

The Nauvoo Tabernacle

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Elden J. Watson

On Sunday, 7 April 1844, Joseph Smith delivered the funeral discourse of King Follett before an assembly of 8,000 (?) Saints.¹ Such a large assembly was uncommon, but smaller assemblies were addressed regularly by the Church leaders in a grove below the Temple. All too frequently these discourses were either cut short or postponed because of inclement weather. Realizing that the Saints would need a large, sheltered area in which to assemble, the Prophet gave instructions (presumably to the Quorum of the Twelve) that a canvas tabernacle be constructed for that purpose.

It was nearly a year after the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith that action was initiated to construct the Nauvoo Tabernacle. The need for the tabernacle had not decreased with the death of Joseph Smith, and on 17 June 1845, the Quorum of the Twelve wrote to the Saints abroad a letter which announced the following:

The walls of our Temple are completed and the roof is nearly on. Through the liberality of the brethren that building is in a rapid state of advancement; but it will only accommodate a small portion of our congregation when completed.

Pursuant to the counsel of Joseph Smith given previous to his martyrdom, we now intend to erect a Tabernacle for the congregation made of canvas. It will take about four thousand yards, which, with other fixtures, will cost between one and two thousand dollars.

We have appointed Elder Orson Hyde one of our own quorum, a faithful, trusty and competent man of God, to go forth and raise all the necessary funds for the above purpose, to procure the materials and return with them to this place as soon as possible. Elder Hyde is authorized to raise the necessary funds by loan, by contribution, or tithing or donation; if by loan, the church here will refund the same in lands at a low rate, or in cash as soon as we can command it; and any contract that he may make in relation to the above, the church will be responsible for.

It is hoped that no brother or sister who has funds that he or she can spare for a season will withhold them from Brother Hyde, for it is the aid that he seeks for us. Also we hope that the saints will be liberal in their donations, and every other person that wishes well to the Temple of God and to the Tabernacle of the congregation in Zion. May God bless all that feel interested in the matter.²

Elder Hyde left for the East about 17 June 1845, for in a letter to Wilford Woodruff dated 27 June Brigham Young said that Orson Hyde had left about ten days earlier to obtain cloth for the tabernacle and that Howard

Egan had gone “to St. Louis to buy about 125 dollars worth of hemp to make cords for it.”³ The most probable route taken by Orson Hyde to New York was by boat from Nauvoo to St. Louis; by boat to Pittsburg and Wheeling, Virginia; across the Allegheny Mountains by stage to Wilmington, Delaware; from there by rail first to Philadelphia and then to the city of New York. The journey took about twenty-three days.⁴ Elder Orson Pratt was presiding over the eastern Saints when Orson Hyde arrived.

Upon his arrival in New York, Elder Hyde published in the *New York Messenger* that portion of the letter of the Twelve (quoted previously) which detailed his responsibilities in procuring canvas, and he subjoined the following comments:

I hope the elders residing in the different branches where I have made appointments, will take the earliest opportunity of laying this before the people that they may be in readiness to make me a witness of their liberality for the cause sake. Should any brother or sister, or branch of the church feel disposed to show their liberality on this occasion, and not have the opportunity of seeing me personally, they can address me through the post at the Mssenger [*sic*] office, No. 7 Spruce-street, New-York, enclosing whatever they may be disposed to give on their tithing or otherwise, and it shall be faithfully entered to their credit on “the book of the law of the Lord.’

Should a greater sum be raised then will be needful to purchase the canvas [*sic*] for the tabernacle, it will be applied toward completing the Temple.

I am very respectfully,
Your brother in Christ.
ORSON HYDE⁵

In the same issue of the *New York Messenger* was published notice of addresses to be given by Elder Hyde in the ensuing two weeks in the filling of his mission. He kept an extremely rigorous schedule, made even more difficult by the hot weather: he preached in New York on 17 August; Hempstead, Long Island, on the twentieth;⁶ and three times in Boston on Sunday, the twenty-fourth.⁷ While in Boston he wrote the following letter to Bishop Newel K. Whitney:

Boston Augt 24. 1845

Bishop Whitney.

Enclosed is a certain note against Bros. Pratt & Brannan for borrowed money. I have received it as tithing upon condition that Bro. Pratt and the balance of you agree to it. If you agree to receive it as tithing, please credit it to the following persons—

Mary Petitt	\$ 50=
Mary Ann Petitt	\$ 50=
Ira Petitt	<u>\$ 50=</u>
	\$ 150.

