



Searching for Tamsen Donner (American Lives)

Gabrielle Burton

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Tamsen Donner. For most the name conjures the ill-fated Donner party trapped in the snows of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in 1846–47. Others might know Tamsen as the stoic pioneer woman who saw her children to safety but stayed with her dying husband at the cost of her own life. For Gabrielle Burton, Tamsen's story, fascinating in its own right, had long seemed something more: the story of a woman's life writ large, one whose impossible balancing of self, motherhood, and marriage spoke to Burton's own experience.

This book tells of Burton's search to solve the mystery of Tamsen Donner for herself. A graceful mingling of history and memoir, *Searching for Tamsen Donner* follows Burton and her husband, with their five daughters, on her journey along Tamsen's path. From Tamsen's birthplace in Massachusetts to North Carolina, where she lost her first family in the space of three months; to Illinois, where she married George Donner; and finally to the fateful Oregon Trail, Burton recovers one woman's compelling history through a modern-day family's adventure into realms of ultimately timeless experiences. Here Burton has for the first time collected and published together all seventeen of Tamsen's known letters.

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