

John “Snowshoe” Thompson Expedition Findings Rationale

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Introduction

Our primary goal was to research, to the best of our abilities, the route taken by Jon Albbret Torsteinson-Rue, better known as John "Snowshoe" Thompson, starting in January 1856 from Placerville, California, to the east side of the Sierra Nevada where he often ended his delivery at Genoa, Nevada. We will then reprise the entire journey as an expedition team in March 2024, the Snowshoe Thompson Expedition to commemorate his remarkable endurance in delivering mail, supplies, equipment, etc., which he did as often as twice a month for 20-years.



Poised like a tightrope walker, Snowshoe Thompson. shown as the artist conceived him, braking with his pole. Thompson usually rode his shoes with his balance pole held horizontally in front of him as he soared down the mountain side. Source: Woodcut from Hutchings' California Magazine. Vol.1. No. Vill. February 1857

Our research of the trans-Sierra route taken by an intrepid Snowshoe Thompson from 1856 to 1876 presented the following obstacles:

- Minimal primary sources (diaries, journals, survivor accounts)
- Little, to no, forensic evidence

It should be noted that when Snowshoe Thompson began traveling between Placerville and Genoa, then the Mormon Station, a wagon road had not been built and was nothing more than a crude path across the Sierra Nevada. However, by the end of the 1850s a constructed wagon road was in use.

Observations from Initial Field Surveying

During our exploring and mapping phase, we observed that the condition of the approximate 100-mile route on public and private lands resulted in the following classification categories[1]:

- Class 5 (Approximate Trail): Much of the route is obliterated or unverifiable and its location is known only approximately. In many cases, route segments have been destroyed by development, such as highways (50, 88, and 89), public corridors, and structures. In other cases, natural causes have removed any remains of the route, such as flooding. In both cases, there is not enough documentary or geomorphic evidence to locate the entire route accurately. As a result, only the approximate route is known.
- Class 4 (Altered Trail): A smaller portion of the route was verified but elements of its original condition have been permanently altered, primarily by road construction, such as widening, blading, grading, crowning, graveling, or paving. In some cases, trail segments, whose location*s* were verified, may have been destroyed by natural events or modern developments, or the original trail has been permanently altered by erosion from lack

[1] There are six trail classifications that is an integral part of the Overland-California Trail Association (OCTA) Mapping Emigrant Trails Manual (MET Manual) – Part A Investigative Procedures & Trail Classifications, Fifth Edition, June 2014. The MET Manual also established research principles, methods, and guidelines for locating and verifying emigrant wagon trails.

of use or maintenance, leaving little, to no, evidence of its original appearance.

We relied upon an extensive in-the-field surveying and first-hand observations, putting ourselves in the place of pioneer travelers who had explored various trans-Sierra crossing to experience what Olive Newell[2] referred to as "the emigrant experience." We have taken into consideration not just the landscape, but the mitigating conditions that would alter one's path, including:

- Being on foot or on what Snowshoe Thompson called Norwegian skates (long snowshoes or skis) as opposed to being in a wagon or on horseback.
- The impact of snow-covered trails; and, altering and flattening terrain
- Weather, daylight, moonlight
- Terrain (steepness, density of forest, rocks, boulders, proximity to water and game)
- Vegetation growth
- Vistas (for unobstructed broad views, covering (slippery, mud, snow)
- Physical, mental, and emotional debilitation, which undoubtedly mitigated one's ability to think and act logically at times.

We complemented our field work with rigorous research utilizing primary sources and credible secondary sources based upon persistent attention to details and unadorned facts, thoroughly researched printed histories, digital sites, and a preponderance of related resources and links. A full bibliography accompanies this document in **Appendix A**.

We have applied trail discovery methodology and research tools like that of Don Wiggins, noted trail researcher and member of the Oregon California Trail Association (OCTA) since 1989. Wiggins' research process is described as,

"…gathering as many emigrant diary accounts as possible that described in any way the trail segments being investigated. …Then he would identify similarities and discrepancies among the various descriptions, arranging them – really, as clues – in some kind of sequential order that would reveal the course, direction, and location of the trail segment under investigation. Taking these eyewitness clues into the field showed Wiggins where to look for trail remains, topographic features, and route directions." [3]

We also adhere to the research principles found in the OCTA Mapping Emigrant Trails Manual (MET Manual) including, "the closer in time the evidence is in relation to the trail under investigation, the more reliable that evidence becomes." Thus, the prioritization of emigrant diaries and eyewitness accounts of trail location, over all other types of later trail evidence.[4] With that said, there is one major difference between trail research for wagon trains and those on foot: the hiker will follow the path of least resistance and exertion while maintaining a proper bearing towards the destination. Although we have tried to utilize many of the methodologies and techniques offered in the MET Manual, we remained steadfast to applying common sense and the path of least resistance when encountering vague or conflicting facts.

A key takeaway of our project is that understanding the land must be equal to appreciating the word. Therefore, we endeavored to spend as much time as possible in the field, treading upon the ground, seeing the landmarks, and experiencing the conditions. Nature never misleads, the landscape remains true and it remains in the eye of the beholder to imagine the beauty that Snowshoe Thompson and others before and after him must have experienced.

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[2] Olive Newell, Tail of the Elephant: The Emigrant Experience on the Truckee Route of the California Trail, 1844-1852, California Sesquicentennial Publication, First Edition, Nevada County Historical, 1997.

[3] OCTA, Overland Journal 37-2, Summer 2019: "Development of Emigrant Trail Research in the Post-Weddell Era," Donald E. Buck, Page 55.

