By 1862, discouragement had overcome many of the settlers of southern Utah. The Virgin River continued to flood sporadically, washing the pioneers' crops and topsoil downstream. Anticipated harvests were lost, affecting the hopes and faith of these early settlers. In the midst of these tribulations, President Brigham Young traveled by buggy to view conditions and encourage the saints. Undaunted by seemingly endless challenges, Young was determined to maintain the “Cotton Mission.” On returning from his tour of the Rio Virgin Valley, he penned the following to Erastus Snow, then presiding over St. George:

As I have already informed you, I wish you and the brethren to build, as speedily as possible, a good, substantial, commodious, well furnished meeting-house; one large enough to comfortably seat at least two thousand persons, and one that will not only be useful, but also an ornament to your city and a credit to your energy and enterprise.

Brigham Young saw that the tabernacle would enable the saints to move from the old Bowery constructed of posts and willows to a structure more appropriate for their worship services and other meetings.

After reviewing Young's request with other local leaders, Snow addressed the assembled settlers, read the letter and asked for their sustaining vote. To their credit, the saints voted in favor of erecting the tabernacle, December 1862. Over the next several years, the saints struggled for their physical survival. The tabernacle was an added burden, but one they irreversibly attempted to finish. It was more than just an ordinary building—a monument to their faith and devotion to their Lord, and to his prophet's request. Workmen from every craft and trade were expected to work on the tabernacle. By the waning months of its completion, the St. George Tabernacle had truly evolved into an “ornament” and “credit” for all to behold. The clock was shipped from London and the bell from New York City. Still, the expensive glass window panes were lacking.

Aware of the need, Church leaders ordered the precious glass at the cost of $0.75 per 8” by 10” pane from a New York manufacturer. To protect the glass, it was ferried by ship nearly fifteen thousand miles from New York around the Cape Horn and up the Pacific Ocean to Wilmington, California, a suburb of modern-day Los Angeles.

While the glass was transported, local leader, David H. Cannon was called upon to raise the needed $800 for the freight bill due at the Wilmington docks. Cannon faithfully attempted to carry out his fund-raising responsibility over a six month period. Unfortunately, the saints were generally able to give only produce or labor—neither of which would pay for the freighting costs. Cash was not readily available. As a result, Cannon was able to collect only $200 from the entire vicinity, one-fourth of the required sum. As the contracted freighter’s departure for California loomed closer, he petitioned the Lord for assistance. Obtaining the last $600 would constitute a miracle.

Peter Neilson, Sr., was a relatively wealthy Danish immigrant living in the nearby community of Washington with his wife Karren and two sons, Israel and Peter Jr. Economic prosperity...
envisioned his forthcoming remodeling. The very next day, Peter was intent upon purchasing the requisite lumber.

That crucial night, neither Cannon nor Peter slept soundly. Cannon realized that although he did not have the necessary funds, postponing the trip until the following spring would expose the tabernacle’s nearly completed interior to the ravages of the winter storms. To Cannon, there was no option. They must get the glass! Six miles away, Peter tossed and turned miserably in his bed. The $600 had been saved specifically for his family’s comfort. Already he had sacrificed repeatedly for the kingdom. Eventually, he dozed off for several hours, only to have his sleep interrupted by a persistent dream which gave him no rest. Peter was encouraged to take his entire savings to Cannon that next morning.

Peter rose before the sun, dressed for the day, lit a candle, and pulled his secret cache from its hiding place. After laying out a large, clean, red bandanna, he dumped the gold coins on top of the cloth. Half-eagles, eagles, and double-eagles clanked against each other, forming a large, golden pile. Awakened by Peter’s activity, Karren asked him what he was doing with the family savings. Peter replied that the Church was in greater need of the money then they were, and the entire $600 needed to be taken to Cannon immediately. As in all other situations, Karren supported her husband. The city of St. George nestled between red sandstone cliffs and black volcanic rock ridges six miles away from Peter’s home. Determined, Peter walked the entire distance early that morning, contemplating his actions. In his hands was a fortune that he would never have the opportunity to spend. Finally, he reached Cannon’s home and prepared to deliver the wrapped bundle. Before Peter’s early arrival, Cannon’s teamsters had arrived to make the trek to California to obtain the glass. Still, Cannon had no idea how to obtain the additional $600. Suddenly there was a knock at his door. There stood Peter, holding a heavy bandanna. Peter somberly greeted the assembled group by handing the wrapped gold coins to a surprised Cannon. “Good morning, David. You will know what to do with this.” Bewildered, Cannon poured the contents onto the table and began counting; before him lay the needed $600. All those present must have felt the spirit of the moment as they witnessed the magnitude of Peter’s sacrifice.

Within an hour, Peter was on his way back to Washington empty handed, and the teamsters were riding down the Old Spanish Trail to California, armed with gold coins. Only Peter was aware of his thoughts. Filled with these feelings, he did not find it necessary to share his philanthropy outside the walls of his home to gain the praise of men. It is only through Cannon’s personal writings that the events of that morning were revealed. Peter’s own autobiography remained silent.

seemed to follow Peter wherever he went and in whatever enterprises he entered. Back in Denmark, he had been a successful tailor. In Ephraim, he quickly became one of the most prosperous farmers in the district. And by the late 1860s in Washington, his talents provided him with a sizable income and economic well-being. Since his arrival in Washington, Peter had worked hard to save money to expand his small two-room adobe home to accommodate his family. No doubt his wife Karren was eager to have additional space to decorate into a comfortable dwelling. Stashed in a secret hiding place within the Neilson home, Peter had saved a small fortune - $600 in gold coins. Sacrifice and toil were contained in each precious coin.

Because of the magnitude of public notice the tabernacle generated, Peter along with the rest of the community, was aware of Cannon’s financial predicament. The night before Cannon was to deliver the required $800 to the teamsters, Peter...