

## Prompt 6.13 - The Donner Party

**Warm-up:** In your journal, write some of the dangers that existed for American settlers based on the slides that you see.

**Directions:** Highlight one important sentence for each paragraph.

Although much of Manifest Destiny was violent, many Americans who moved out west were just ordinary people looking for a way to feed their families. Many of them were immigrants themselves who had trouble finding jobs in the crowded cities of the Eastern United States. By moving out west they hoped to start a **new prosperous life**.



“My father, with **tears** in his eyes, tried to smile as one friend after another grasped his hand in a last **farewell**. Mama was overcome with **grief**. At last we were all in the wagons. The drivers cracked their whips. The oxen moved slowly forward and the long **journey** had begun.” — Virginia Reed



On April 16, 1846, nine covered wagons left Illinois to move out west. The original leader of this party was **James Reed**. Reed hoped that his wife, Margaret, who suffered from terrible headaches, might improve in the coastal climate of California. He had recently read a book titled “*The Emigrants’ Guide to Oregon and California*,” by Landsford Hastings. Hastings advertised a new shortcut to California. What Reed did not know was that the “Hastings Cutoff” was never tested.



With James and Margaret Reed were their four children as well as Margaret’s 70-year-old mother, Sarah Keyes. Even though Sarah Keyes could barely walk with tuberculosis, she insisted upon going with her **family** out west. James Reed tried to make the journey as comfortable as possible. So, he built a two-story wagon with an iron stove, spring-cushioned seats, and bunks for sleeping. Taking eight oxen to pull the luxurious wagon, Reed’s 12-year-old daughter, Virginia, dubbed it “The Pioneer Palace.”



Also in the party was the **Donner family**. George and Jacob Donner were adventurous brothers who traveled frequently. They decided to make this trip to California, their last. Accompanying the Donner party was George’s third wife, Tamsen, their three children, and George’s two daughters from a previous marriage. Jacob brought his wife Elizabeth, their five children, as well as Elizabeth’s two children from a previous marriage. Altogether, The Donner party had 12 children and 4 adults.

James Reed soon found others seeking adventure and fortune in the vast West, including the Grave family, Breens, Murphys, Eddys, McCutcheons, Kesebergs, and the Wolfingers, as well as seven **teamsters** (cattle drivers) and a number of **bachelors** (single people). The initial group of 32 men, women and children eventually grew to a total of 90 people.

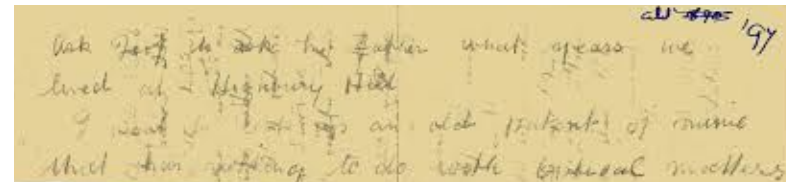


At Fort Laramie, Reed ran into an old friend. He **warned** Reed not to take the “Hastings Shortcut,” stating that the road was difficult on foot and would be impossible with wagons. Reed, however, had a problem. Pioneers had to be careful not to leave too soon or else risk the extreme summer heat in the deserts. Conversely, pioneers could not wait too long or else risk being trapped in the cold mountains during winter. His party had already waited too long to start the trip. So, Reed decided that he needed to take the shortcut so he could get to California before winter.

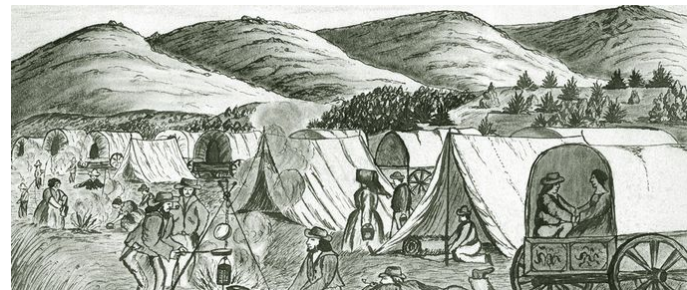


In the spring of 1846, the 90 person and 20 wagon party headed west. After a few days of travel, the party ran into a man with a letter from the famous **Hastings himself!** The author had heard about the large party and promised to meet them in the nearby town of Fort Bridger. However, when the party arrived, Hastings was nowhere to be found. Instead, Hastings had left a note for the party to follow his marked trail.

