

History: Cartographers struggle to place Lake Tahoe

Publisher's note: This is reprinted with permission from the May 1990 Lake Tahoe Historical Society newsletter.



Lake Tahoe first appears as a small opening in the mountains labeled “mountain lake” on the Fremont-Preuss map in the expedition of 1844, only 146 years ago. It took thirty more years for mapmakers to place it accurately in California and Nevada and to show its size and shape correctly. Admittedly, Tahoe was not easy to explore in the 19th century and those who found it were sometimes engaged in activities that made the gathering of exact data difficult.

Exploration of the area was undertaken mainly to answer questions on the proper location of the boundary between California and Nevada or to lay out roads to facilitate the movement of traffic across these most difficult mountains. John “Cockeye” Johnson explored the area very early, laid out a route but did not produce a map. Asa Hawley circumnavigated the lake in 1857 with James Green and “Snowshoe Thompson”, none of them trained in mapmaking. Their knowledge did not find its way onto any map.

When it did appear on Bartlett’s map in 1854, Lake Tahoe was one hundred miles north of its proper location. George Goddard finally put it in the right place in 1857 as a result of his survey of the boundary line, but his Tahoe is the wrong shape. Henry de Groot created a map in 1860 that was closer to reality and George Bancroft’s 1863 map placed the lake in the proper place, but its shape was still fanciful. It took ten more years to show its shape properly on maps, a surprising figure considering the number of people who lived and visited

in the basin or repeatedly traveled through it by 1870.

There was uncertainty about the name too, though most called it "Tahoe", adapted from the Washo. Four different names appeared on maps and consideration was given to several others. Some were rejected because they were already in use like Sierra and Truckee. Some were fanciful, like Tula Tulia, or staid like Lake Union. People laughed at Lago Beergler, an Italianized form of Bigler, not believing that it was a serious suggestion.

It was called Lake Bigler on official documents in spite of esthetic and political opposition. The Department of the Interior listed it as Lake Tahoe beginning in 1862, recognizing the name used by residents, visitors, and local writers. By the last quarter of the 19th century, both its location and its shape were known. Mapmakers called it Lake Tahoe though politicians and journalists argued over the official name. Lake Bigler disappeared in 1945, and Lake Tahoe was finally in the right place with the right name.