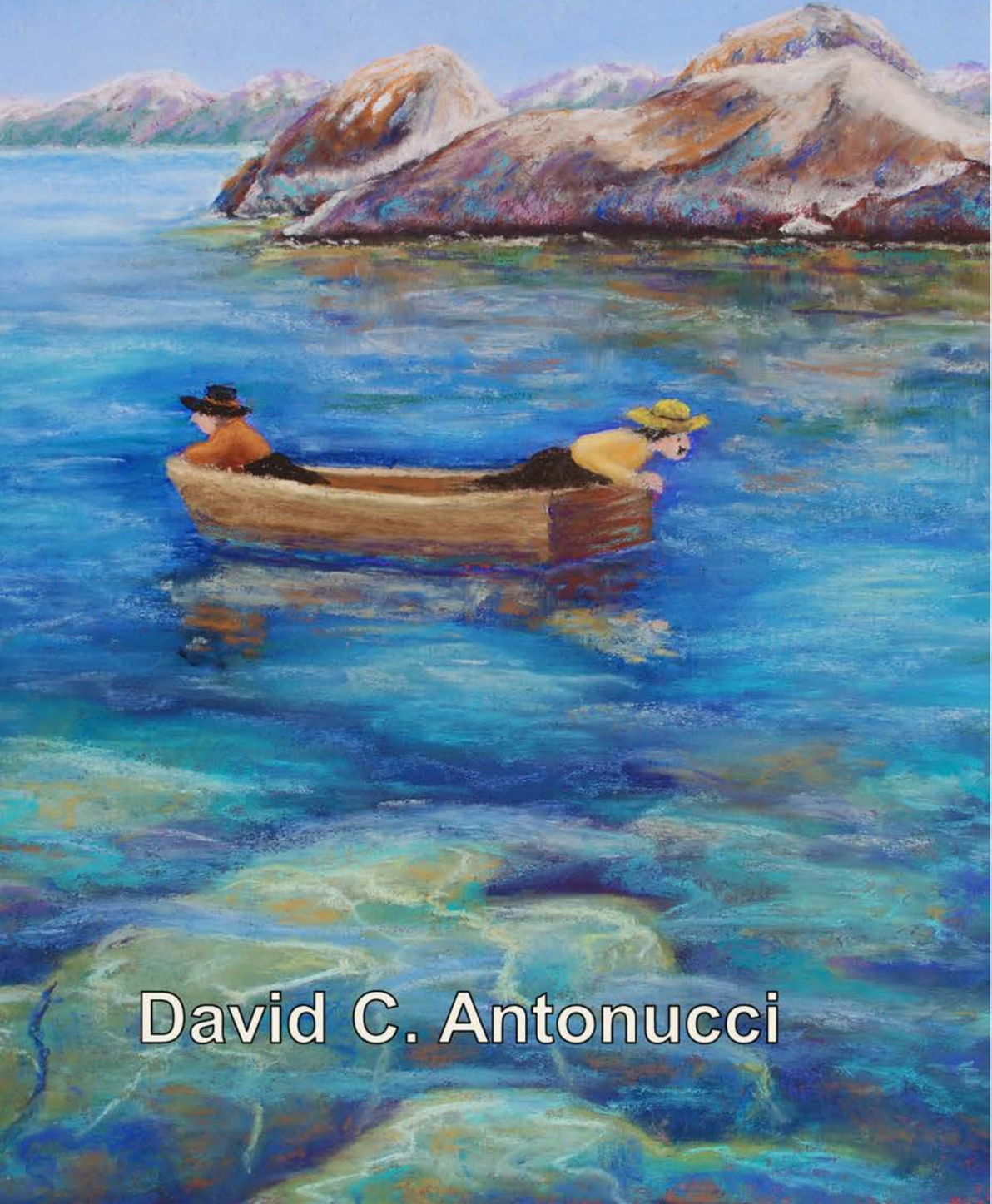


# Fairest Picture

Mark Twain at Lake Tahoe



David C. Antonucci

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*Cover image: Sam Clemens and John Kinney drift over submerged boulders offshore of Stateline Point; from original pastel “Balloon Voyage” by Jenny Antonucci*

**Art of Learning Publishing  
Lake Tahoe, California**

For Jenny and Dominic

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.

Mark Twain's recollection of his first sighting  
of Lake Tahoe from the trail high above Crystal  
Bay, as recounted in *Roughing It*







S. L. Clemens

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Mark Twain

## Chapter 3

### **A Wood Ranch or So and Become Wealthy**

#### **Prologue**

Responsibility fell to newly inaugurated President Abraham Lincoln to implement the formation of the Nevada Territory that was carved out of the larger Utah Territory by federal law in 1861. The action came after the discovery of a significant silver ore deposit at Virginia City. Residents wanted local control over the mining area, then known as Washoe. In the tense political environment leading up to the Civil War, federal officials saw the opportunity to strengthen the balance of power by creating a new state free of slavery.

Separate reasons brought Sam Clemens and his older brother Orion to the newly formed Nevada Territory. Owing to his political connections, Orion obtained an appointment from President Lincoln to the office of Secretary of the Nevada Territory. Sam was a riverboat pilot, but lost his job when Civil War hostilities shut down traffic on reaches of the Mississippi River. After a brief stint as a Confederate rebel and with little to keep him near home, Sam decided to accompany his brother to his new life in the West. Orion promised to

make Sam his assistant, “secretary to the secretary,” as Sam put it, in exchange for Sam paying Orion’s fare.

The two brothers traveled six days by riverboat to St. Joseph, Missouri where they embarked on the Overland Mail company stagecoach for a tortuous 20-day crossing to Carson City, the newly selected seat of



**Figure 38. Samuel L. Clemens (Mark Twain) in 1863 (Wikimedia Commons)**



the Nevada Territory. The brothers arrived in Carson City on or about August 14, 1861. Abe Curry and William Ormsby founded Carson City in 1858 on the land of its predecessor, Eagle Ranch. They named their new town site after the legendary Christopher “Kit” Carson, a mountain man, guide, and member of early expedition parties in the West.

Curry and Ormsby envisioned the new town as the capital of a new territory and eventually, the state capital. The founders laid out 30 ft. x 80 ft. town lots with waffle iron precision. They dedicated about 10 acres at the center as a plaza for a future capitol building. Commercial structures lined up on the west side of the main north-south running thoroughfare, Carson Street. Cross streets led to a scattering of outlying dwellings. In the vacant plaza, horse traders set up auctions,



**Figure 39. Illustration of Carson City in 1861 from *A Peep at Washoe* (Wikimedia Commons)**

the public gathered for Civil War rallies, and travelers rested their stock while camping there.

Situated on a flat plain called Eagle Valley, Carson City was at the transition from Great Basin Desert to the foothills of the Carson Range that divided it from the Lake Tahoe Basin. Visitors in 1860 described Carson City as a “thriving settlement” with perhaps 150 buildings made of brick, wood and stretched canvas. Depending on the influx of travelers, the population varied between 1,000 and 1,500 persons.

In a letter to his mother, Sam expressed his opinion of Carson City and showed the early vestiges of the literary talent and humorous style that would propel him through his life.

*... [W]e are situated in a flat, sandy desert – true. And surrounded on all sides by such prodigious mountains, that when you gaze at them awhile, – and begin to conceive of their grandeur – and next to feel their vastness expanding your soul – and ultimately find yourself growing and swelling and spreading into a giant – I say when this point is reached, you look disdainfully down upon the insignificant village of Carson, and in that instant you are seized with a burning desire to stretch forth your hand, put the city in your pocket, and walk off with it.*

*... Now, although we are surrounded by sand, the greatest part of the town is built upon what was once a very pretty grassy spot; and the streams of pure water that used to poke about it in rural sloth and solitude, now pass through on dusty streets and gladden the hearts of men by reminding them that there is at least something here that hath its prototype among the homes they left behind them. And up "King's Canon," (please pronounce canyon, after the manner of the natives,) there are "ranches," or farms, where they say hay grows, and grass, and beets and onions, and turnips, and other "truck" which is*

*suitable for cows – yes, and even Irish potatoes; also, cabbage, peas and beans.*

*The houses are mostly frame, unplastered, but "papered" inside with flour-sacks sewed together, and the handsomer the "brand" upon the sacks is, the neater the house looks. Occasionally, you stumble on a stone house. On account of the dryness of the country, the shingles on the houses warp till they look like short joints of stove pipe split lengthwise.*

[Remainder of the letter is missing.]



**Figure 40. Carson City in the early 1860s looking south along Carson Street from the plaza (Library of Congress)**

Facing the vacant Carson City plaza area was the Ormsby House, a hotel that was both sleeping quarters for Sam and Orion at night and an interim office for Orion during the day. Later, Sam moved in with 14 other men associated with Territorial Governor James Nye that he came to call the “Irish Brigade.” The term comes from the tradition of segregating Civil War forces into brigades based on ethnic heritage. The brothers had their meals at Mrs. Bridget Murphy’s boardinghouse.



**Figure 41. In the overview of Carson City in the mid-1860s, evident is its expansion from its early 1860s "outpost" size (Wikimedia Commons)**

In *Roughing It*, Twain recalled or creatively wrote about living and eating at Bridget O'Flannigan’s boardinghouse, but some scholars believe he roomed at the Ormsby House while eating at Murphy’s boardinghouse.

96 A Wood Ranch or So

After settling into their accommodations, Orion and Sam got down to work planning for the inaugural meeting of the territorial legislature. As Sam quickly found out, there was not enough work or money to keep him gainfully employed. The \$800 stake he carried from Missouri kept a roof over his head and food on the table during this period. Eventually, Sam could earn eight dollars per day assisting Orion between October 1 and November 29, 1861. Between his mid-August arrival in Carson City and the onset of temporary gainful employment in October, Sam turned his attention to other endeavors in hope of providing a source of income.

While killing time in Carson City, Sam met up with another recent arrival, John Kinney, from Cincinnati, Ohio. Kinney traveled on the overland stage with two justices for the territorial court, arriving the second week of September. One of the justices was a man named Turner, who was a Clemens family acquaintance. Kinney was active in real estate dealings and mining speculation. He remained in the Nevada Territory until March 1862, and then left to return home. Clemens and Kinney formed a bond that would lead to a loose partnership.

### **A World of Talk**

Several lumber mills were operating on the east slopes of the Carson Range. Lumbermen had already cut available stands of trees, and speculators controlled the remaining uncut stands. Clearly, future timber supplies would have to come from further outreaches, including Tahoe Basin, once the limited stands on the east slope of the Carson Range were exhausted.

In the dormitory at Ormsby House and around Mrs. Murphy's dining table, Sam heard "a world of talk" about the wonders of Lake Tahoe, called Lake Bigler in 1861. A few members of the Irish Brigade had been there and established a timber claim in partnership with





**Figure 42. A caricature illustration of the members of the Irish Brigade from *Roughing It***

Governor James Nye and some area pioneers in anticipation of a lumbering boom. Other members of the group had established a camp at Stateline Point where they had cached food and equipment that were accessed by boat. Sam's curiosity and newly kindled desire to stake a similar claim motivated him to visit the lake. The Irish Brigade offered the use of their rowboat beached at the northeast corner of lake and access to their food and equipment cache on the North Shore.

### **A Mountain a Thousand Miles High**

Sam and John Kinney agreed to hike to Lake Tahoe together and form a partnership on a timber claim. As Mark Twain wrote in *Roughing It*, both men were intrigued and consumed with the goal, "... to take up a wood ranch or so ourselves and become wealthy."



From the established date of arrival of Kinney in Carson City, we know that Sam set out for Lake Tahoe about September 14, or a day or two later, and not the end of August as he recounted in *Roughing It*.

Not owning horses, the two men necessarily set out on foot and traveled lightly with only blankets and axes. Given their destination as the North Shore, they chose the shortest established route between Carson City and Lake Tahoe. Apparently, members of the Irish Brigade told them the distance was 11 miles, although the actual distance was closer to 11.7 miles. The difference was probably due to inaccuracies in distance measurements during that era of poor mapping of the region. For all the exaggeration and disgust over the difficulty of the hike expressed in the *Roughing It* description, Mark Twain later recalled the distance as 10 miles twice in lectures.

In *Roughing It*, Twain neither names, nor describes the type of route he followed. He only gives us the distance and a description of the topography and scenery. This leaves us with the two controlling constraints for the route: It was passable in less than one day by two men on foot and Twain's perceptive observations along the way.

They followed a wagon road that served lumber and ore processing mills in Ash Canyon, called Mill Creek in 1861 and then trails. The road and trails led to the Washoe Trail that would bring them to the northeast shore of Lake Tahoe. The overall route appears on Figure 43, and the route profile appears on Figure 44, both annotated with quotes from *Roughing It*.

The Ash Canyon to Washoe Trail route is the only route with the unique characteristics that meet every aspect of Twain's description.

- The route is 11.7 miles long; Twain cites 11 miles.
- Preceded by relatively flat ground west of Carson City, as Twain recalls.