[4] OCTA MET Manual, Fifth Edition, June 2014



Photo: Bob Crowley

These are our research tenets:

1. Always presume you're wrong.
2. Accept nothing as the whole truth or fact.
3. Be thorough, detailed, then thorough again.
4. Behaviors and routes of those on foot differ greatly from those with wheels or hoofs.
5. Snow is a game changer: no trail to follow, flattens landscape features.
6. Understanding the land must be equal to appreciating the word.
7. Remain steadfast to applying common sense and the path of least resistance when encountering vague or conflicting facts, especially if the party(s) in question were lost.

In summary, through the task of trail discovery, we have become enamored with the history of Snowshoe Thompson; his characteristics, behaviors, and motivations. Thus, our research expanded well beyond the deep body of work pertaining to Snowshoe Thompson to include genealogy, anthropology, archeology, psychology, entomology, and culture. This is reflected in the bibliography in **Appendix A**.



Photo: Bob Crowley

Field Research

The intrigue of mutually combining our sport of ultra-endurance trail competitions with our passion for American history is irresistible. After considering several possible trans-Sierra expeditions and their importance to history of the west, we commenced our field research[5] into Snowshoe Thompson in October 2023, after reading numerous historical accounts from letters, books, articles, etc. It became readily apparent that these resources did not provide a detailed description or maps of Snowshoe Thompson's trans-Sierra route including factors such as mileage, weather, timing of locations, purported route, key events, and terrain. We came to find out that Thompson did very little to document or map his routes.

We did what we could in thoroughly researching Thompson's routes from known resources and then headed to the field to investigate the feasibility of crossing the Sierra Nevada along what we believed was the route Snowshoe Thompson took in January 1856. From fictional and non-fictional accounts on our subject, visiting local museums, and interviewing historians, we turned to examining the clues that we obtained in the form of terrain, notable landmarks, places of interest, etc. When schedules allow, we plan to continue to venture into the field to see in-person the route that has captivated us from our research.

We found solace in the idea of "seeing is believing." With assistance from satellite imagery and topographic maps on our mobile devices, we witnessed first-hand from our initial field discovery that parts of the purported historic route across the mountain from Placerville to Genoa has disappeared or that evidence of early day travel was difficult to find. However, we are confident in and reliant upon our own experience and common sense: when on foot, one will take the path of least resistance and/or easiest route while maintaining the bearing to the destination. And when lost, this premise becomes precedence.

Much like what Snowshoe Thompson is known to have done, we have narrowed any conflicting set of possible route segments down to the most likely candidate. We plan to return to the field looking for additional clues that might sustain our chosen path. While back in the field we will experience different conditions with the landscape transformed from the blanketing of snow. While obstacles such as rivers and streams become easily passable, other challenges emerged with steep slopes and side-hills along with the difficulty of navigating the snow-covered terrain and its contours. Today's gps and mapping technology has become an important part of our scouting of the route and will serve us well in each of our planned expedition-day endeavor.



Photo: Bob Crowley

We realized our passion is an obsession – and planning projects like the Snowshoe Thompson Expedition includes completing the entire journey ourselves in the winter, to honor and commemorate his distinctive feat of navigation, survival, and endurance.

[5] Field research refer to first-person observations, witness, trekking, and recordings such as notes, photographs, video, and drawings.



Photo: Bob Crowley

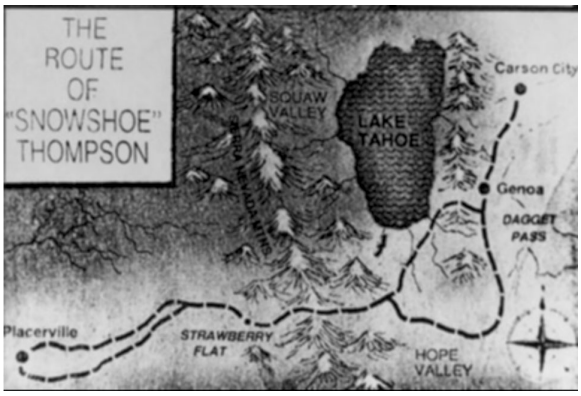
We have spent significant time examining the route from Placerville along the El Dorado Trail to Camino, the Pony Express Trail to Polluck Pines, the Old Carson Road to Pacific House and the South Fork of the American River, Strawberry Meadows, Johnson's Pass/Echo Summit, Lake (Christmas) Valley and the Upper Truckee River, Grass Lake, Luther Pass, Hope Valley, West Fork of the Carson River, Carson Valley, and Genoa. We have already seen a "glimpse" what Snowshoe Thompson experienced in his travels through a forested landscape and high desert including three river canyons, two mountain passes, three valleys, and one small and one large lake.



Photo: Bob Crowley

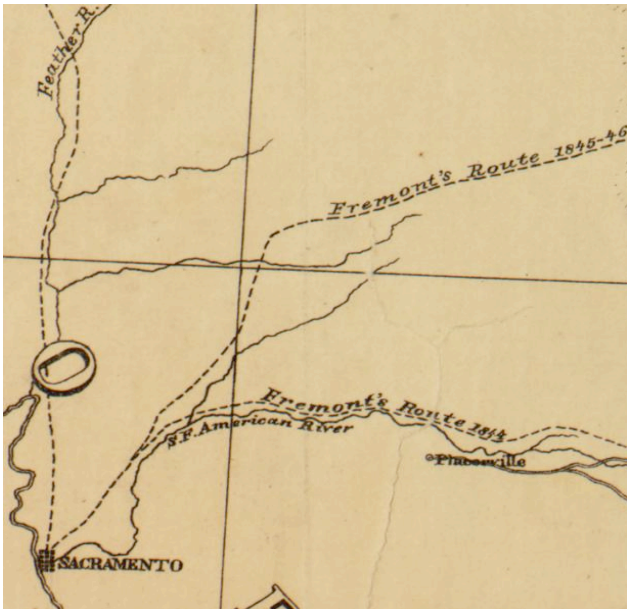
Maps

While we found maps concerning the emigrant trails and wagon roads through the Sierras, we were only able to find one undated map (source unknown) that specifically snows a vaguely mapped route of Snowshoe Thompson.



