

THE GREAT TABERNACLE: A BUILDING OF PURPOSE AND SPIRIT



THE HISTORY SURROUNDING THE TABERNACLE
ON TEMPLE SQUARE IS AN INSPIRATION TO US,
AS WELL AS AN EXAMPLE OF SACRIFICE AND THE JOY
THAT FOLLOWS AS WE HELP BUILD THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

The story of the Tabernacle on Temple Square in Salt Lake City, Utah, is much like the story of the Latter-day Saint people. The Tabernacle was built under less than favorable circumstances through great sacrifice. Understanding the Tabernacle's history can help Church members understand more of their own Church history and appreciate the marvel that is the Salt Lake Tabernacle.

Although a visit to the Tabernacle is impressive, knowing how it came to be will allow us to appreciate it in a way we could not by just walking inside.

When President Brigham Young (1801–77) and the pioneers arrived in the Salt Lake Valley,



President Brigham Young

they wasted no time in beginning to make the desert blossom. The prophet chose a site for the temple and planned the rest of the city around this site. One of the Saints' foremost needs was a place to gather, and that need was fulfilled when they built a bowery on the temple site

only a week after they arrived in the valley. That first bowery was replaced by a second, and the second by an adobe tabernacle (later known as the Old Adobe Tabernacle). These earlier structures gave the pioneer builders experience and confidence when the time came to build “the Great Tabernacle,” as did their previous experiences in building the Kirtland Temple in Ohio and the Nauvoo Temple in Illinois.



A Grand Design

In a press conference at the start of the Tabernacle's recent renovation, President Gordon B. Hinckley commented: "I absolutely marvel at President Young's boldness in going forward with this project. Way out here in this then-remote wilderness, without steel, with their bare hands, very little in the way of resources, they determined to construct a building to accommodate their needs for assembly and to dream of such a building as this—unique and different from

anything that I've seen anywhere in this world."¹

In both form and function the Tabernacle points to the gathering of Zion in the latter days. Its design reflects the centrality of the prophet's guidance to the Church. The Restoration of the gospel meant that living prophets were again on the earth, and for the Saints to hear the prophets, a large gathering place was necessary. It needed to have good acoustics. It needed good sight lines. And it needed to be comfortable and

Above: This early photo shows the Tabernacle under construction. The building was to be 150 feet (46m) wide, 250 feet (76m) long, and 64 feet (20m) tall. It has served as a central meeting place for Latter-day Saints for nearly 150 years. Construction began in 1863. General conference was held in the partially completed building in October 1867, and it was dedicated in October 1875.

Below left: President Heber J. Grant speaks from the pulpit in the Tabernacle, circa 1930.

Below center: President David O. McKay with then Elder Gordon B. Hinckley, the day he was called as an Apostle, September 30, 1961.
Below right: The Old Adobe Tabernacle after the construction of the Temple Square wall. Notice the decorative elements following the slope of the gable.

easily accessible so the Saints could be instructed.

The design of the Tabernacle also evidenced the Church's hierarchy. The original tiered seating and pulpits of the rostrum reflected the leadership of the Brethren who were seated there. Even the placement of the Tabernacle, directly on axis with the Salt Lake Temple, shows its importance—its joint centrality and connectedness with the temple. The Saints were not simply a religious congregation; they were a covenant people.

A Building with Purpose

For many years the main use of the Tabernacle was for weekly sacrament meetings.

The Saints renewed their covenants each week under the roof of the tabernacle until the 1890s. Over its many years of use, the Tabernacle has served not only as a place for worship but also as a venue for cultural and community events.

The Tabernacle Choir has had its home in the Tabernacle for more than 130 years. The building housed general conferences for nearly 140 years. In its lifespan, the Tabernacle has seen funerals of Church leaders, missionary calls, pageants, programs, concerts, and civic meetings.