- Two rigorous climbs and descents with a valley between, as Twain writes.
- Inability to view Lake Tahoe from either of the route high points, as Twain recounts.
- Unexpected and high-elevation view over the lake exhibiting a surface reflection near the end of their hike, as Twain so vividly remembers.

The topography of the Ash Canyon to Washoe Trail route did not contain insurmountable barriers to foot travel such as steep cliffs or fording hazards such as a deep, fast-running watercourse or swamp.

The density of virgin vegetation cover on arid hillsides in the Great Basin was low and well-spaced because of ecological requirements, principally competition for scarce moisture. Twain highlighted this principle when he stated in a lecture, "... the sage brushes stand from three to six feet apart." The higher in elevation trees were well spaced with little understory. Recurring natural fires kept overgrowth in check. These vegetation cover conditions allowed for easy passage by humans on foot where there was not an established road or trail.

The proof of the ability to traverse the route lies in the oral and archeological history of the Washoe Tribe. Tribal members created pathways as they followed migratory deer herds on game trails through the canyon. Surface artifacts of their occupancy attest to the presence of Washoe in Ash Canyon before intrusion by Euro-Americans. Furthermore, General Land Office surveyors could penetrate the area on foot in 1861 and thereafter to lay out ground controls for future land surveys.

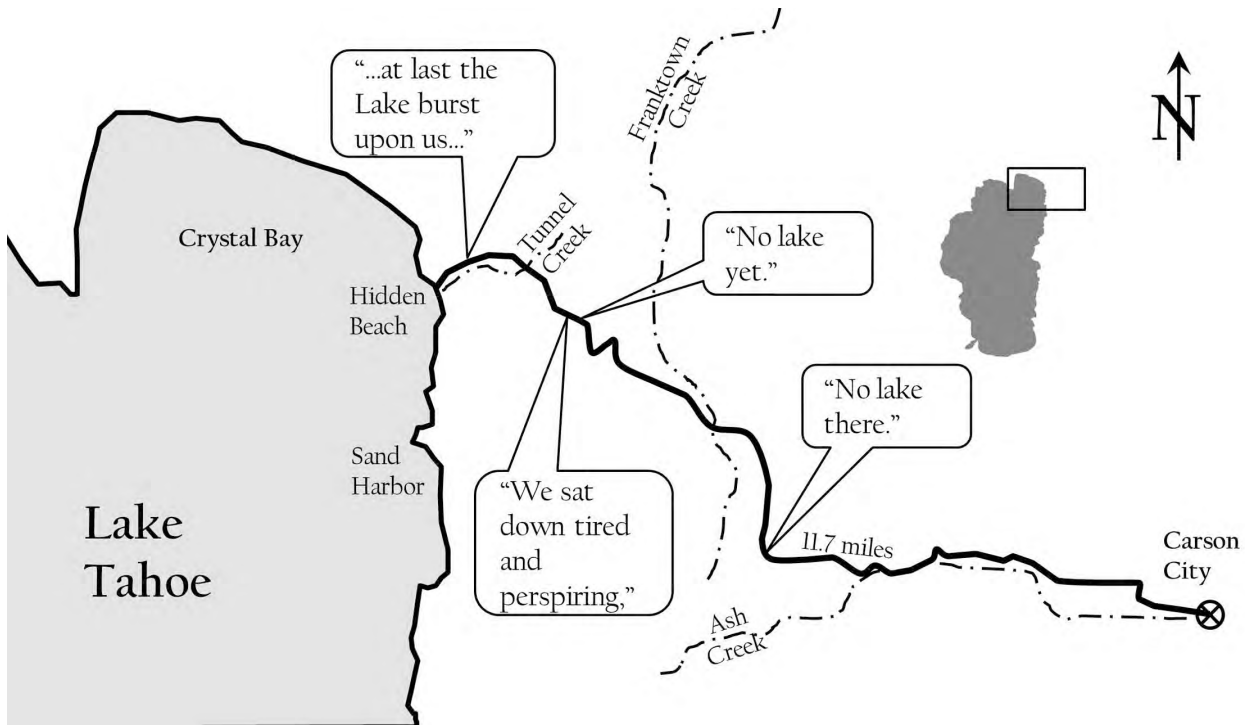
In 1861, there were two sawmills and a mine operating in Ash Canyon. Bancroft's map shows the Ash sawmill about 2½ miles upstream from Carson City on Ash Creek. The logging method in the 1860s was to fall the tree and limb it by hand. Teams of draught animals would drag the log on a skid trail to a haul road. Here, the team would continue on the road toward the mill, or the log would be

loaded onto a wagon or suspended from a set of “high wheels” for transport to the mill. As logs were extremely heavy, the cutting took place in the watershed above the mill to take advantage of a gravity assist in transporting the heavy log to the lower elevation mill. Animal drawn wagons hauled the finished product on a wagon road that led out of the canyon to the point of sale. The temporary skid trails, haul roads, and wagon road would have provided easy passage for two men on foot for all or a major part of the trip.

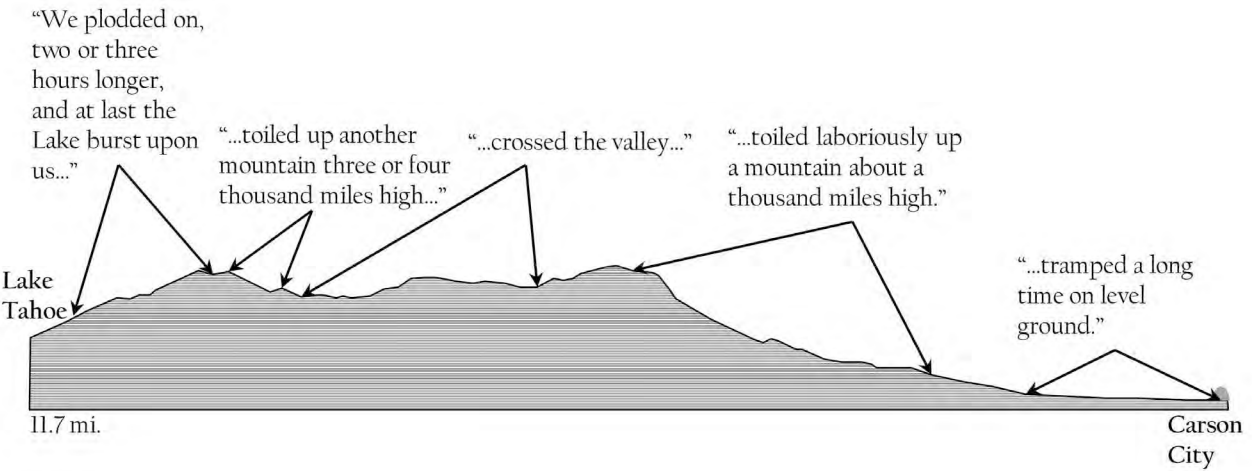
Leaving Carson City, Clemens and Kinney followed a wagon road over flat ground to the mouth of the canyon. There, they began a steep climb through Ash Canyon. They passed sagebrush-covered hills with few trees other than cottonwoods, alders and willows growing along watercourses. As we deduced later, Clemens and Kinney must have begun their hike at night and moved under the illumination of a full or a waxing gibbous (increasing toward full) moon.

As they continued climbing up the canyon, they passed another settler’s house and a quartz stamp mill. The water-powered stamp mills used heavy iron columns that acted like hammers to crush the quartz rock into powder. Once in a powder form, chemical leaching could extract the mineral values, principally gold. The eastern slopes of the Carson Range around Carson City held gold-bearing quartz veins of limited value.

At about 5,400 ft. elevation, the two entered the remains of the conifer forest that would surround them for most of their journey. It is almost certain that loggers had already clear-cut the lower elevation forest, leaving vast stump fields at either side of the canyon as they struggled to ascend the Carson Range. At four miles from Carson City, Clemens and Kinney passed near the Alexander Ashe sawmill and the namesake for Ash Canyon. One mile further north, they encountered another sawmill owned by Treadwell and Thompson.



**Figure 43. Map showing the route Sam Clemens and John Kinney followed from Carson City to Lake Tahoe.**



**Figure 44. Profile of the route followed by Sam Clemens and John Kimney from Carson City to Lake Tahoe (2x elevation display)**



**Figure 45. Modern-day Ash Canyon Road, starting in the lower right on the photo, winds its way into the Carson Range**

Mark Twain recalled ten years later as he was writing *Roughing It*, the hike was physically demanding and they “toiled laboriously up a mountain about a thousand miles high.” They reached the first summit at just under five miles having steadily climbed nearly 3,100 ft. from Carson City. As Mark Twain recalled, they looked over the summit, “No lake there.” Indeed, topography makes the sighting of Lake Tahoe from this ridge impossible.

From the first summit, the men turned northward looking for the connection to the Washoe Trail. They descended the slope to follow a trail paralleling Franktown Creek, downstream to the ford of the Washoe Trail. In *Roughing It*, “We descended on the other side, crossed the valley...” This refers to Little Valley, the north-south tending watershed from which Franktown Creek flows northward.





**Figure 46. A modern-day view shows the approach to Ash Canyon. The lower part of the canyon suffered a wildfire in 2004.**

Once at the Washoe Trail crossing of Franktown Creek, the two men turned westward to scale the next ridge, or as Twain recalled, they “...toiled up another mountain three or four thousand miles high, apparently, and looked over again.” Now at about nine miles into their journey, they were looking westward again but, “No lake yet,” as Twain recalled. The terrain and old-growth forest still obscured any possible sighting of Lake Tahoe.

As stated in the *Roughing It* account, just past the second summit, they sat down for a long rest and encountered Chinese workers. Twain wrote that he paid them to curse the Brigade members, who “beguiled” them to undertake this strenuous adventure. Was this Twain’s creative imagination coming into play, or could such an encounter have occurred? The truth is, perhaps, somewhere in between. Chinese immigrants found employment as lumber workers and wood scavengers and reasonably could have been in the area to supply sawmills lower down in the Franktown Creek watershed. This

makes the chance meeting plausible. Did Clemens pay them to curse the Brigade, or is this the humor of Mark Twain showing itself? It is doubtful that money changed hands and Twain never mentioned the encounter or the supposed payment in any of his reported lectures.



**Figure 47. View towards Lake Tahoe on the Ash Canyon Road from the first summit**

After a good long rest, the two men pushed forward over a level area on the summit and past two ephemeral lakes, now known as Twin Lakes. They continued to follow the Washoe Trail toward Lake Tahoe, passing through virgin old-growth forest that still obscured any distant views. The trail turned north to follow the contour of the dividing ridge after it began its descent into the Lake Tahoe watershed. At a bend in the road and about three miles from their last rest stop, the two men finally emerged from the forest.



**Figure 48. Modern-day road in the general area of the Washoe Trail as it climbs toward the second summit.**



**Figure 49. Modern-day level terrain along the Washoe Trail at the top of the second summit in the Carson Range**

## **Fairest Picture**

Exhausted from the strenuous hike, the view that appeared suddenly after they emerged from the forest and topped a rise in the trail was both stunning and emotional. It is here that Clemens for the first-time laid eyes on Lake Tahoe. At an altitude of almost 1,000 feet above the lake, the men had a commanding view of Lake Tahoe. Through the wide canyon, they saw the curvature of the North Shore, an encircling ring of snowcapped mountains of the Sierra Nevada, and because the lake was calm at that time of day, the image of the snowcapped mountains in a flat-water reflection. The view was so awe-inspiring and breathtaking that it indelibly etched Clemens' imagination and memory with its vividness and emotion. Ten years later, he recalled the magical moment in *Roughing It*,

...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! It was a vast oval, and one would have to use up eighty or a hundred good miles in traveling around it. 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.

Given this description and particularly, the brilliantly reflected image, one must consider the position of the sun and the effect of afternoon winds on the water surface. The sun must be at the correct position and angle in the sky to illuminate the Sierra Nevada sufficiently to reflect light vividly. The lake surface must be calm and flat enough to yield a discernible reflected image. These criteria suggest that the two men arrived in this location within several hours after noon when the sun would still be in the correct position and before the frequent late-afternoon winds roiled the lake. However, it would be unlikely for the men to have covered the 10 miles and the 4,400 feet of climbing to that point if they had started their journey at daylight from Carson  
108 A Wood Ranch or So

City. At a grade this steep and with brilliant sun bearing down, it is likely their average walking speed would have been less than half their normal speed, further decreased by their extended rest periods. It seems highly probable that they started in the predawn hours and walked by moonlight to avoid the blistering Nevada sun.

A historical astronomical projection revealed that the moon was 85% or more illuminated beginning on September 14 as it approached its full phase on September 19, 1861. This suggests that walking by moonlight was feasible, though there is no mention of it. We do know that in September 1862 Clemens walked the 90 miles from a Nevada mining camp, most of it at night by moonlight, to report for work at the *Territorial Enterprise* in Virginia City.

