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LOCATION OF SITE  
OF BREEN CABIN

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# The Location of Site of Breen Cabin

General C. F. McGlashan, Donner  
Party Historian, Declares Present  
Pioneer Monument Covers Exact  
Spot Where Hut Stood



Array of Interesting Facts Presented  
Relating to Early Investigation of  
Sites of Various Cabins Occupied  
by Members of Ill-fated Pioneer Party

Oakland, California

1920





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## IN EXPLANATION

*At the session of the Grand Parlor held in Truckee in 1918, during which session the Pioneer or Donner monument was dedicated, the Historic Landmarks Committee of the Native Sons of the Golden West was instructed by resolution to mark the sites of the various cabins occupied by members of the Donner Party, the committee to confer with General C. F. McGlashan, Donner Party historian.*

*Acting upon the mandate of the Grand Parlor, conferences were held with General McGlashan, the sites of all the cabins located, and an order placed for the tablets.*

*The sites of both the Murphy and Graves cabins were suitably marked. The Murphy tablet was placed on the face of the rock which formed the north end of the fireplace of the cabin, and contains a complete list of the members of the Donner party.*

*According to General McGlashan, the best living authority, the Pioneer Monument stands on the exact site of the Breen cabin. The committee thought it most appropriate that a tablet be placed on the north side of the monument facing the main road. Mr. L. De Rome, who cast the monument, designed a tablet which harmonizes. The following inscription on the Breen cabin tablet briefly recounts the history of the Donner Party, which the monument was originally planned to commemorate, but in no sense conflicts with the later proposal of making it a memorial to all pioneers:*

### DONNER PARTY

*"On this spot stood the Breen cabin of the party of emigrants who started for California from Springfield, Illinois, in April, 1846, under the leadership of Captain George Donner. Delays occurred, and when the party reached this locality on October 29, the Truckee Pass Emigrant Road was concealed by snow. The height of the shaft of the monument indicates the depth of the snow, which was twenty-two feet. After futile efforts to cross the summit, the party was compelled to encamp for the winter. The Graves cabin was situated about three-quarters of a mile to the eastward, the Murphy cabin about two hundred yards southeast of the monument, and the Donner tents were at the head of Alder Creek. Ninety people were in the party, and forty-two perished, most of them from starvation and exposure."*

*Objection was made to placing the tablet on the Pioneer Monument by the chairman of the Donner Monument Committee, who contended that it did not stand upon the site of the Breen cabin and quoted General McGlashan as his authority. At the session of the Grand Parlor held at San Diego, the matter came up for discussion, and a resolution was passed referring the matter of placing the tablet to the Donner Monument Committee and the Historic Landmarks Committee to act jointly, with full power delegated to the Board of Grand Officers to determine the matter if the committees failed to come to an agreement. In order to clear up the question of the location of the Breen cabin, General McGlashan was asked to present his views, which he has done in the letter addressed to the Chairman of the Historic Landmarks Committee, and printed hereafter, in which letter he most emphatically declares that the monument stands upon the exact spot occupied by the Breen cabin.*

J. R. KNOWLAND,  
Chairman Historic Landmarks Committee.

TRUCKEE, CAL., June 2nd, 1920.

Hon. J. R. Knowland,  
Oakland Cal.

*In re Site of Breen Cabin.*

Dear Sir:

You ask if I can furnish any information to substantiate the fact that the Monument dedicated by the Grand Parlor of the Native Sons, June 6, 1918, was placed on the location of the Breen Cabin.

I have resided in Truckee almost uninterruptedly since July 12, 1872. While collecting data for the History of the Donner Party in 1879, I brought survivors of the party and of the Relief Parties to Truckee to establish the exact location of the cabins occupied by the Breen, Graves and Murphy families, and the approximate location of the Donner tents.

Last Friday, May 28th, 1920, Dr. C. W. Chapman, Chairman of the Donner Monument Committee, told me, in the presence of Hon. Joe V. Snyder, that the site of the Breen Cabin was thirty (30) feet from the base of the Monument. That is the first time that he or anyone else ever declared in my presense that the Monument does not stand over the identical spot where the Breen Cabin stood. My reply to him was: "If any man on earth knows the site of the Breen Cabin, I do, and I am ready to take an oath that it is covered by the foundation of the Monument."

