

# 4 Preliminaries to Construction of the Great Tabernacle

## The Need

The inadequacy of the meeting places of the Mormons, as indicated in the previous chapters, gave rise to the saying “There has never been a house built large enough to hold the Saints.” The Mormons had not had such a place of worship unless they met outdoors. There must have been many times that the members of the Church hoped for larger quarters, especially when they were among the unfortunate who were not able to gain admission to the small meeting places. That hope was expressed by Brigham Young in the opening of the April conference of 1853, when he said, “We may have a place sufficiently large to accommodate the Saints [in a few years,] although, only 23 years ago, the Church was organized with only 6 members.”<sup>1</sup> The necessity for the construction of some such building as the Great Tabernacle grew more evident each year the



1. Journal History, April 6, 1853.

Mormons were in Utah. The growing population of Salt Lake City and the increase in the membership of the Church made the need more urgent. As means of travel to Salt Lake were improved, more Saints came from distant places for conferences, leading to more people attempting to find accommodation in the Old Tabernacle. A sampling of reports over the years will be indicative of this:

Sunday, February 24, [1856]. . . . The meeting in the Tabernacle was so crowded that hundreds were turned away.<sup>2</sup>

Sunday, February 1 [1857]. The weather was pleasant in G. S. L. City. Meeting was held in the Tabernacle. Hundreds could not get in and had to turn back.<sup>3</sup>

Sunday, January 2 [1859]. . . . The Tabernacle was opened this morning for public worship. This is the first time it has been opened for public meetings since June 1858. The organ and singers' seats have been moved from the north end to the center of the room opposite the stand, and a fence put up from the organ to the stand, dividing the room in two divisions, the north for the female and the south for the male.<sup>4</sup>

The above citations make it evident that the Old Tabernacle was not only too small for conference but also inadequate for the usual Sunday meetings.

The fact that the Mormon people were now scattered over a large area of the Intermountain Region made the gathering at conference time all the more important. Many times Brigham Young and his counselors must have considered the desirability of an adequate place for worship, but it is not until 1863 that definite evi-



2. Journal History, February 24, 1856.
3. Journal History, February 1, 1857.
4. Journal History, January 2, 1859.

dence is found of plans to construct a tabernacle to meet the needs of the Mormon people.

## **Early Plans**

The first indication that definite planning on the Tabernacle had been done is contained in a letter written from George A. Smith to Hosea Stout, dated March 20, 1863. The following is an excerpt: “The President is discussing the propriety of building a Tabernacle this season, a circular ended building 250 feet long and 150 feet wide: 500,000 feet of lumber will be requisite for its erection; the site proposed is the west gate of the Temple Block, or between that and the Temple.” This indicates that by March of 1863 the general measurements of the Tabernacle had been decided upon and a computation had been made of the lumber required for its construction. This is evidence that the construction had been considered for some time.

Whether a definite decision had been reached at the time of the letter from Mr. Smith to Mr. Stout to go ahead on the Tabernacle is not known, but it must have been reached at about that time because by April 6—at the convening of conference—it provided one of the main themes of the services.

President Daniel Hammer Wells, a counselor of Brigham Young, was the Church official in charge of the public works. It was he who started the drive for the construction of the Tabernacle. His remarks on the opening day of the April conference of 1864 are most interesting and informative:

Right here we want to build a Tabernacle, to accommodate the Saints at our General Conferences and religious worship, that will comfortably seat some ten thousand people; and over there we want to build a Temple. These two items I wish to call your attention to to-day.

We have organized the different districts throughout the Territory so that fifty teams can be at work for the



Daniel H. Wells, second  
counselor to Brigham Young  
*Courtesy of Church Archives*

Temple, hauling granite rock from Big and Little Cottonwoods. There has been some hauling done, but I wish to suggest a little amendment on our present operations and plans. . . . We shall want the same number of teams this season. We have never had as many as was designed in the first place, which was fifty, at any one time. If we could have even twenty-five or thirty teams constantly at work, they would keep the stonecutters employed. There was a difficulty last season about feed for the animals engaged on this work, but we are prepared to feed hay this year, but grain must be furnished by the Wards.

I wish to say a word in regard to the teamsters. Send men to drive the teams and not boys; men who will have some interest in the work they are sent to do; men who will not sell the grain sent to feed the teams to buy whisky with; men who will not take their teams to haul wood with instead of rock for the Temple. Let the teamsters be fitted out with at least one spare shirt, that they may not be placed under the necessity of wearing one shirt five or

six weeks, and then leave the work to go home if they are not supplied with more; this same remark will apply to shoes also. Either send men that do not use tobacco, or send them with a supply, that they may not come to me and tell me they will have to leave the work if they are not supplied with tobacco. Some of the Bishops sent word if I would find the men from the Wards tobacco they would pay for it, which they have not done, and you may expect that in the future we shall not find them in this article. We expect these things to be found them and men sent who will take care of their teams and wagons. It is a heavy tax upon us to repair unavoidable breakages; this we expect to do. We have a pretty good road to the rock, and if men will be careful in the management of their teams they need not break wagons as much as they have. . . .