After pausing to take in the view, the two men followed the trail and stream (Tunnel Creek) to a sandy beach along the shore of Lake Tahoe.

### **The Life We Led on Our Timber Ranch**

At the Lake Tahoe shore in a location now known as Hidden Beach, they found the Brigade's skiff, as Twain called it. A skiff is a shallow, flat-bottomed open boat with sharp bow and square stern. However, the illustration in *Roughing It* (Figure 53) seemed to contradict this. The boat in the illustration appeared to have a square bow and stern with benches, more like a john boat. Keep in mind that Twain did not draw the book illustrations himself; artists drew them based on his description and the publisher's direction; so, either type is a possibility, and artistic license may have been a factor. Like other Lake Tahoe boats of the era, the owners either fabricated it on site from available local materials or, more likely hauled it in parts to the lake and assembled it there.

From the beach, the two men “set out across a deep bend of the lake toward the landmarks that signified the locality of the camp [,]” per *Roughing It* (Figure 51). The deep bend of the lake is Crystal Bay and





**Figure 50. The modern-day view of Lake Tahoe form the location where Sam Clemens first sighted Lake Tahoe in 1861**





**Figure 51. The distinctive ridge line and peninsula of Stateline Point were the visible “landmarks that signified the locality of the camp” that Twain wrote about.**

the landmarks that signified the location of camp were the highly distinctive ridge of Stateline Point and the tip of the point that jutted out into the lake. These were the only two prominent and unmistakable landmarks visible from the beach. Kinney handled the oars while Clemens sat on the stern and operated the rudder as he faced in the direction of travel. In *Roughing It*, Twain claimed he chose to steer while looking forward because riding backwards while rowing made him sick and not because he was trying to avoid the exertion of rowing.

Why did Twain use the phrase “deep bend of the lake” instead of the word “bay,” a term he later used to describe other parts of the shoreline? Twain was a trained riverboat pilot and knew that the term “bay” did not fit such a wide and open feature. Instead, he likely drew upon his memories of deep sweeping bends of the banks of the Mississippi River, like the wide curvature of the Crystal Bay shoreline

(Figure 54), as the inspiration for his descriptive phrase. Indeed, the word “bend” appears frequently in his book, *Life on the Mississippi*,



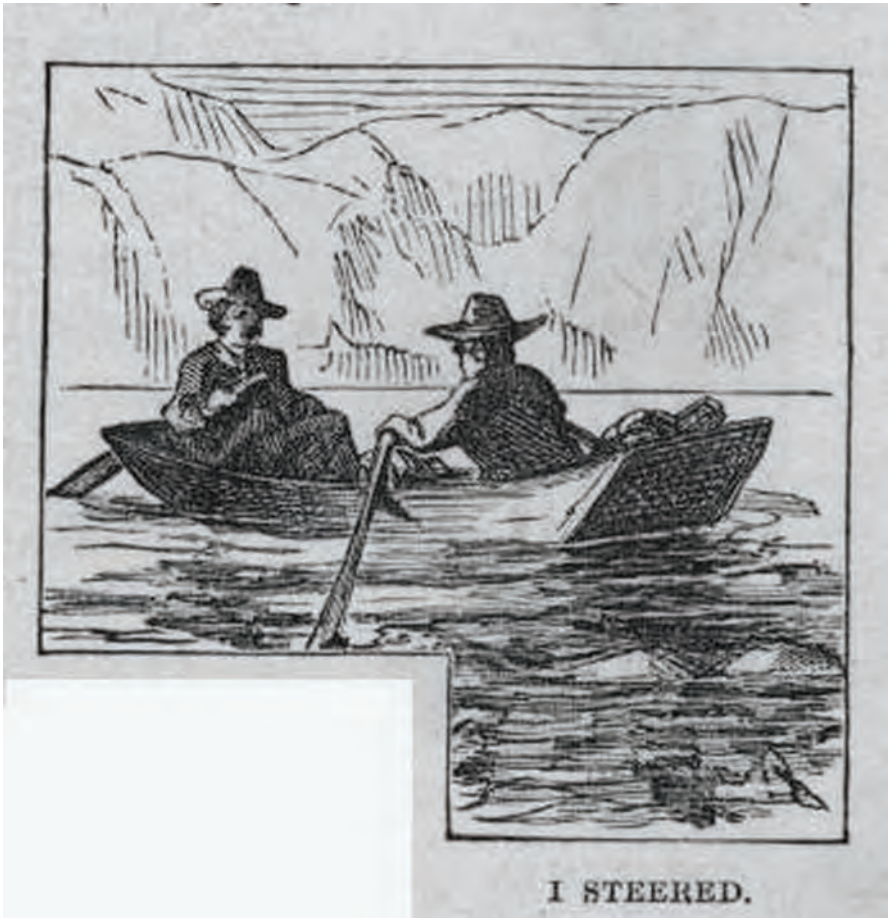
**Figure 52. The modern-day view of Hidden Beach where Clemens and Kinney found a boat.**

where Mark Twain is describing the wide curvature of the meanders of the Mississippi River.

Though Twain recalled in *Roughing It* a “three-mile pull” across the water, it was 3.4 miles from Hidden Beach to their destination on Stateline Point, making it a close estimate from an experienced boat pilot. The two men arrived at the first night’s campsite at dusk indicating the two spent several more hours resting at the beach and rowing across the expanse of water.

In his letter, Clemens named their campsite “upper camp.” Use of the term “upper” was Clemens’s way of associating the name of the campsite with the adjacent terrain – the steep and relatively high topography of Stateline Point. He described the timber claim campsite

as “lower camp,” a reference to the flat and wide valley near present-day Tahoe Vista that spilled out onto his campsite there.



**Figure 53.** An illustration from *Roughing It* depicted Clemens steering while Kinney rowed in a boat with square bow and stern.

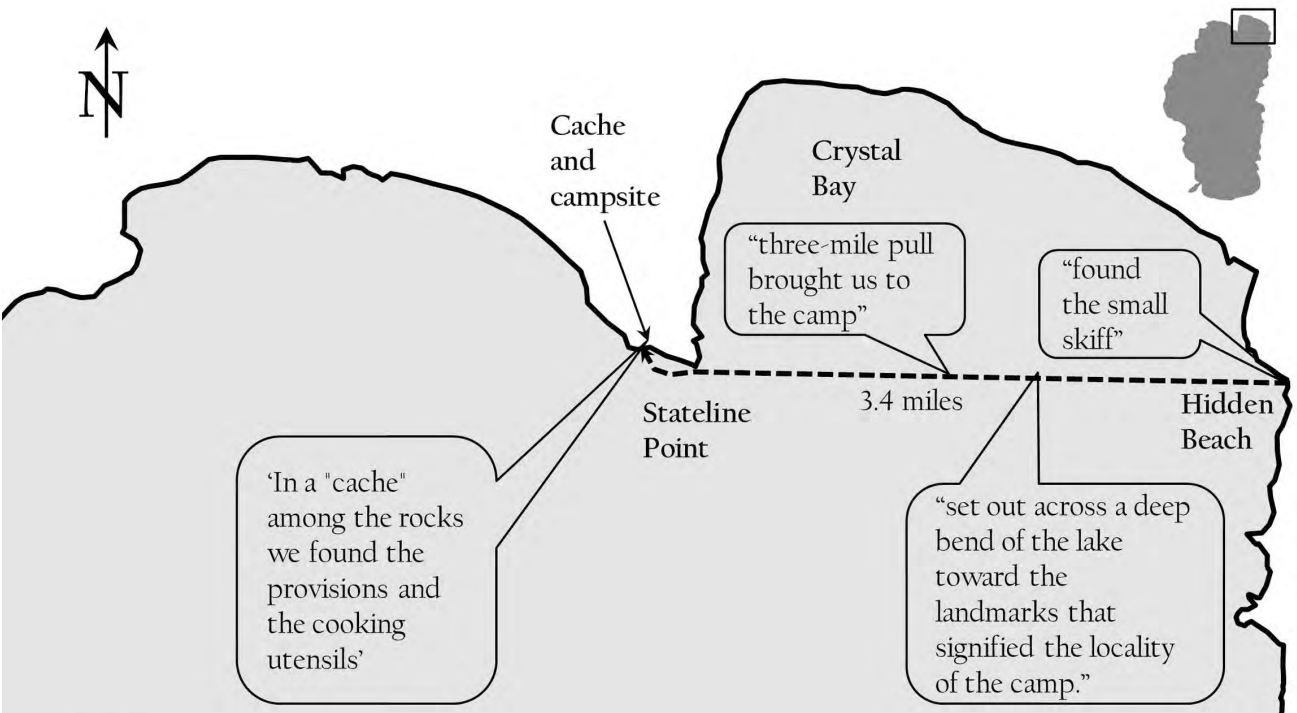
Clemens’ use of “upper” and “lower” rather than compass points is consistent with the terminology used in his description of Kealakekua Bay in the Hawaiian Islands. Appendix II contains the detailed reasoning for his use of the terms “upper” and “lower” and how to associate the campsites with their topographically defined locations. At the first campsite, they found the Irish Brigade’s food and supplies cache in the rocks on the hillside. Kinney was still doing the drudgery;



**Figure 54. Overview of modern-day Crystal Bay showing the obvious “deep bend of the lake” cited by Mark Twain.**

he gathered the wood, started a fire, and cooked a dinner of bacon, hot bread, and coffee. Given that the men carried no fresh food with them, the bacon was probably salt cured for preservation. The hot bread was likely hardtack, a type of hard and thick bread-like cracker, that was fried in the bacon grease to soften it. Dried beans were available, though Twain does not write about consuming them. However, he does make mention of using them as markers to keep score in card games.

In *Roughing It*, Twain made two observations about his location: a lake-wide population of less than 15 persons and workers at a sawmill three miles away. We know from Chapter 1, that since he was on the desolate North Shore, he would have seen few other Euro-American people. On the latter, there is no historical record of any sawmill with workers within three miles of Stateline Point. Here, Twain is simply making an incorrect recollection as he did elsewhere in *Roughing It*.



**Figure 55. Map showing probable course of the skiff across Crystal Bay to first night's campsite on Stateline Point**

This is further borne out as a misremembered detail since the imagined sawmill had no role in the storyline and no humorous exaggeration associated with it. See also, the discussion in the subsection “Consider that Claim Better than Bank Stock” regarding Clemens’ desire to encourage a Mr. Jones to erect a sawmill near his timber claim, ostensibly because no nearby sawmill existed.

Twain wrote of absorbing the spectacular scenery and then drifting off to sleep, following his “delicious” dinner.

As the darkness closed down and the stars came out and spangled the great mirror with jewels, we smoked meditatively in the solemn hush and forgot our troubles and our pains. In due time we spread our blankets in the warm sand between two large boulders and soon feel asleep, careless of the procession of ants that passed in through rents in our clothing and explored our persons. Nothing could disturb the sleep that fettered us, for it had been fairly earned, and if our consciences had any sins on them they had to adjourn court for that night, anyway. The wind rose just as we were losing consciousness, and we were lulled to sleep by the beating of the surf upon the shore.

The beach at Stateline Point, currently known as Speedboat Beach, was the only significant sandy beach on the point in 1861. As it is now, large granite boulders, many of them with flat surfaces, studded the beach in 1861. Twain wrote they slept among these protecting boulders while ants prowled about and over the two men. Current photos of the general area of the campsite appear in Figures 56-57.

On July 31, 1861, sketch artist Joseph Lamson (see Chapter 1) passed by the same location and reported finding “no good camping ground,” meaning the water level was up against the vertical bank and covering most of the sandy beach. This agrees well with the pre-dam average late June high water level of 6226.3 ft. L.T.D. since the toe of the vertical bank was at 6226.0 ft. L.T.D. With these shreds of



information, how could Clemens and Kinney camp on a sandy beach there nearly two months later? The answer lies in knowing that the combination of water escaping unimpeded through the lake's outlet and evaporation from its surface lowered the water level over a very flat sandy beach. By the time of Clemens' visit, the lake level had dropped by 11 in. to an elevation of 6225.1 ft. L.T.D. This exposed over 900 lineal feet of flat sandy beach, 50 ft. to 130 ft. wide – more than sufficient for two men to camp.

On the morning of the second day, the two men set off on foot to scout for timber. Probably, the two elected to travel on foot rather than use the row boat because of rough lake conditions. Ideally, they were looking for an unclaimed forest of large ponderosa, Jeffrey or sugar pines, flat terrain, and a sandy beach to land logs for water transport to a sawmill.



**Figure 56. View from offshore showing part of beach at first night's campsite on Stateline Point**

The two started out over the steep and rough terrain on the west slope of Stateline Point, each carrying an ax in anticipation of cutting trees



**Figure 57. View of shoreline and beach at first night's campsite**

for a log cabin and fence enclosure. Clemens wrote to his mother afterward that it was, “the steepest, rockiest and most dangerous piece of country in the world” (Figure 59). Clemens bemoaned that Kinney hiked in bursts of activity, stopping frequently to assess his precarious position, and then carefully moving onward, only to pause again and ponder. After struggling for three miles over four hours, they reached a site that seemed suitable as a timber claim. In his letter, Clemens dubs this site “lower camp” because it is on the relatively flat ground of a wide valley that spills out to the lake. For clarity, the author uses “timber claim site” for lower camp and “cache site” for upper camp.

