

MARK TWAIN'S ROUTE TO LAKE TAHOE

by

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In 1861, Samuel Clemens traveled to the newly created Nevada Territory with his brother Orion to fulfill Orion's appointment by President Abraham Lincoln to the Office of Secretary of the Territory of Nevada. Shortly after his arrival in the territorial capital of Carson City, Clemens hiked to Lake Tahoe with recent acquaintance John Kinney to explore the Lake's beauty and stake a timber claim. His account of these visits and ensuing adventures are contained in Chapters XXII and XXIII of his 1872 memoir, *Roughing It* (Twain, 1993) and letters written to his mother and sister during the period of these visits (Branch, Frank, & Sanderson, 1988). The *Roughing It* account is actually a composite of 10-year old recollections of two timber-scouting visits to the Lake with characteristic hyperbolic embellishments.

Clemens went on to become a prolific and revered American author with an impressive literary legacy. In 1863, he assumed the better-known pen name of Mark Twain. In this paper, we refer to Samuel Clemens as Mark Twain.

Mark Twain's early visits to Lake Tahoe are historic because they inspired him to express his oft-quoted visual and emotional impressions upon sighting Lake Tahoe for the first time, "As it lay there with the shadows of the mountains brilliantly photographed upon its still surface I thought it must surely be the fairest picture the whole earth affords. ..." (Twain, 1993, p. 148) Carved deeply into the rich Tahoe history, these immortal words are perhaps the most eloquent description of Lake Tahoe.

Through these visits, Twain encounters a classic social trap – the conflict over the use of a natural resource, exemplified in the ecological parable. The Tahoe version of this social trap pits the individual motive to exploit natural assets for personal gain against the socially responsible opportunity to conserve. Twain arrives at Tahoe with exploitation on his mind, but leaves as a changed person with deep reverence for the Lake and a spirit moved by its extraordinary natural beauty.

As evidenced in his later writings, Lake Tahoe became the gold standard to which he compared all other lakes, with none ever measuring up. If he were alive today, Twain would surely be a formidable and vociferous proponent of preservation of Lake Tahoe. In Twain's own words, Lake Tahoe "... is the masterpiece of the Creator." (Branch, Frank, & Sanderson, 1988, p. 264)

Although Twain did not publish his account until 10 years after his historic trip and despite his liberal use of humorous exaggeration, one can reconstruct the route and locations by relating clues in his description to known topographic features and historical records. In this analysis, we cite the original manuscript passages verbatim where possible.

