



Donner Party Debate Feedback

After we watched “The Donner Party” documentary from the American Experience and PBS we recorded our short debates on the guilt or innocence of Lansford Hastings. I contacted a variety of authors, historical experts and archaeologists to ask for feedback on your debates. The following is a collection of their thoughts.

PERIOD 3

Hi Eric,

Internet is back up.....looks like we cut through the cable while doing yard work this weekend. Thank you for asking me to participate in this exercise with your class. I think they both did a great job and they are both right.....the Donner Party and Hastings are both to be blamed for the pioneers being trapped in the mountains.

The first person (blonde haired girl) did the best job of arguing the case. The strongest part of her argument was that there were many different reasons the Donner Party became entrapped in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. She blamed the weather, talked about how the party should have stayed with the rest of the wagon train, mentioned the Donner party packing too many personal belongings, and basically placed the blame on their bad decisions.

The second student (Alabama) blamed Hastings for the bad choice of a short cut, the length of the short cut, and that Hastings abandoned the Donner Party. Some of this is true, but Hastings gave them a choice, the party was warned against the route by others, but the party still took a risk at trying to shave time off of the trip. If Tamzene Donner was giving directions we never would have heard of the Donner Party ;-)

The first student made an astute observation that a short cut does not always take the least amount of time. For a modern example, even though a two lane highway connecting point A and point B may appear shorter on a map, I would rather take a highway interstate to get to my destination even if it is several miles longer since I know I will not end up behind a RV, stuck in road repairs, and I can drive 65 miles per hour rather than 55 mph. In addition, interstates are often safer routes.

Although most of my research has focused on the Donner Party family camp, I do understand why they became trapped in the mountains. There are several main reasons.

1. Hastings Cut Off: This caused the Donner Party to lose a lot of time, exhausting their oxen, reducing their supplies, and wearing the party down both emotionally and physically.
2. Early Snow Storm: If it snows in the mountains at the end of October, it usually melts and would have allowed the Donners to make it to California. A snow storm hit and closed the pass early that season-----this is VERY rare. They physically could not get out of the mountains. Later on in the entrapment, a group from the Lake site did make it out by foot.
3. Time: They did take a leisurely amount of time. I think the first half of their trip was so uneventful that they became complacent and underestimated the ruggedness of mountains and the difficulty of crossing this type of terrain. These were farm families.....not mountain men.
4. Negative energy. From my research, the Donner Party had all of the drama of a Jerry Springer show. Men were murdered and fights broke out over greed and jealousy along the trail. Once the party was split into two groups and stranded in the two camps (Alder Creek and Truckee Lake--now Donner Lake) the fighting continued, especially over meat and hides for food.

The Donner Party had a lot of bad luck and made many bad decisions. The good news was that half of the pioneers survived. Descendants of the Donner family still live in California today. In fact, George Donner's 1 year old great, great, great grandson came to visit us with his dad during our archaeology dig at Alder Creek.

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PERIOD 5

Hi Eric--

OK, I watched the debate and I thought both sides made some good points.

Here's some feedback for the side that felt Hastings was a villain. I thought your best points were that (1) Hastings should have known that taking the "shortcut" was not an advantage for the Donner party. As you pointed out he did not travel the route himself with heavily laden wagons and from what he did see of it he should have known it would not work for wagons. And (2) as you pointed out Hastings had a financial interest in luring Americans to California. He and John Sutter were in cahoots in this. Sutter owned most of the land around what is now Sacramento California, and he gave Hastings a sizable portion of that land. Hastings wanted to subdivide the land and sell it to Americans, but to do that he had to divert people who planned to go to Oregon and lure them to California instead. One place that you were incorrect was in regard to the weather. Weather wasn't a factor in the Wasatch Mountains in Utah, which is where Hastings' shortcut was. Snow only became a factor much later when the Donner Party entered the Sierra Nevada in late October of 1845.

For the side that argued against Hasting being a villain. I thought your best point was that ultimately it was the Donner Party's responsibility to get the best information they could and make wise decisions. They made a very bad decision when they set out as late in the season as they did. They did also receive advice that countered Hastings advise and they chose to disregard it. You also made a good point that Hastings did get the party ahead of the Donner Party through the Wasatch Mountains successfully.

My own conclusion is that Hastings was, in fact, a villain. The fact is that he did travel through the Wasatch on his way to meet the emigrants, and once he had done this he should had seen (and did in fact see) that the east side of the Wasatch were not readily passable with heavy wagons and oxen. He should have told the emigrants to stay on the established trail. The only plausible explanation for why he continued to advise his shortcut was that he wanted as many people as possible to get to California as soon as possible to begin buying his real estate....

