

Theodore Judah and the Dutch Flat Route

Right after Theodore Judah returned from his latest trip to Washington, D.C. in early July 1860, he headed to the Sierra Nevada to locate a practical route over the mountains for a railroad. There was pressure to locate a route through the towns of Grass Valley and Nevada (City) and over Hennes Pass, the lowest pass across the Sierra, but Judah quickly realized it was not a practical route for a railroad. In late summer 1860, with his friend and fellow civil engineer Charles Marsh, he explored a route over Hennes Pass. Next he explored a route from Dutch Flat to the Lake Pass (Donner Pass) summit with Dutch Flat pharmacist Daniel Strong. Judah also explored a route over Burton Pass with several businessmen from Placerville.

Dutch Flat was on a long ridge that extended from the Sacramento Valley floor to the summit at Lake Pass. Judah recognized the value of a constant grade from the valley to the summit for a railroad. On November 1, 1860, Judah published a short pamphlet for potential investors that described his new route as “a practicable route from the city of Sacramento, upon the divide between Bear river and the North Fork of the American, via Illinoistown, Dutch Flat, and Summit Valley to the Truckee river...”

Many histories claim that Daniel Strong showed Theodore Judah the best route over the Sierra, but there exists only one primary source with that claim. That source is Strong himself, in the 1887 Pacific Railway Commission testimony. Strong’s 44 pages of testimony are full of errors and fabrications, and there is little reason to believe his claim that he showed Judah the route. There are no other primary sources that support Strong’s claim. Judah never claimed that Strong had shown him the route.

In January 1861, Judah’s friend, wealthy jeweler James Bailey, introduced Judah to potential investors at a meeting in Sacramento. On June 28, 1861, the Central Pacific Railroad of California was incorporated with five local businessmen (Bailey, Crocker, Hopkins, Huntington, Stanford) committing to invest \$15,000 each in the new venture.