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## Unfortunate Emigrants

Kristin Johnson

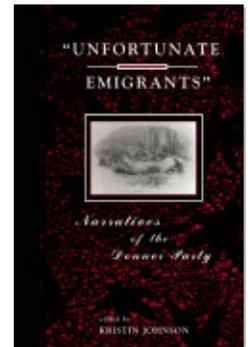
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## J. QUINN THORNTON (1810–1888)

Jessy Quinn Thornton was born August 24, 1810, near Point Pleasant in what is now West Virginia and grew up in Ohio. He studied law for several years, including nearly three years in London, England, and was admitted the Virginia bar in May 1833. In 1835 he began to practice law in Palmyra, Missouri; he married Nancy Logue three years later. An abolitionist, Thornton left Missouri because of the slavery controversy, moving to Quincy, Illinois, in 1841. There the Thorntons lived until their ill health prompted them to leave for Oregon in the spring of 1846.

On May 13 J. Quinn and Nancy Thornton became members of a wagon train camped about 100 miles west of the “jumping off point” of Independence, Missouri. William H. Russell had been elected captain of this company, which was joined on May 19 by the nine wagons of James F. Reed and George and Jacob Donner of Springfield, Illinois. These three families and their hired hands, thirty-one souls in all, formed the nucleus of what was to become the Donner party. Most of the other eventual members of the Donner party also traveled in the Russell train.

Thornton’s diary records his journey with the Donners, Reeds, and others from May 19 until June 2, at which time the Oregon-bound wagons separated from those headed towards California. Thereafter his journal refers occasionally to the “California company,” which his own party periodically “passed and repassed” on the road.

For the sake of clarity, some events unrecorded by Thornton should be mentioned here: on June 27 diarist Edwin Bryant exchanged his wagon and team for packmules at Fort Bernard in what is now eastern Wyoming, as he, Russell, and several others had become dissatisfied with the company’s slow rate of travel. Hiram O. Miller, who had traveled with the Donner families as a teamster, was prevailed upon to join Bryant on July 2. This small party, consisting of nine single men, soon drew ahead of the others and became the first group of emigrants to take Hastings Cutoff.

Also, on or about July 12, at Independence Rock, the Donners and their companions met a solitary horseman, Wales B. Bonney, returning to the East from Oregon. He carried an open letter from Lansford W. Hastings, whose *Emigrants’ Guide to Oregon and California* had inspired many of the

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travelers to head west. In this letter Hastings notified "all California emigrants now on the road" that he would wait for them at Fort Bridger to conduct them along a newly explored cutoff, which, passing south of the Great Salt Lake, would greatly reduce the time and distance to California.

Thornton records that by July 19 several emigrant companies had camped together at the Little Sandy River in what is now western Wyoming. There those emigrants who had decided to try Hastings Cutoff formed a new party and elected George Donner captain. On July 20 the companies separated, the Donner party taking the left-hand road towards Fort Bridger, the others the established route via Fort Hall, near present-day Pocatello, Idaho.

Thornton's travels with the Donner party had ended; the remainder of his diary details his journey to Oregon. He took the new Applegate Cutoff, suffering great hardship along the way. As a result, he became involved in a lengthy and acrimonious dispute with the trail's promoters, Jesse Applegate and David Goff, in the course of which he was challenged to a duel.

In early 1847 Thornton was appointed to the supreme court of Oregon's provisional government. At the end of that year he was sent to Washington, D.C., to present Oregon's petition for territorial status to Congress. He went by sea, arriving on November 10, 1847, in San Francisco. There he met survivors of the Donner party, his former traveling companions, who requested him to publish their version of events to offset the distorted and sensational accounts which had appeared in the press. Thornton had a relatively brief time in which to interview survivors, as he sailed from San Francisco on December 12. After arriving at Boston in May 1848, Thornton proceeded to Washington. The Oregon bill, which he had drafted, was passed in August.

During his travels Thornton wrote up his diary and notes, which were published in early 1849 by Harper and Brothers of New York in two volumes as *Oregon and California in 1848*. The first volume contains Thornton's overland diary and a description of Oregon; the information about Oregon continues in the second volume, which also contains a description of California, the Donner party narrative, and an appendix about the gold discovery. The Donner material constitutes roughly half of the second volume.