Reassured, the party left Fort Bridger and continued west. However, soon after, they found another note from Hastings. He warned them that the route ahead was more difficult than he had thought and told them to make camp and wait until he could return.



**Hastings' note** troubled the party. They had already come too far to turn back since winter was coming. They decided to wait for Hastings and elected George Donner as their new leader instead of Reed. After eight days of not hearing from Hastings, Donner sent a messenger to find him. The messenger returned with new instructions from Hastings to follow a completely new trail. Anxious to leave soon, Donner took Hastings' advice.



Hastings' **new route**, however, turned out to be even worse than the first! The arduous journey through the Mountains forced the pioneers to clear trees on their path. In the beginning, the wagon train was lucky to make even two miles per day. Some of the wagons had to be abandoned and before long, morale began to sink. They began to blame Hastings and James Reed for listening to him.



When the group began to cross the **Great Salt Lake Desert**, the wagons were slowed down by the deep sand. On the third day in the desert, their water supply was nearly exhausted and some of Reed's oxen ran away. When they finally reached the end of the grueling desert, The Donner party was low on food, Oxen, and wagons. Worst of all, they began to see snow powdering the mountain peaks that very night; winter had come.



**Frustrations** ran high in the party. Two wagons became entangled with each other so a teamster, John Snyder, began to whip his oxen in anger. Infuriated by the treatment of the oxen, James Reed ordered Snyder to stop. When he wouldn't, Reed grabbed his knife and stabbed Snyder in the stomach, killing him. The Donner Party wasted no time in responding to the murder. Though some favored hanging Reed, the party voted to banish him. Reed had to say goodbye to his family and vanished into the desert.



The Donner Party continued to travel west but their remaining oxen were exhausted. To spare the animals, everyone who could, walked. Eventually, an old Belgian man, named **Hardcoop**, could no longer keep up with the rest of the party. With his severely swollen feet, he began to knock on other wagon doors for help. Fearing that he would slow down their wagons, no one in the party let him in. He was last seen sitting under a large sage brush, exhausted, and unable to walk. He was left in the desert to die.

The terrible ordeals of the Donner Party continued to mount. While on the trail, the party suddenly found themselves under attack by a Native American tribe known as **The Piute**. In the attack, 21 oxen were killed and George Donner's hand was severely injured.



The Donner Party entered the Sierra Nevada Mountains late in the season and snow began to fall. The party was forced to retreat to a nearby lake for protection from the coming **snowstorm**. At the lake stood one existing cabin. Realizing they were stranded, the group built two more to try and shelter the 59 remaining people. They had hoped that the snow would melt the next morning. The very next day, however, five more feet of snow fell. The Donner Party now knew that they were stranded.



After 3 weeks, the party had eaten all their **food**. Consequently, they were forced to eat their remaining oxen and horses. They even had to eat the family dog to survive the cold. They would eat the meat, then they would boil the skin, and then they would chew the bones. They even tried eating bark on the trees or twigs on the ground. Eventually, they began to freeze to death one by one. They would put the bodies in a nearby ditch as a makeshift grave. They did this until one member suggested that perhaps if one member were to die, the rest might live. Soon, the Donner Party, one by one, pulled the frozen human bodies from their graves and began to eat them to survive. The Donner Party had resorted to cannibalism.



When the Donner Party never arrived in California, the local authorities became concerned. So, on February 5, a nearby fort sent a **relief** party to try to find them. This relief party was led by none other than James Reed. On March 1st, Reed finally found the Donner Party at the lake and was reunited with his family after 5 months of separation.