Source: University of Utah

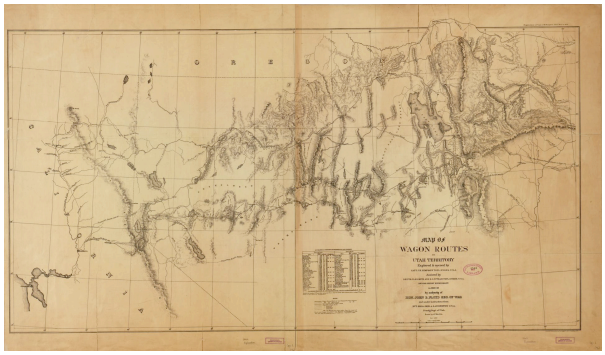
Again, we are tracing the footsteps of Snowshoe Thompson, rather than the wheels of those with wagons – or for that matter even with horses. However, we considered notable maps that preceded Thompson's inaugural journey of January 1856 including the map of wagon routes in Utah Territory that shows routes of Captains Stansbury, Fremont, Gunnison, and Beckwith.



Source: Library of Congress

Following Thompson's initial journey across the Sierras, he began a regular carrier service as often as twice a month throughout the year. All the while, improvements were being made to crude path that he and others were taking. The following maps are examples that show improved trails and a newly established wagon road along Thompson's route:

- Map of Wagon Routes in the Utah Territory, Explorations of Captain J.H. Simpson, 1858-1859:
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- Parker H. Pierce, Official Map of the Washoe Minnig Region with relative distances from the principal places of California, 1860:



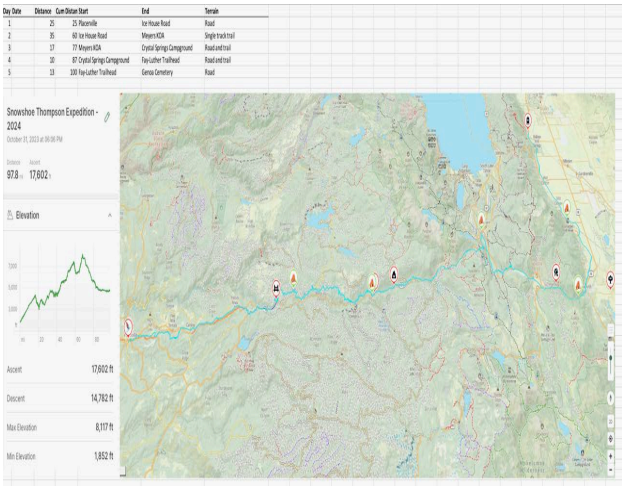
- Map of the Placerville Route, undated:



Source: E. Lord, Comstock Mining & Miners, 1883, Page 8.

With the discovery of the Comstock Lode in and around Virginia City, Nevada, the enormous population growth resulted in the demand for supplies and equipment. This was because of the rush from the Sierra foothills to the Comstock. Eliot Lord wrote, "How to reach the silver ledges was the absorbing thought, for beyond the Sierras the riches of their dreams appeared before them, and neither inexperience nor poverty could deter such passionate pilgrims from joining the odd troop which began its march over the mountains while the passes were still impassable."

Given our understanding of known emigrant trails and wagon roads coupled with our field research and discovery has led to our GAIA GPS mapping of what we believe was the route taken by Snowshoe Thompson in 1856.



Map credit: Bob Crowley and Hal V. Hall

Primary Sources

Primary Sources are immediate, first-hand accounts or testimony of a topic, from people who had a direct connection with it. Primary sources include:

- Text from original documents
- Newspaper reports, by reporters who witnessed an event or who quote people who did
- Speeches, diaries, letters, and interviews - what the people involved said or wrote
- Original research
- Datasets, survey data, such as census or economic statistics
- Photographs, video, or audio that captured an event

We researched primary sources to find cluses of Thompson's route(s) – including any first-person and/or once-removed sources. We determined that he neither wrote down the details of his routes nor created any maps. He was known to navigate the route by the terrain, landmarks, and the sky. For example, by observing the appearance of the trees and rocks Thompson could tell which way was north and directed his course accordingly.[6] However, we noted that there are traces of the Old Emigrant, El Dorado, and Pony Express trails that provided us clues to the most likely path Snowshoe Thompson followed. Again, he would have sought the path of least resistance for speed and safety.



Photo: Bob Crowley

There is a lack of primary sources available. We did not discover any diaries or journals that offered descriptions of Thompson's trans-Sierra journeys. However, we found letters written by Thompson to his wife,[7] which is curious since Agnes was known not to be able to read or write.[8] We did locate written reflections by Dan De Quille, editor of *The Territorial Enterprise*, in 1860s, which provides a rich portrait of the character of Snowshoe Thompson, from his known travels across the Sierra Nevada.[9] But again, except for a reference to Cottage Rock where Thompson would seek shelter during a snow storm six-miles below Strawberry, there was nothing substantial about the route(s) that he had taken. As we learned from our research into the Grosh Brothers silver discovery[10], De Quille