“What a remarkable and useful building it has been,” President Hinckley said. “What great purposes it has served. I know of no other structure like it in all the world.”²

TABERNACLE TIME LINE

1847

A week after the pioneers arrived in the Salt Lake Valley, they built a bowery where they gathered to hear the prophet and take the sacrament.



1849

A second bowery replaced the first. It was sturdier, with walls and a shingled roof. Canvas awnings were later added to house larger audiences.



Right: Architectural drawing of the great arched wood trusses bearing on one of the 44 stone piers, which are three feet (.9m) wide and nine feet (2.7m) deep. Massive wood sleepers rest atop the 20-foot (6m) stone piers, transferring their load to the stone piers below.



All the Presidents of the Church from Brigham Young to Gordon B. Hinckley have spoken from the pulpit of the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle and its predecessor buildings have always served as a place for the Saints to gather to hear the word of the Lord.



The first meeting place on Temple Square was the bowery, a simple pole structure with open sides and roofed with willow branches. This 1862 photo shows a later bowery, behind the Old Adobe Tabernacle. This bowery was enlarged as needed to

accommodate the increasing number of Saints. The first conference in the Salt Lake Valley, August 22, 1847, was held in the original 40-by-28-foot (12 x 8.5m) bowery located on the southwest corner of Temple Square.

1851-52

An adobe tabernacle was constructed in the southwest corner of Temple Square. It protected audiences from the weather, unlike the previous boweries.

1854

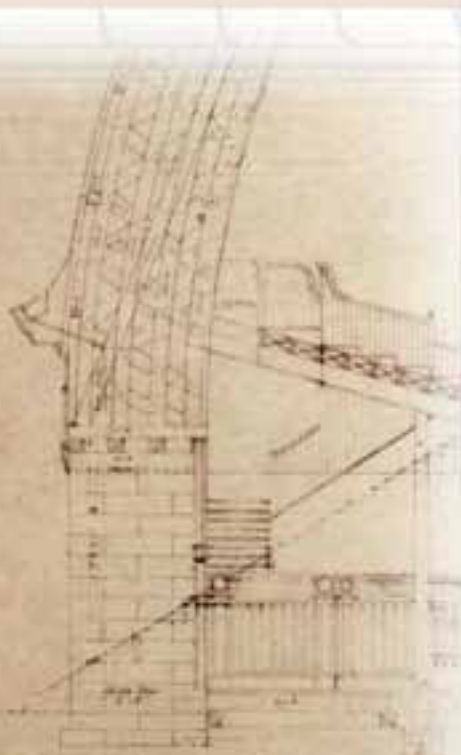
Seats were set up north of the adobe tabernacle to provide room for thousands more. The next year the seats were covered with a bowery.

Spring 1863

Construction began on "the Great Tabernacle."



Above: The trusses were framed and put together on the ground and temporarily pinned. When everything was properly fitted and marked, the timbers were taken apart and raised plank by plank and put into place over scaffolding erected for that purpose.





The completed Tabernacle, circa 1870.

A Spirit of Its Own

If you visit the Tabernacle, you will likely hear a tour guide explain its roof—how it spans 150 feet (46m) with no supports, how it consists of a latticework of timbers and plaster strengthened by horse and cow hair and occupies 10 feet (3m) of space between the ceiling and roof covering. You might also hear that it is an architectural masterpiece.

The Saints who built the Tabernacle had few resources, not even steel for the girders. All the building materials were locally acquired, including 1,500,000 board feet (457 km) of timber. Sacrifice was a less tangible raw material that aided in its construction. The Saints were not well off, so the Tabernacle was built using donations. For both the Salt Lake Temple and the Tabernacle, Latter-day Saint artisans from Europe produced hand-grained, hand-marbleized woodwork using methods that are no longer commonplace.

The many uses of the building, the people who built it, the very materials it is made of all contribute to the spirit of the Tabernacle.

October 1867

General conference was held for the first time in the Tabernacle.

1869-70

A balcony was built to provide additional seating in the Tabernacle.

July 4, 1873

The Tabernacle Choir performed inside the building for the first time.