In *Roughing It*, Twain recalled the timber claim site as, “... yellow pine timber land [most likely, ponderosa and Jeffrey pines] – a dense forest of trees a hundred feet high and from one to five feet through at the butt.” This clearly fits the description of the mature forest on the North Shore based upon scientific analysis of stump fields left after the intense 19<sup>th</sup> century logging period and the size of surviving trees found there today. Archeologists found evidence the trees were up to



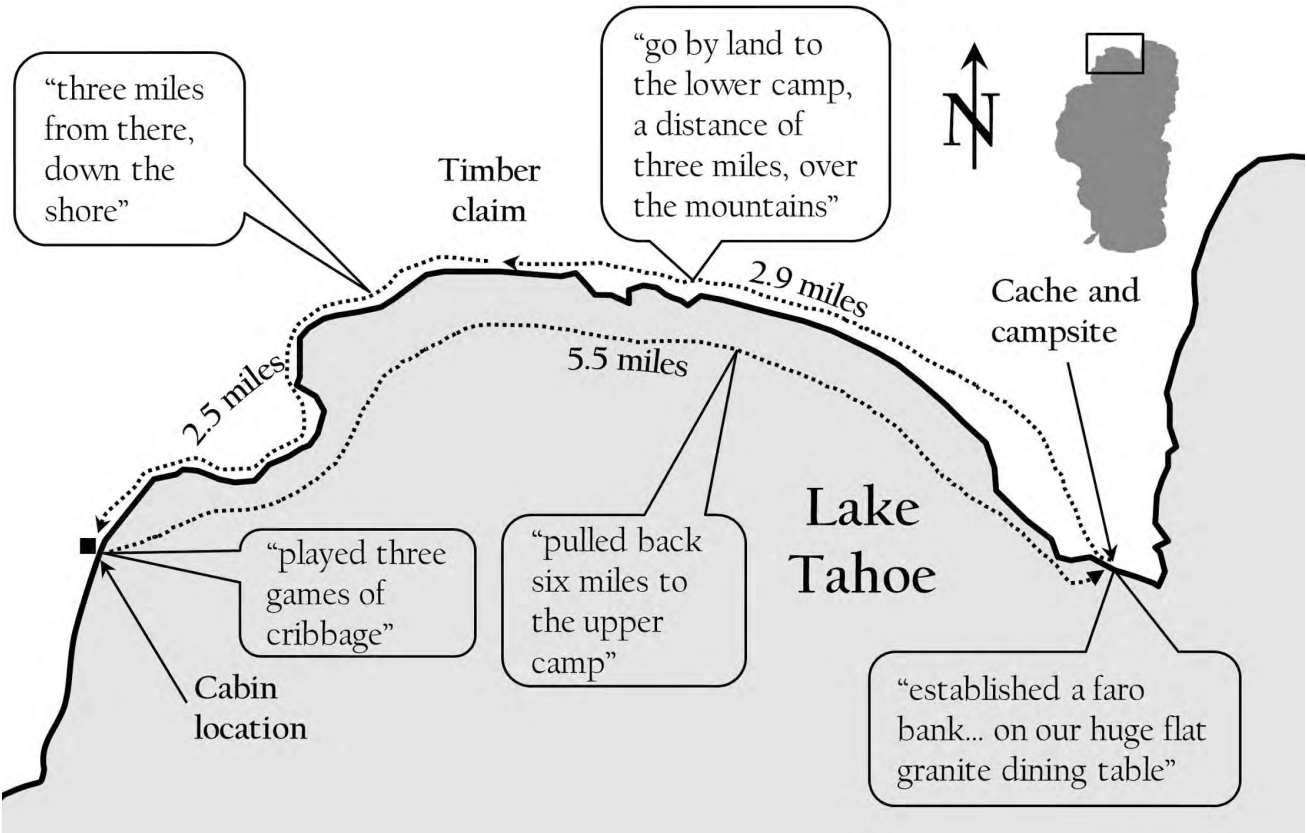


Figure 58. Map showing land and water routes followed by Clemens and Kinney on the second day.



**Figure 59. A modern-day view of the west slope of Stateline Point showing the steep and rough terrain**

5.5 ft. in diameter. The 5.1 ft. base diameter of several existing trees that escaped the logging onslaught confirm these findings.

Using Clemens' three miles of distance estimate in his letter and the location of an 1861 sandy beach that distance from Stateline Point, places the campsite near modern-day Tahoe Vista. Figure 58 is a map showing this location and Figure 60 is a photo of the general area taken in 1916 as part of a Reclamation Service shoreline photographic survey. Erosion caused by unnaturally higher lake levels and pier and jetty construction has heavily modified the shoreline from its 1861 condition. Builders frequently relocated the large rocks in the water to protect their shoreline developments, and any of these may have been the protective boulders that Twain in *Roughing It* recalled sleeping in between.

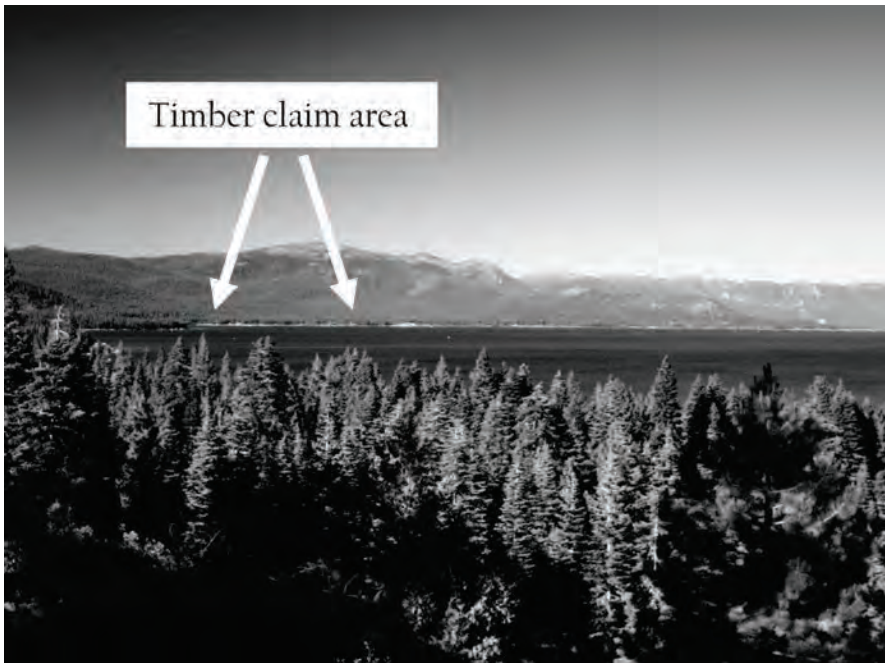
At the timber claim site, they realized they had not brought provisions along and considered how to get back to the food cache. Because they had just covered difficult terrain, Kinney refused to go back the way



**Figure 60. This 1916 photo of the Tahoe Vista shoreline shows the general area of the Clemens-Kinney timber claim campsite before high water levels and shoreline development impacted the area. (North Lake Tahoe Historical Society)**

they came on foot. Instead, the two tried mounting floating logs and attempted to paddle back to the cache site. However, the typically rough late-afternoon water in that part of the lake thwarted them, and they gave up on that idea.

Clemens and Kinney decided to continue and hiked another three miles beyond, even though the steep rocky terrain became challenging again. Clemens wrote in his letter, they “... *set out for the only cabin on this side of the lake,*” suggesting that they seemed to know about the existence of the cabin farther down the shoreline. In a December 14, 1871 lecture, Twain spoke of observing mountain sheep at Tahoe through a “spyglass,” an archaic term for a handheld telescope. It may be that Clemens or Kinney had a telescope and could see the cabin across the water from east of the timber claim site.



**Figure 61. Modern-day overview photo of the timber claim area at Tahoe Vista**

The two men hiked the difficult three miles to the unoccupied cabin, reaching it just before dark, and played three games of cribbage using playing cards they found there. They probably intended to spend the night in the cabin, but found no food. They instead discovered the owner's dugout canoe and decided to appropriate the canoe for an evening return trip to camp. Since they reached the cabin just before dark, they played the card games to kill time until the moon was high enough above the ridge of the Carson Range, at about 8:00 p.m. Aided by the bright light of the waxing gibbous moon or full moon, they paddled back to camp on the now calm lake.

The documented existence of the cabin in 1861 remains elusive. The structure was probably a squatter's cabin as it was not yet possible to preempt land for private settlement. The earliest detailed mapping of the region did not occur until 1865 as part of the public lands survey in California. The 1865 Public Land Survey plat (Figure 63) shows a 122 A Wood Ranch or So



**Figure 62. This circa 1860-70s photo shows the Carnelian Bay shoreline during cordwood cutting operations and appears to have been taken from a location very near the cabin briefly occupied by Clemens and Kinney. (R. J. Waters, North Lake Tahoe Historical Society)**

structure at the location described by Clemens in his September 18-21, 1861 letter to his mother. The cabin, as well as the claim, were in the County of Placer, Calif. The Placer County archives do not contain any property ownership records for this site dating as far back as 1861. In 1928, Dym E. Taylor, a property owner very close to the cabin site, offered her property for sale to the Placer County Chamber of Commerce as an historical site where Mark Twain had camped. There is no record of the chamber or the county acting on the offer.

Once back at the food cache at the Stateline Point campsite, they wasted no time preparing and eating their dinner. The fate of the borrowed dugout canoe remains unknown.

As Clemens wrote in his letter,

*After supper we got out our pipes – built a rousing camp fire in the open air – established a faro bank (an institution of this*



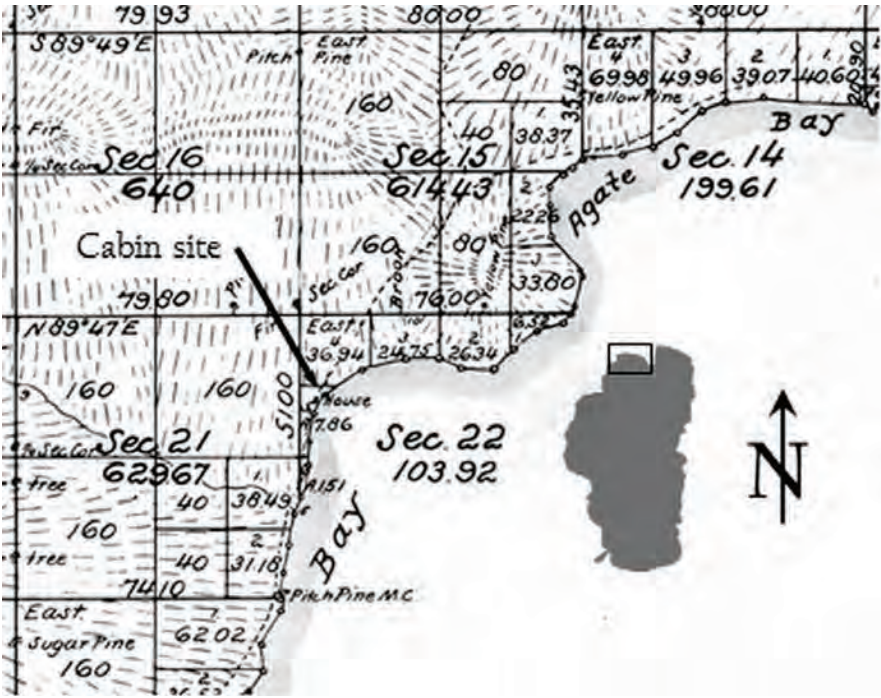


Figure 63. Cabin site from 1865 Public Land Survey plat



Figure 64. Example of a dugout canoe of the type used by Sam Clemens and John Kinney.

country,) on our huge flat granite dining table, and bet white beans till one o'clock, when John went to bed.