[6] Thompson & West, History of Nevada, Page 103.
[7] Letters from Snowshoe Thompson to His Wife, Carson River Valley, 1872; and, Snowshoe Thompson, The Carson Valley Historical Society, Keepsake No. 2, 1991, Page 18.
[8] Frank Tortorich, John A. "Snowshoe" Thompson – Pioneer Mail Carrier of the Sierra, Pronghorn Press, 2015, Page 190. University of Nevada Special Collections Department, Correspondence about Snowshoe Thompson. The collection contains letters written by Snowshoe's wife, Agnes (Singleton Thompson) Scossa, as well as Rees Davis to Francis Fairchild regarding John "Snowshoe" Thompson and his life. Both Agnes and Rees describe their memories of Thompson and tell stories about his life, including when he rescued E. J. Baldwin, also known as "Lucky Baldwin."
[9] Dan De Quille, "Snow-Shoe Thompson," Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine, Volume 8, Issue 46, October 1886, Pages 419-435 (http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moajrnl/ahj1472.2-08.046/427).
[10] John H. Trent and Hal V. Hall, Myth-Busting the Myth – The Grosh Brothers' Grasp on an Unforgiving History, 2023. Free e-book can be download at: www.historyexp.org/grosh-brothers-myth-busting-the-myth/

was a journalist, not a historian, and rarely got the facts correct and instead he took an editorial approach to his writings. Subsequent authors perpetuated De Quille's mistakes, which were repeated in one publication after another.

An article in the Sacramento Union in December 1856, Snowshoe Thompson is quoted by saying, "that if by next season something is not done by Sacramento and Placerville towards the opening of the road by way of Johnson's Cut-off, the travel will all go by way of Murphy's [Murphy, California]. Mr. Thompson came by way of the Old Carson Road." [11]

In another Sacramento Union article, dated February 14, 1857, states that, "Mr. Thompson, the Carson Valley Expressman, called upon us yesterday—having just arrived in this city from Carson Valley, which place he left on Tuesday, Feb. 10th. He arrived at. Placerville, on Thursday, the 12th, about noon—having made this trip in less than two days and a half. On his last trip, Mr. Thompson left Placerville, on Monday, the 2d, and arrived in the valley on Thursday, the 5th inst. Nothing unusual occurred on the way. The snow had settled and was about six feet deep on the summit. There was a severe storm on Wednesday night, and during the whole of Thursday. There was a good deal of slush on the snow caused by the rains, which rendered necessary the use of snowshoes, a part of the way. There was nothing new of importance in the valley. The man hitherto reported, who had his feet amputated [Sisson], in consequence of them having been frozen, was getting along finely. About the latter part of the first week in February, it was excessively cold on the other side of the mountains. On the 4th, Col. Wm. Rogers left the valley for his copper mine, and on returning on the 6th, had his feet so badly frozen, that it was feared he would lose the nails of some of his toes. The people of the valley are looking with anxiety for the next mail from Great Salt Lake, (now about due,) for should it bring no information respecting Elder Orson Hyde and party, who left Carson Valley for Salt Lake in November last, their worst anticipations—that of their loss —will be realized. On the return trip, nothing occurred to Mr. Thompson worthy of mention. The weather was extremely rough. Mr. Thompson will leave again for the valley on the arrival of the mail from the east." [12]

An article in the San Francisco Evening Bulletin in March 1860 indicates that from Sacramento the old emigrant trail led by way of Placerville over Johnson's Pass into the Valley of the Carson. Although this had been the path of the great overland migration, the road was a rudely broken track, scarcely fit for wagons even in summer, and when the advance guard reached Placerville, the movement was checked by the snow blockade[13] and hundreds of tons of freight accumulated in the streets of the town which could not be dragged across the mountains. In another San Francisco Evening Bulletin article in April 1860 states that wagons succeeded pack-mules and sledges. Through the slough along the bank of the American River only one-third of a full load could be pulled.[14] In May, more than 2,000 animals were employed in the work of transportation as the road became more passable.

Lastly, other than noted Sierra historian and author, Frank Tortorich, no one in recent time, to our knowledge, has thoroughly researched and/or retraced the entire route followed by Snowshoe Thompson. However, we noted that there was a re-enactment of Thompson's mail route as a Bicentennial event on February 15, 1976, as carriers started in Placerville in a relay of mail from one person to the next before reaching

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[11] "Late from Carson Valley," Sacramento Daily Union, Volume 12, Number 1781, December 10, 1856.
[12] "Later from Carson Valley," Sacramento Daily Union, Volume 12, Number 1837, February 14, 1857.
[13] San Francisco Evening Bulletin, March 30, 1860; Special Correspondent, Placerville, March 28, 1860. The article describes the difficulties of the trans-Sierra route being taken by Thompson four years after his initial journey.
[14] San Francisco Evening Bulletin, April 9, 1860. The article also describes the continued difficulties of the route being used by Thompson four years after his initial journey.

Genoa.[15] Also, Rick Gunn, a photo Journalist, crossed the Sierra Nevada alone in the winter of 2001 from Placerville following a route he believed was one that Snowshoe Thompson had once used, but differed from the January 1856 journey, which is the planned route for the March 2023 expedition.[16]

[15] Snowshoe Thompson – His Life and Adventures, The Carson Valley Historical Society, 1991, Pages 30-31.

[16] Joanna Welch, "Tahoe Man Retraces Snowshoe Thompson's Tracks, Tahoe Daily Tribune, December 19, 2001.

Secondary Sources

A secondary source is one that was created later by someone that did not experience firsthand or participate in the events in which the author is writing about. Secondary sources often summarize, interpret, analyze, or comment on information found in primary sources. Common examples of secondary sources include:

- Books
- Biographies
- Essays
- Literary Criticism
- Journal articles that do not present new research

We provide a complete bibliography of all our sources in **Appendix A**.