Above: The Tabernacle during the summer of 1867. Right: The pews and interior balcony were finished in 1870. Note the star and word *Utah* on the organ pipes. Above right: The Tabernacle organ was draped in black for the August 1877 funeral of President Brigham Young. The garlands from the ceiling were still in place after the 30-year celebration of the pioneers' July 1847 entry into the valley.



“A building develops a personality of its own,” says President Hinckley. “The Spirit of the Lord has been in this structure. It is sacred unto us.”³

The Tabernacle Exhibit

What the tour guides at the Tabernacle don't tell you is how much the building has changed over its history. Though its structure remains the same, its appearance has changed markedly. You can see these changes and learn much more about the history of the Tabernacle in a current exhibit, which runs through January 2009, at the Museum of Church History and Art.

The most recent renovations to the Tabernacle are part of its ever-changing

character. It has been seismically updated, and access and seating have been improved, among other changes. “When all is said and done, it will be modern in its strength and capacity but old and beautiful and original and natural in its appearance,” President Hinckley promised at the start of the renovation.⁴

A History of Strength

Like the Tabernacle's history, the history of the Latter-day Saints is full of change and growth, of adapting to meet current and future needs. President Hinckley has said:

“In imagination I can see Brigham Young standing here and looking up at the men putting together the timbers, and saying,



BUILT IN THE WILDERNESS

“To me it is a miracle building. I think of the skill of those who designed it and know that there must have been great inspiration behind that skill. I think of faith as I reflect on the time and circumstance of its construction. It is truly a tabernacle, built in the wilderness from which the voice of the servants of the Lord should go forth to the world.”

President Gordon B. Hinckley, “Building Your Tabernacle,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1992, 51.

October 1875

Construction on the Tabernacle was completed, and it was dedicated in general conference.



Above: Detail showing the orientation of the wedges. The wedge, driven into the peg, expanded the peg to ensure a tight fit. The wedge was driven so that it expanded in the direction of the grain to avoid splitting the trusses at the end. Contrary to legend, some metal bolts were used in the construction of the Tabernacle.

July 15, 1929

The Tabernacle Choir's weekly radio program, *Music and the Spoken Word*, was broadcast from the Tabernacle for the first time.



Left: A celebration in the Tabernacle after 1884 featuring handcars and flags. Above left: Richard L. Evans speaks from the pulpit for *Music and the Spoken Word*, circa 1930.



The Tabernacle as it appeared circa 1940, with an oxidized tin roof.

‘Build it strong, boys. Build it strong!’

“Our bodies, . . . our minds, are the tabernacles of our spirits. He who is the Father of those spirits would have us build strength

and virtue into these personal tabernacles. Only in such strength is there safety and growth and happiness. If there is one great ringing message I take from the builders of this structure it is this—*Be strong!*”⁵

The Tabernacle is a building of great purpose and spirit, and, like the Saints who built it, it is strong. It has withstood the tests of time. ■

NOTES

1. Tabernacle renovation press briefing, Oct. 1, 2004, newsroom.lds.org.
2. “Good-bye to This Wonderful Old Tabernacle,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1999, 90.
3. “Good-bye to This Wonderful Old Tabernacle,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1999, 91.
4. Tabernacle renovation press briefing, Oct. 1, 2004, newsroom.lds.org.
5. “Building Your Tabernacle,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1992, 51.

Based on historical research by Richard Oman, curator for the Tabernacle exhibit at the Museum of Church History and Art.

1947

For the centennial of the arrival of the pioneers in the Salt Lake Valley, a new aluminum roof replaced the shingles of the Tabernacle.



Above: Workers atop the building completing construction of the roof on the west end of the Tabernacle. Above center: President David O. McKay at the pulpit with Elder Spencer W. Kimball in the background. Right: Exterior view of the Tabernacle dome and the spires of the Salt Lake Temple.

1970

The Tabernacle became a National Historic Landmark.