If you shall not receive it as tithing, please enclose it in a note and address it to Ira Petitt, near Hempstead, L.I. New York.

To find tithing in these kinds of notes does not afford very flattering prospects to buy canvass. I will not receive them as tithing unless you agree to it.

By accounts, Bro. Joseph Ball is any thing but a pure hearted man. He is represented as very corrupt, like Adams.—He is gone to Nauvoo. You will no doubt have an eye to him. I shall not return so soon as I expected. Will you see that my family are helped a little if necessary.

I shall succeed in getting the canvass if God will. My constant exertion in this very hot weather has injured my health, and I think I shall ship the canvass in about 2 weeks or 3 to Whitney and Miller, and get it insured, and then stay long enough to catch the cool sea breezes and recruit a little.

Prospects very good. The church is nearly free from the effects of Rigdonism, and nearly free from a worse malady—Adamsism and Ballism.

This letter is sent by Bro. Kimball who leaves to morrow for Nauvoo.

My kind love to my wife, family and friends. I shall try to be at home in Octo. if all be well. My kindest regards to yourself, family and all the Brethren.

As ever your Brother
Orson Hyde⁸

By 4 September Orson Hyde had raised about eleven hundred dollars and was paid the following tribute to his faithfulness by Orson Pratt in a letter to President Brigham Young:

President Orson Hyde has visited the main branches of the church in the East and has succeeded in raising about eleven hundred dollars all in tithing. He is in hopes to get still more. He will purchase the canvass in 4 or 5 days and forward it immediately to Nauvoo. What Tithing I have or shall receive previous to his return I shall commit to his hands. After all that Parley and Elder Hyde have received from the Churches here you must not find fault with me if I should not succeed in obtaining much in tithing, nevertheless, I will do all that I can both by preaching and through the paper to keep up the tithing spirit. I shall visit Boston in about ten days, thence through the branches to Peterboro. Tell Brother Taylor that I have sold about 40 books of Covenants and have got the 350 bound for 8 cents per copy.

Elder Hyde has this moment left our office for Philadelphia and Chester Co. after visiting which he will return to this city, purchase the canvass, and go on to Boston. He will then probably return west.

Brother Hyde has been diligent and active upon his mission and has faithfully cried Tabernacle day and night—no person could have done more under the same circumstances. O that I might be able to discharge my duties as faithfully in all things as P.P.P. and O.H. have theirs.⁹

After leaving New York on 4 September, Elder Hyde went to Philadelphia and then Massachusetts, returned to New York, left again by 6 September for Chester County, Pennsylvania,¹⁰ from whence he returned on

13 September. He lectured in Boston on Sunday, 14 September, and was scheduled to lecture in Lowell Massachusetts, on 16 September, if a suitable location could be found.¹¹

Finally, on Thursday, 17 September, Orson Hyde shipped to Nauvoo 4000 yards of canvas for the construction of the tabernacle.¹² On the following day he left for the West,¹³ arriving in Nauvoo sometime prior to 17 October 1845.¹⁴

In slightly more than one month Elder Hyde preached a minimum of sixteen times and raised \$1415.38½ in tithing from the eastern Saints, of which he paid \$1050.56 for over 4000 yards of canvas.¹⁵ However, Orson Pratt reported that in the Eastern States, after the concentrated effort to raise funds for the canvas, and despite the zeal put into the eastern Saints by reports of persecution in and around Nauvoo, tithing money came in very slowly.¹⁶

A letter from Orson Pratt to Reuben Hedlock, published in the *New York Messenger* of 30 August 1845 while Orson Hyde was still in the East gathering funds, contains the only description of the tabernacle that I have been able to locate:

Pres. Orson Hyde of the counsel by the Twelve, is now in the east. His mission is to collect tything for the purpose of purchasing 4000 yards of canvass in this city. It is intended to erect a tabernacle of canvass in front of, and joining the Temple on the west. The form of this tabernacle will be that of an ellipse, its longer axis running north and south, parallel to the front of the Temple. Its height will be 75 feet in the centre; its sides sloping at an angle of 45 degrees. The area of its base will be sufficient to contain eight or ten thousand persons; its seats will gradually rise one above another in the form of an amphitheatre. This will be intended for preaching to the vast congregation; while the temple will be used for the meeting of councils and quorums, and the administrations of ordinances and blessings, and preaching to smaller congregations, &C.¹⁷

Based on the figures given by Orson Pratt and assuming an ellipse with a 2:1 ratio of major to minor axes, the Nauvoo Tabernacle would have been approximately 250 feet long and 125 feet wide. It would have joined the Temple on the front and possibly would have spanned Wells Street, which the Temple faced, perhaps providing an awning for that area when the tabernacle was not in use. Wells Street was not a through street in front of the Temple.

