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Unfortunate Emigrants

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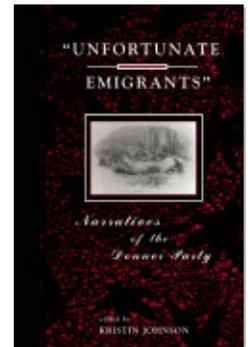
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JAMES F. REED (1800–1874)

James Frazier Reed was born November 14, 1800, in County Armagh, Northern Ireland. While he was still a child his widowed mother brought him to Virginia. In the 1820s Reed moved to northern Illinois, where he became involved in lead mining.

In 1831 Reed moved to Sangamon County, Illinois. After serving in the Black Hawk War he returned to Springfield and engaged in various enterprises, including a furniture factory and a sawmill. He was also a railroad contractor. On October 14, 1835, he married Margret Wilson Keyes Backenstoe, a young widow with an infant daughter, Virginia. The Reeds had four more children; Martha Jane, James Frazier, Jr., and Thomas Keyes accompanied their parents to California, but an eleven-month-old son died in December 1845.

Reed was active in organizing the group that emigrated from Sangamon County in the spring of 1846, which was remembered in Springfield as the “Reed-Donner Party.” Diaries of the 1846 emigration frequently refer to Reed; in addition to his public role, he was also conspicuously more wealthy than most of the other emigrants. Despite Reed’s prominence, however, George Donner was elected captain of the party that formed on the Little Sandy, a fact which has been attributed to the latter’s genial disposition rather than his ability. Donner’s death left Reed the only surviving leader to face the blame for the disaster, but at least two sources attribute the catastrophe in the Sierra Nevada to the absence of Reed’s leadership after his banishment.¹

The criticism leveled at Reed probably had as much to do with his personality as with his leadership. Though a man of great ability, Reed rubbed some of his companions the wrong way and he has been described as “overbearing” and “aristocratic.” A biographical sketch described him more thoroughly as “strong in his convictions, warm in his friendships, bitter in his hate; but honorable in apologising if satisfied that he has been in

1 John Breen, in the memoir cited, and William M. Boggs, “The Donner Party: Authentic Story of Their Trip Across the Plain,” *San Francisco Examiner*, August 25, 1884; reprinted in *Crossroads* 6 (Winter 1995), 7–9.

the wrong.”² However his manner may have struck some individuals, Reed was energetic in his efforts to direct the company while they were en route and to rescue them after they were trapped.

In 1847 the Reeds settled in San Jose, where they became prominent citizens. They had two more children, one of whom died young. Reed prospered in the gold rush and invested the proceeds in land and mining interests; he was also active in civic affairs. He died in San Jose at the age of seventy-three on July 24, 1874.

The Text

Reed had not commented on the Donner party in public before Frances McDougall's article provoked him to respond. Like other survivors' accounts, Reed's is self-serving, but understandably so: he had been attacked in print with false accusations. He is not entirely truthful in reporting that he went ahead to Sutter's only for supplies; however, mentioning the killing of Snyder would have given McDougall ammunition to use against him, in addition to opening old wounds. He is also careful to record that the decision to cut the trail through the Wasatch and to abandon the emigrants at Starved Camp was not his alone.

The *Pacific Rural Press* published Reed's rebuttal in two installments on March 25 and April 1, 1871, the second accompanied by William McCutchen's statement. Reed's memoir was reprinted in the *San Jose Pioneer* on April 28 and May 5, 1877; but since the *Pioneer* had not published McDougall's article, some of Reed's initial remarks became irrelevant and were omitted. His stylistic mannerisms were also much edited in the *Pioneer's* version, but the sense was not materially altered.

Despite its late composition, Reed's memoir is of great value, especially when taken in conjunction with his other major contributions to the Donner story: letters written on the plains, the Miller-Reed diary, his diary of the Second Relief, and the J. H. Merryman article (all of which are published in Morgan, *Overland in 1846*). Despite the memoir's importance, it is surprisingly difficult to come by. In addition to the version in the *San Jose Pioneer*, a nearly complete version appeared in *History of Santa Clara County* (1881), and lengthy extracts can be found in other works, but it has not been reprinted in its entirety. The present text is that of the original *Pacific Rural Press* article of 1871.

2 Frederic Hall, *The History of San José and Surroundings* (San Francisco: A. L. Bancroft, 1871), 371.



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