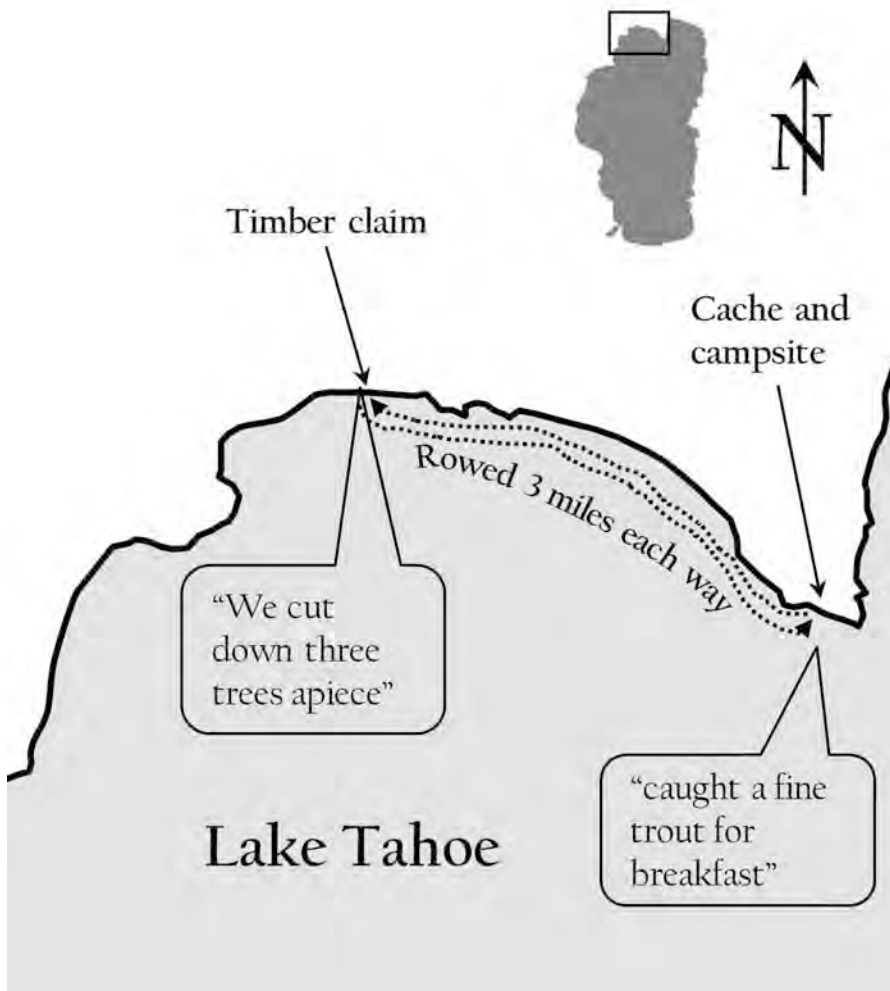
The mention of the “flat granite dining table” referred to the flat surface granite boulders that are common on Stateline Point. They occur elsewhere along the shoreline of Lake Tahoe where exposed granite rock occurs on the adjacent land surface. Figure 65 shows a flat surface boulder on the beach at Stateline Point. This is very likely the “flat granite dining table” since it was farthest from the water and would have been on dry sand when Clemens was there.



**Figure 65.** The flat granite rock that served as Clemens and Kinney’s dining and card table is shown here.

On the third day at the lake (Figure 66), the two rose early, caught a Lahontan cutthroat trout and ate their catch for breakfast. Clemens’ ineptitude at cooking or just simple carelessness caused him to add more tea to the simmering coffee pot and more coffee to the boiling tea. The results, he wrote his mother, were “*villainous mixtures.*”

With Clemens superintending again and Kinney on the oars in the

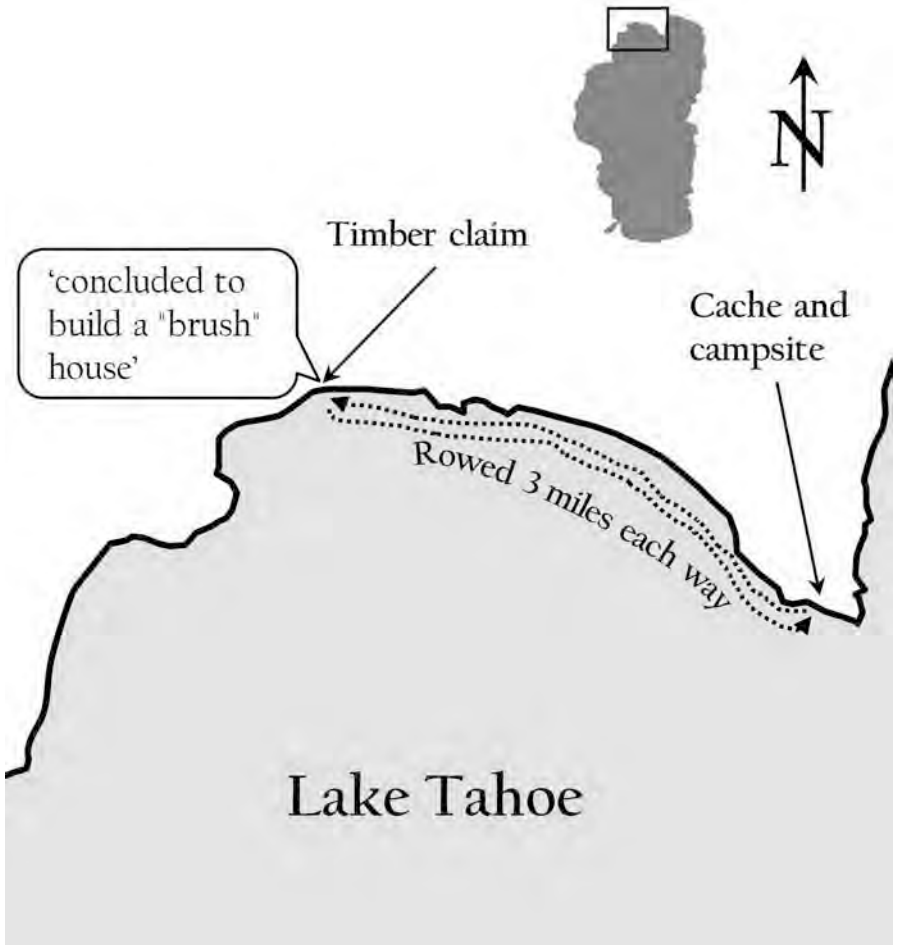


**Figure 66. Map showing water route and activities by Clemens and Kinney on the third day**

skiff, the two men skirted the shoreline three miles northwest to the timber claim site. They claimed 300 acres by posting notices on trees. The two could have claimed 320 acres, but Twain recalled it as 300. The two then proceeded to construct the requisite fence to define the property boundaries. They began to fall trees in a pattern that would



create a loosely fenced enclosure. However, after dropping three trees each, the work became too exhausting, and they decided to make their case solely on what little fence construction they had accomplished. Twain later opined in *Roughing It* that they did not worry about the land running away and so what, if it did. The two returned by boat to the cache site that night.



**Figure 67. Map showing water route and activities by Clemens and Kinney on the fourth day**

On the fourth day (Figure 67), both men again traveled by boat to the timber claim site with the goal of building a cabin that would qualify as a dwelling. They cut and prepared the first tree for a log cabin but then concluded a log structure was too much work. They elected to build a lesser structure of saplings, but backed away from that after cutting and preparing just two saplings. Finally, and after much discussion, they settled on a brush “house,” constructed as a simple lean-to, set back into the forest on level ground. The raw materials would have been the plant species Manzanita, whitethorn, and willow with an underlying support frame composed of sturdy alder, and small diameter pines. The illustration, taken from *Roughing It*, shown in Figure 68 depicts the construction of the brush house as interpreted by the illustrator, possibly from Twain’s description. If Clemens was more knowledgeable and receptive to Native American culture, he could have easily constructed a sturdy Washoe *wickiup*. The traditional *wickiup* was a conical structure made of limbs, and brush covered with bark slabs to stand against the elements.

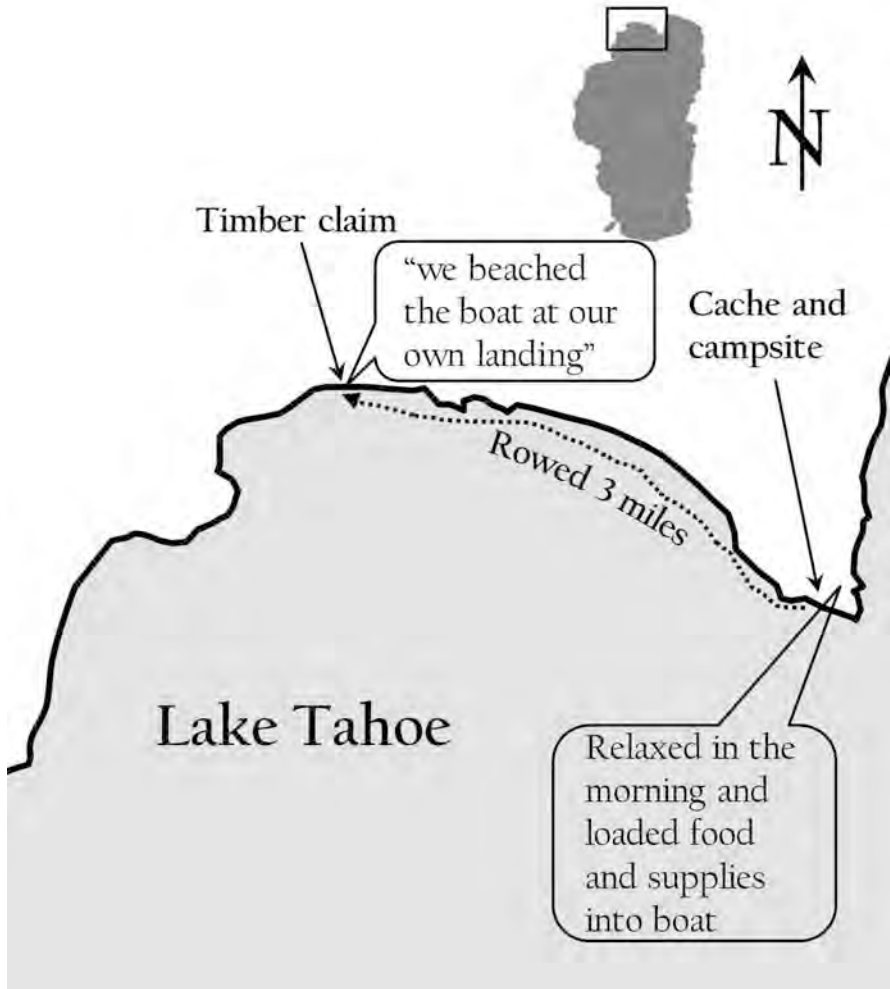
Following a day of start-stop work and debate and a possible excursion of 1-2 miles offshore to the “blue water” line, the two returned by boat to the cache site on Stateline Point for the night. The lack of proper tools to cut and prepare the logs perhaps led to the decision to construct their abode from brush and small trees. In addition to the two axes the pair carried, they would have benefited from a two-man crosscut saw and a log bark scraper.

The fifth day of the trip (Figure 69) and fourth full day at the lake began with the two timber barons hopefully relaxing and resting at the cache site. In the morning, they caught a Lahontan cutthroat trout and cooked it for breakfast. In his 1880 book *A Tramp Abroad*, Twain recalled this and his other meals of the mild flavored fish on a list of his favorite foods he missed while traveling overseas.

After spending the morning and early afternoon at the cache site, the two men gathered up as much of the food and equipment as they could



Figure 68. Illustration of the lean-to brush house from *Roughing It*



**Figure 69. Map showing water route and activities by Clemens and Kinney on the fifth day**

carry in their boat and set course for the timber claim. Their intent was to set up camp and spend idyllic time enjoying their new timber ranch and the marvelous natural assets of Lake Tahoe. The reality would be much different, ending in a catastrophe.

## **We Were on the North Shore**

Recall that what we have in the two Lake Tahoe chapters in *Roughing It* is a composite storyline. Twain based the partially true story on two trips that spanned perhaps six days or so each, separated by one or two days back in Carson City. The chronology of the first trip, based largely on his letter home, seems to account for most of the time spent seeking a timber claim or ineffectively working to build a fence and cabin. Only the afternoon of the fourth day offered an opportunity for an open block of time for recreation and relaxation.

We do not know the chronology of the second trip or the actual participants that might have accompanied Clemens. If there were more persons on this expedition, then there might have been time for the recreational pursuits described in *Roughing It*. The details of these pursuits could not have been fabricated by Twain for literary effect; they are based solidly on the 1861 conditions at Lake Tahoe. Moreover, through correlation to known features of the Tahoe Basin, they reinforce the location of his timber claim on the North Shore.

How else do we know for sure that the two men were on the North Shore of Lake Tahoe? Aside from his route description that could only have taken them to the North Shore, Twain wrote a defining description of the boulders he saw on the bottom of the lake. He recalled, “We were on the North Shore,” and then observed, “There, the rocks on the bottom are sometimes gray, sometimes white.” Twain’s reference to white and gray rocks on the bottom is consistent with the unique area between Stateline Point and the eastern extent of modern-day Tahoe Vista. It is only here on the northern half of the lake that gray colored surface volcanic rocks composed of andesite meet the uplifted white granite. Eons of seismic activity and weathering have shed large boulders from the above-water terrain. In Tahoe Vista, boulders along the shoreline are gray and change to white granite as one moves eastward toward Stateline Point. Figure 70 presents a map showing the generalized geology between Stateline Point and modern-day Tahoe Vista.