However, the tabernacle was never built. Less than four (winter) months after Orson Hyde's return to Nauvoo, the Camp of Israel left Nauvoo in the exodus westward, the initial wagon crossing the river on 14 February 1846. The following two entries from Brigham Young's journal suggest that although diverted from its original intent, the canvas was put to good use for such things as tents, tent ends and wagon covers for the fleeing Saints.

This supposition is strengthened by the conspicuous absence of purchase records for canvas for the period of time during which the Saints were preparing for the exodus.

17 February, 1846:

I then called upon all who wanted to go with the Camp, to raise their right hands, and all hands were up. I said—we must wait here until we get the artillery, canvas, and public property; that the brethren must build a pen for corn and hay. George W. Harris was appointed commissary.

18 February, 1846:

I called the brethren together and instructed the Captains of hundreds to raise money in their respective companies, and send for Cloth for tent ends and wagon covers; and informed the Pioneer Company, that it would be their duty to prepare roads, look out for campgrounds, dig wells.¹⁸

The words “Tabernacle for the congregation” (see the first quote of this article) have led many to connect the Nauvoo Tabernacle with the tabernacle constructed by Moses in the wilderness. In a cursory comparison I have been unable to find any notable similarities between the two in shape, size, or purpose.¹⁹ The Nauvoo Tabernacle may, however, have provided the impetus in the unique design of the Tabernacle on Temple Square in Salt Lake City constructed under the direction of Brigham Young.

1. Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1932–1951), 6:302; hereafter cited as *HC*. The figure quoted in the source cited is “twenty thousand Saints,” but at the time there were not 12,000 inhabitants of Nauvoo, including women and children. Even with an influx of conference visitors, the 8,000 figure is more likely.

2. *HC*, 7:427. The Nauvoo Tabernacle was never built.

3. *HC*, 7:431. Brigham Young also said: “The brethren are clearing the ground round the Temple, and we expect to have the Tabernacle reared, so as to be ready to meet in this fall” (also in *Millennial Star* 6 [1 September 1845]:91–92).

4. Elden J. Watson, ed., *The Orson Pratt Journals* (Salt Lake City: Published by author, 1975), p. 496. This was the route taken by Parley P. Pratt on his way east in December 1844. There was another possible route: from Nauvoo to Chicago by land and then by the Great Lakes and Erie Canal to New York. However, in May 1847, Orson Hyde wrote a letter to Orson Spencer in which he stated that he had borrowed \$50 in St. Louis “a year or two ago to buy canvass with,” which amount he then had to repay on his way home. (See *Millennial Star* 9 [15 August 1847]:243.)

5. *New York Messenger*, 16 August 1845, p. 52.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 56

7. Willard Snow to Orson Pratt, 2 September 1845, *New York Messenger*, 13 September 1845, p. 84.

8. Orson Hyde to Bishop Newel K. Whitney, unpublished original in Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; printed by permission.

9. Orson Pratt to Brigham Young, *Orson Pratt Journals*, p. 548.
10. *New York Messenger*, 6 September 1845, p. 77.
11. *Ibid.*, 13 September 1845, p. 85.
12. *Ibid.*, 20 September 1845, p. 93.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *HC*, 7:482.
15. *HC*, 7:483. Elder Hyde's account records:

Money collected	1415.38½
Paid for canvas	1050.56
Other expenses	<u>105.80</u>

(Presumably) Applied towards completing Temple 259.02½

Funds were also received at the *Messenger* office from areas which Elder Hyde could not visit. Receipt of some of these funds was acknowledged in the *New York Messenger*. (See *New York Messenger*, 30 August 1845, p. 68, and *New York Messenger*, 27 September 1845, p. 99.)

16. *HC*, 7:509–10.
17. *New York Messenger*, 30 August 1845, p. 67.
18. Elden J. Watson, ed., *Manuscript History of Brigham Young, 1846–1847* (Salt Lake City: Published by author, 1968–1971), pp. 34, 40–41.
19. See Exodus 26:1–37; 36:8–38.