1971

The Tabernacle was named a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark, an honor given to other structures like the Golden Gate Bridge and the Panama Canal.



The Tabernacle Organ

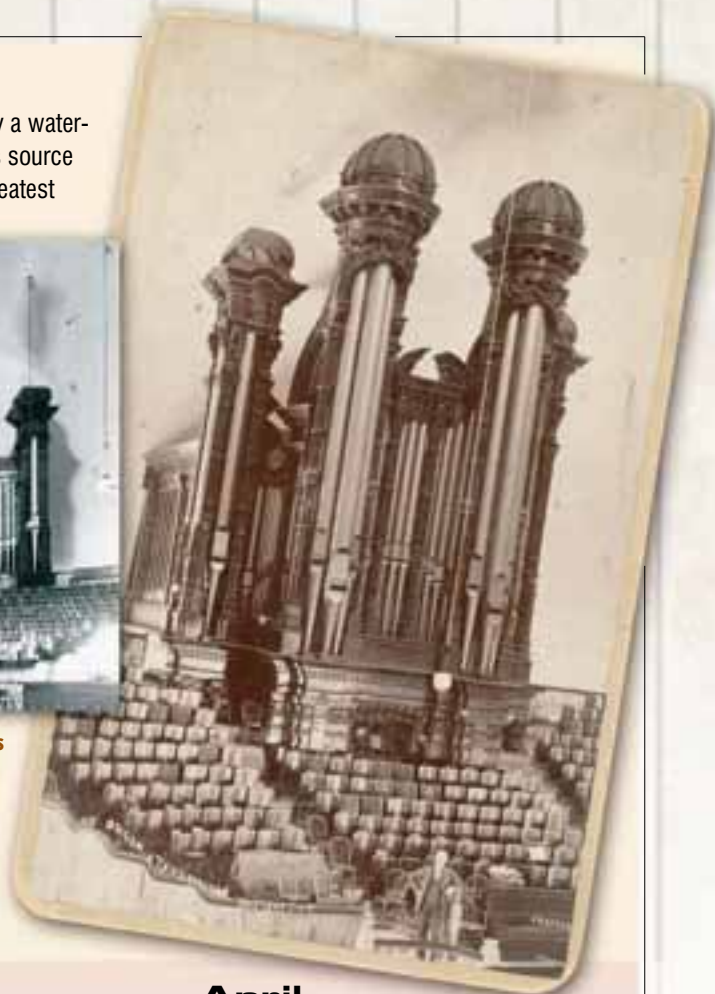
It has been run by a team of five men pumping bellows. It has been run by a water-wheel in the basement. And now it is run by electricity. No matter what its source of power, the Tabernacle organ has always been considered one of the greatest organs in the world.

Joseph Harris Ridges built the organ at the request of President Brigham Young. Timber for the wood pipes came from Pine Valley, 300 miles south of Salt Lake City. The metal pipes came from Boston, Massachusetts. Ridges's early organ looked much different than the present version. It was five times smaller and had only two keyboards.

Over its history, the organ has been added to and updated several times. It now has 11,623 pipes, 206 ranks of voices, and 5 keyboards. Daily recitals were given in the Tabernacle for nearly 100 years, until 2005, when the Tabernacle was closed for renovation. ■



Organ with 1915 extension (above) and without extensions in 1904 (right).



October 1999

General conference was held for the last time in the Tabernacle, which had a seating capacity of about 6,000. Conferences were moved to the Conference Center, which has a seating capacity of 21,000.

2005

The Tabernacle was closed for renovation.

April 2007

The Tabernacle reopened.



PHOTOGRAPH BY A. ANGLE



Left: Tabernacle interior at the 1978 general conference with the newly rebuilt rostrum area. Note the increased number of lights above the Tabernacle Choir. Center left: In 2006 new steel "sister" trusses were installed adjacent to the existing wood lattice trusses. This will preserve the historic arch while providing the level of safety desired for gravity and seismic loads. Above: An aerial view of the new aluminum roof being installed in 2006.