Our secondary research approach covers the landscape from traditional historical and academia, through scientific and medical findings, genealogy, anthropology, archeology, psychology, entomology, and culture. We noted that the following reliable secondary sources included clues to the Thompson's trans-Sierra route:

- (Colonel) James H. Simpson, 1859 Trail Across the Great Basin - A Route for the Overland Stage, Utah State University Utah State University, 2008. During the summer of 1859 Simpson of the US Army's Corps of Topographical Engineers led an expedition of exploration from Camp Floyd, Utah to Genoa, Nevada, where he became acquainted with what was described as one of the most colorful characters of the region - - Snowshoe Thompson. Besides showing Simpson how he walked on his snow-shoes, Thompson must have begun to travel with the expedition, because Simpson mentioned that after leaving Lake Valley, Thompson had pointed out several interesting sights, including Lake Bigler, which is now known as Lake Tahoe.[17]

- Eliot Lord, Comstock Mining & Miners, University of California Press, 1883, Pages 21-22, pointed out that …Remembering the wearisome and terrible passages of (Joseph R) Walker, (John) Bidwell, (John C.) Fremont, the Donners, the Raymond brothers, and others who risked their lives in the sierran snows, the frequent and fearless trips of Thompson seem marvelous at first thought; but these parties were generally unfamiliar with the route to be traversed, or worse still, were heavily handicapped with baggage or feeble companions; while the blond Norwegian, a model of manly vigor, could run across the Sierras, scarcely pausing for breath. …He ran from Carson Valley to Placerville, a distance of 100 miles, in three days, and returned in two, bearing a heavy load of mail and baggage over the pass.[18] During the winter months this mountain Mercury was almost the sole medium of communication between the (Comstock) miners in their inaccessible canyon and the rest of the world.

- Adrien Stoutenburg and Laura Nelson Baker, Snowshoe Thompson, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1957. Chapter VIII – Mountain Luck, describes Thompson's first trek over the Sierra and references various places that he travelled by east of Placerville including Stonebraker Creek, South Fork of the American River, Woodfords, Carson Valley. Other chapters refer to Genoa, West Carson River, Hope Valley, and Placerville among others along his route.

[17] James Hervey Simpson, Report of Explorations across the Great Basin of the Territory of Utah for a Direct Wagon Route from Camp Floyd to Genoa, in Carson Valley, in 1859, University of Nevada Press, Reno, Nevada, 1983, Pages 96-97).

[18] Sacramento Union, December 10, 1856. "Thompson's first trip from Carson Valley to Placerville was made in four days."

- Evelyn Teal, Flying Snowshoes, The Caxton Printers Ltd., Idaho, 1957. Chapter III – Across Sierra, describes Thompson's trek over the Sierra and references various places that he travelled by including Pacific House, Strawberry, Big Water (presumed to be Lake Tahoe), and the Carson River.

- Francis P. Farquhar, History of the Sierra Nevada, University of California Press, 1965, Page 100, indicates that Snowshoe Thompson first used the Placerville-Johnson-Luther Pass route, where the Big Tree route merged with Thompson at Hope Valley, which is where both routes continued eastward down the Carson River Canyon and north to Genoa, Nevada.



Francis Peloubet Farquhar (December 31, 1887 – November 21, 1974), was an American mountaineer and environmentalist. Photograph by Glen Dawson, early 1930s

- William B. Berry, Lost Sierra - Gold, Ghosts & Skis, 1991. The author indicates that Thompson's route from Placerville to Carson Valley stretches 90 miles. Thompson is responsible for naming surrounding peaks and valleys that he passed during his travels across the Sierra Nevada. As an example, a finely watered defile, holding promise as a future settlement, he called "Hope Valley." The author also states that, through pine forests by day he followed a blazed trail, by night he had only the starts and his natural instincts to guide him. Frequently, he was enveloped by storms. One place, Cottage Rock, served as a rest station. In front of this he would light a fire and then crawl inside to wait out the storm. In addition, the author indicated that Thompson made his first successful crossing from Placerville to Genoa, skiing from the snowline at Strawberry, California, to the snowline at Woodfords, California, a short distance from the Nevada state line and Genoa.



Ski writer and historian, William "Bill" Banks Berry (1903 –1999), was inducted into the U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame in 1976 and served on the 1960 Olympic Organizing Committee

- Frank Tortorich, John A. "Snowshoe" Thompson – Pioneer Mail Carrier of the Sierra, Pronghorn Press, 2015, Chapter 5 – John Thompson Delivers the Mail. The author provides clues to the route that Thompson followed with specific references to places like Mormon Station (now Genoa), Summit [Johnson Pass],

Slippery Ford (near Strawberry), Brocklis trading post (near the crossing of the South Fork of the American River), and the Placer Hotel in Placerville (where mail was left for Thompson) along with a map of the approximate winter delivery route of Thompson drawn by the author. Frank had come to know this area well from visiting several times to perform field surveying. This source is thorough, factual, footnoted, and well-organized. Frank has emerged as our most trusted secondary source. His attention to details and logical reasoning has earned our gratitude and respect.

Frank has been a welcomed resource and supporter of our research undertaking and ultimate journey. Frank has given us his time, insight, and encouragement despite our disappointment with the lack of primary and reliable secondary resources. We extend our praise and gratitude to this Snowshoe Thompson scholar.



Frank Tortorich is the author of several guidebooks for hiking and visiting the Gold Rush Trail region (available at the El Dorado County Historical Museum), in addition to his historical biography, John A. "Snowshoe" Johnson: Pioneer Mail Carrier of the Sierra (available on amazon.com). After retiring as an educator, Frank became involved in the Oregon-California Trails Association (OCTA), where he led tours and gave presentations on the history of the region, in addition to volunteering as a seasonal ranger. Frank has received numerous awards and honors, including the Greg Franzwa Meritorious Achievement Award granted by the OCTA. However, Frank is known to say that the greatest gift is having the opportunity to help preserve the unique history of the region for future generations to enjoy.