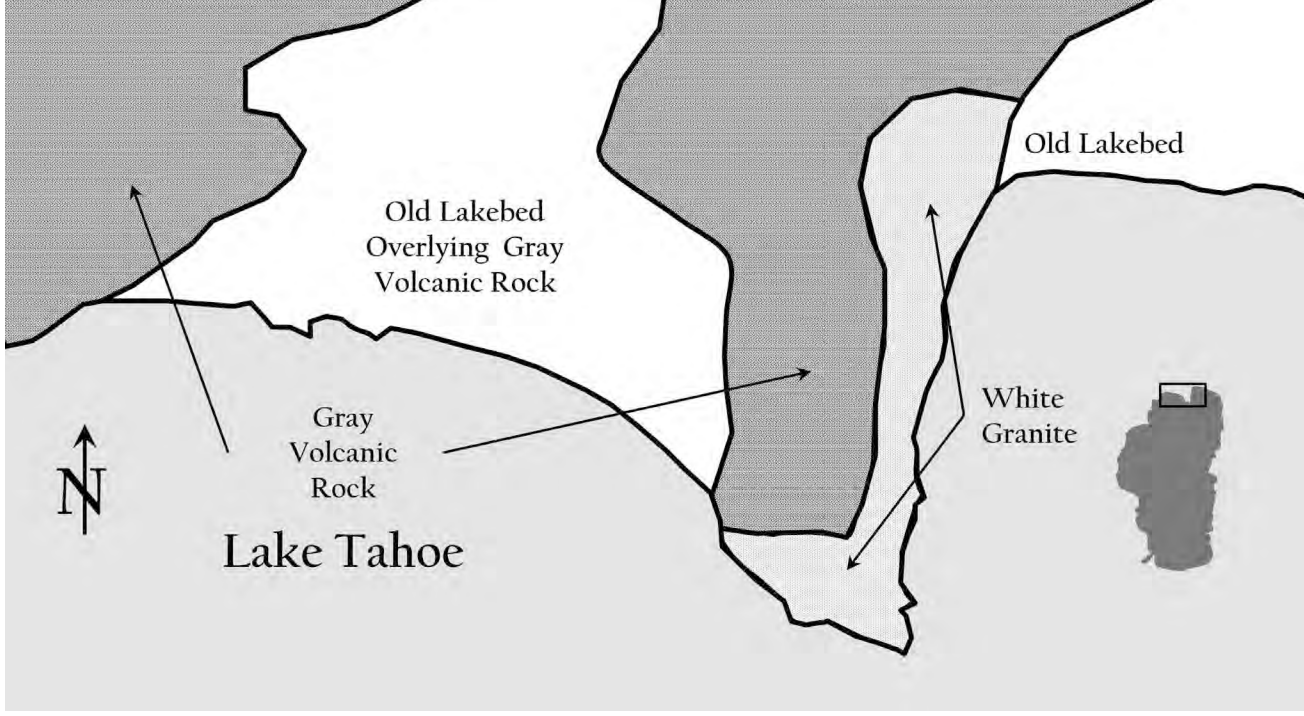


Figure 70. Map showing generalized geology of Stateline Point and the area to the west.





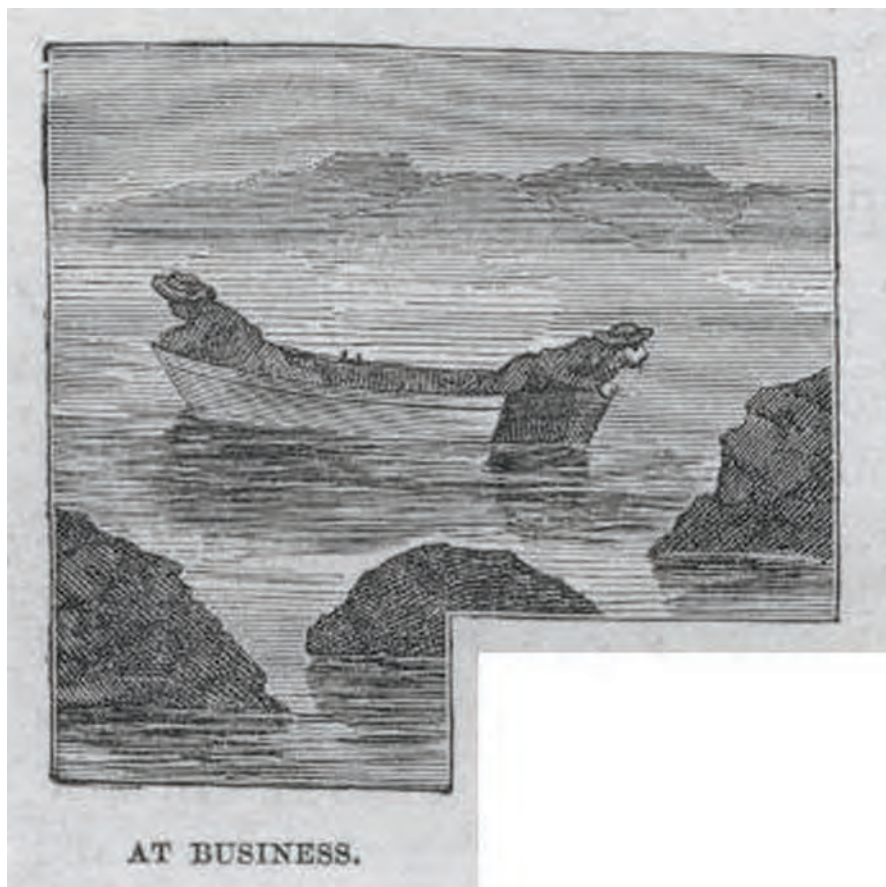
**Figure 71. Example of a large 25+ ft. diameter boulder offshore of Stateline Point**

Another identifying factor was Twain's description of the size of the submerged boulders. While drifting in the boat, he saw boulders the size of a "village church." These boulders offshore of the cache site were of massive size compared to other boulders elsewhere.

Consistent with Twain's recollection, the boulders offshore of Stateline Point and Sand Harbor are extremely large when compared to submerged granite boulders elsewhere in the lake. Figure 71 shows one of these boulders as typical of others near Stateline Point. We begin with morning and afternoon of the fourth day of the first trip when it is likely that Clemens and Kinney spent time drifting around Stateline Point in their boat and gazed over the sides to peer into the depths of Lake Tahoe. With the mid-day sun still high in the late-summer sky, light penetrated deeply into the exceptionally clear water and brightly illuminated the bottom features.

We can no longer see the boulders in the same way Clemens did because of decreased water clarity and growth of attached algae.

However, we know from the large granite rocks found along the shoreline, and in shallow water, that similar-sized granite rocks occur deeper in the lake. Although we can see the exceptional size of these rocks, attached algae prevent us from seeing their white granite surface. Twain characterized the drifting over the boulder fields as “balloon voyages.” His sense of flying over the lake bottom, revealed by the exceptionally clear water, was so strong that it appeared as if it was earthly terrain viewed from an airship. He commented on the large boulders that came into a magnified close view, seemed to threaten to ground the boat, but dropped away as they drifted over.



**Figure 72.** An illustration from *Roughing It* showed Clemens and Kinney drifting and observing large boulders (Wikimedia Commons)

One must read the passage verbatim in Chapter 8 to experience the fullness of his vivid description.

Twain wrote in *Roughing It*, “Sometimes we rowed out to the "blue water," a mile or two from shore. It was as dead blue as indigo there, because of the immense depth.” As sunlight penetrates clear water, red, orange, yellow, green, and violet is absorbed leaving the residual blue and indigo colored light to backscatter from particles in the water toward the observer’s eye. This is an important point: In the 19<sup>th</sup> century and at the 100-foot depth and deeper, the waters of Lake Tahoe showed their characteristic blue and indigo blue colors without the bottom being visible.

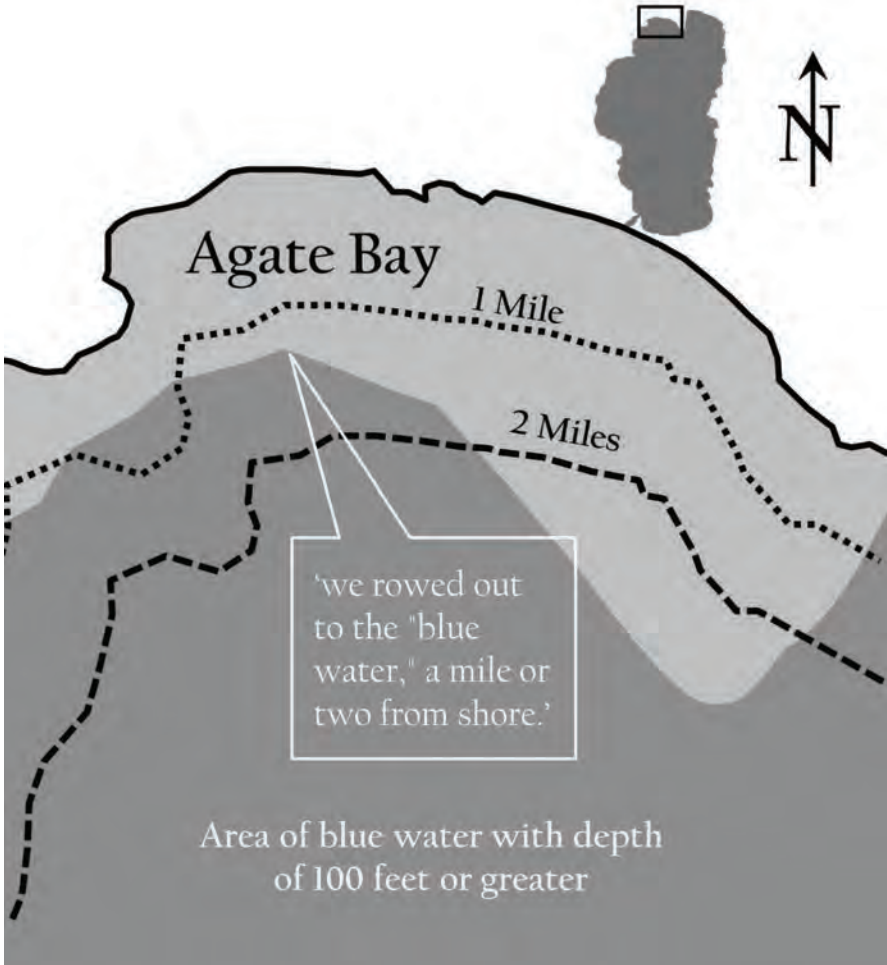
The map on Figure 73 shows the occurrence of blue water as defined by the 100-foot bathymetric contour and the horizontal distance from shore. The blue waterline in Agate Bay is the only area in the northeast quadrant of Lake Tahoe that occurs at an offshore distance of 1-2 miles, precisely as described by Twain.

Although Twain never wrote about seeing Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep at Lake Tahoe, he mentioned them in lectures promoting the publication of *Roughing It*. He talked about viewing them far off through a “spyglass.” Again, this serves to locate him on the North Shore since the bighorn habitat occurred on the high open meadows north of Stateline Point that would have been visible from the boat as Clemens and Kinney traveled between their campsites.

Twain lamented their unsuccessful attempts at catching Lahontan cutthroat trout:

We frequently selected the trout we wanted, and rested the bait patiently and persistently on the end of his nose at a depth of eighty feet, but he would only shake it off with an annoyed manner, and shift his position.

The mainstay of the Lake Tahoe Lahontan cutthroat diet was insects and small fish. Understanding that they were using bait-fishing



**Figure 73. Map of Agate Bay area showing area of blue water occurrence and distance from shore**

techniques, the two probably did not have live bait or an artificial lure that was appealing to the trout. We can suppose that his fishing tackle consisted of a hand reel wound with fine copper wire line, sinker, and hook. Twain speculated that the trout could see his line in the clear water. In any event, they “did not average one fish a week...” including the one trout they caught on the third day.

Twain reported, “We bathed occasionally, but the water was rather chilly, for all it looked so sunny.” Even with global warming well underway in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, water in snow-fed Lake Tahoe in September is usually 62° F. In 1861, the water temperature was perhaps 2°- 3° F colder on average.

### **A Tossing, Blinding Tempest of Flame**

On the fifth day and after arriving by boat at the timber claim just before evening, the two went about unloading and carrying their cargo to the brush lean-to house for storage. As it was some distance from the shoreline and well into the forest, it required a short walk from the boat. Clemens started a campfire near their “house,” unknowingly turned his back to the ever-increasing flames, and walked back to the boat to get another load. Just as he reached the boat, he heard Kinney yelling and whirled around to see him sprinting through the gauntlet of flames that had escaped the confines of the campfire ring. Figure 74 shows the illustration of the incident from *Roughing It*. The two men stood near the water’s edge of the wide beach and observed the quick progress of the flames.