However, that is not all he found. Reed found a **cauldron** in the tent of a German pioneer by the name of Lewis Keseberg. In the cauldron Reed saw cooked flesh and discarded bones. There were even rumors from some of the surviving children that Keseberg had taken one child to his tent one night and the next morning the boy was hung up on the wall of the cabin, like a slab of meat, and later eaten. Reed was horrified.



Unfortunately, not everyone could be rescued at once. The women and children were first to be escorted off the mountains before returning for the men. George Donner's wife, Tamsen, stayed with her husband regardless. His injured hand was now **gangrenous** (rotting), so Tamsen refused to leave his side. Instead, she sent her children while she stayed behind. Sadly, it was too late for George Donner because his infection had spread. He died later that day with Tamsen **comforting** him all the while.



Although there was no definitive evidence of what exactly happened at Donner Pass, we do know that only 45 of the original 90 pioneers ever made it to California. The journalists of the day, however, feasted on the story. **Sensationalized** articles, often filled with lies, capitalized off of the horrors of cannibalism.

Despite the public embarrassment and horrors that they went through, The Donner Party is a story of **survival**. Westward settlement was dangerous and typically only affected people desperate enough to move.

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**Activity:** Make an 8 scene comic strip of the Donner Party Tragedy. Include one summary sentence, 2 dialogue bubbles, and a drawing for each page.

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**Cooldown:** Why did many Americans move out west? What were some challenges of moving out west?