When I first learned the location, the print of the foundation logs was distinctly visible, the fireplace remained intact, and about four feet from the northwest corner of the site of the cabin stood a jagged stump about eight feet high.

I personally began excavations of the site, taking care to examine every shovelful of earth myself. The relics exhumed by myself, or in my immediate presence by workmen whom I employed, most positively established the correctness of the identifications of the Breen Cabin.

The character of the identifications supplied by the relics discovered is illustrated by the following quotation from the History of the Donner Party, page 258:

"Among the relics found at the Breen Cabin are numerous pieces of old porcelain and china-ware. These fragments are readily distinguished by painted flowers, or unique designs enameled in red, blue or purple colors upon the pure white ground surface of the china-ware. This ware is celebrated for the durability of the glaze or enamel, which cannot be scratched with a knife, and is not acted upon by vegetable

acids. The relics unearthed were found at a depth of from one to six inches beneath the ground which formed the floor. A fragment of this ware, together with an old-fashioned gunflint, was sent to Hon. James F. Breen, who wrote in reply: "The relics, piece of china-ware and gun-flint, are highly appreciated. The china-ware was at once recognized by my brother. In fact, there is one piece of the china set (a cream pitcher) still in the possession of my brother. The piece sent is recognizable by the decoration figures, which correspond exactly with those on the pitcher.'"

One more quotation is made from the History, page 260:

"A whetstone, or what might more properly be called an oilstone, was discovered at the Breen Cabin. On this stone were the initials 'J. F. R.,' which had evidently been cut into its surface with a knife blade. Mrs. V. E. Murphy and Mrs. Frank Lewis, the daughters of James F. Reed, at once remembered this whetstone as having belonged to their father, and duly identified it upon examination."

Year after year I have pointed out the site of the Breen Cabin to visitors, pioneers and members of the Donner Party, and feel absolutely positive that I know the site. Since 1879 the site was marked by the stump, the excavated floor, and by the fireplace, for I did not dig up the fireplace in searching for relics. The ashes were sifted, but the burned earth and foundation of the fireplace stood undisturbed, and formed a blackened landmark liberally covered and surrounded by bits of broken, charred remnants of charcoal, by which I mean the small black coals left from a wood fire. The excavated space showed the size of the cabin, and with the stump and fireplace as markers anyone could find the site of the Breen Cabin from 1879 until 1910.

As early as 1880 I began talking up and advocating in the public press the desirability of permanently marking the sites of the cabins and the erection of a monument on the site of the Breen Cabin. There was never any question as to this being the one spot where a monument should be placed. The ground is level, high, sightly, and near the road which crosses the mountains. Its location made it the central, most important of the Donner Cabins during the days of the Donner tragedy; the place where the imprisoned emigrants met to discuss plans of escape. Here the "Forlorn Hope" was planned, and from this spot they began their heart-rending struggle. Here came the Relief Parties, here they started back over the cruel mountains after the agonizing task of selecting what survivors should accompany each expedition and who should be left behind, perhaps to perish. It was the final parting place of loved ones; it was where Tamsen Donner bade her last farewell to her three

little daughters and fled back to her dying husband and to her own death.

*Planning for long years to see that a monument should be erected on this identical spot, guarding the place sacredly, visiting it often each year for thirty years, can anyone doubt my claim that I know the site of the Breen Cabin?*

Early in the eighties Joseph Marzen, who owned the ground, promised to donate the acre of land surrounding the Breen Cabin for the purpose of erecting a monument to the Donner Party. When he was about to sell the land he asked me to select the particular acre I desired. With great care I measured off an acre with the site of the Breen Cabin as nearly as practicable in its center. No thought was in my mind except to choose the most suitable surrounding for the erection of a monument on the exact spot where the Breen Cabin stood. *I chose the ground with the sole thought that the Breen Cabin floor was to be underneath the base of a monument to the Donner Party, a monument which I supposed it would devolve upon me to build.*

