

Teaching notes

Resources

Card sort - cut up and in envelopes (26 cards). One set will be needed for each group (3-4 students in each group works well).

Learning objectives

Identify the problems faced by migrants travelling west.

Identify the mistakes the Donner Party made.

Explain the problems, difficulties and dangers migrants faced travelling west.

Decide who was to blame for the Donner Party failure.

Tasks

1. Ask students to read the cards in groups of 3-4 and write headings they could sort the cards under.
2. Find cards that help to answer each of the following areas:
 - Explain what preparation was needed before making the journey west.
 - Identify the problems the Donner Party faced.
 - Identify the mistakes made by the Donner Party - when did they make their first mistake?
 - Explain reasons why the Lansford Hastings short cut was not a good route to take.
 - What were the consequences of not preparing for your journey west?
 - Explain the problems the Donner Party faced.
3. Decide who was to blame for the Donner Party failure? To what extent were they to blame - a little, to some extent or a lot?

Lesson mystery: Who was to blame for the Donner Party failure?

The Donner Party was a group of 300 migrants travelling with 60 wagons. They were led by the Donner brothers.

The Donner Party set off from Independence on the Oregon Trail in May 1846.

The Donner Party was very well equipped.

The Donner Party had more women, elderly people and children than most migrant groups. This meant that they had fewer people with the skills needed during the trek west.

Migrants travelled in large-sized wagon trains because it was dangerous to travel alone.

Migrant groups needed to travel with people with a variety of useful skills. For example hunting skills.

The weather was an important factor when deciding when to start the journey west. Migrants had to avoid the winter months and make sure the prairie grass was good quality to feed the animals. .

April was the best time to set off on the Oregon Trail if they wanted to arrive before the winter months.

In July 1846 the Migrants had reached Fort Bridger in the Rocky Mountains. The Donner Brothers and 80 migrants decided to take Lansford Hastings' short cut through Utah into Nevada. They left the Oregon Trail.

The Donner Brothers led the 80 migrants south west of Fort Bridger curving south-west below the Great Salt Lake.

Lesson mystery: Who was to blame for the Donner Party failure?

A trail guide by Lansford Hastings claimed to have found a short cut to California. The route was described as a fine road with plenty of grass and water. This impressed the Donner Brothers.

Lansford Hastings only thought the short cut would work. He had never used it himself. The migrants did not know that Hastings had never used the short cut.

Lansford Hastings short cut proved to be anything but short. It cost the migrants time because of lots of delays and problems they encountered on this route.

The Hastings short cut caused delays because the route was not marked out; the wagons got stuck on the rugged, rocky terrain, with steep slopes and deep canyons. They had to find safe river crossings. Parts of the route did not have enough water or grass for the animals.

The Oregon Trail was cleared for wagons; the route had been marked out. Migrants could follow the wagon ruts in the road. River crossings had ferries (for a fee) waiting to transfer migrants across. The Oregon Trail had forts where migrants could find provisions and places for livestock to find grass.

The delays caused arguments amongst the Donner Party. They argued over whether they should go back or continue on the 'short cut'.

The Donner Party finally reached the Sierra Nevada Mountains by mid-October. They were too late, they had little food, were exhausted and demoralised (disheartened).

They were high into the mountains by early November, but before they could make it over the pass, heavy snow trapped the Donner Party. They had no other choice but to dig in for the winter.

Lesson mystery: Who was to blame for the Donner Party failure?

Trapped in the snowy mountains conditions worsened. Animals died, their food ran out. The first migrant died of starvation in mid-December.

Trapped in snowy conditions no one in the Donner Party had the skills to hunt in the unforgiving Sierra Nevada Mountains.

Fifteen members of the group decided to set off on foot through the snow and blizzards to try and get help. Their food ran out. When four froze to death, they roasted and ate them.

They carefully labelled the remains of the bodies so that no one ate their husband or wife. When the Indians refused to eat human remains they were killed and eaten too.

It took the small group of 15 members (now down to 9) 32 days to raise the alarm to get help.

News spread of the Donner Party fate and a rescue party was sent to the trapped Donner Party in early 1847. Four rescue parties set off from California bringing much needed supplies over the Sierra Nevada.

When the rescue party found the rest of the trapped Donner Party they found that over half over them were dead and that those who had survived had done so by eating the dead.

Rescuers found a horrible scene of terribly mutilated human bodies - arms, legs and skulls. A pot was filled with human flesh, and a skull had been split open and the brains removed. It was the remains of George Donner.