In addition to the demands on his time, Thornton's political duties also taxed his delicate health. He excuses his work in its preface, explaining that his notes had been "written out under circumstances of great embarrassment, and with many unavoidable interruptions." Receiving an urgent summons back to Oregon, he had to send his manuscript to the publishers without revision.

In May 1849 Thornton arrived once more in Oregon, where he spent the remainder of his life. He practiced law in various cities and was active

in public affairs throughout his lifetime, taking a particular interest in educational issues. He died in Salem on February 5, 1888.

## The Origins of the Text

In *Winter of Entrapment* (1994) Joseph A. King assails Thornton's credibility, charging that his claim to have interviewed more than one survivor of the Donner party is false. Since Thornton named only William H. Eddy as a source, King concludes that Eddy was Thornton's only informant. The rest of the narrative, King alleges, is derived from secondary sources, especially "wild accounts" which appeared in the press and circulated as hearsay. However, much of the material in Thornton's account is not sensational and many minor details are corroborated by contemporary sources. Some information can only have been derived from eyewitnesses, including both survivors and rescuers.

William H. Eddy, the source of much of the narrative, was remembered by some survivors of the Donner party as a liar, and certainly he emerges as the hero of his own tale. At times Eddy seems to have exaggerated his role, and occasionally to have represented himself as participating in events in which he was not involved. This does not mean that everything he says is necessarily false. For example, his account of killing a grizzly bear might sound boastful, but archaeological evidence confirms that a grizzly was killed, or at least eaten, by the emigrants at Donner Lake. As with any historical source, one must decide for oneself how much credence to accord Eddy on any given point.

James F. Reed must also have been one of Thornton's informants. The description of his unsuccessful attempt to take supplies to the snowbound emigrants could have come only from him or his companion, William McCutchen. The story of his next expedition, the Second Relief, was doubtless also from Reed, as he is the focus of this part of the narrative. Furthermore, on December 9, 1847, J. H. Merryman published an article about the disaster in the *Illinois Journal* based on information sent by Reed. While they are by no means identical, the similarities between Thornton's account and Merryman's strongly suggest that Reed was one of Thornton's informants.

The detailed account of the fundraising efforts in San Francisco may have come from Reed, from Thornton's friend William Clark, or from any of a number of people living in San Francisco at the time. It did not come from the *California Star*. Nor can the story of the First Relief have come from the newspaper, as Thornton gives many details not reported in its pages. For instance, on March 13, 1847, the *Star*, in an article titled "Later from the California Mountains" printed extracts from a journal provided by Aquilla Glover. This version mentions only that the relief

party visited the Donner families' camp, some miles away from the other emigrants; the actual diary records that Tucker and two others went; but Thornton names Reason P. Tucker and his companions. He must therefore have spoken with a member of the relief party, perhaps Aquilla Glover, who was living in San Francisco in 1847. Many details of the First Relief's journey to the lake are verified by a later source, the 1873 memoir of rescuer Daniel Rhoads.

Thornton may well have had additional informants whose contributions are not easily discerned, but he obviously relied on newspaper accounts for some of his narrative. From January to June 1847 the *California Star* published several articles about the Donner party, some of which Thornton paraphrased and wove into his text. Others, ostensibly given verbatim, have been edited. Although many of his changes are minor, in some instances Thornton has "improved" his sources.

Regarding the genesis of his history, Thornton informed historian Hubert Howe Bancroft in 1878:

When I left here in the autumn of 1847 to go to Washington, I stopped at San Francisco—a little insignificant village—I there met with some of the survivors of the party; & knowing that I had been in the habit of keeping a journal on the way to this country several of them had kept journal notes, & they desired me to take up the story of their journey from the time we separated & until they got here. None of them kept their journals perfectly & clear through; there were intermissions, sometimes of a week, & sometimes even more. But where one omitted a week some other one would cover that time. I was enabled to get, in this way, the events of every day from the time we separated until they were all gotten through, with a complete & perfect history of the relief parties that were fitted out in California & sent up to them, & their being brought out, one by one. I made a complete history of it.<sup>1</sup>

The passage of thirty years had clouded Thornton's memory, for this description is clearly at variance with his earlier statement mentioning only interviews. Perhaps he meant that his informants refreshed their memories with notes while they spoke with him; he may also have been thinking of Patrick Breen's diary, Glover's First Relief diary, and Fallon's Fourth Relief journal, versions of which had been published in the *California Star* and which he had used in his own text. The diary kept by Hiram Miller from May 12 to July 2 and continued by James Reed from July 3 to

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1 Jessy Quinn Thornton, Oregon history: Salem Ore., and related materials, Bancroft MS P-A 70. Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

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October 4—the Miller-Reed diary—was obviously not one of the journals to which Thornton alludes, for there are many discrepancies between it and his narrative.