Joseph Marzen and a number of prominent citizens coincided with my selection of the best acre possible to surround a monument built upon the ground occupied by the Breen Cabin, and on the 21st day of July, 1894, Mr. Marzen deeded to me the following described land:

“One square acre of land surrounding the site of the ‘Breen Cabin’ of the Donner Party, situate in the Donner Meadows, Nevada County, California, near the, and south of the Dutch Flat and Donner Lake wagon road in Section Seventeen (17) North, Range Sixteen (16) East, M. D. B. & M.; the Eastern side of said square acre (208 feet 8½ inches) having this day been designated by stone monuments erected by the parties hereto. Said acre of land having been expressly deeded for the purpose of a site for a monument to the Donner Party, and for such fences, buildings and improvements as may be deemed desirable in maintaining the same. Together with the right to conduct water from the adjacent hillside to said land, and full access to and from said land to said wagon road.”

Among the plans devised by me for raising money with which to build a monument to the Donner Party on the site of the Breen Cabin, one seems pertinent:

On the 12th day of August, 1893, accompanied by Prof. A. E. Baugh, principal of the Truckee Schools; Hattie A. Baugh, his wife; E. K. Downer, publisher and proprietor of the Downieville *Messenger*, and my wife, Mrs. Nona McGlashan, I took up the last remaining log of the Murphy Cabin and conveyed it to my residence. Six logs of this cabin

were in place in 1879, but all had decayed and vanished except the log on the western side of the cabin, the one containing the threshold of the door. With the assistance of the ladies of Truckee, five thousand small vials were filled with the partially decayed wood of this log, and these, together with the remnant of the log, were placed in the Rocking Stone Tower. The vials containing the relics were sealed with wax and bore labels, one of which read:

“No.....Price \$1.00. Sent by mail prepaid.

“I hereby pledge that the net receipts from the sale of 5000 of these relics shall be devoted to the erection of a monument to the Donner Party.

“C. F. McGLASHAN.”

In writing the History of the Donner Party, I visited, so far as possible, the twenty-six members of the party then surviving, and brought members of the party and of the relief parties to Truckee, as heretofore stated, to give accurate identifications of the locations of the cabins. I had another motive, and that was to have them give the narration of the incidents of the tragedy on the very ground where it had occurred. All went to the site of the Breen Cabin to explain important details of their narratives. Everyone identified it.

During the writing of the History the various chapters were first published in the *Truckee Republican*, and the paper was regularly sent to each survivor for corrections. A first edition of the book was then issued and sent to each survivor with an earnest request for corrections. A year was then spent in writing the twice revised history. Meantime, members of the Party who were taking an especially active interest in assisting in having the story correct, came to Truckee and added their testimony to the location of the cabins. During subsequent years other survivors came. There was never the slightest difference of opinion as to where the Breen Cabin stood.

*When Dr. Chapman came to me first, some years ago, it was as Chairman of the Donner Monument Committee of the Grand Parlor of the Native Sons of the Golden West, and his avowed purpose was to erect a monument to the Donner Party, under the auspices and with the assistance and co-operation of the Native Sons. My delight can readily be imagined. I was to be relieved of a great responsibility. I gave him the heartiest welcome, and cordially pledged him every assistance in my power. I explained each detail of my long-cherished plans, and was pleased and proud to have his approval. He agreed with me that the site of the Breen Cabin was the appropriate and only place for the monument, and I promised to deed to the Grand Parlor the acre of land Mr. Marzen had given me sur-*

*rounding the cabin. I promised to give him the 5000 vials to help raise funds. Nothing was ever said in those old, first days of a monument to the Pioneers; all our talks and plans were of a monument to the Donner Party.*

In 1909 Dr. Chapman was ready to break ground for the Donner Monument and very generously insisted that I was the proper person to turn the first spadeful of earth *which, he said, must be turned in the very center of the site of the Breen Cabin*, as that was to be the site of the monument. Due solemnity was observed, and among the witnesses and participants were Hon. Frank M. Rutherford and Dr. George F. Kelly, representing Donner Parlor No. 162 of Truckee.