Although we will never know the full circumstances surrounding the escape of the campfire, we can surmise a few relevant factors. September is historically a very dry month, accounting for only 2 percent of the total yearly precipitation, and humidity is nearly its lowest for the year at 25 percent. It is the last month following the typically dry summer period beginning in early June. During this time, wildfire danger is abnormally high. Add to this the south exposure of the campsite and the drying effects of the still intense sun. Twain recalled the weather as “superb,” implying the warm daytime temperatures and low humidity that contribute to increased wildfire danger. The needles, leaves, plant, and tree materials on the forest floor, collectively known as duff, would have been extremely dry and easy to ignite.

Typically, afternoon winds on the North Shore near the timber claim blow vigorously from the south and accounts for the rapid expansion of the fire. If Clemens had not cleared to bare soil a sufficiently wide area around the campfire ring, the gusty winds would have easily carried flaming embers into the highly flammable forest duff and understory. The result would have been the wall of flames that Kinney had to sprint across to safety on the beach. In *Roughing It*, Twain wrote of the dry pine needles igniting like “gunpowder” and with an almost pyromania inspired fascination, he wrote the fire was “wonderful to see [and the] ... fierce speed the tall sheet of flame traveled!”

By today’s standards, we cannot excuse Clemens’ negligence and ignorance of campfire safety. However, we can understand that in prior days, he camped along the beach at Stateline Point. Here, his campfires were on nonflammable sand and gravel devoid of forest duff and a safe distance from dry brush. Perhaps his experience there coupled with his tenderfoot outdoor skills led to this disastrous outcome.

The escaped campfire engorged itself on dry brush and forest duff so that within one-half hour, it had become a widespread out of control wildfire. In Clemens’ letter home, he gave a more subdued and factual account of the fire’s progress. Comparatively, in his description in *Roughing It*, he spared no superlatives, vivid imagery, or hyperbole in giving a Hollywood-like version of the wildfire’s growth.

From the letter,

*...The level ranks of flame were relieved at intervals by the standard-bearers, as we called the tall dead trees, wrapped in fire, and waving their blazing banners a hundred feet in the air. Then we could turn from this scene to the Lake, and see every branch, and leaf, and cataract of flame upon its bank perfectly reflected as in a gleaming, fiery mirror. The mighty roaring of the conflagration... rendered the scene very*



*impressive. Occasionally, one of us would remove his pipe from his mouth and say, "Superb! magnificent! Beautiful!"*

From *Roughing It*,

... [A]ll before us was a tossing, blinding tempest of flame! 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. Away across the water the crags and domes were lit with a ruddy glare, and the firmament above was a reflected hell!

Every feature of the spectacle was repeated in the glowing mirror of the lake! Both pictures were sublime, both were beautiful; but that in the lake had a bewildering richness about it that enchanted the eye and held it with the stronger fascination.

Hidden in the book description is another clue to his location. Where he wrote about the glare of the fire on the crags and domes across the water, he was recalling the illumination of the fire on the western side of Stateline Point. The diminishing daylight, direct lighting from the flames, and the reflection from the flames on the lake surface toward the lightly colored granite surface of Stateline Point caused this phenomenon.

The two retreated to the beach to watch the spectacle from a safer distance. They watched the fire spread and progress generally northward to the ridgeline separating the Tahoe Basin from Martis



Figure 74. Illustration from *Roughing It* showing the start of the wildfire

Valley. When they felt safe at about 11 p.m., they bedded down with their blankets on the sandy beach between protecting boulders. In the morning, they were surprised to find themselves covered with ash, discovered the fire had switched directions overnight, and found charred driftwood that floated back toward their camp. When the colder night air began to sink, it slid downward on the mountain slopes toward the lake, forcing the direction of burn southward to within a few steps of their sandy beach beds. The violent updrafts generated by the advancing line of fire lifted small pieces of burned wood into the air, and they drifted southward with the night air currents. They landed in the lake where waves gently pushed them back ashore and within six feet of the beached boat.

Although the fire had changed directions overnight, Clemens wrote to his mother that they were still safe. He added that no one else was within six miles of his location. This was a possible reference to a Washoe tribal campsite located on Incline Creek (possibly revealed by smoke from cooking fires), the Chinese woodcutters encountered near the summit of the Carson Range during the trip from Carson City, or a few Euro-Americans moving along the Washoe Trail or camped on the North Shore.

Another consideration is the description of the fire itself. The *Roughing It* description seems highly embellished, perhaps for creative literary value, and goes on to state that the wildfire consumed all the trees. However, this is implausible, since the wildfire occurred in a mature forest that was well adapted to periodic fire. This seems to be borne out by the more subdued description in the letter. Here Clemens wrote of “*level ranks of flame,*” seemingly a description of the burning understory. The letter went on to mention standing dead trees that burst into flames, possibly indicating that a considerable period has passed since the last wildfire had burned through this area within the forest. This was most likely a low-intensity surface fire; it only burned forest duff, undergrowth and standing dead trees, and left only burn scars on the very large mature trees. Clemens’ letter seems

to reinforce this conclusion, when he tells his mother, “*In a day or two we shall probably go to the Lake and build another cabin and fence, and get everything into satisfactory trim...*” If the fire had consumed all the trees, as the sensationalized *Roughing It* account would have us believe, then there would have been no reason to return to a forest of worthless fire ravaged trees.

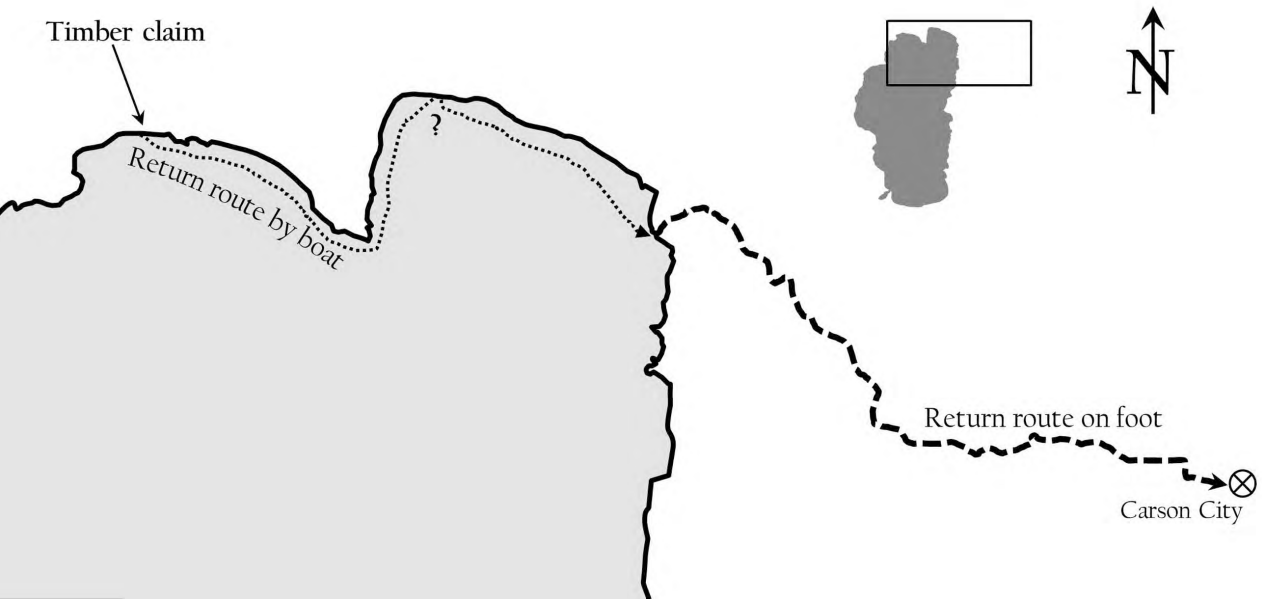
According to the *Roughing It* account, the next morning on the sixth day (Figure 75) the two would-be timber barons boarded their boat for the return trip to Carson City. They encountered rough water with Clemens bailing while oarsman Kinney labored against the oncoming waves. After helplessly passing east of Stateline Point, the situation became dire, and they decided to make a hard landing on a small segment of sandy beach east of the point.

As they made their landing, the boat swamped and high waves washed crew and cargo ashore. The account continues with the two men taking refuge on the shore and shivering in the shelter of a large boulder. Knowing the whole adventure covered only six days away from Carson City, this latter element seems improbable for the first trip. Perhaps, the swamping occurred but not the night spent shivering on the shore, or the incident happened during a subsequent trip, and Twain fused it into the *Roughing It* storyline for dramatic effect. In any event, the two returned to Carson City by boat and foot and prepared for a return trip to complete work on their claim.

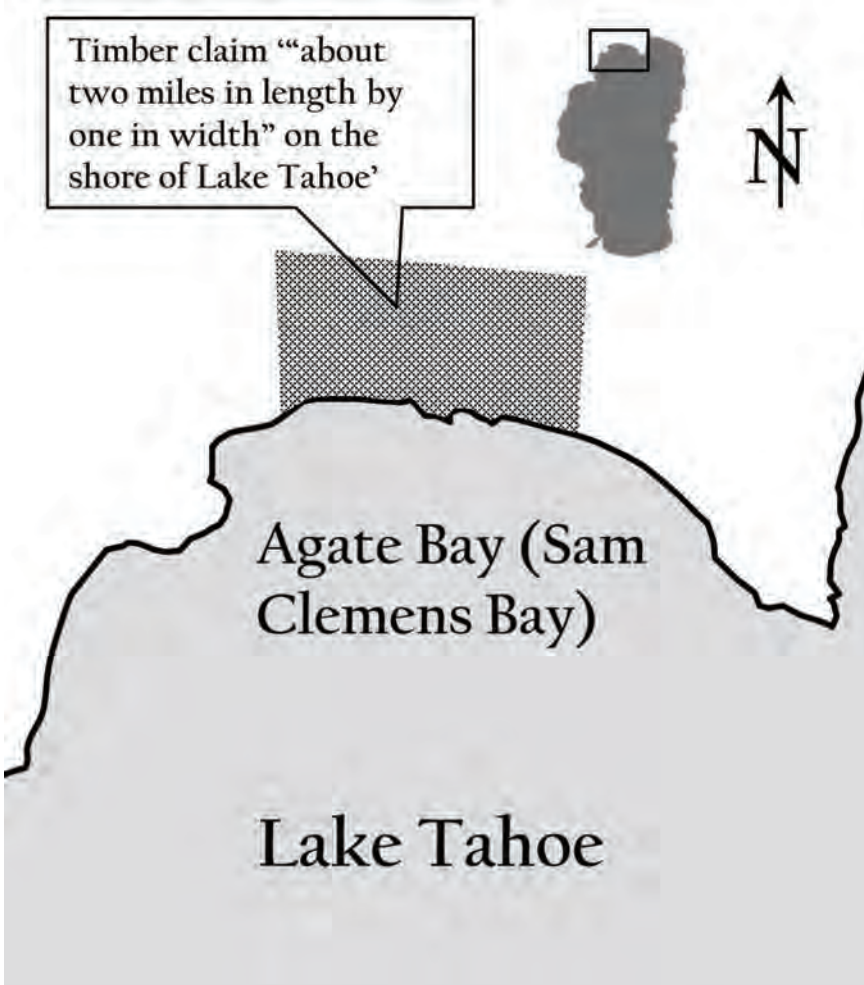
### **Consider that Claim Better than Bank Stock**

On October 25, 1861, Clemens wrote his sister, Pamela Moffett. The lengthy letter covered several of his recent undertakings and responded to a September 8, 1861 letter in which his sister inquired into the status of the timber claim filed on behalf of her husband, William A. Moffett.

Clemens wrote that he had laid a claim, “*about two miles in length by one in width on the border of a lake (Bigler).*” He listed the owners of the claim as, “*Sam. L Clemens, Wm. A. Moffett, Thos. Nye*” and three



**Figure 75. Map showing water and land route followed by Clemens and Kinney on the sixth day.**



**Figure 76. Map showing the location and possible extent of the claim filed by Clemens and five others and the location of Sam Clemens Bay.**

*others.* Thomas Nye was the nephew of Nevada Territorial Governor James Nye. Possibly, one of the three other unnamed persons was John Kinney. This claim was in the same location as the claim initially discovered by Clemens and Kinney on their first trip that ended in a wildfire that burned, but did not destroy, the timber. The size of this claim (Figure 76) was 1,280 acres, an amount that exceeds the maximum claim per person of 160 acres for six claimants. Perhaps,



Clemens was mistaken in his land claim dimensions, or he expected to add more partners later. Clemens continued in his letter, saying, '*It [the timber claim] is situated on "Sam Clemens' Bay"—so named by Capt. Nye—and it goes by that name among the inhabitants of that region.*' This is a reference to modern-day Agate Bay, as it had no recognized name until 1863. It is not clear if "Capt. Nye" was the same person as "Thos. Nye" mentioned on the list of claim partners.

The latter part of this quote suggested that Euro-Americans were in the general vicinity of the claim (probably spread out along the North Shore) and correlated to Clemens' earlier statement that no one was within six miles of the wildfire. The observation also discredits the statement in *Roughing It* that they did not see another human during the timber claim adventure, since he would have seen the mentioned inhabitants that obligingly used his name for their bay. Alternatively, the mention of naming of the bay was all in jest and never happened.