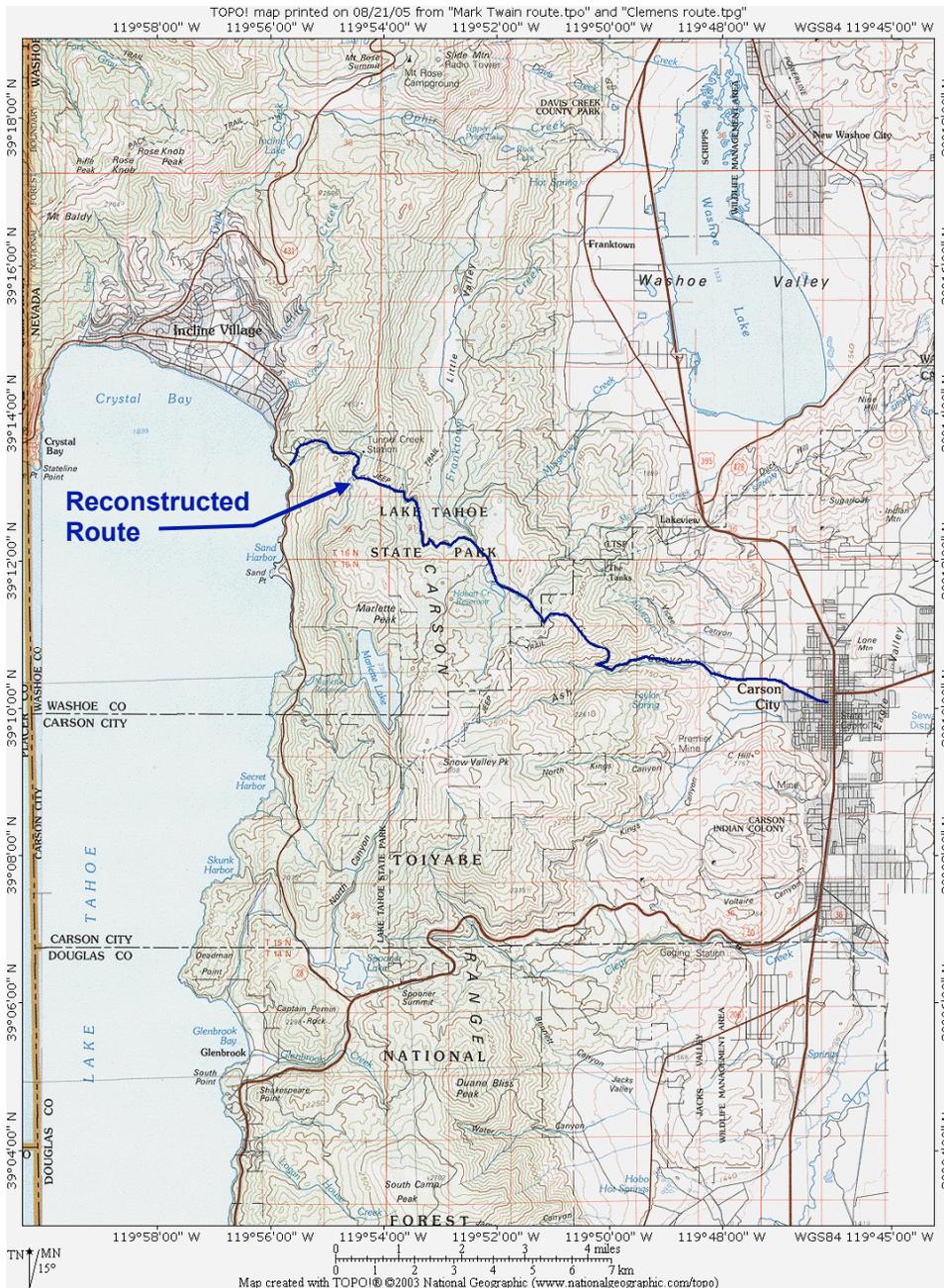
Twain's route has been the subject of some conjecture. E. B. Scott in *Saga of Lake Tahoe* and other authors place him near Glenbrook, although Twain's description clearly does not fit. Others speculate he came to the east shore or west shore of the Lake. Neither appears accurate. Twain himself states in fact, "We were on the north shore. ..." (Twain, 1993, p. 153)

Twain states, "We were told the distance was eleven miles. ..." (Twain, 1993, p. 147). This places his starting point in or near modern day Carson City, Nevada. In 1861, a known route from Carson City toward Lake Tahoe was the Ash Canyon road. (Unknown, Public Land Survey Plats, 1861-65) This road serviced two lumber mills that produced timbers for the Comstock mines in Virginia City from stands of Jeffrey pine. By following a road and creek this route would have intersected with the Placer County Emigrant Road constructed in 1852, (Scott, 1957) taking Twain toward Lake Tahoe near present day Incline Village, Nevada. The other possible routes from Carson City, Walton's Road and Kings Canyon Road, did not exist or were not widely used before 1861 and fit neither Twain's cited distance nor topographic description of his route.

Twain mentions walking a "... long time on level ground ..." (Twain, 1993, p. 147) suggesting a stroll over the gentle terrain west of Carson City to a point where his steep climb up a mountain "... about a thousand miles high ..." (Twain, 1993, p. 147) begins. This likely route follows the very steep grade of Ash Canyon Road up to the first ridge. This ridge defines the eastern extent of Little Valley, a watershed draining Franktown Creek northerly into the Washoe Valley. He remarks after reaching the top of this first summit, "No lake there. ..." (Twain, 1993, p. 147) Due to topography, Lake Tahoe is not yet visible from this ridge. After descending the ridge and following a road and Franktown Creek, Twain would have intersected the Placer County Emigrant Road that followed Little Valley connecting Lake Tahoe with Washoe Valley. At this time, the "road" was probably little more than a wide trail. He would have then tracked the trail northwesterly toward his Lake Tahoe destination.