I will make a suggestion here, that the city be divided into ten working Wards, each Ward to pay its tithing labor punctually every tenth day, that we may have all the common labor we need on labor tithing and not be placed under the necessity of hiring labor with available means. This tithing labor can be done by the people in this city; but, you say, the hauling of rock and sending teams to the States takes up all the tithing labor we owe. If this be so, you may call the hauling of the rock and teams going to the States a free will offering if you please. I care not how you fix it. I know there is a great portion of the community who care not much which way it applies. Those who have teams are the ones who supply both the hauling of rock for the Temple and going to the States. A great mass of the people do not do any labor of this kind. Let the Bishops in each Ward look to it and find out who in their Wards do not pay labor tithing in sending teams to the States. We want the common labor on the block, this season, to excavate, to attend masons and do a variety of work that is necessary

to be accomplished for the building of our contemplated Tabernacle. Let there be an organization of the people in order to bring a portion of that labor on this block.

The labor tithing of mechanics cannot be settled by sending a person to work at a dollar and a-half a day if the Bishop understands his business. All our tradesmen make more than a dollar and a-half a day; they should pay what their tenth day's labor is worth. The shoemakers can furnish boots and shoes, which can be used to a good advantage. If there is an objection raised to paying the material on labor tithing, it can be credited on their property tithing. We would not wish our tradesmen to leave their shops to work out their labor tithing in common labor with the shovel, the pick, &, for they would not earn as much as a common laborer would who daily follows this kind of labor. We want them to pay their tithing in the kind of labor they are constantly employed at, and the products of this we can place to an excellent use. Common labor is more plentiful than mechanical labor.

I have been particular in noticing this matter. Great abuses are springing up among us for want of proper attention to the business of tithing labor upon the public works.

Sometimes men are found fault with because they spoil the work; they do not, for instance, cut the stone to line and do not improve in their work as much as they should. If anything is said to those persons they feel gouty and as though they did not care whether they continued to work or not on the public works; "For," say they, "my work is as good as the pay." Perhaps you do not know what kind of pay you get. What does the Tithing-office pay to the hands on the public works? It pays money, it pays clothing, it pays good flour and plenty of it, all that the hands need; it pays vegetables of every kind that is raised in these mountains, it

pays molasses, chickens, eggs, butter, beef and pork, some hay and wood. I wish to ask if this is not good pay, and especially when you consider that the public hands get all their wages and more too; for in many instances they are behind on the books. They get all they earn and more, unless they are more diligent than some generally are, because we pay high wages. These are facts that cannot be truthfully denied. Men who work on the public works should be satisfied and contented, and give their best services, and try to improve and do the best they can; a good many do this. There is no place in the Territory that pays better pay and better wages than is paid to the hands that work on the public works, upon an average. . . .

I speak thus plainly that you may know how we feel about such things. . . . I am no more interested in building a new tabernacle than you are; it is no more the business of the First Presidency or Twelve Apostles than it is yours. . . .

We will build a new Tabernacle of sufficient dimensions to accommodate the people much better than they can be at present. . . . Then let us be faithful and never neglect the opportunity of doing good when presented to us, be it ever so small in our estimation. . . . It looks a small thing to quarry rock and to pick up the pebbles and cobble rock or to take the spade and go and labor a simple day's work, but those small matters form together a grand whole in bringing to pass the great purposes we are anticipating will come to pass in the Lord's due time.<sup>5</sup>

President Wells, therefore, outlined the plan of work and gave good insight into the operation of the public works. He was followed



5. *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 10:139. For a discussion of the Word of Wisdom during this era, see Paul H. Peterson, "An Historical Analysis of the Word of Wisdom" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1972).

by others who also urged exerting the utmost effort toward the aim of building a tabernacle. Elder Orson Hyde remarked:

Now, there is a Tabernacle to be built, and what argument shall I need to urge in its favor. Here are to-day I do not know how many thousands of people exposed to the wind and dust under this Bowery, and at this early season of the year we are very liable to have rain or snow. Not only so, but the winter, although only just passed, may be said to be again approaching. . . . It is important that we have a comfortable place to meet in, and I hope the brethren will bear in mind the necessity there is for having this building erected. . . . Brethren and sisters, let us build a Temple, let us build the Tabernacle.<sup>6</sup>

Elder John Taylor also followed the theme: “Then, here is a Tabernacle to be built; we want a building of this kind to convene the people, to protect the people from the wind, sun and rain while they are worshipping God. Then, the President is continually preaching to us to make good improvements, good buildings, good gardens, and make ourselves more comfortable, to elevate ourselves in the scale of existence, that our children after us may become more elevated also in their sentiments and ideas.”<sup>7</sup>

President Heber C. Kimball spoke the following day in the Bowery and articulated one of the strongest arguments for constructing the Tabernacle when he said: “Brethren and sisters, I perceive that the wind is blowing so very strong that it will be very difficult for the loudest speakers to make you all hear, and, therefore, I shall have to depend upon the stillness of the congregation.”<sup>8</sup>



6. *Journal of Discourses*, 10:157–58.

