

Featured Article:

The Somerset County Connection to the Donner Party

By Jacqueline Wells Lubinski

Blue Family #A2.3.1.5.5.1.6.1.7.2

5th Cousin, 3-times removed, of Mary and Elizabeth Blue Donner

The descendants of our original Somerset County settlers have gone far and wide and the stories that they have are many. However, none is more tragic than the story of the Donner Party. It is one of the most terrible and infamous tragedies in the history of the American West. A westward trek to California incorporating ten families and others started from Illinois in April 1846. A group of ninety-one persons, eventually led by George Donner and his brother Jacob, chose to follow an untested route to California suggested by the guide Lansford W. Hastings. Finding the route through eastern Utah more difficult than promised, the inexperienced party lost weeks of precious time and began the difficult crossing of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in late October.

Within a week, they were snowbound. In mid-December, seventeen of the party set out to bring help from California. Only seven of those reached civilization and sent back rescue parties, but not before many of those remaining had starved to death and others had resorted to cannibalism. The last person was rescued in April 1847. Only forty-nine survived.

The Somerset County connection to the Donner Party starts in Blawenburg, Somerset County, New Jersey. The town of Blawenburg is named after John Blaw and his sons Michael and Frederick, known originally as *Blaw's Mill*. John Blaw was a son of Jan Frederickse Blaw and his wife Aeltje of New Amsterdam, grandson of Frederick Janss and Grietjen Janss van Groeningen, Dutch immigrants to New Amsterdam in 1652.

Prior to 1742, John Blaw (1), son of Jan Frederickse, purchased 400 acres of farmland located about one half mile south of Blawenburg, Montgomery

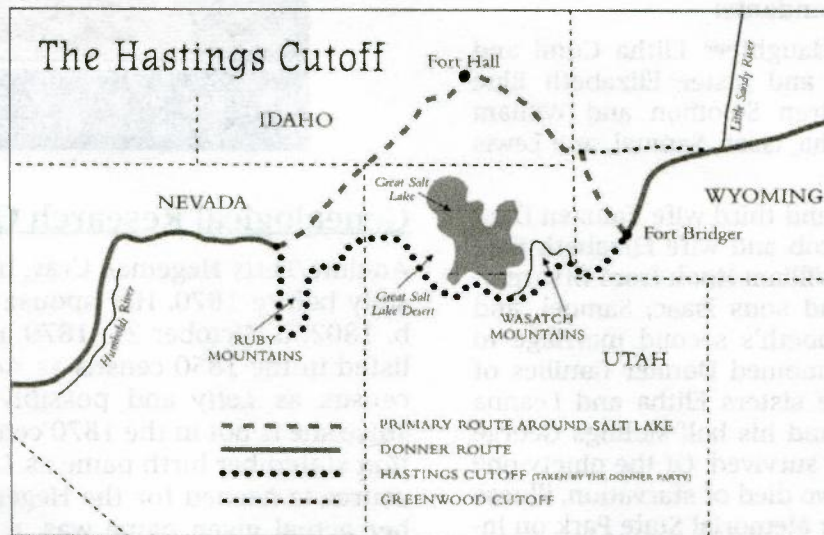
Township, Somerset County, NJ, on the Great Road leading to what is now Mercer County. John Blaw and his sons Michael (1.3) and Frederick (1.5) farmed the land and Michael ran a mill at the point where the Great Road crosses Beden's Brook. It is believed that Blaw's Mill was the origin of the name Blawenburg. The houses of John, Michael, and Frederick still stand near Blawenburg.

During the middle 1700s there was much migration of Dutch settlers to Virginia in the area along the South Branch of the Potomac River. John (1) Blaw's grandsons John (1.1.1) and Michael (1.1.2) were two of them. By that time they were using the surname spelling *Blue*. In 1749 John Blue (1.1.1) received a land grant from Lord Fairfax for Lot 27-304 acres on the South Branch of the Potomac River in the soon to be formed Hampshire County, (now West) Virginia where he relocated. Brother Michael (1.1.2) went with him and made his home near Shepherdstown, (now West) Virginia.

The ancestry of sisters Mary and Elizabeth Blue who married the

two Donner brothers George and Jacob goes back to Michael Blue (1.1.2). His son Barnabus (1.1.2.3) was raised in Berkeley Co. VA and served in the Revolutionary War. After the war, in 1786, he received a warrant for 400 acres of land in Providence Twp., Bedford Co. PA. He subsequently moved to Bourbon Co. KY, and in 1805 he received two land patents in Miami Co. OH, where he died.

Barnabus's son Solomon (1.1.2.3.4) Blue married Teli-tha Ann Morris in Montgomery Co., Ohio and subsequently moved to Sangamon Co., Illinois. Two of their daughters were Mary (1.1.2.3.4.3) Blue and Elizabeth (1.1.2.3.4.5) Blue—the spouses of the two Donner brothers George and Jacob.