- "Crossing the Sierras – Norwegian Snow Skates," Hutchings' California Magazine, No. 8, February 1857, Pages 349-352, describes Thompson's discovery of James Sisson, the partner of Asa Hawley, in a cabin near Lake Valley suffering from severe frostbite during a late-December 1857 trek over the Sierra. There are references to various locations along his route including Hope Valley, Luther Pass, the pass on Johnson's Summit, and Slippery Ford.

Our amazement and awe for Snowshoe Thompson's endurance accomplishment is beyond words. For context, our History Expedition Team have collectively participated in over 500 ultra-trail endurance events over the decades, on nearly every continent with some of the most grueling courses; many self-declared "the most difficult in the world." In addition, the History Expedition Team has crossed the Sierra Nevada in the three preceding years starting with the Forlorn Hope Expedition in December 2020, followed by the Donner Party Relief Party expedition in mid-February of 2022, and the Grosh Brothers Expedition during the winter of record snowfall in February and April of 2023.[19] After witnessing first-hand, the terrain and

[19] www.historyexp.org

conditions related to Snowshoe Thompson's 20-year reign of crossing the Sierra Nevada, we have concluded he was truly an amazing endurance athlete and human-being.

We revel in Thompson's perseverance, endurance, toughness, passion, and grit… focusing on the motivation, ruggedness and resilience of a 'normal' person who accomplished extraordinary feats and who embodied the core characteristics and tenets that became the backbone of America.

Unreliable Sources

Historical revisionism has always existed. Re-interpreting a historical account, either through opinion or bias or for self-aggrandizement occurs endlessly.

Part of our research challenge was to "sort the wheat from chaff" and rely upon resources that exhibited thoroughness, substantiated facts, and consistent and sustained logic. Several times we encountered seemingly reliable resources that lacked in what we were hoping to find or depreciated in quality. As a result, we elected to pick and choose facts from the most reliable sources for Thompson's route, blending that input into our own final determination and assessment.

The trail we have identified is indeed our own unique interpretation and best effort to trace the footsteps of Snowshoe Thompson.



Photo: Bob Crowley

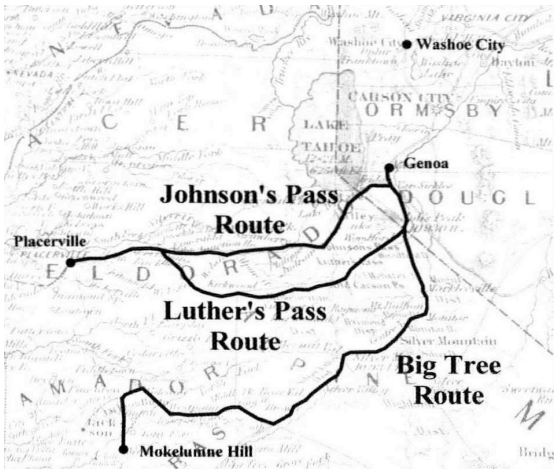
Alternate Routes

While Snowshoe Thompson usually traveled the route known as Johnson's Cutoff, he had explored other possible trails looking for a better, easier way from Genoa to Placerville including, but not limited to, the following routes:

- Kingsbury Grade
- Emigrant Ridge and Dagget Pass
- Hawley's Grade
- Peavine Ridge
- Carson Pass via the Carson Emigrant Road

In addition, he expanded his mail carrier work with his privately contracted express service[20] versus as a government mail contractor that would on occasion take him away from his normal route. As a result, he was known to travel on trails and wagon roads to the following locations:

- Big Tree Route to Murphy[21] and Mokelumne Hill[22]
- Gold Canyon, Chinatown (Dayton), Johntown, and Six-Mile Canyon all near Virginia City[23]
- Cisco to Meadow Lake[24]
- Sacramento



Source: "Across the Sierra Nevada Mountains by Snow-shoe," U.S. Philatelic Classics Society, 2007

Thompson's Carson Valley Express was established in 1857 and operated between Mokelumne Hill, California and Carson Valley, Utah Territory, via the Big Tree Road.[25] Later he expanded his service between Carson Valley and Strawberry Flat, California (Tuolumne County).[26]



Dated back to 1857, this postal indicia used by Thompson symbolizes his unwavering commitment to delivering mail through unforgiving winter conditions. Source: https://www.mediastorehouse.com/granger-art-on-demand/portraits/john-a-thompson-1827-1876-american-mail-12392543.html

[20] Floyd Risvold and Richard C. Frajola, "Across the Sierra Nevada Mountains by Snow-shoe," U.S. Philatelic Classics Society, Vol 59, No. 3, August 2007, Page 204.
[21] Frank Tortorich, John A. "Snowshoe" Thompson – Pioneer Mail Carrier of the Sierra, Pronghorn Press, 2015, Pages 119-121, 123, 128.
[22] Floyd Risvold and Richard C. Frajola, "Across the Sierra Nevada Mountains by Snow-shoe," U.S. Philatelic Classics Society, Vol 59, No. 3, August 2007, Pages 205-206.
[23] Ibid, Page 96.
[24] Mark McLaughlin, "Snowshoe Thompson: Legendary Skiing Mailman, Mic Mac Media, 2012.
[25] Advertisement, *Sacramento Union*, June 11, 1857.
[26] Hallvard Slettebo and Dag Henriksbo, "Norway in America – California," May 10, 2021, https://slettebo.no/norway-in-america/california.htm.

