drew Gilpin Faust, ed., *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).
  67. Carl Bode, *The Anatomy of American Popular Culture 1840–1861* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), 6–8.
  68. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 225.
  69. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 224–26.
  70. For a narrative that explicitly connects starvation and the loss of civilization, see Stewart, *Ordeal By Hunger*, 145.
  71. Bode, *Anatomy of American Popular Culture*, 130.
  72. For an astute analysis of how Emerson’s essay reveals key elements of nineteenth-century political and rhetorical cultures, see Andrew C. Hansen, “Reading Sonic Culture in

- Emerson's 'Self-Reliance,'" *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 11 (2008): 417–37.
73. See, for instance, Hartnett on "Yankee Ingenuity," in *Democratic Dissent*, 33–39.
  74. Emigration always had a self-interested motive, most clearly elaborated in Horace Greeley's admonition to "Go west, young man." But the cultural fiction surrounding emigration also entwined self-interest and community—in ways that are most elegantly elaborated in Tocqueville's notion of "self-interest properly understood."
  75. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 506–9.
  76. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 511.
  77. See Rushing, "The Rhetoric of the American Western Myth."
  78. Tirman, "Future of American Frontier," 30.
  79. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 293.
  80. Martin Barker and Roger Sabin, *The Lasting of the Mohicans: History of an American Myth* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996).
  81. Bode, *Anatomy of American Popular Culture*, 127.
  82. "Distressing News," *California Star*, February 13, 1847, <http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist6/donner/html> (accessed January 2011).
  83. McGlashan, *History of the Donner Party*, 25.
  84. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Eliza P. Donner Houghton offered a different analysis, recounting both the accusations against the Donner Party and her refutation of them. Her story emphasizes heroism, generosity, and suffering in the face of horrific circumstances. See *Expedition of the Donner Party*, 335–36.
  85. In later years, William Eddy accused Keseberg of robbing a Lakota grave; no trail diaries mention this alleged event. On the count of wife-beating, see Virginia Reed Murphy, quoted in Mullen, *Donner Party Chronicles*, 63, 158; and Stewart, *Ordeal By Hunger*, 21.
  86. The kinder treatments of Keseberg can be found in McLaughlin, *Donner Party*, 122–27; Mullen, *Donner Party Chronicles*, esp. 359–60; Rarick, *Desperate Passage*, 222–27, 232; and Houghton, *Expedition of the Donner Party*. The harsher depiction is found, most prominently, in Stewart's *Ordeal by Hunger*, esp. 261–65. McGlashan's narrative includes all of the charges made against Keseberg as well as an interview with Keseberg in which he denies all of them; see McGlashan, *History of the Donner Party*, 128–38.
  87. McGlashan, *History of the Donner Party*, 40.
  88. McLaughlin, *Donner Party*, 123.
  89. Houghton, *Expedition of the Donner Party*, 360.
  90. As quoted in McGlashan, *History of the Donner Party*, 22.
  91. On the connection between immigration, assimilation, and transformation, see Stuckey, *Defining Americans*, 162–71.
  92. Mullen, *Donner Party Chronicles*, 158.
  93. There is no record of his first name. For an account of his death, see Stewart, *Ordeal by*

*Hunger*, 7–69.

94. It seems entirely implausible that Keseberg was involved in Wolfinger's murder. See Stewart, *Ordeal by Hunger*, 292–93.
95. Seguin, *One Eternal Winter*, 107–08.
96. Rarick, *Desperate Passage*, 121.
97. Mullen, *Donner Party Chronicles*, 178.
98. McGlashan, *History of the Donner Party*, 47, 50.
99. Eliza P. Donner Houghton called this effort “heroic”; see *Expedition of the Donner Party*, 37.
100. See Rushing, “The Rhetoric of the American Western Myth.”
101. Rarick, *Desperate Passage*, 126.
102. McGlashan, *History of the Donner Party*, 88.
103. David Galloway's fictional story of her life is titled *Tamsen: A Novel of the Tragic Journey of the Donner Party and the Heroism of an Extraordinary Woman* (New York: Harcourt, 1983).
104. See, for example, Tocqueville's description of women and their role in *Democracy in America*, 592–94. See also Mary P. Ryan, *The Empire of the Mother: American Writing About Domesticity 1830–1860* (New York: Haworth, 1982).
105. William Graves referred to Reed as “an aristocratic fellow”; see Mullen, *Donner Party Chronicles*, 142–43.
106. Graves showed considerable resentment, blaming Reed for the decision to take the Hastings cutoff; see Mullen, *Donner Party Chronicles*, 125.
107. This is most obvious in Rarick, *Desperate Passage*.
108. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 301.
109. McGlashan, *History of the Donner Party*, 32.
110. Stewart, *Ordeal by Hunger*, 212.
111. For a discussion of Manifest Destiny, see Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History* (New York: Knopf, 1970); John O'Sullivan, “Annexation,” in Joshi, *Documents of American Prejudice*, 127–35; Robertson, *American Myth*, 72–124; Theodore Roosevelt, “The Winning of the West,” in Joshi, *Documents of American Prejudice*, 136–41; and Stuckey and Murphy, “By Any Other Name.”
112. The first 190 pages of Mullen's 350-page *Donner Party Chronicles* are dedicated to a recital of the events of the trip prior to entrapment; similarly, the first 90 pages of Stewart's 300 tell of the pre-Sierra events.
113. Rarick, *Desperate Passage*, 21. Eliza P. Donner Houghton called the politics of wagon trains “essentially democratic and characteristically American”; see *Expedition of the Donner Party*, 13.
114. See Robertson, *American Myth*, 147–51.



115. See Hastings, *Emigrants' Guide*, 6–7.
116. Rarick, *Desperate Passage*, 82–83.
117. Mullen, *Donner Party Chronicles*, 77.
118. Stewart, *Ordeal By Hunger*, 14.
119. Teggart, *Diary of Patrick Breen*, 7.
120. Breen's diary is particularly moving in this regard because it is full of faith in the face of despair. On Christmas Eve, for instance, he wrote: "Rained all night & still continues to rain poor prospect for any kind of comfort spiritual or temporal, wind S: may God help us to spend the Christmass as we ought considering circumstances." On New Year's Eve he wrote: "Last of the year, may we with Gods help spend the comeing year better than the past which we purpose to do if Almighty God will deliver us from our present dredful situation which is our prayer if the will of God sees it fiting for us Amen." Teggart, *Diary of Patrick Breen*, 8, 9.
121. See Robertson, *American Myth*, 143–46.
122. Madison, "Federalist #10," *Federalist Papers*, 61.
123. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 638–40.
124. See, for example, Kagan, *Dangerous Nation*, 13.
125. George B. Cheever, "God's Hand in America," in *American Life in the 1840s*, ed. Carl Bode, 312–15 (New York: New York University Press, 1967).
126. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The National Experience* (New York: Random House, 1965), 1.
127. On the importance of modernity in these years, see Hartnett, *Democratic Dissent*; Kagan, *Dangerous Nation*.
128. George Donner placed this ad in the Springfield paper: "Who wants to go to California without costing them anything? As many as eight young men of good character who can drive an ox team, will be accommodated by gentlemen who will leave this vicinity about the first of April. Come on boys! You can have as much land as you want without costing you anything. The government of California gives large tracts of land to her sons who have to move there." See Mullen, *Donner Party Chronicles*, 40.
129. Resources were crucial. Most emigrants were middle class—the trip was not only expensive, but it required a family to be able to go months without income. Emigration was not for the poor. See Rarick, *Desperate Passage*, 17.
130. Robertson, *American Myth*, 74.