*When called upon by Dr. Chapman to speak, I dwelt upon the appropriateness of erecting a Donner Monument over the precise location of the Breen Cabin.* Dr. Chapman on that occasion, and more than once since, very kindly and cordially praised my remarks. I uttered only the views we had often discussed together, and upon which we were at that time in perfect accord. I stood in the exact center of the Breen Cabin and turned the first spadeful of earth. Ground was broken for a Donner Monument. The corner-stone was to be laid the following June by the Grand Parlor.

When the workmen came to construct the foundation upon which the monument would rest, and upon which the corner-stone was to be laid, they excavated the earth to a considerable depth and erected on the firm foundation thus obtained a most substantial and imposing cement base for monument and corner-stone. Its dimensions and stability were in keeping with the splendid monument now standing upon it, being twenty by twenty feet, and raising four feet above the surface of the ground. I was present on different occasions to watch the progress of the work which meant so much to me, because of the years of waiting. At last a wonderful monument was to be reared on the site of the Breen Cabin. This cabin covered only twelve by fourteen feet, as is stated by Moses Schallenberger, on page 61 of the history. The workmen removed all traces of the floor, the fireplace and even the stump. Their excavations were far deeper and broader than I had anticipated; yes, and the cement work was far higher and presented a more massive appearance. I saw and know that the cement foundation covered and obliterated the site of the Breen Cabin. Upon the several occasions when I was present watching the progress of the workmen, I do not recall that at any stage of this work was Dr. Chapman present. I was afterwards informed by him that he was unavoidably absent and had to trust the work to the workmen.

*I am ready to testify under oath, at any time or place, that I know of my own knowledge that the foundation constructed for the corner-stone covers the exact spot where the Breen Cabin stood.* The foundation of the monument today is over twenty-three feet square, the outside finish or ornamental work being outside of and completely enveloping the cement foundation, and the cement foundation covers and overlaps the floor of the Breen Cabin.

On the tenth day of June, 1910, the Grand Parlor laid the corner-stone with impressive ceremonies. Three of the survivors of the Donner Party were present at the invitation of Dr. Chapman. Patty Reed and others donated articles to be placed under the corner-stone. At Dr. Chapman's request I gave a bound copy of the Donner History. Dr. Chapman auctioned off some of the 5000 vials which I had given him, one bringing \$30, another \$27.50, others bringing good prices. Finally quite a number were disposed of at \$1.00 each. In the few words spoken by me on this occasion, I stated that the foundation of the corner-stone covered the exact site of the Breen Cabin. Dr. Chapman heard every word I said. I was the historian of the Donner Party uttering facts connected with the history. This fact was fresh in my memory, fresh in the memory of many who were present and heard my positive, public statement. The Grand Parlor were present. I think that you, Congressman Knowland, had come from Washington to preside over that very meeting and help to celebrate the event. The Landmarks Committee were present and could not fail to understand that I would not make such an assertion unless I knew its truth. It was truth and my statement was not questioned. Because the vials were sold above the site of the Breen Cabin was mentioned as one reason the survivors of the Donner Party who were present should autograph the labels on the vials sold, and thus give them a greater value at the sale. The barbecue was held in the tamarack grove surrounding the Murphy Cabin. It was quite a Donner Party day.

On September 1st, 1910, I signed a deed to the Grand Parlor of Native Sons of the Golden West for "acre of land surrounding the site of the 'Breen Cabin' of the Donner Party," thus fulfilling the promise I had made to Dr. Chapman.