## 6.13 The Donner Party

**Warm-up:** Write down potential challenges for pioneers moving west based on each picture you see.













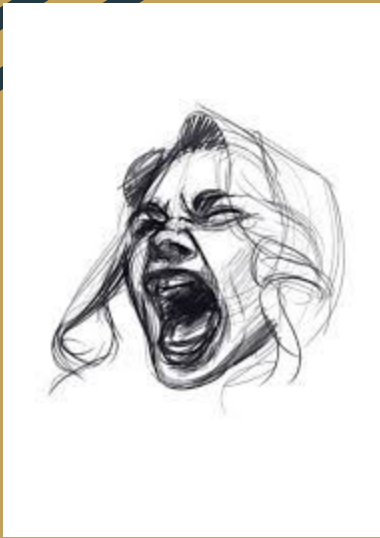














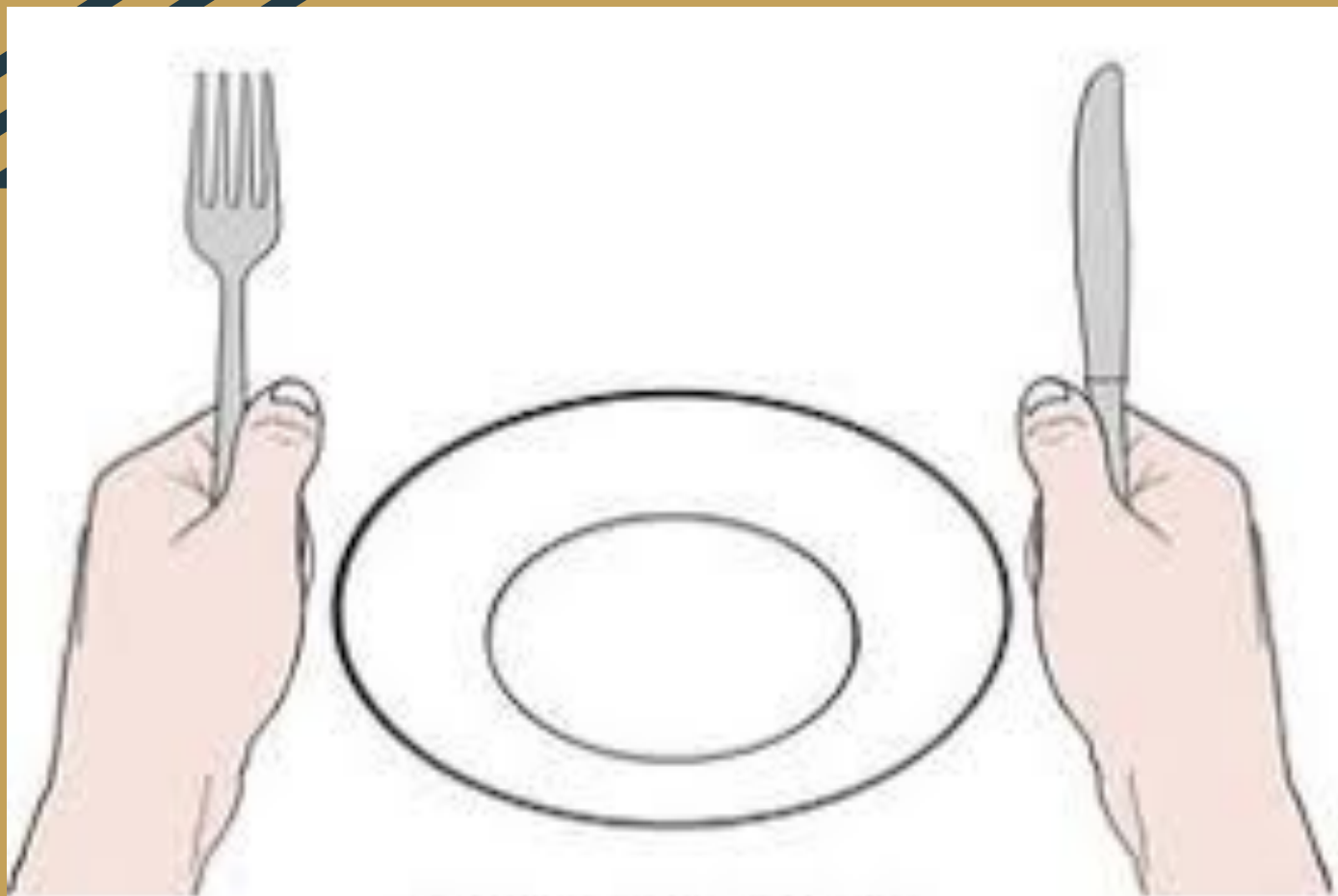












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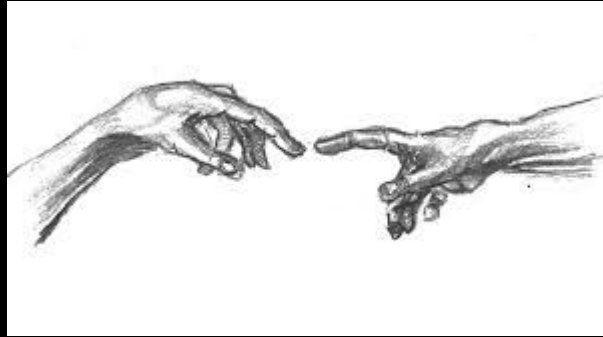
# Reading Directions

Highlight one sentence for each paragraph that surprises you.



