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Unfortunate Emigrants

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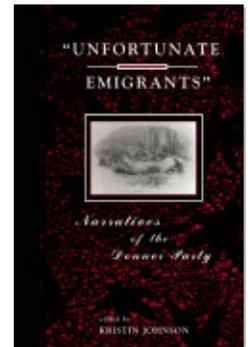
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JACOB WRIGHT HARLAN (1828–1902)

Jacob Wright Harlan was born October 14, 1828, in Wayne County, Indiana. His mother died when he was two, after which his father remarried. The family moved to Kosciusko County, where Harlan received a limited education. In 1838, at the age of ten, he was bound out to his uncle Elijah, for whom he labored until 1844. Overwork damaged his health to the point his life was despaired of, but he recovered and, in 1845, was sent to live with another uncle, George W. Harlan, in Michigan.

Not long after young Jacob joined his uncle, George Harlan decided to emigrate to California with his large extended family. The Harlans were among those who took Hastings Cutoff ahead of the Donner party. After arriving in California, Jacob Harlan met Hastings in San Jose and taxed him about the shortcut: "Of course he could say nothing but that he was very sorry, and that he meant well." This is the only recorded instance that Hastings apologized to one of his victims. Harlan enlisted in Hastings's company of Fremont's battalion and campaigned in southern California, doing a great deal of marching but little if any fighting.

Harlan returned north in 1847 and married Ann Eliza Fowler in Sonoma on November 22, Lilburn W. Boggs officiating. Harlan worked at various occupations over the next two decades; he had a livery stable, kept a store, prospected, ran San Francisco's first dairy business, farmed, and ranched in various locations in northern California. He went back east by sea in 1852, returning overland with livestock the following year. The Harlans did well until Ann died in 1866; after which, her widower wrote, "my prosperity has seemed to have left me." Harlan struggled along, but in the fall of 1886 he reluctantly entered the Alameda County Infirmary as a charity case. He applied for and received a pension as a veteran of the Mexican War, and also stayed for a time at the Napa Soldiers' Home, which was not to his liking. He died March 7, 1902, in San Leandro, California.

The Text

In 1888 the Bancroft Company published Harlan's *California, '46 to '88*, which, though often inaccurate, provides not only an intriguing view of life in early California but also personal glimpses of such figures as Lansford W. Hastings, William H. Russell, John C. Fremont, Sam Brannan, William A. Leidesdorff, and many others. Harlan reprinted the memoir himself in 1896 from the original plates; except for the title page and an additional preface, the second edition is identical to the first. The volume has not been republished in print since 1896, but microfilm and microfiche versions are available.

Harlan's narrative of the journey to California, written forty-two years after the event, is unreliable in many particulars. He reports, for instance, that his company had celebrated Independence Day before reaching Fort Laramie, a statement refuted by contemporary sources. Harlan also labors under the delusion that the Donner party had traveled with the Harlans as far as the Weber River but then backtracked and struck out on their own.¹ Needless to say, Harlan is quite wrong, but at least he is consistent. His account of the Donner party is a mixture of garbled hearsay and precise data.

In creating his account, Harlan, like W. C. Graves, seems to rely primarily on his own memory with little recourse to published accounts. Interestingly, Harlan appears to derive isolated details from McGlashan, but otherwise the text shows little influence from other sources. The story of the Fourth Relief's arrival at the lake was supplied by Louis Keseberg, whose acquaintance Harlan renewed in the early 1870s. Harlan's description of the Donner party's most notorious survivor is unique: though he is sympathetic and believes Keseberg innocent of murder, Harlan also suggests that the German suffered from longstanding mental instability.

Though his account is a more valuable source for the 1846 migration and early California than for the Donner party per se, that tragedy's historians have found Harlan useful despite his errors. He adds to the Inman and Old Bill Williams anecdotes told elsewhere and contributes to our understanding of the parties that took Hastings Cutoff ahead of the Donners. The Harlan-Young party's experiences on the cutoff parallel those of the Donner party in many respects: both companies buried members in the Tooele Valley, both had one member who lost most of his cattle on the Great Salt Lake Desert, both spent several days recuperating at Donner Spring, both sent two men ahead to Sutter's for supplies, of whom only one returned.

1 Among writers on the Donner party, only Zoeth Skinner Eldredge and Charles Kelly accepted this statement, which is unique to Harlan.

JACOB WRIGHT HARLAN

The text published here consists of chapters 3 to 15 of *California, '46 to '88*. In the preceding chapter Harlan had been diagnosed with incurable consumption and sent back to his uncle Elijah's to die, but his ailing grandmother assured him on her deathbed that would get well. A few days after her death Harlan had a remarkable dream of recovered health and a beautiful countryside, which he later associated with California.



Jacob Wright Harlan (1828–1902); photo of frontispiece from *California '46 to '88*. Special Collection, University of Utah Library