Hope that helps...

He and John Sutter were in cahoots. Sutter owned a large piece of the Sacramento Valley and he gave Hastings a significant amount of this land to subdivide into parcels that Hastings could sell to Americans who showed up in California. So Hastings had a financial interest in luring Americans to the area (convincing them to go to California rather than Oregon).

Daniel James Brown

Author of The Indifferent Stars Above : The Harrowing Saga of a Donner Party Bride

To learn about my books, please visit www.danieljamesbrown.com

PERIOD 7

Wow, Mr. Langhorst, great debate! The students listened well to the program, I'm impressed.

After watching the students debate their case, I believe that the 1st team presented their case and rebuttal better. However, the 2nd team did a good job as well.

My thoughts on the subject? I go back and forth. I was born and raised in Truckee and have heard the story my whole life, usually with the Donner Party's tragedy as the focal point and not the events that lead up to it.

It's easy to make Mr. Hastings the bad guy, he gave bad advice. He underestimated his own shortcut and oversold it to the vulnerable emigrant party. But, as debated by team 1, the Donner Party made a number of bad decisions along the way that would play a factor in their fate. As far as the double-decker wagon goes, totally excessive. Team 2 mentioned it was necessary to have the extra large wagon because of food preparation and sleeping room. No other emigrant party before (or after) them needed such a wagon and made it across country without one. The need to pack excessive possessions would prove selfish as it held the rest of the party up, which further delayed them.

It wasn't any one decision that put the Donner Party in harm's way. Late starts, poor decisions and the biggest winter snow fall in written history all came together to test the will of a party so eager to make a better life in California. This Californian will tell you it IS heaven out here, I'm sure glad my ancestors made the journey.

On a separate note...have you read Give Me a Mountain Meadow, written by Nona McGlashan? I'm sure you have, but if not, you should. There's good information on Charles McGlashan and his interest in the Donner Party which lead to the composition of the first accurate written account of the tragedy.

Keep up the good work, your students did a great job.

Sincerely,

Chelsea Walterscheid – Truckee Lake Historical Society

PERIOD 7

Dear Mr. Langhorst and your terrific students,

I hope I am not too late to weigh in on the presentations given in debate: Who was at fault for the Donner Party's tragedy of being trapped in the Sierra during the winter of 1846-47? Members of the Donner Party, or Lansford Hastings?

I believe that the group arguing for the tragedy being the fault of the Donner Party presented a stronger argument (with seven points enumerated), but gave a weaker rebuttal. The students arguing that Lansford Hastings was at fault gave fewer reasons, but offered a stronger rebuttal to the opposition.

A note to all your students regarding the ad hominem argument that the Donner Party was "just lazy" -- stating an opinion as fact, and particularly stating an opinion that maligns the character of a person, destroys the credibility of all of your other carefully presented arguments. It was interesting that the group arguing for Lansford Hastings being at fault did not use this technique, and that is to their credit. It would have been easy to employ that technique, but they stuck to the facts.

I am proud of all of you for studying and considering the trials that faced the Donner Party, including their own limitations.

If any of you are ever out in California, do come to see us at the Truckee Donner Historical Society. We are a short distance from Lake Tahoe, and it is beautiful here.

Katie Holley - Truckee Lake Historical Society

PERIOD 4

Attached are my comments on the debate; I didn't respond to the rebuttals, except for a comment about maps.

A few other comments: I don't think the disaster can be attributed to any one person, group, or factor. As I mention on my website, it was really the early onset of winter that did them in, but if they had been a little faster, if they had kept better watch on their cattle while trekking along the Humboldt, if Reed had been with them, if Donner had been a better leader, if Stanton hadn't been so stubborn about the mules, if, if, if... there are just too many variables that went into creating the disaster.

Also, something I've been thinking about lately are words like "responsibility," "blame," "guilt," "fault," "wrong," and so on. For instance, you can say that "taking Hastings Cutoff was the wrong decision," but it wasn't wrong for the hundreds of people who took it with Hastings, it was only wrong for the Donner Party, so can the decision itself be "wrong"? You can be wrong about something, or you can do something wrong, but that doesn't make you a "wrong doer" (an expression that is often used of criminals). We all have to put up with the results, good or bad, of our actions, but that doesn't make us good or bad people. I'm saying these things not because of anything your students have said, but because I often encounter statements like, "Oh, the Donner Party was stupid, they deserved what they got!" and it might be interesting to see what they make of the statement.

Anyway, here it is -- enjoy!

Kristin Johnson – Historian for Donner Party Archaeology Project