Thornton seems to have compiled his account piecemeal, receiving the bulk of the story from Eddy, then filling in the gaps with information from other sources. Thornton clearly did not take a complete statement from Reed, for in that case several errors in the account would doubtless have been corrected. There is no personal testimony about events at the lake between Eddy's departure and the arrival of the First Relief, a break which Thornton bridges with Patrick Breen's diary.

In addition to the question of Thornton's informants is the problem of his style, the intent of which appears to be to impress the reader with the author's erudition and aesthetic sensibilities as much as it is to inform. This is not merely an annoying affectation, for Thornton's approach is sometimes so melodramatic or sentimental that it undermines his credibility.<sup>2</sup> This defect is particularly noticeable in the dialogues which Thornton invents. The scenes of the killing of a deer by William Eddy, much of the Curtis episode, Margaret Breen's tirade, and Tamsen Donner's tearful conversation with her dying husband are particularly suspect. Also, the negative remarks about Hastings which Thornton attributes to members of the Donner party very likely reflect his own rancor against Jesse Applegate rather than the actual opinions of survivors; certainly other early Donner sources make scant mention of the man whose shortcut led to disaster.

Since Thornton spent only a month in San Francisco and could interview but few of the participants, his narrative is necessarily unbalanced; comparatively little is said about the Murphy and Graves families, for instance. The circumstances of the book's creation also allowed considerable room for error between what Thornton was told, what he wrote down, and what he made of his notes months later. He had no opportunity to clarify points he may have questioned while he was writing, or to revise the manuscript after it was written.

Despite its flaws, Thornton's book was the only complete account of the Donner party for thirty years. When *Oregon and California in 1848* first came out in 1849 news of the gold discovery had created an enormous demand for information about California. The book sold well and Thornton's version of the Donner story was thus widely disseminated. The work was reprinted in 1855 and again in 1864.

Thornton's influence can be detected in many Donner party writings up to 1879, the year C. F. McGlashan published his *History of the Donner Party*,

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2 For a discussion of the narrative voice in Donner party accounts see Richard C. Poulsen, "The Donner Party: History, Mythology, and the Existential Voice," in *Misbegotten Muses: History and Anti-History* (New York: Peter Lang, 1983), 103–16.

and beyond. McGlashan and Eliza Donner Houghton often relied on Thornton, as did George R. Stewart in his influential *Ordeal by Hunger*. While there are many difficulties with Thornton's account, his influence in shaping perceptions of the Donner tragedy cannot be denied.

## The Text

*Oregon and California in 1848* has been republished in several forms over the years. In addition to the Harper reprints of 1855 and 1864, a facsimile edition was published by Arno Press in 1973. The book has also appeared in microfilm and microfiche formats.

Another version of Thornton's account is *The California Tragedy*, which contains a few diary entries from Volume One and the Donner material from Volume Two, along with some passages from Edwin Bryant's *What I Saw in California* (1848). Published by Biobooks in 1945, this version is no longer in print. The well-illustrated *Camp of Death: The Donner Party Mountain Camp, 1846-47* (1986) is widely available but contains only the Donner chapters from Volume Two, omitting the passages describing the early stages of the journey. Although it includes a handful of corrections, *Camp of Death* has no detailed annotations.

The text published here consists of selected passages from Volume One of the 1849 edition in addition to the twelve chapters containing the Donner party narrative from Volume Two. The passages included from the first volume are Thornton's introduction and diary entries mentioning Donner party members or other individuals referred to later in this volume. Since Thornton is quite discursive, the passages from Volume One are not complete entries but only the portions of them relevant to the narrative.

## The Problem of Itinerary

Thornton's work was the only detailed account of the Donner party's journey available until 1946, when the many items donated by a Reed descendant to the Sutter's Fort State Historic Park were cataloged. Among them was the Miller-Reed diary, published by the museum's curator, Carroll D. Hall, in *Donner Miscellany* the following year.