In 1918 the Grand Parlor held its annual session in Truckee on the 6th day of June, and the monument was unveiled and dedicated in the presence of a vast assemblage of people. Dr. Chapman presided and honored me by placing my name on the list of speakers. I stated distinctly and emphatically, just as I had done at the laying of the corner-stone, that the site of the Breen Cabin was exactly and com-



pletely covered by the cement foundation of the monument. Thus, twice, on public and momentous occasions I placed myself clearly on record by stating that the site of the Breen Cabin is marked by the monument itself, is directly under the monument. Both times Dr. Chapman stood close to me and heard every syllable I uttered; both times the officers and members of the Grand Parlor were present; both times hundreds of witnesses were present; both times members of the Donner Party and many descendants of members were present; and both times I dwelt upon and elaborated the importance of the fact in showing the relation of the monument to the Donner Party. I stated the simple truth, and never in my presence, either in public or private, did Dr. Chapman or anyone else every deny or question this truth until the 28th day of May, 1920, when Dr. Chapman stated that the site of the Breen Cabin was thirty feet from the base of the monument. I replied to this astounding assertion, as stated at the commencement of this letter, "If any man on earth knows the site of the Breen Cabin, I do, and I am ready to take an oath that it is covered by the foundation of the monument."

The conversation thus abruptly terminated was resumed in my office on the afternoon of that day, Hon. Joe V. Snyder again being present. Dr. Chapman again declared that the site was 30 feet from the base of the monument. I told him that he could easily prove his contention if he was right. That the hearth or foundation of the fireplace of the Breen Cabin, if he could locate it, would be found intact. I have always honored and revered Dr. Chapman and felt sure I could convince him of his error. I knew he could not find the fireplace of the Breen Cabin because it was under the monument. It was agreed that we should test the matter next day by digging at the spot Dr. Chapman claimed the cabin stood.

Arriving first upon the ground, I pencilled the following in duplicate:

"Memorandum:

"Donner Monument, May 29, 1920.

"Dr. C. W. Chapman and C. F. McGlashan are, and for many years have been, staunch friends.

"Yesterday, May 28, 1920, Dr. Chapman first told McGlashan that the site of the Breen Cabin is thirty (30) feet from the foundation of the Monument.

"McGlashan is positive the base of the Monument is directly over the site of the Breen Cabin.

"By amicable agreement they will today excavate the site pointed out by Dr. Chapman to

ascertain if evidence can be found to support Dr. Chapman's contention.

"C. F. McGLASHAN."

"Signed in duplicate  
in the presence of"

When Dr. Chapman arrived he was accompanied by T. C. Wohlbruck in an automobile driven by John Cabona. It was near 11 o'clock a. m., and I had walked out from Truckee, arriving at 6 o'clock a. m. I had written the memorandum on a little tablet I had found in my pocket.

Dr. Chapman seemed greatly excited and said: "We have looked all over town for you." He went at once to a spot some fifty feet or more from the monument, and striking a shovel in the earth said: "This depression in the earth is the spot." There was an irregular depression in the surface of the ground of from two to six inches.

I said I thought we should sign a memorandum of what we were about to do, and read what I had written and asked him to sign. I had already signed. He said: "Yes, I will sign that, but it should be changed to read the spot is the one pointed out by you to me." I asked him when I pointed it out, and he said in 1909. He said the only knowledge he had of the spot was that I had told him so. I asked how he could identify a spot pointed out by me eleven years ago, and he answered: "It was burned into my memory." I said I would change the wording to read as he wished, and started to do so. The two memorandums are inclosed and marked "Exhibit A" and "Exhibit B." It will be seen that in "Exhibit B" I had interlined the words: "It is agreed that the site was first shown by McGlashan." But while I was writing Dr. Chapman was digging in the place where he said I pointed out the fireplace in 1909. The first few shovelfuls uncovered small bits of charcoal which Dr. Chapman picked up exultingly exclaiming: "That shows there has been a fire." I stopped writing and said we could sign afterwards. Dr. Chapman agreed to this, and I began taking the bits of charcoal and other things discovered and placing them upon a silk handkerchief which I took from my pocket.