He continues, “We descended on the other side, crossed the valley and toiled up another mountain three or four thousand miles high. ...” (Twain, 1993, p. 147) This is consistent with the topography of Little Valley, accepting that Twain loosely used the term “mountain” to describe each of the pair of north-south tending ridges that enclose Little Valley and disregarding the obvious hyperbole. In addition, this is consistent with the trace of the Placer County Emigrant Road. Reaching the top of the second ridge, he proclaims, “No lake yet. ...” (Twain, 1993, p. 147) From this location, Lake Tahoe is still not clearly visible due to topography and the tall mature forest that existed in 1861.

At this point in his journey, Twain recollects, “We sat down tired and perspiring, and hired a couple of [Chinese] to curse those people who had beguiled us.” (Twain, 1993, p. 147) At first glance, this seems fanciful and another injection of Twain’s clever sense of humor. However, consider that Chinese immigrants worked in the forests as laborers, loggers and wood gatherers. (Chung, 2002) A lumber mill established on Franktown Creek at the edge of the Washoe Valley in 1856 utilized logs harvested in Little Valley and perhaps employed Chinese workers.

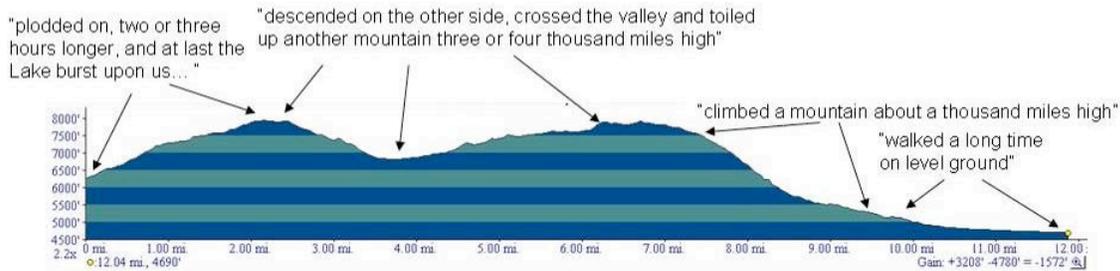


After reaching the summit of the second ridge and resting, Twain recalls,

We plodded on, two or three hours longer, and at last the Lake burst upon us – a noble sheet of blue water lifted six thousand three hundred feet above the level of the sea, and walled in by a rim of snow-clad mountain peaks that towered aloft full three thousand feet higher still! ... (Twain, 1993, p. 148)

Although this portion of the description is vague, the most expedient route from the second ridge to the Lake would be to continue to follow the Placer County Emigrant Road along Tunnel Creek canyon, a trek that would take no more than the prescribed amount of time for exhausted travelers on foot.

The topography and probable forest cover support describing the event of the first appearance of the Lake as a “burst” into view. Even today, the second growth forest conceals the view until one is within one mile of Lake Tahoe. Clearly, Twain’s moment of



first sighting the Lake blazed itself into his memory and became the inspiration for his elegant prose that unmistakably captured the magnificent beauty of the pristine Lake Tahoe Basin in 1861.

Following this reconstructed route up to this point, we project Twain could have reached the lakeshore following the Placer County Emigrant Road or more likely, a shorter route along the Tunnel Creek watercourse to its outlet into Lake Tahoe. From the vantage point of the second summit, Tunnel Creek and the Placer County Emigrant Road trace are the only logical ways to the Lake. Along the shore, he “... found the small skiff ...” (Twain, 1993, p. 148) left by an earlier party. It seems logical that the only secure and launch accessible location to stow such a vessel would be a wide beach. Indeed, there is a small, though wide, sandy beach (Hidden Beach) at the outlet of Tunnel Creek.

Interestingly, the total overland mileage from Carson City to the Tunnel Creek outlet is approximately 12 miles, remarkably close to Twain’s recollection of the distance of 11 miles, as told to him by others. In comparison, the overland distance from Carson City to Glenbrook is approximately 15 miles via the Ash Canyon route and 16 miles by the Clear Creek route. This further eliminates Glenbrook as a destination.