Other Endeavors and Places

Thompson helped to carry the typeface and parts for the printing press of the Territorial Enterprise, the first printed newspaper in Nevada. He moved the items to Genoa in 1858, to Carson City in 1859, and then finally to Virginia City in 1860 where the newspaper grew to fame with Mark Twain as one of its most celebrated reporters.[27]

In early 1859, Thompson was employed by Henry Comstock to deliver a piece of blue rock, the first silver ore, to Frank Stewart, a geologist connected with *The Placerville Observer*, who was considered an authority on minerals. Stewart informed Thompson that the sample might be black sulphide of silver and recommended that he take it to Sacramento, where it was assayed and determined it was worth $1,000 to the ton in gold and $1,200 to the ton in silver.[28]

In October 1859, Thompson partnered with Judge Child to start a stage line that ran tri-weekly between Placerville and Genoa, which included running coaches from Placerville to Strawberry Valley, and from there to Carson Valley they used sleighs and were able to keep the line open all winter.[29]

For a short time, during the building of the Central Pacific Railroad, he carried the mail from Cisco to Meadow Lake.[30]

He was involved in the local Genoa community and was even the first person to sign up with the Genoa Rangers during the Pyramid Lake Paiute Uprising of 1860, which ended with more than 75 Rangers dead. Thompson was one of 29 survivors[31] and listed as a Genoa Ranger.[32]

According to Dan De Quille, Thompson would load a quarter beef on his back and ski up a steep canyon to supply miners working at the Pittsburg Mine, which was 20 miles south of Thompson's Diamond Valley ranch in Alpine County.[33]

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[27] Snowshoe Thompson – His Life and Adventures, The Carson Valley Historical Society, 1991, Page13.
[28] Pacific Coast Mining Review, 1878, Page 150; C.C. Goodwin, As I Remember Them, 1913, Pages 192-193; and, George Lyman, Saga of the Comstock Lode, 1934, Page 32.
[29] Thompson & West, History of Nevada, Page 105.
[30] Mark McLaughlin, "Snowshoe Thompson: Legendary Skiing Mailman, Mic Mac Media, 2012.
[31] Don Chaddock, "Snowshoe Thompson risked life to deliver prison correspondence," Unlocking History, July 18, 2019.
[32] Thompson & West, History of Nevada, Page 153.
[33] Ron Watters, "The Soaring Eagle of the Sierras," 2004. http://www.ronwatters.com/SnowShoe.htm

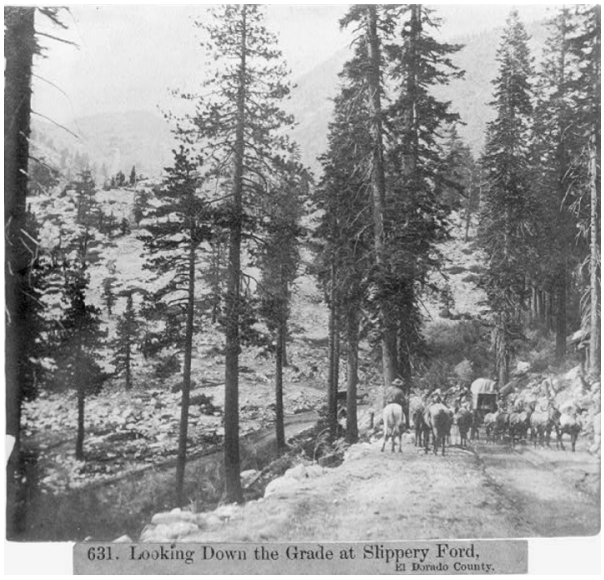
Johnson's Cut-off



John Calhoun "Cock-eye" Johnson. Photo from the California State Archives.

John Johnson also known as Colonel or "Cockeyed Johnson" emigrated from Ohio in the spring of 1849 and by September 1849 settled on 320 acres near Camino, California, where he constructed a ranch called the "Six Mile House" or "Johnson's Ranch." He is best known for the road he laid out from Carson City Nevada to Placerville in 1852 known as the "Johnson Cutoff." During the 1850s Johnson's ranch served as a resting place and trading post for emigrants who crossed the Sierra Nevada Mountains over the Johnson Cutoff enroute for Placerville. Johnson's Ranch once served as a haven for 1000 emigrants. In 1850-1851 Johnson served as adjutant to the state militia during the El Dorado County Indian War. During the El Dorado County Indian war, his ranch served as a camp for 200 militia men. A man of firsts, Johnson was the first to carry mail over the Sierra Nevada Mountains to Genoa Nevada and the first treasurer of El Dorado County. He is credited with the discovery and naming of Fallen Leaf Lake after his Delaware Indian guide, Fall Leaf. In 1854 John married Emily Hagerdon on his ranch where they made their home for over 20 years. In the spring of 1876 John and his son George traveled to Arizona to build a new home for the family. Johnson was killed by Apache Indians September 13, 1876 while digging a ford across the San Pedro River about 30 miles south of Tres Alamos, Arizona.

Johnson was purportedly the first man to carry the mail over the Sierra's in the winter. Snowshoe Thompson later took over the job and used Johnson's route. Johnson maintained a 400-acre ranch in Placerville called Johnson's Ranch for immigrants heading into California looking for gold. He was the first man to name Lake Tahoe, calling it Bigler's Lake after Governor Bigler, and nearby Fallen Leaf Lake was named by him for his friend, the Delaware Indian Chief Fallen Leaf.[34]



A wagon team and riders make their way down the grade from Johnson Pass/Sayle's Flat towards Slippery Ford, 1866. Photo from the Library of Congress.

