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Unfortunate Emigrants

Kristin Johnson

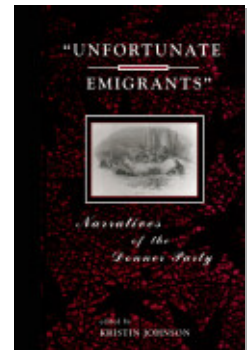
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WILLIAM McCUTCHEN (1816–1895)

William McCutchen was born in 1816 in Davidson County, Tennessee, the youngest child of James and Elizabeth Deane McCutchen. The family moved to Morgan County, Missouri, some time prior to 1836. William McCutchen married Amanda Henderson about 1841. The McCutchens had been living in Jackson County, Missouri, when they decided to emigrate west in the spring of 1846 with their daughter Harriet, about one year old.

Little is known about the McCutchens' journey across the plains. Shortly after leaving the Missouri settlements one "McKetchem" offered to pull Heinrich Lienhard's aching tooth for fifty cents, and George McKinstry passed "McCutchens co" about 100 miles east of Fort Laramie.¹ Whether these incidents refer to the same McCutchen who joined the Donner party cannot be determined, especially as a John McCutchen is mentioned as traveling with the Harlan-Young party.² In any event, the William McCutchen family was at Fort Bridger, apparently without a wagon, when the Donner party arrived.

After her husband and Stanton went ahead to Sutter's Fort for supplies, Amanda McCutchen struggled along with Harriet to Donner Lake, where they lived in the Graves cabin. Amanda departed with the Forlorn Hope in mid-December, leaving Harriet with the Graveses; the child died at the beginning of February.

After they were reunited in California, the McCutchens lived for a time in Sonoma. They settled in Santa Clara County in 1848, living at San Jose and Gilroy. William served as county sheriff in the 1850s. Amanda died after giving birth to a son, Edward, in 1857; William remarried in 1860. The Great Register of Santa Clara County for 1866 lists him as a farmer,

1 Heinrich Lienhard, *From St. Louis to Sutter's Fort, 1846*, trans. and ed. by Edwin G. and Elisabeth K. Gudde (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), 18; McKinstry, entry for June 21, in Morgan, *Overland in 1846*, 214.

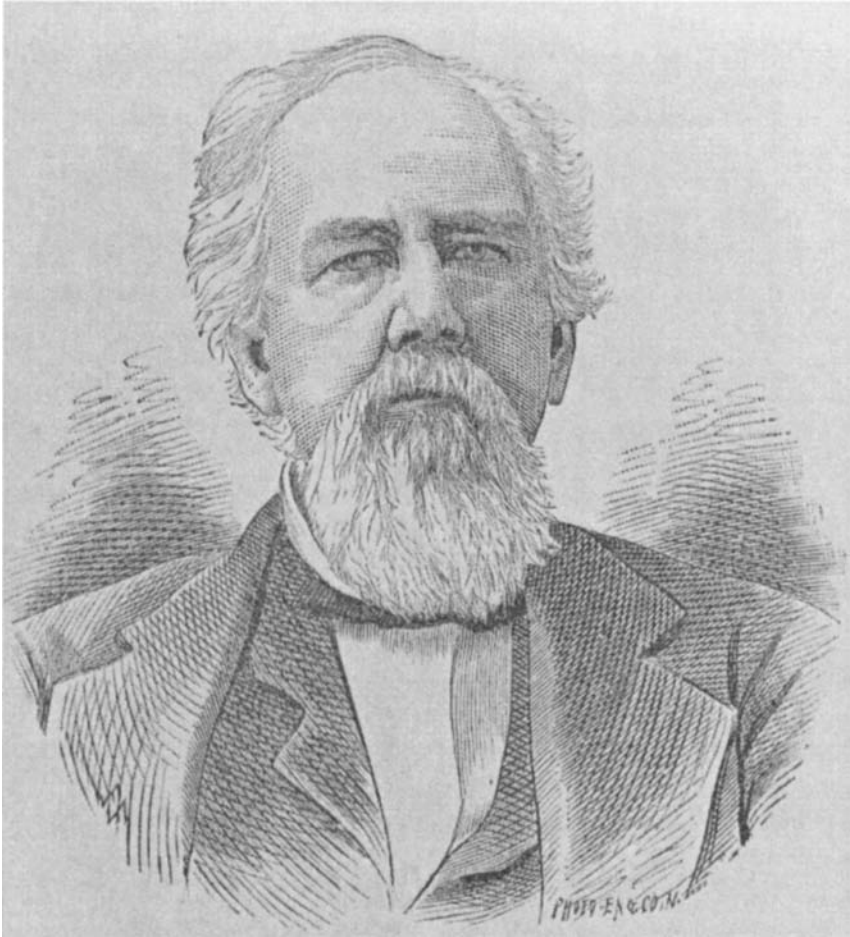
2 "Biographical Obituary: Samuel C. Young," *San Jose Pioneer*, November 9, 1878; reprinted in *Crossroads* 6 (Fall 1995): 9–12.

but the 1890 Great Register records his occupation as “Collector.” He died April 17, 1895, after a stroke.

The Text

McCutchen, like Reed, responded to Frances H. McDougall’s article in the *Pacific Rural Press*. Since Reed bore the brunt of Mrs. Curtis’s irresponsible tale, McCutchen’s answer is comparatively brief. He is chiefly concerned with the remarks about himself but also bolsters Reed’s statement regarding events at Starved Camp.

McCutchen’s account was published in the *Pacific Rural Press* on April 1, 1871, following the second installment of Reed’s memoir. It was similarly appended to the version of Reed’s memoir printed in the *San Jose Pioneer* of May 5, 1877. This later printing of McCutchen’s statement, unlike that of Reed’s, differs very little from the first version.



William McCutchen (1816-1895); photo of engraving from C. F. McGlashan, *History of the Donner Party: A Tragedy of the Sierra*. Special Collection, University of Utah Library