



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Unfortunate Emigrants

Kristin Johnson

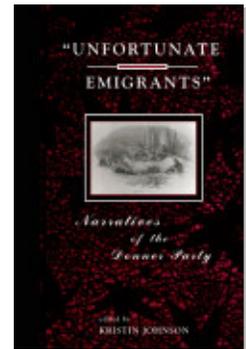
Published by Utah State University Press

Johnson, Kristin.

Unfortunate Emigrants.

Utah State University Press, 1996.

Project MUSE.[muse.jhu.edu/book/9318](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9318).



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9318>

## WILLIAM C. GRAVES (1829-1907)

William Cooper Graves was born January 20, 1829, in Vicksburg, Mississippi, the eldest son of Franklin Ward and Elizabeth Cooper Graves. By the spring of 1846, when his family left Illinois for California, he was old enough to take an active part in the events of that year. Only a few weeks after his escape from Donner Lake with the First Relief in February 1847, Graves joined the failed relief party of March that was forced to turn back because of soft snow.

In June 1847 Graves went back to Illinois, but he returned to California in 1849, guiding a company of gold seekers from Pittsburgh.<sup>1</sup> After his return, he at first lived in the Napa Valley near his sister Eleanor but later moved to Lake County, where, in 1853, he helped build one of the first houses in the town of Clearlake. He also had a blacksmith shop there. It was presumably during this period that Graves took a Pomo Indian woman to wife; the couple had several children but later separated.

W. C. Graves lived near Visalia for a time in the 1860s and in Plumas County in the 1880s but spent much of his life in Sonoma and Napa counties. Standing 6'-3", Graves was correspondingly strong; he was also a skilled hunter. He generally supported himself as a blacksmith but was interested in mining as well, and in the 1890s talked of going to the Klondike.

In his later years, Graves took turns living with his sisters and their families, who had come to regard him as a ne'er-do-well; as a result of his stays with them, descendants of the Graves family acquired a fund of stories

---

1 When the party neared Donner Lake, Graves disappeared and did not rejoin his companions until after they passed the ruined cabins. "He preferred viewing the place of his unprecedented suffering alone, not wishing that the eye of unsympathising man should be a witness to his harrowed feelings." Vincent Geiger and Wakeman Bryarly, *Trail to California: The Overland Journal of Vincent Geiger and Wakeman Bryarly*, ed. by David Morris Potter (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 203. John A. Markle gave a more prosaic reason: he, Graves, and another went in search of game. "The Diary of John A. Markle, Forty-niner," *Donner Trail Rider* 6 (1936), 26:1.

about gruff Uncle Will.<sup>2</sup> W. C. Graves died at the Sonoma County Hospital in Santa Rosa on March 5, 1907, and is buried in Calistoga.

## The Text

W. C. Graves was living at Pine Flat in northeastern Sonoma County in 1875 when he visited the office of the *Russian River Flag*, a weekly paper published in Healdsburg. Graves chatted about his pioneer experiences with the editor, who wrote up the conversation and published it as “A Survivor of the Downer [*sic*] Horror” on December 30. In the spring of 1877 the *Flag* published Graves’s first-person memoir, “Crossing the Plains in ’46,” in four installments appearing on April 26 and May 3, 10, and 17.

In early 1878 Graves moved to Calistoga in Napa County and was working there as a blacksmith the following February when he began a lengthy correspondence with C. F. McGlashan. The two men became friends and Graves visited Truckee, pointing out various sites, assisting in the excavation of the ruined cabins, and identifying artifacts. He sent McGlashan a map he had sketched of the vicinity, showing the relative locations of the camps to one another and to various landmarks. Early in the correspondence Graves sent McGlashan a book in which he had pasted a copy of his published memoir. McGlashan used several of Graves’s anecdotes in his *History of the Donner Party*.

A few of Graves’s recollections are quite accurate—the details of his family’s losses to Indians along the Humboldt River are attested by Thornton’s account and the Miller-Reed diary, for instance—but he garbles so many other incidents that his account is best taken with a grain of salt. As he points out in his memoir, the events he relates had happened thirty years previously. Despite the many errors of fact in his account, Graves took care to correct or explain several minor inaccuracies in his letters to McGlashan.

Though unreliable, Graves’s account is strikingly honest: it represents his own memory, fallible though it was, and there is no sign that he relied on such earlier authors as Thornton and Bryant. This is in sharp contrast with the late reminiscent accounts by Virginia Reed Murphy and Eliza Donner Houghton, whose debt to earlier writers is readily apparent.

At the end of his memoir Graves published a version of Patrick Breen’s diary which is, in the words of Dale Morgan, “grossly inaccurate & much

---

2 I am indebted to Karl Kortum for sharing a wealth of family lore; Donna Diehl also provided several anecdotes.

altered.”<sup>3</sup> The person responsible for most of these errors was not Graves, however, but the author of an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* of December, 3, 1876, which included the version of the diary printed with Graves’s memoir.<sup>4</sup>

For the most part these changes are minor, but a more serious alteration is found in the entry for February 15, 1847. In the original manuscript this reads, “Mrs Graves refusd to give Mrs Reid any hides”; but an accurate transcription of the diary was not available until 1910. Writers had to rely on the 1847 *California Star* version, which tactfully replaced the names in this and other entries with dashes. The author of the 1876 *Chronicle* article, however, filled in the blanks, apparently by guesswork, and had Mrs. Murphy refusing the hides. Though Graves has been accused of deliberately falsifying this entry in order to make Levinah Murphy appear guilty of an uncharitable act committed by Graves’s mother, it is clear that he merely repeated another’s error. Whether he knew the real circumstances and chose not to correct the statement is another matter.