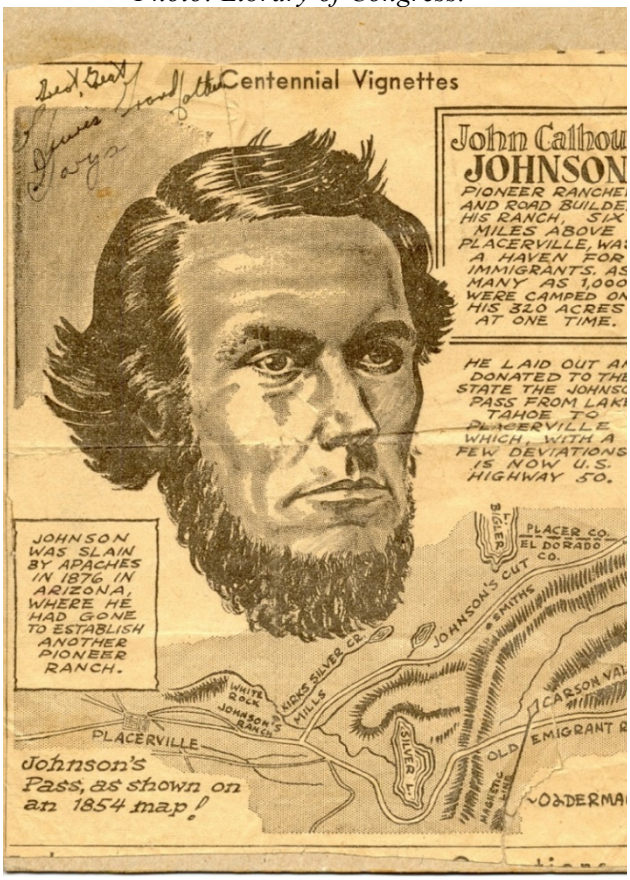
[34] Find a Grave website: https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/55893525/john-calhoun-johnson



1866 photo showing the wagon train headed up the grade. The photo was taken at the horseshoe bend as located on the map at the end of the post. Photo: Library of Congress.



Sierra Summit on Johnson Cutoff (Source: John Putnam, June 7, 2011, https://mygoldrushtales.com/johnson%E2%80%99s-cutoff-a-shorter-route-across-the-sierra/)



Sacramento Bee, November 4, 1950

Expected Deliverables

Armed with knowledge from our field research and what we deem to be reliable sources, we will depart from Placerville on March 6th and arrive on the east side of the Sierra Nevada at Genoa on March 10th, which will be 168 years after Snowshoe Thompson first trekked across the Sierras carrying the mail.

We will publish a fully digital map in .gpx and .kml formats, capable of being ingested by virtually any global positioning system (gps) navigation application. We have utilized several layers for research and display including a 1900 historic topo and current public and private property boarders.

This map will include waypoints for the location of each night's campsite, key incidents, and notable landmarks.

We will also generate a separate map which will depict the route we will follow during our planned expedition starting on March 6th from Placerville. Our route will be similar to what we know of Snowshoe Thompson's 1856 initial route; but, because of modern-day obstacles, we will have to deviate in places to reach Genoa, Nevada.

As we move across the Sierra Nevada, we will be carrying a tribute card with the photograph and biography of Snowshoe Thompson. In the evening we will take time to discuss and reflect on this extraordinary person. Other tribute cards and evening discussions will honor the following individuals:

- Snowshoe Thompson's wife, Agnes, and son, Arthur (Arthure).
- John Calhoun "Cock-eye" Johnson of Placerville surveyed and cleared a route in 1852 known as Johnson's Cut-off of the California Trail that served as a shorter, easier trail than the Carson Route. Johnson's Cut-off became a major artery for emigrant travelers and was the road used by Snowshoe Thompson beginning in 1856 and later by the Pony Express in 1860. For the most part, the route is what Highway 50 follows today.
- E. Allen Grosh and Hosea B. Grosh who were the first discoverers of silver in the Utah Territory travelled back-and-forth across the same Sierra route between their camp at Mud Springs (near Diamond Springs, California) to their rock cabin above Johntown (near Silver City, Nevada) every year from 1853 through 1857. From both locations the brothers wrote letters home to their father, A.B. Grosh, in Pennsylvania about their time in California and Nevada.[35] There is a possibility that Thompson carried these letters from 1856 to late 1857.
- Ira Manley Luther traversed an eastern Sierra summit by wagon in 1854 and painted his name on a rock; hence the name, Luther Pass, which became one of the main east-west wagon roads used in the 1860s. Luther was one of the "Irish Brigade" described by Mark Twain in *Roughing It*.
- James Sisson who was discovered by Snowshoe Thompson in December 1856 half-frozen and was rescued from a remote snowbound cabin belonging to his business partner, Asa Hawley. Sisson was caught in a blizzard, got turned around, and wound up at the cabin for 12 days without food except for raw flour. Sisson survived after a doctor amputated his frost-bitted feet.
- Asa Hawley established a trading post in Lake Valley in 1854 near the Upper Truckee River wall that became known as Hawley's Hill. Hawley is credited for the construction of a new wagon road was completed in 1857 with a gentle grade for safe travel, unlike the existing Carson Grade, where block and tackle had to be used to get the wagons over into Lake Valley.
- George Chorpenning saw the need for fast and reliable mail service between California and the

[35] The Letters of Ethan Allen and Hosea Ballou Grosh 1849-1857, as Transcribed and Complied by Charles Thomas Wegman and George C. Harville, 1997, unpublished; and, The Gold Rush Letters of E. Allen Grosh & Hosea B. Grosh, Edited by Ron James & Bob Stewart, University of Nevada Press, 2012.

eastern states in 1851, most of which was then being transported by sea around South America via the Strait of Magellan. It was a hard journey over the Sierra Nevada, and 16 days was considered good time. He teamed with fellow Pennsylvania entrepreneur Absolam Woodward, and they received a contract in April 1851 from the U.S. Post Office to provide monthly transport of the mail between Sacramento and Salt Lake City, the most difficult leg of the first overland mail service. This contract was annulled in 1860.

Lastly, evening discussions will include the reading of letters that Snowshoe Thompson may have carried.