Settlement





A Last Farewell



# The Oregon Trail

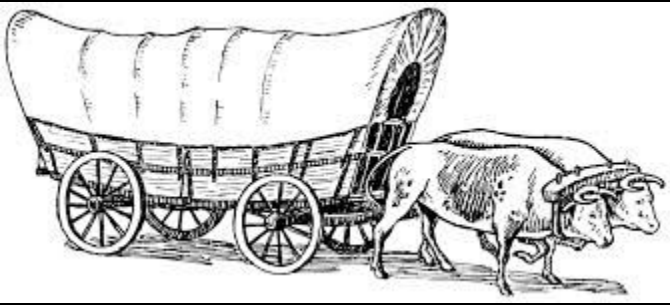




## The Hastings Shortcut



AP / Utah State Historical Society, File



The Reeds





The Donners

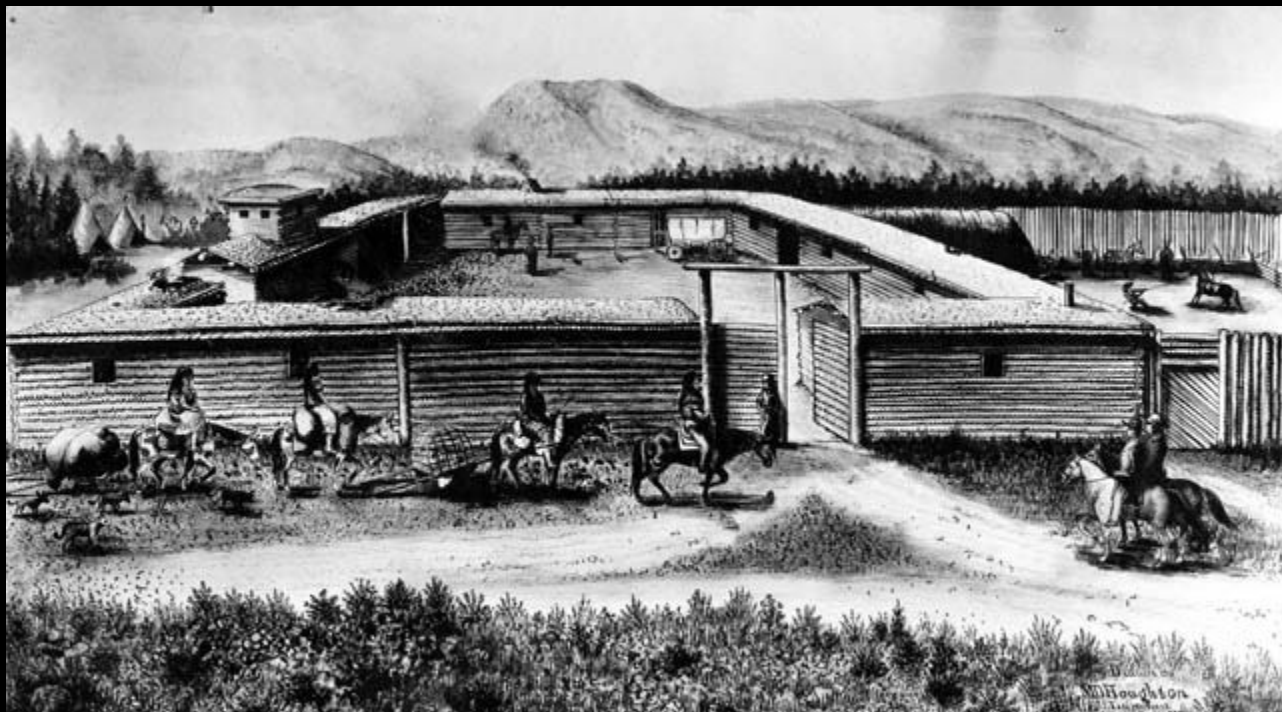


The Party





Hastings



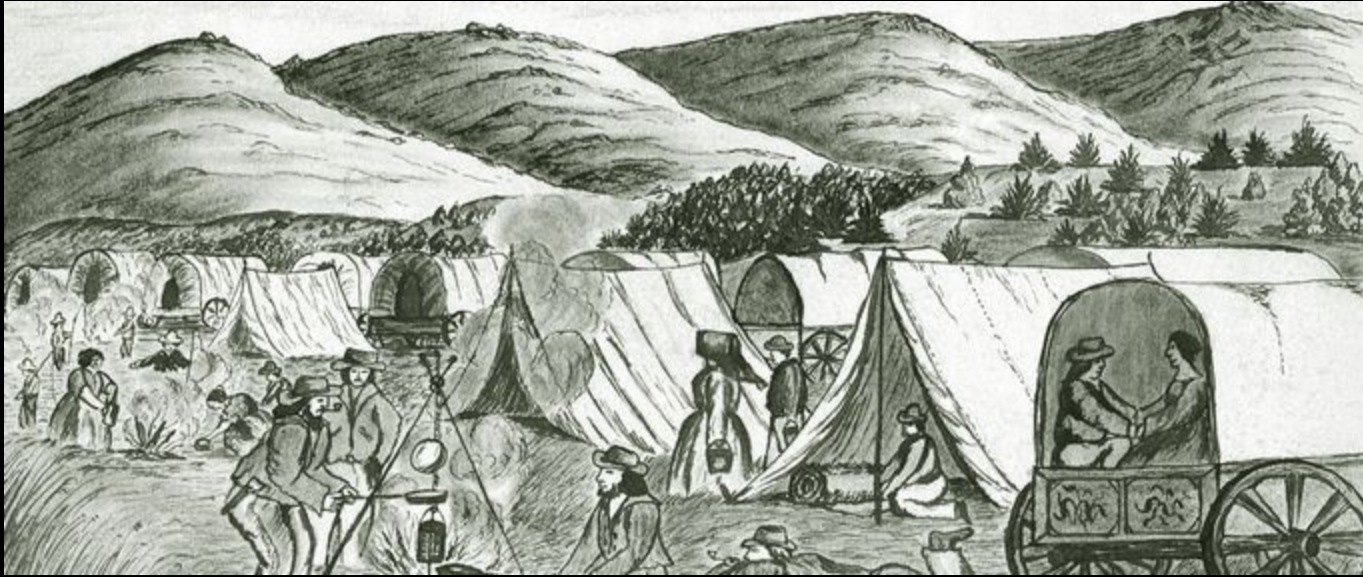
The Promise



ask Jeff to take his father what apass we  
lived at - Highway Hotel  
I want to know an old patient of mine  
that has nothing to do with political matters

all ~~the~~ 197

The Note



The Donner Party





Blame

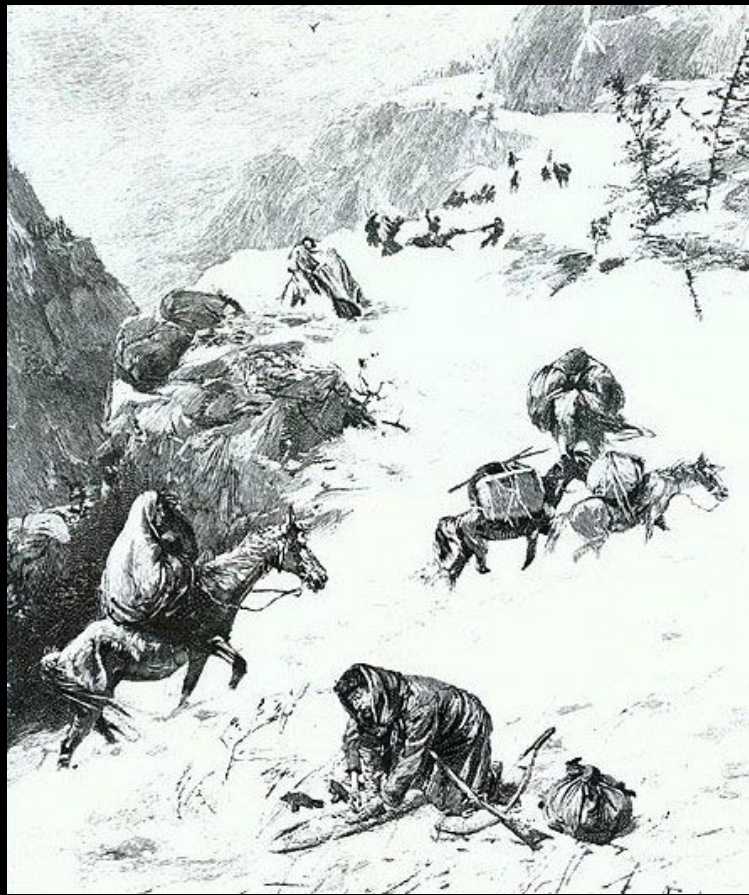


The Great Salt Lake





The Murder



The Straggler





The Piute Attack



Snowfall





Hunger





Rescue



Love



## The Pioneer Struggle



# Comic Book Directions

With your group, divide the story into 4 parts.

Draw a cartoon for each part of the story.

Add a label for each page of your comic book.

Make a title page and staple the cartoons together.

**Cooldown** - Why was Manifest Destiny important to many of these American settlers?

**DBQ** - Was Manifest Destiny justified in helping these American settlers? Why or why not?