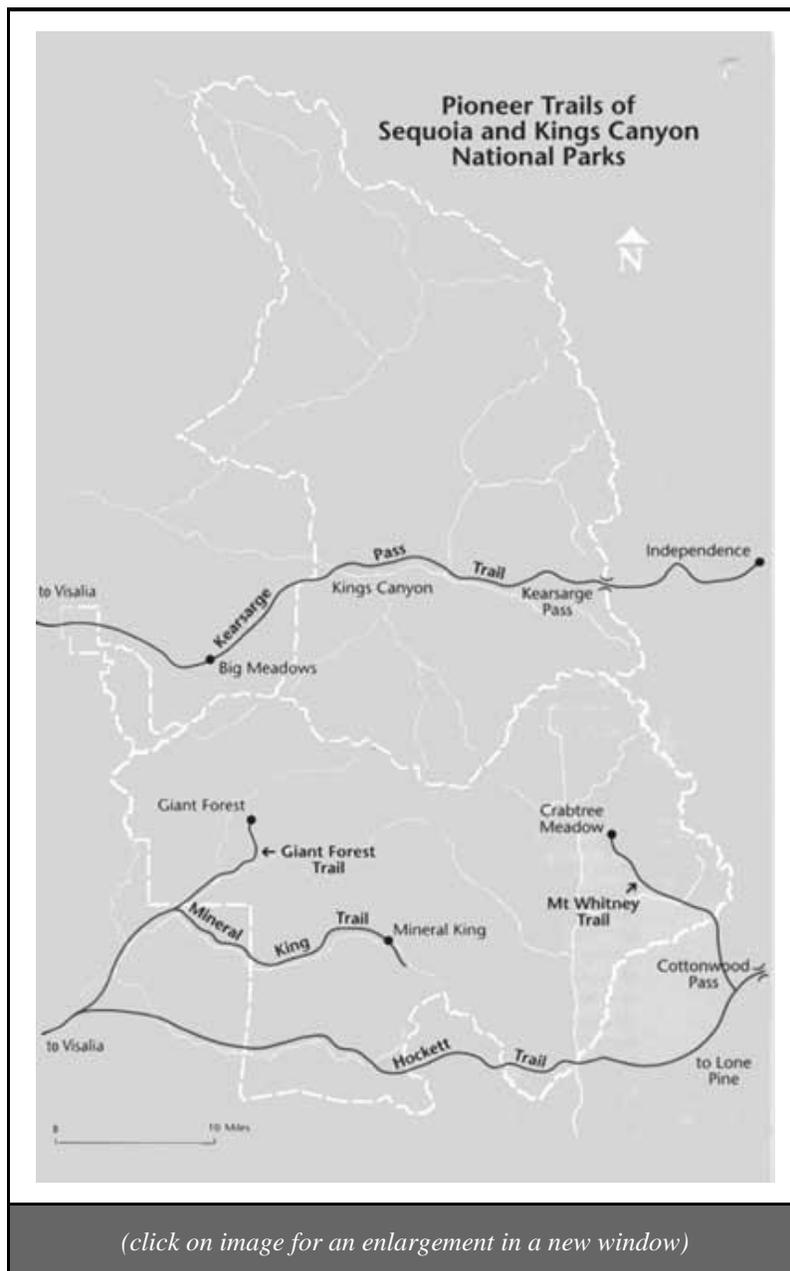


As noted, trans-Sierra travel began as early as the late 1850s, but only with terrible hardship. Soon, however, the development of mining communities in the Owens Valley and Coso Mountains areas immediately east of the southern Sierra led to attempts to improve transportation across the mountains. Anyone looking at the western side of the Sierra from the San Joaquin Valley could tell that the high peaks of the Sierra, which stretched north almost indefinitely, ended immediately south of the Kaweah watershed. It was for this natural target that the early trails headed. The first route, used by the summer of 1860, was known as the Dennison Trail. The Dennison ascended the west slope of the Sierra along the Tule River, south of the Kaweah country, crossed into the Little Kern drainage, and eventually came out on the east at Olancho. Little is known about the Dennison because it was soon supplanted by the better-known Jordan and Hockett trails.



John Jordan petitioned the county of Tulare for permission to build a toll trail across the mountains in November 1861. He was at work on his trail when he drowned attempting to cross the Kern River in June 1862. Other pioneers completed his trail, which was largely an improvement of the Dennison route, and used it for many years. That December, Tulare County chartered yet another trail across the mountains, this time in response to a petition from John B. Hockett. Hockett's trail ran farther north than either the Dennison or Jordan routes, and passed through portions of what later became Sequoia National Park. The Hockett Trail began near Tharp's Ranch on the Kaweah River, ascended the South Fork of the Kaweah to the subalpine plateau now known as Hockett Meadow, then crossed into the Little Kern; it briefly combined with the Jordan Trail only to diverge to the north again and cross the main Kern in the vicinity of Kern Lake. East of the Kern the route climbed Golden Trout Creek (then Whitney Creek) to Big Whitney Meadows, crossed the Sierra at Cottonwood Pass, just south of the southernmost major peaks, and then descended steeply to Owens Lake and the desert.

By 1865, traders pushed a wagon road over Walker Pass in the southern Kern country, providing business headed from Visalia to the Inyo mines a longer, but much easier route. The trails remained however, and they opened up the southern flank of the high Sierra to sheepmen, hunters, mineral prospectors, and anyone else interested in looking at the country.