Within about two feet of the place where he first struck his shovel in the earth, at a depth of from eight to ten inches, Dr. Chapman and Mr. Wohlbruck uncovered the upper surface of four closely packed stones, carefully matched stones, fairly flat and level, showing evidence of having been burned and blackened to some extent by fire. There was a score of smaller stones, about a dozen pebbles and a small handful of little pieces of charcoal, or charred coals, and several bits of rotten wood. All these we carefully examined, and I placed them in the

handkerchief. It was clear there had been a fire at that place. Dr. Chapman was positive that he had discovered the hearth of the Breen Cabin. While I knew this was not true, I realized that Dr. Chapman and Mr. Wohlbruck were thoroughly convinced, and that no argument could undeceive them. I had challenged the Doctor to find the Breen fireplace and he had promptly accepted the challenge, and without any doubt, hesitation or difficulty, had located a place where a fire had been built. The stones indicated to me a camp fire, but nothing resembling a hearth to a fireplace.

Subsequent measurements show that the larger stone was approximately 25 x 15 x 4½ inches, another was 9 x 8 x 4 inches, another 9 x 7 x 5 inches, and another 12 x 8 x 4½ inches. There were twenty small stones ranging from two inches to five in their greatest diameters. All are irregularly shaped and the dimensions are approximations. I have in my possession all the stones, pebbles, bits of charcoal and little pieces of wood, in fact, every single particle of evidence unearthed. A careful inspection of these will convince any expert woodsman or mountaineer that they did not form the hearth to a fireplace built and used by the Schallenberger party in 1844, used by Schallenberger during that winter, and used by the Breens, Reeds and Keseberg during the winter of 1846-7. There are not enough stones, and the stones are not black enough. There are not enough coals, for coals do not readily disintegrate. The stones would make a very comfortable camp fire.

Three stones of unknown size were partly uncovered which were in line with each other, and which Dr. Chapman and Mr. Wohlbruck felt sure formed the foundation of the side wall of the cabin on the north side. They were at a suitable distance from the fire, but were so large and so firmly imbedded in the earth that we could not, or at least did not, remove them. I mention these because we found them, but knew that no such stones were under the imprint of the north foundation log of the Breen cabin when I excavated the floor in 1879.

I have spoken of four rather large flat stones, though we all supposed there were five. Wedged tightly between the straight edges of two of the stones was a strangely flat, smooth stone whose upper surface was quite regular, and which appeared exactly square with regular rectangular outlines. I asked that this stone be removed. John Cabona pointed to it and excitedly exclaimed, "That is brick." Upon examination we found it comprised two bricks firmly wedged together by heat. They were modern, hand-pressed bricks, and had evidently occupied a place in the kiln where the fire came in direct contact with them during the burning.

There was a brick kiln and brickyard just west of Truckee, and about a mile and a half east from the Monument in the years from 1868 to 1873. Sisson, Wallace & Co. erected a brick building in Truckee during the days when the Central Pacific Railroad was being constructed; and many chimneys and other buildings were built with these bricks. Old discarded brick from this yard, particularly the badly burned bricks, which were in contact with the fires of the kilns, were often used by fishermen and others in their camp fires. It must be remembered, too, that just across the road from the present site of the Monument, during those days of railroad building, there were several dwellings and a store, and on Donner Creek about a hundred yards west of the site of the Murphy Cabin was a saw mill owned and operated by Towle Brothers. Bricks were to be found in abundance in the ruins of these old buildings in those early pioneer days following the completion of the road when I first came to Truckee.

While Dr. Chapman and I were still examining and talking about the two bricks, the hour of noon arrived, and Surveyor E. C. Uren and the two sons of Dr. Chapman arrived on the scene. Upon seeing the bricks, one of the Chapman brothers said: "There are other bricks like these around here," and not twenty feet from where we were working he picked up from the surface of the ground two of the very same kind of bricks, similarly welded together by heat. Going to an old camp fire about fifty yards away he brought back five other bricks of the same peculiar burnt appearance, and two of these were welded together by heat. *We had now nine bricks of identical appearance, two of which formed an integral part of the fireplace which Dr. Chapman had been so sure was the Breen-Schallenberger fireplace of 1844-1847.*

I omitted to mention that Dr. Chapman's fireplace was pointed out to Surveyor Uren and he carefully measured with a steel tape line its distance from the south base of the Monument. It was not thirty feet, but fifty-two feet, from the base of the Monument.

Yours very respectfully,

C. F. MCGLASHAN.

