Clemens foresaw the need to establish a sawmill near his timber claim if he was ever to realize its value. He told his sister,

*[I]f we succeed in getting one Mr. Jones, to move his saw-mill up there, Mr. [William] Moffett can just consider that claim better than bank stock. Jones says he will move his mill up next spring.*

Contrary to the letter's promise, Mr. C. Jones did not move his mill up as Clemens hoped and, instead he and a partner erected a steam-powered mill on the lower reach of Clear Creek, south of Carson City. Another implication of Clemens' comment about a sawmill is that it casts further doubt on the veracity of his statement in *Roughing It* that his first night's campsite was three miles from a sawmill and workmen. Why would Clemens think he needed a sawmill near his timber claim if an existing mill was within a reasonable distance?

In an August 18, 1863 column for the *Territorial Enterprise*, Twain mentioned his recollection of riding, "that razor-bladed beast of Tom

Nye's" on a horseback trip to Lake Tahoe. He did not state the date, purpose, or specific destination for the horseback trip. Some researchers speculate this was a reference to the second timber claim trip to Lake Tahoe. They infer this from the October 25, 1861 letter to Clemens' sister stating that Nye was one of six co-owners of the timber claim. This seems an unlikely destination since access to the North Shore timber claim and supply cache was by boat, leaving the question of what they did with the horses unanswered.

Given that the two were mounted and the event occurred before mid-1863, the trip had to follow routes accessible by horses. This strongly points to the area south of Glenbrook along the Carson Emigrant Ridge Road as the most likely route for the riders. The Kings Canyon Road and the Glenbrook to Zephyr Cove branch of the Lake Tahoe Wagon Road did not open until 1863. Some authors even hypothesize that the timber claim was near Zephyr Cove, if this was, in fact, a timber-scouting trip.

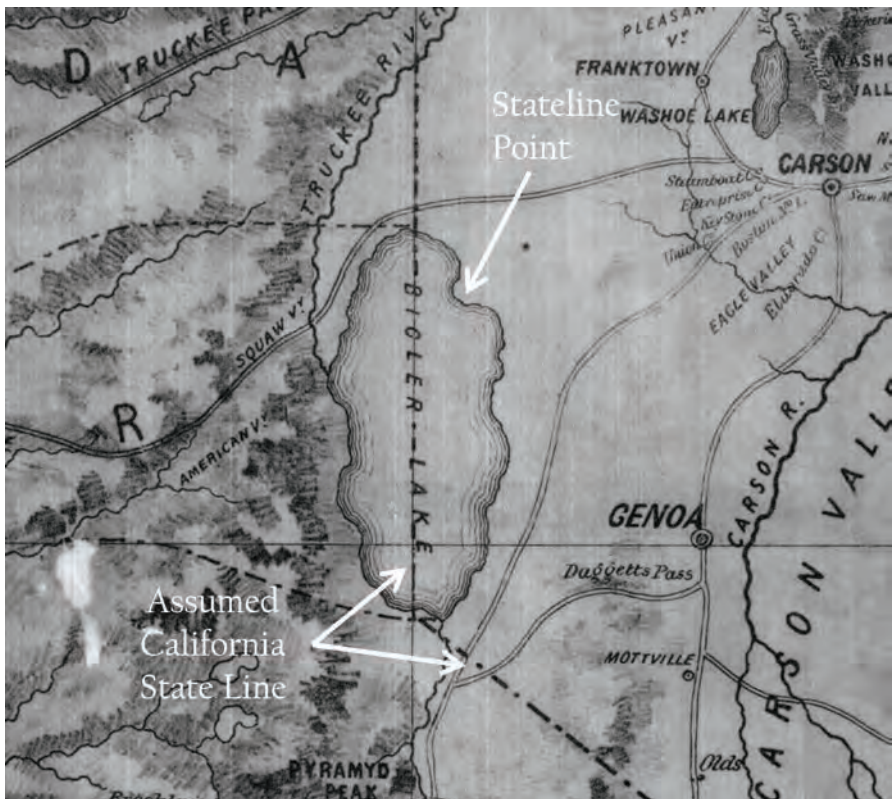
An alternative and more plausible explanation has the trip on Tom Nye's horse unrelated to the timber claim. Barring any new information, we will never know if this trip was timber claim-related or for some other purpose.

### **Timber Claim Never Completed Because It Was Not in the Nevada Territory**

Scholars have long puzzled over Clemens' lack of follow-through to preempt (convert government land to private ownership) the land for the timber claim compared to his aggressive acquisition of mineral rights. This is particularly confounding because he wrote his sister on October 25, 1861 that he had "*laid a timber claim*" at Lake Tahoe on behalf of his sister's husband, himself and four others. Why did he not complete the filing? Perhaps new mining ventures swept away his focus, or the claim partners were unwilling to pay the cost of surveying and mapping the claim. A more likely explanation comes from the inaccurate mapping of Lake Tahoe prevalent in 1861.

Clemens had to rely on available crude maps that predated the publication of the General Land Office surveys and maps. From these rudimentary maps, he and others were led to believe they were in the Nevada Territory, when they were in California. A portion of a map from that era showing the Tahoe region before the public land survey of 1861 appears in Figure 77.

Government agents would have held in abeyance the approval of Clemens' claim until General Land Office surveys underway at the time could provide plats (large-scale scale maps) showing the details



**Figure 77. Circa 1860 map of the Western Nevada Territory and Eastern California, showing the area west of Stateline Point at Lake Tahoe (Bigler Lake) incorrectly located within the Nevada Territory. (Public Domain)**

of government land ownership and more importantly, the state-territorial boundary between California and Nevada. When these approved plats became available, they would have identified the location of Clemens' claim was about 2-3 miles inside the State of California and therefore, ineligible for the land preemption program in the Nevada Territory.

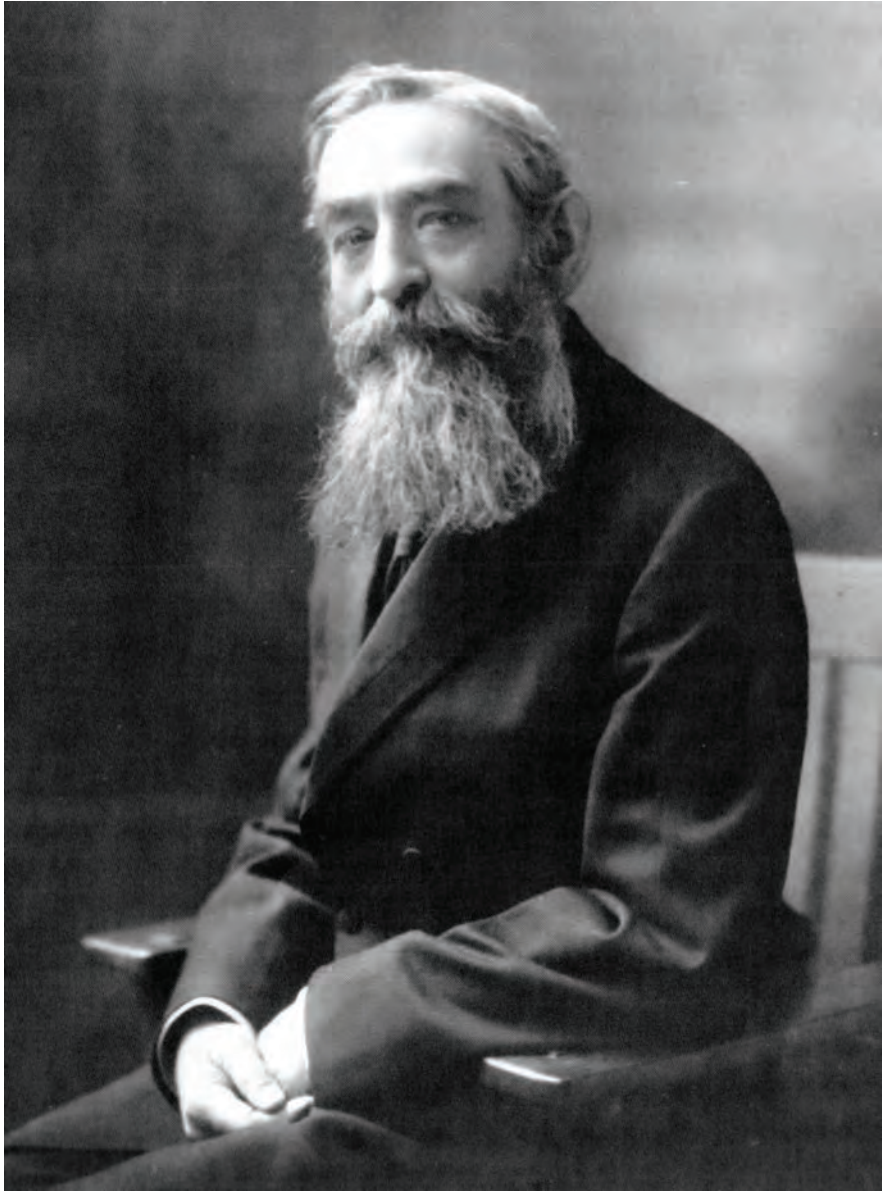
Another confusing fact is that the act creating the Nevada Territory granted land all the way to the crest of the Sierra Nevada, well into the already established State of California. Surely Clemens was familiar with this legislation as his brother was Secretary of the Territory. Perhaps, this grandiose act of Congress to cede California land to the new territory misled him. If he was east of the obvious Sierra Crest, he might have reasoned, then he was in the Nevada Territory on land eligible for preemption. We know that Territorial Governor James Nye traveled to California to resolve the border question, but California would not relent.

Twain apparently never spoke on record, nor did he write about the timber claim after October 1861, except for *Roughing It*. No other information or public records specific to this timber claim have been located, so we may never know for sure the real reason for the failed enterprise.

A final note about John Kinney, Clemens' companion on his first trip to Tahoe: Kinney returned to his native Ohio around March 1862. He served as a captain in the 7<sup>th</sup> Ohio Calvary, as Twain reported in the January 6, 1863 *Territorial Enterprise*. Kinney later abruptly resigned from his commission under unknown circumstances. He died in 1878 and left no details about his timber claim partnership with Clemens.

### **Twain Biographical Writer Stated Carnelian Bay Area as the Location**

George Wharton James was a late 19th century/early 20th century writer. He wrote on travel, Native American culture, natural history, and health. In addition, he wrote Mark Twain biographical pieces for



**Figure 78. George Wharton James pictured here met with Mark Twain and discussed his experiences during his time in the West (Wikimedia Commons)**

books and magazines. He wrote *Lake of the Sky*, the seminal comprehensive natural history book about Lake Tahoe, in addition to  
A Wood Ranch or So 149



numerous books and articles about the natural history of the West. In 1914, he was a guest lecturer to the Nevada Historical Society on Nevada history, lectured again in 1921 on “Nevada Authors” for the Nevada Department of Education and wrote a Nevada promotional piece for the “All Nevada Edition” of the *Nevada State Journal* in 1922. James wrote at least three Twain-themed magazine articles, plus portions of two book chapters involving Twain in the West.



**Figure 79. Excerpt of map from George Wharton James’ *Lake of the Sky* (1915) showing location of Carnelian Bay in relation to the North Shore of Lake Tahoe (Public Domain)**



In another book by James, *California Romantic and Beautiful*, published in 1914, he pinpoints the location of Mark Twain's campsites as "not far from Carnelian Bay," located on the North Shore of Lake Tahoe. This is the only reference to a specific location for a timber claim site by an author from the same era as Twain lived. In 1914, the community of Carnelian Bay was the largest recognized settlement in that area, so James referenced this known and mapped geographical location as it was closest to the timber claim and cabin.

In 1907, James diligently pursued a meeting with Mark Twain to discuss his years in the West and his literature during that period, only to be rebuffed by Twain's secretary ostensibly based on Twain's very busy schedule. James traveled to see Twain in New York anyway and did secure a meeting with Twain, partly to convince him to pose for fundraising photos to benefit Ina Coolbirth. Coolbirth was a dear friend of Twain's from his San Francisco days, and she had lost her home in the 1906 earthquake.

James is one of only two persons known to speak personally with Mark Twain and later write about Twain's Lake Tahoe experiences and location. The other person was Albert Bigelow Paine, Mark Twain's biographer, who gave no specific details on location. James lived in Nevada in the 1880s and was friendly with several of Twain's Virginia City, Nev. friends. James knew Dan DeQuille, Twain's colleague at the *Territorial Enterprise*, and Marshall Jack Perry. DeQuille and Twain roomed together and later; DeQuille stayed at Twain's home while writing his Comstock history, *Big Bonanza*. As a news source and friend, Perry knew Mark Twain well during his years as a reporter for the *Territorial Enterprise*. Both men could have provided extensive background material to James in addition to his in person 1907 meeting with Twain.