Maps from the years 1861-65 show a road ascending Ash Canyon (called Mill Creek in 1861) (Unknown, Public Land Survey Plats, 1861-65), a road partway along Franktown Creek and the crossing of Franktown Creek by the Placer County Emigrant Road. The plat for T16N, R18E clearly shows a trail from Lake Tahoe labeled “Trail to Carson” heading southeast toward Carson City. Although this road appears to enter the plat for T16N, R19E cartographers did not show its connection to Placer County Emigrant Road at Franktown Creek. Unfortunately, this plat omits significant detail on roads, trails and watercourses compared to the adjacent plats to the west and south. The plat of T15N,

R19E resumes the route, shows Franktown Creek, a trail paralleling the creek partway and continuing to its intersection with the Ash Canyon road to Carson City. All subsequent mapping shows a connector trail or road between these points.

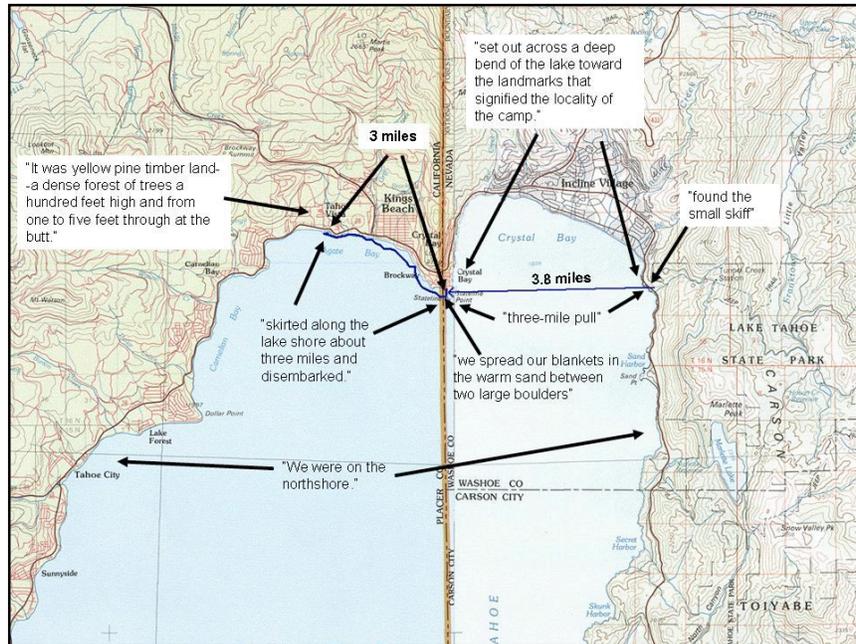
At the found skiff, Twain and his traveling companion "... set out across a deep bend of the lake toward the landmarks that signified the locality of the camp. ..." (Twain, 1993, p. 148) The "deep bend of the lake" is consistent with the configuration of Crystal Bay. Twain's use of the term "bend" rather than "bay" probably comes from his riverboat pilot days where he recalled the Mississippi River exhibiting very wide bends comparable to the curvature of Crystal Bay. From the lakeshore at Tunnel Creek outlet, the only prominent landmark for line-of-sight navigation is Stateline Point. Twain estimates a "three-mile pull" (Twain, 1993, p. 148) in the skiff to the campsite, not far off from the 3.8 miles straight-line distance from Tunnel Creek outlet to Stateline Point.

Twain's description of his outdoor bed reinforces the evidence that Stateline Point was the site of the first camp: "We spread our blankets in the warm sand between two large boulders. ..." (Twain, 1993, p. 148) Stateline Point is an ideal campsite because of its exceptional southern exposure enhances solar warming of the ground throughout the day. The southern exposure combined with the presence of very large boulders along the shoreline serve the dual benefit of shelter protection and natural heater. At night, accumulated heat from the day's solar warming emanates from the large boulders as radiation and convection, warming the surroundings and evening air. Speedboat Beach is the location of this campsite.