The Miller-Reed diary was a boon to historian Dale L. Morgan and his friends J. Roderic Korns and Charles Kelly, with whom he was avidly researching Hastings Cutoff. In 1951 Morgan published *West from Fort Bridger* as Volume 19 of the *Utah Historical Quarterly*, attributing the authorship to Korns, who had died in 1949. This work minutely analyzes source

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documents dealing with early emigrant trails across Utah. Among other texts, the Reed portion of the Miller-Reed diary is printed along with references to other sources, including Thornton's work. By studying mileages and landmarks given in the sources, examining maps, and traveling over much of the terrain, the compilers established the probable itineraries of several emigrant groups to and through Utah.<sup>3</sup>

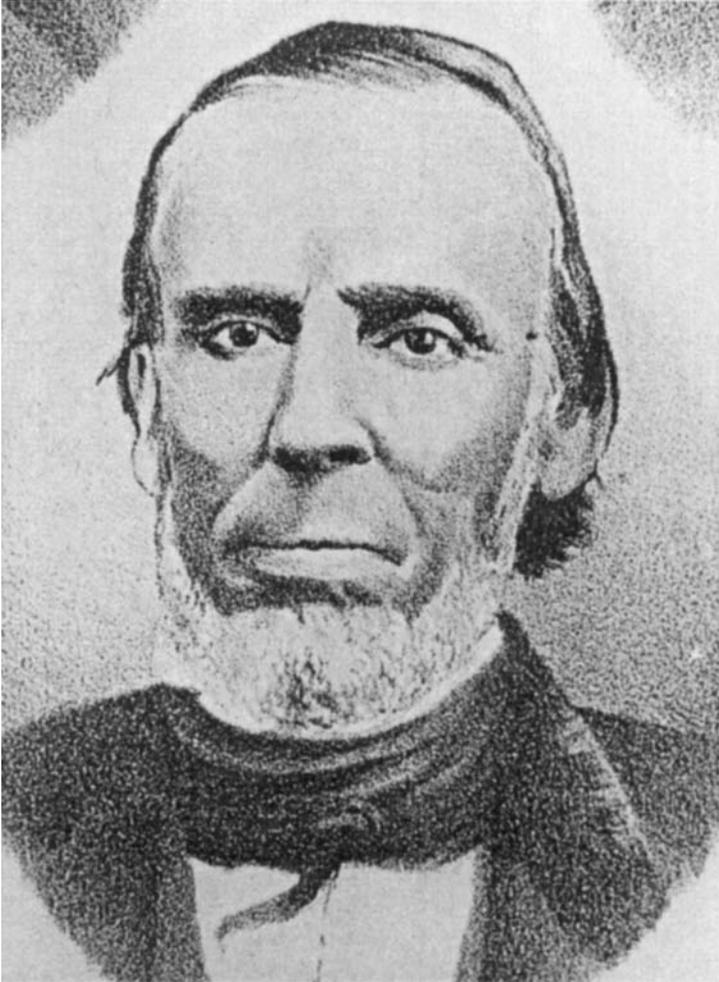
The many discrepancies between Thornton's account and the Reed diary are intriguing and worthy of study; however, space cannot be devoted to studying them here. The itinerary reported by Thornton is obviously based on a reminiscence, as the details are often vague, events are sometimes given out of sequence, and the dating is faulty. While it is not without problems, Reed's contemporary journal presents a much clearer and more accurate picture of the journey. In the absence of an alternative and in light of Morgan's acknowledged mastery of the subject, *West from Fort Bridger's* itinerary of the Donner party is generally regarded as definitive. Morgan's dates have been inserted into the text, using a bold typeface to distinguish them from corrections of errors in the original. In those instances where Thornton's account gains or loses time in relation to Reed's, the reader is referred to *West from Fort Bridger* for more detailed information.

Thornton's itinerary of the First Relief also differs slightly from that of another source, the diary begun by M. D. Ritchie and continued by Aquilla Glover. For the sake of comparison, the dates from the Ritchie-Glover diary have also been inserted into Thornton's account.<sup>4</sup>

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3 A new edition of this classic, revised by Will Bagley and Harold Schindler according to Morgan's notes, was published in 1994 by Utah State University Press. Though he wished Korns to be given credit for *West From Fort Bridger*, I here refer to Morgan as the author.

4 The diary can be found in Morgan, *Overland in 1846: Diaries and Letters of the California-Oregon Trail* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 331-34.



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