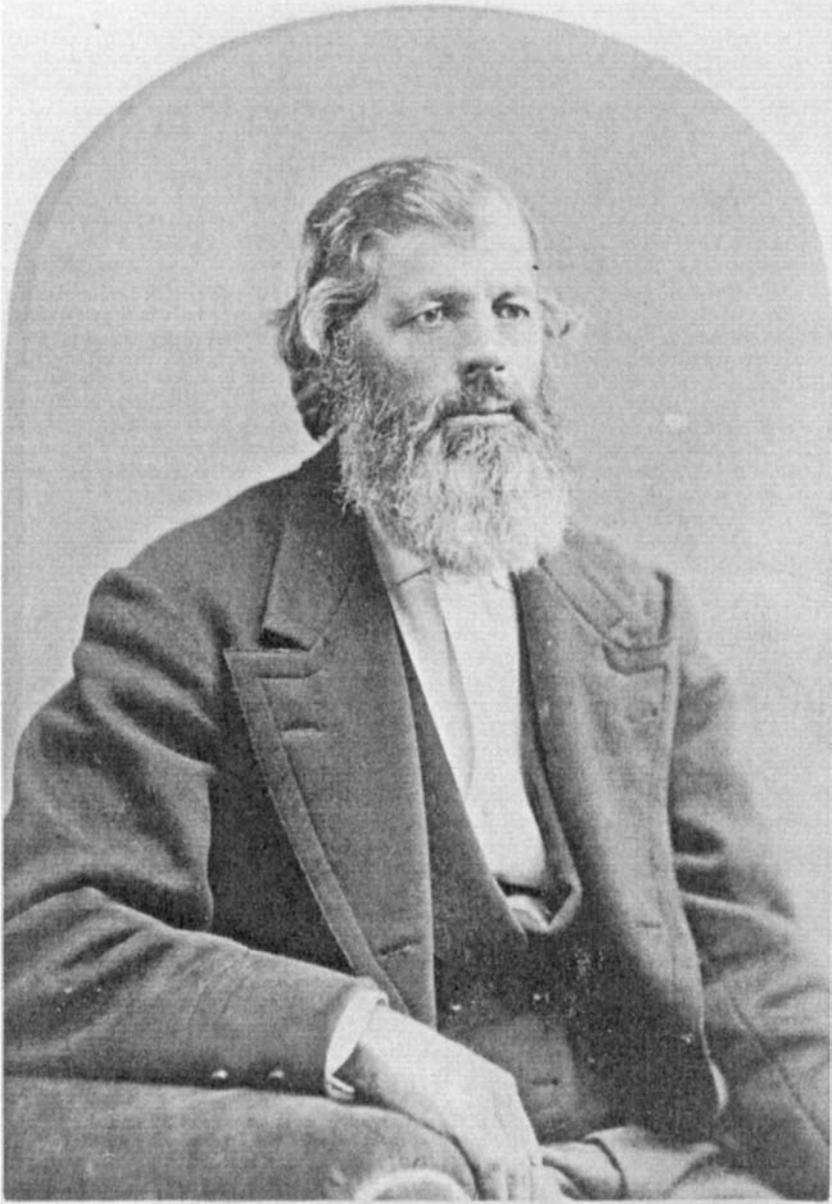
“Crossing the Plains in ’46,” unreliable in many details yet corroborated in others, is a problematic source, and secondary writers have approached it with due caution. Nevertheless, as a first-person, firsthand account told by a survivor who had been nearly an adult at the time of the disaster, it is surprising that the memoir has never been reprinted in its entirety since 1877, unless one counts an obscure genealogical compilation made by the California Daughters of the American Revolution in 1929.<sup>5</sup> The memoir is a useful addition to the available sources of the Donner story. The present transcription is from photostats of the *Russian River Flag* in the Madeleine R. McQuown papers, Marriott Library, University of Utah.

---

3 Handwritten note at the top of one of the photostats from which this transcription was made, signed “DLM.” Madeleine R. McQuown papers, Marriott Library, University of Utah.

4 “A Tale of 1846: The Donner and Reed Expedition Across the Plains.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 3, 1876. The *California Star* of May 22, 1847, was the source of this version of the diary and of that published by Thornton. Graves may have been inspired to write his own memoir after seeing the article in the *Chronicle*.

5 Daughters of the American Revolution, State Committee on Genealogical Research, “Crossing the Plains in ’46,” in *Unpublished Records of the Families of California Pioneers*, 1:57–77. Franklin Ward Graves’s father, Zenas, had been a fifer in the Revolutionary War.



William C. Graves (1829–1907); date of photo, 1879. Courtesy, the Bancroft Library