Twain's observation, "Three miles away was a saw-mill and some workmen..." (Twain, 1993, p. 148) is puzzling. Historical records reveal the nearest Tahoe Basin sawmill in operation in 1861 was Augustus Pray's mill at Glenbrook. However, this mill site is 10 miles from Stateline Point and blocked from view by the westward projection of Deadman's Point, northerly of Glenbrook. Twain could be recalling Pray's mill as closer than it actually was or possibly there was a nearby temporary sawmill that went unrecorded in history. In any event, this quadrant of the Tahoe Basin was where active logging commenced for wood supply to the Comstock Lode and Twain's observation is consistent with this historical fact.

Twain stated the purpose for the trip was to search out a timber claim at Tahoe. He states, they "... skirted along the lakeshore about three miles and disembarked. ..." (Twain, 1993, p. 150) He does not indicate which direction he traveled, leaving the possibility of either a northeasterly or a northwesterly heading. Three miles to the northeast of the Stateline Point campsite lay the steep, rocky shoreline of Crystal Bay. Here trees are sparse due to the steep slopes and visible rock at the surface, resulting in poor soil conditions. Going much further east would have landed them in present day Incline Village where the 1861 T16N, R18E plat shows a gravelly beach and yellow pine forest. In a westerly direction three miles from their campsite is level shoreline and sandy beach where dense forest growth occurs at what is now the community of Tahoe

Vista located along the shoreline of Agate Bay. Here, Twain's description of his timber claim is an important clue: "It was yellow pine timber land -- a dense forest of trees a hundred feet high and from one to five feet through at the butt. ..." (Twain, 1993, p. 150) The 1865 T16N, R17E MDM plat shows yellow pine as the predominate species in the Tahoe Vista-Carnelian Bay area. Given the consistency of the forest description and considering that level, sandy shoreline is preferable for depositing logs into the Lake for rafting to a sawmill, Tahoe Vista – Agate Bay emerges as the most probable location for the timber claim.



Twain writes that they felled trees to create a property boundary and constructed a crude brush shelter as prerequisites to perfecting a right of ownership. He does not make mention of any steepness of the land, surely a point not missed if he was on the sheer easterly facing slope of Stateline Point. The two travelers occupy the site as camp for the duration of their stay. Later, Twain carelessly allows their campfire to rage out of control, igniting the forest and burning the timber claim. Twain's description of the fire lends further evidence to support the Tahoe Vista – Agate Bay location as he describes his view of the fire from offshore:

It went surging up adjacent ridges –surmounted them and disappeared in the canons beyond--burst into view upon higher and farther ridges, presently – shed a grander illumination abroad, and dove again – flamed out again, directly, higher and still higher up the mountain-side – threw out skirmishing parties of fire here and there, and sent them trailing their crimson spirals away among remote ramparts and ribs and gorges, till as far as the eye could reach the lofty mountain-fronts were webbed as it were with a tangled network of red lava streams. (Twain, 1993, p. 156)

A view of gently sloping topography, as Twain describes here, is visible from the near shore of Tahoe Vista, as opposed to Crystal Bay, where a steep and relatively high fault scarp and ridge conceal the topography beyond from a nearby offshore vantage point. One must be nearly one mile offshore to see clearly the full length of the eastern slope of Stateline Point to Mt. Baldy.

Twain characterizes their timber claim beach camp, "... in the sand close to the water's edge, between two protecting boulders..." (Twain, 1993, p. 152) In the time since Twain's first encampment, the shoreline of Agate Bay has been heavily man-modified by dredging, filling, rock structures and an artificially raised lake level. A visual survey of this stretch of beach identified two large and sufficiently spaced apart boulders offshore in shallow water that appear to be naturally occurring. Only the tops of these boulders are visible above the current lake bottom. Littoral drift from the outward cutting of the new shoreline embedded their bulk in sand. Allowing for erosion of the beach due to higher unnatural lake levels beginning in the 1870's together with seasonal and long-term climatic factors, these boulders almost certainly would have been on the dry natural beach of Lake Tahoe, near the water's edge as Twain describes. Only further investigation will reveal if these boulders could qualify as the ones mentioned in *Roughing It*.