7. *Journal of Discourses*, 10:150.

8. *Journal of Discourses*, 10:163.





This image of the street running just east of the Temple Block, now the Main Street Plaza, shows some of the buildings nearby, such as the Tithing Office (bottom right) and Heber C. Kimball's home (center, marked with a white X).  
*Courtesy of Church Archives*

He talked at length on the obligation of the people to the public works and dealt specifically with the Tabernacle:

Then, in regard to this new Tabernacle that we contemplate building, if you will take hold with us we design that you shall have the privilege of meeting in it next winter. According to the plan which is already designed, it will be larger than this concern which is polled over our heads here, and when completed it will have the advantage of both comfort and convenience for a large congregation, neither of which are afforded by this Bowery in stormy weather. Then let us step forward and do our duty as men of God. And if a sister says, "Can I do anything to help to roll on the Work of God," I say, yes you can assist if you choose; you can pull off your jewels, take your ornaments out of your hair, your earrings; you can knit some stockings and get some cotton and make some shirts or anything of the kind. Will such works as these advance the

kingdom? Yes, they will help considerably. To another sister . . . I will say, yes, take some of the children of those that labor on the Temple and teach them how to read and write and how to sew. Then let another sister say, “I will wash for the men on the Temple [and Tabernacle].”<sup>9</sup>

President Brigham Young added his prestige to the drive for the construction of the Tabernacle by confining a large portion of his remarks during the April 8 conference session to the “design, dimensions, and commodiousness” of the proposed “new bowery.”<sup>10</sup>

Shortly after the adjournment of the April conference, work commenced on the Tabernacle. On April 18, 1863, Brigham Young wrote: “Surveyor Jesse W. Fox on the Temple Block surveying for the new Tabernacle foundation to be laid. The portion of the block west of the Temple foundations is being cleared off this week, preparatory to digging foundation for new Tabernacle.”<sup>11</sup>

Following the completion of the survey, the excavation for the foundation was done and work commenced. The first report on the progress of the building of the Great Tabernacle is contained in the *Deseret News* on June 3, 1863:

#### The New Tabernacle.

The work on the New Tabernacle, which is being built on the Temple Block, directly west of the Temple foundation, is progressing rapidly, and the foundations to the piers will be completed shortly, and then the columns will begin to rise. The following plan of the stupendous edifice has been kindly furnished us by the gentlemanly architect:



9. *Journal of Discourses*, 10:166.

10. John V. Long, “Thirty-third Annual Conference,” *Deseret News*, April 22, 1863, 1.

11. History of Brigham Young, April 18, 1865.

Plan of the New Tabernacle.

Dimensions on the ground, 150 ft. wide; 250 ft. long, with semi-circle ends making one hundred feet of straight work on sides of building. The roof will be supported by 46 piers, 3 by 9 ft. and 20 ft. high, from which an elliptic arch will be sprung of 44 ft. rise. From floor to ceiling, 64 ft.; width in clear, 132 ft.; length 232 ft. in clear. There will be an elevation in the floor of 16 ft., starting from the west radius of circular end, making 66 ft. of floor on the level. The stand will be in the west end, with an elevation of 8 ft., which will give every person in the house good opportunity of seeing the speaker, which is always very desirable. Between the piers will be openings of doors and windows, which can be thrown open at pleasure, which will make it cool and pleasant in the summer and warm and comfortable in the winter.

The sides of building outside will be 45 ft. high from floor level to eaves of cornice. Roof, quarter pitch, with attic in centre, 50 ft. wide by 150 ft. long, on which will stand three octagon domes or ventilators.

The arches will be formed with lattice work 9 ft. deep in the smallest part, with an increase in the centre and outer end, forming and corresponding with the pitch of the roof. The roof will be self-supporting, without a pillar.

It is the intention to have it enclosed this fall, and when finished, will seat nearly 9000 persons.

Wm. H. Folsom, Architect<sup>12</sup>

The plans outlined in the *Deseret News* article called for a large attic in the Tabernacle, but there is no such attic in the finished building. The plans also indicated a quarter-pitch roof—the roof on the finished building is rounding and not quarter pitch. These



12. "The New Tabernacle," *Deseret News*, June 3, 1863, 3.

two items indicate that the original plans were later changed. This phase of the history of the Tabernacle will be discussed at greater length later.

As had been true on the Old Tabernacle, the Mormons set a very immediate goal for the completion of the big Tabernacle. President Heber C. Kimball in his talk had indicated that “they shall have the privilege of meeting in it next winter,” and Mr. Folsom reported, “It is the intention to have it enclosed this fall, and when finished will seat nearly 9,000 persons.” Both estimates were very optimistic, and the Tabernacle was not finished as scheduled. Instead, it required until 1867 for its completion.

