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Unfortunate Emigrants

Kristin Johnson

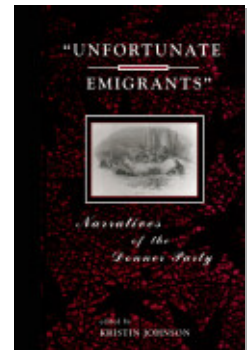
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VIRGINIA REED MURPHY (1833–1921)

On September 13, 1832, Margret Wilson Keyes married Lloyd C. Backenstoe in Springfield, Illinois. Backenstoe died of cholera the following year, leaving his widow with an infant daughter, Virginia Elizabeth, who had been born on June 28, 1833. Margret Backenstoe married James F. Reed on October 14, 1835. Reed was a kind stepfather who regarded Virginia as his own, never treating her any differently than he did his other children. She went by his name, signing her early letters “Virginia E. B. Reed.”

In the spring of 1846 Virginia was twelve, old enough to observe and take part in the events of that year. After the family settled in San Jose, she attended school for a few years, but ran off to marry John M. Murphy on January 26, 1850.¹ John Murphy was active in the early administration of Santa Clara County, serving as treasurer, recorder, and sheriff at various times. He kept a store for some time but later went into the real estate and insurance trades. When her husband became ill, Virginia assisted him with his enterprises, successfully continuing them after his death in 1892. She was the first woman on the Pacific Coast to engage in the fire insurance business. The Murphys had nine children, three of whom died young. Virginia Reed Murphy died in 1921 at the age of eighty-seven.

The Text

Virginia’s contributions to the literature of the Donner party are varied. On July 12, at Independence Rock, she wrote a letter describing the journey to a young cousin in Springfield. Ten months later she had quite a tale to tell the folks back home: a second letter, dated May 16, 1847, contains an often misspelled, ungrammatical, but remarkably vivid account of her family’s sufferings to which James Reed added his own corrections. A much-edited version of this missive appeared in the *Illinois Journal* under

¹ John Murphy had been a member of the Townsend-Stephens-Murphy party of 1844, not the Donner party.

VIRGINIA REED MURPHY

the headline "Deeply Interesting Letter" on December 16, 1847. The letter has been published in many forms over the years and is widely available; both it and Virginia's earlier letter are printed in *Overland in 1846*. Her vivacity undimmed by the years, Mrs. Murphy also carried on a voluminous correspondence with C. F. McGlashan.

That same vivacity appears in the following account which was published in the popular *Century Illustrated Magazine* in July 1891, signed "Virginia Reed Murphy." Preserved in the Bancroft Library's McGlashan Collection is an early but undated version of this memoir which relates the journey only as far as Fort Bridger. Expanded and much edited, it became the account published below.

This document is one of the most popular in the Donner canon. Lively, unpretentious, and full of human interest, it tells the story of the Donner party as seen by a young girl, and has the additional virtues of being comprehensive yet relatively brief. Its very readability is a serious drawback to its usefulness as a historical text, however, as this leads one to forget that it is a late memoir, written forty-five years after the event. In addition, its apparent accuracy is deceptive, for some passages indicate that the author has referred to McGlashan's history. This is not to suggest that it is without merit as a historical document, only that it should be used warily. "Across the Plains in the Donner Party" has been published several times, most recently by Outbooks in 1989, but without a critical apparatus.



Virginia Reed Murphy (1833–1921); date of photo, 1880. Courtesy, the Bancroft Library