In the 1914 book, *California Romantic and Beautiful*, authored by George Wharton James, we find a final and conclusive piece of evidence as to Twain's actual location. In Chapter XV, The Lake Tahoe Region, James writes,

In the sixties Mark Twain, the inimitable, the world famed, then unknown and poverty-stricken, came with a friend from Carson City and camped for awhile on its shores. His chief stopping-place was not far from what is now known as Carnelian Bay. Later, in half jest, half earnest, he wrote of his experiences. ... (James, *California Romantic and Beautiful*, 1914, p. 236)

At the time of James' writing, Tahoe Vista was still in its formative years compared to the much longer established Carnelian Bay resort and town site located near Agate Bay and founded in the 1870's. James was a contemporary of Mark Twain and knew him well, having written at least two biographical magazine articles about him.

After surviving a summer thunderstorm, Twain resolves to "Set out to Carson..." (Twain, 1993, p. 157) to tell his story to his waiting comrades, a further confirming reference to modern day Carson City as the starting point for his historic expedition to Lake Tahoe.

As a side note, in a fragment of a letter Twain wrote about September 18-21, 1861 (Branch, Frank, & Sanderson, 1988) to Mrs. Jane Clemens and Mrs. Moffett, he recounted his first trip to Tahoe with the same companion, John Kinney. He referred to

the fire but described the balance of the visit much differently than the *Roughing It* version and vowed to return in a few days to establish another claim.

This September 18-21 letter and others appear to correct Twain's *Roughing It* account from a late August period to mid-September. In addition, this letter describes hiking three miles, then another three miles to a cabin, a side trip not mentioned in *Roughing It*. Although not conclusive because of a four year time lag, the 1865 T16N, R17E MDM plat does show a " house " on the shoreline 5 ½ miles southwest from Twain's Stateline Point campsite.

In an October 25, 1861 letter to the same Clemens and Moffett (Branch, Frank, & Sanderson, 1988), he stated he had returned to Tahoe and staked a timber claim for himself and five others. The letter contains no description of the location of this claim. It is clear the *Roughing It* account was a composite of the two visits, mixed with a somewhat fuzzy recollection some ten years later, and spiked with a liberal dose of humorous embellishment.

So far, researchers have not found any evidence that Twain or Kinney ever filed a claim, nor did they leave any clue as to why they never followed through. Perfecting the claim would have required hiring a surveyor to set corners, prepare a legal description and file papers with the Government Land Office. Perhaps that was a sizable expense that Twain and Kinney could not or would not pay. The most likely explanation is that the claim was actually within the State of California, not the Nevada Territory, and was either preempted by others or not offered.

While Twain and Kinney were scouting for timber, government surveyors were laying out townships and marking state boundaries in the Tahoe area. Up until that time, highly inaccurate maps misrepresented the location of the would-be timber claim as part of the Nevada Territory. However, the plats prepared by government surveyors showed the actual location of the state line much farther east than previously thought.

Depending on the map he may have used or the verbal description given to him, together with his unfamiliarity with the terrain, he was misled into believing his claim was in the Nevada Territory. The result was a claim in California that the would-be timber barons could not consummate.

Twain turned his attention to mining speculation and writing, while Kinney moved into real estate dealing and mining speculation and eventually returned to the East.

This work clears Twain's much-celebrated trip of misconceptions and self-serving speculation imputed by others. Despite a generalized and embellished description, many facts remain certain. Twain traveled to and from modern day Carson City, he was actually on the North Shore of Lake Tahoe and he crossed Crystal Bay. Additionally, he

camped at Stateline Point, established a fleeting timber claim near present day Tahoe Vista in Agate Bay and carelessly started a wildland fire. While the details of Twain's route and visit are intriguing, it his immortal words inspired by that trip that most eloquently describe the feelings of all those who, at first sight, are forever moved by the exceptional scenic beauty of Lake Tahoe.

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Twain at Lake Tahoe and regularly gives multi-media presentations to visitors on Lake Tahoe environmental issues and interpretive history. He is a frequent presenter at the UC Davis Tahoe Environmental Research Center at Incline Village, NV.