The route of the *Hastings Cutoff*, which took the Donner Party far out of their way, was too difficult and too long to safely traverse. This set up the tragedy that led them to become stranded.

George Donner, born in North Carolina, who was the head of the Donner party, was married three times. Mary Blue was his second wife. Mary died before he started his westward trek and he then married Tamzene Eustis. Mary and George had two daughters—Elitha Cumi and Leanna Charity Donner. They made the trek with their father and stepmother and survived. George and Tamzene Eustis Donner did not.

Jacob Donner, born in North Carolina and George's brother, married Elizabeth Blue, Mary's sister. Mary was married previously to James Hook who abandoned the family and she divorced him. She had two sons with James—Solomon Elijah and William Hook. After her divorce, she married Jacob Donner and had five more children—George, Mary Martha, Isaac, Samuel, and Lewis. Elizabeth Blue Donner, her husband Jacob, and all seven of her children were members of the Donner party. Jacob and Mary perished and only three of her children survived—Solomon Hook, George Donner and Mary Martha Donner.

Blauw/Blue Family Descendants:

Mary Blue Donner and daughters Elitha Cumi and Leanna Charity Donner and sister Elizabeth Blue Hook Donner and children Solomon and William Hook, George, Mary Martha, Isaac, Samuel, and Lewis Donner.

Those who died: George and third wife Tamzen Donner, George's brother Jacob and wife Elizabeth Blue Donner, Elizabeth's son William Hook from first marriage to James Hook, and sons Isaac, Samuel, and Lewis Donner from Elizabeth's second marriage to Jacob Donner. Of the combined Donner families of thirteen people, only the sisters Elitha and Leanna Donner, Solomon Hook and his half-siblings George and Mary Martha Donner survived. Of the ninety-one total in the party, forty-two died of starvation, illness or froze to death. Donner Memorial State Park on Interstate 80 in California honors their struggle and sacrifice.

Sources and Further Reading:

Descendants of John (Blaw) Blue d. 1757, Somerset Co., New Jersey, Fifth Edition April 2003, Compiled by William H. Blue, Seattle, WA

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donner_Memorial_State_Park

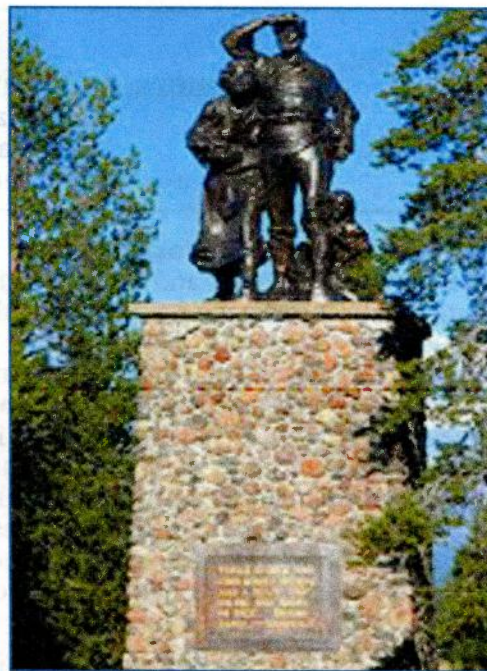
<https://user.xmission.com/~octa/DonnerParty/index.html>

The Chalice, newsletter of the National Blue Family Association, Issue 18, #2, Nov. 2000, article prepared by William H. Blue, based on information supplied by Kristen Johnson johnsokri@netscape.net

The Chalice, newsletter of the National Blue Family Association, Issue 29, #4, Autumn 2011, The Donner Party Revisited, submitted by Kenneth Blue, Grass Valley, CA

The Perilous Journey of the Donner Party, by Marian Calabro

The numbers after the names in parenthesis are lineage numbers from the *Descendants of John (Blaw) Blue d. 1757, Somerset Co., New Jersey, 5th Generation*, Fifth Edition, April 2003, Compiled by William H. Blue, Seattle, WA



The top of the pedestal was the height of the snow at the camp.

Genealogical Research Queries

Adeline/Letty Hegeman Cray, b. 1808 in NJ, d. possibly before 1870. Her spouse was Jeremiah Cray b. 1802, d. October 21, 1879 as a widower. She is listed in the 1850 census as *Adeline* and the 1860 census as *Letty* and possibly died before 1870 since she is not in the 1870 census. Other information stated her birth name as *Lucretia Hegeman*. A source is needed for the Hegeman surname, what her actual given name was, a date of death, and who her parents were.

Contact SCHS genealogist Marian Meyer at 908/218-1281 or at info@somersethistorynj.org, if you have information about individuals/families listed above. Please send us your own brickwall Somerset County queries and we will print your question(s) in a future issue of our newsletter. Should you need searches done for you, please review our research policy on our new historical society website: <https://somersethistorynj.org>

