Bread Before Gold

Utah's 1864 Grain Circular and the Struggle to Keep a Territory Fed

Illustrated reading edition • October 2026

Highlights

July 5, 1864: the handwritten date on a one-sided appeal to preserve provisions and organize grain sales. [1]

A year's food before a sale; a twelve-dollar flour minimum; help for neighbors unable to hold out. [1]

A proposed convention at the Old Tabernacle, followed by reports and advocacy extending into 1865. [1–4]

The circular did not begin with a price. It began with hunger.

Before asking Utah's farmers to hold their flour at twelve dollars a hundred, the circular reminded them of roots, hides, and wolf meat. Before speaking of gold, it recalled crops destroyed by crickets, grasshoppers, and drought. Its argument began with a memory: the people addressed by this paper knew what it meant to reach the end of ordinary provisions and still have to eat. [1]

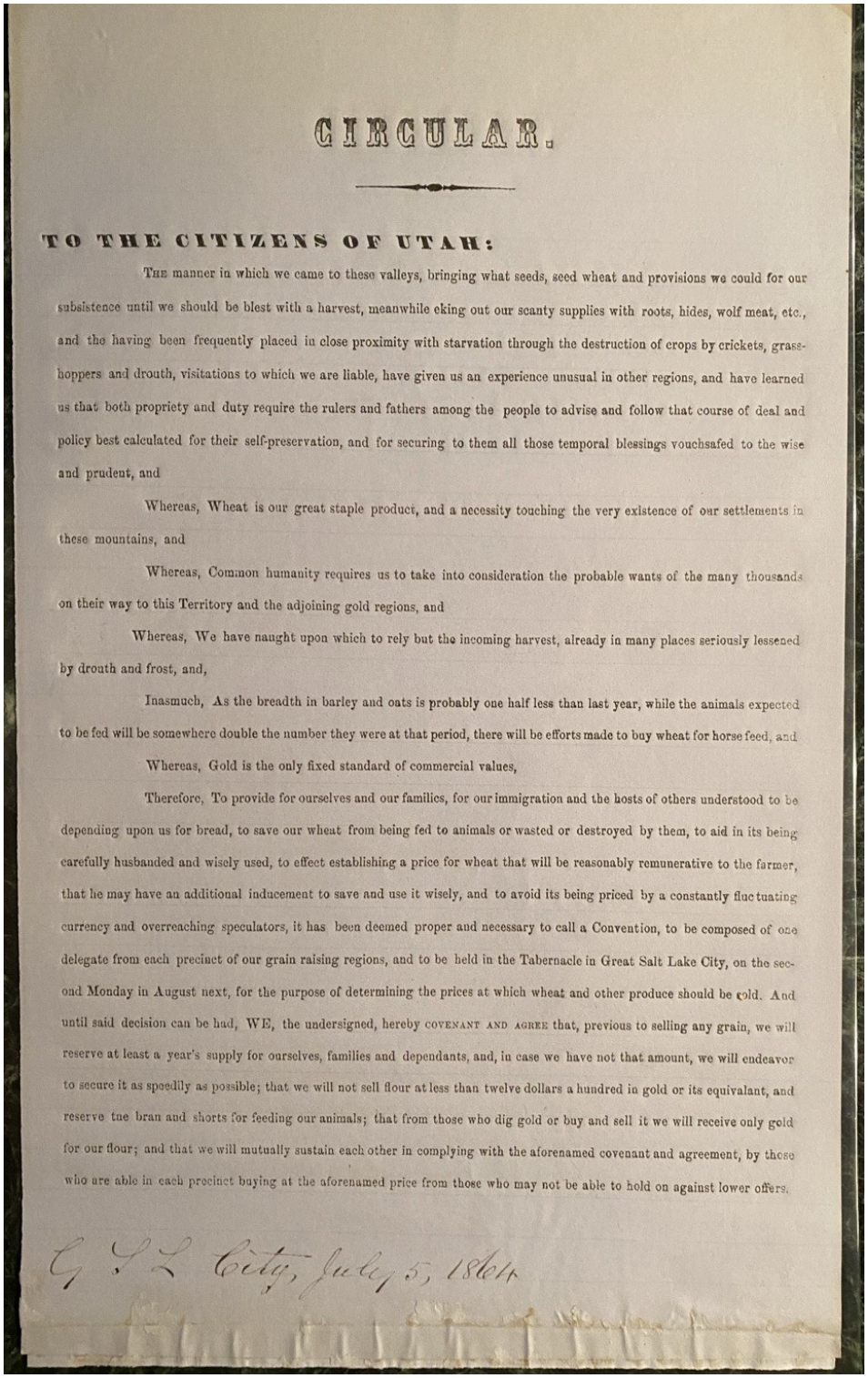
That was an arresting way to introduce an agreement about agricultural prices. The language did not invite readers to think first of a successful sale. It asked them to remember the circumstances in which a sale could become a mistake.

Now the paper warned of another uncertain harvest. It reported damage from drought and frost, anticipated thousands of people traveling to Utah and the adjoining gold regions, and expected increased demand for animal feed. Wheat would be wanted in more places than the family kitchen. There would be opportunities to sell it. There would also be danger in selling too much. [1]

At the foot of this surviving sheet, someone wrote, "G. S. L. City, July 5, 1864." Above that date stood a proposal reaching from the farmer's field into the household pantry: before selling grain, keep at least a year's supply for oneself, one's family, and those dependent on the household. [1]

The gold seekers needed bread. So did the people who grew the wheat.

The original circular



CIRCULAR.

TO THE CITIZENS OF UTAH:

THE manner in which we came to these valleys, bringing what seeds, seed wheat and provisions we could for our subsistence until we should be blest with a harvest, meanwhile eking out our scanty supplies with roots, hides, wolf meat, etc., and the having been frequently placed in close proximity with starvation through the destruction of crops by crickets, grasshoppers and drouth, visitations to which we are liable, have given us an experience unusual in other regions, and have learned us that both propriety and duty require the rulers and fathers among the people to advise and follow that course of deal and policy best calculated for their self-preservation, and for securing to them all those temporal blessings vouchsafed to the wise and prudent, and

Whereas, Wheat is our great staple product, and a necessity touching the very existence of our settlements in these mountains, and

Whereas, Common humanity requires us to take into consideration the probable wants of the many thousands on their way to this Territory and the adjoining gold regions, and

Whereas, We have naught upon which to rely but the incoming harvest, already in many places seriously lessened by drouth and frost, and,

Inasmuch, As the breadth in barley and oats is probably one half less than last year, while the animals expected to be fed will be somewhere double the number they were at that period, there will be efforts made to buy wheat for horse feed, and

Whereas, Gold is the only fixed standard of commercial values,

Therefore, To provide for ourselves and our families, for our immigration and the hosts of others understood to be depending upon us for bread, to save our wheat from being fed to animals or wasted or destroyed by them, to aid in its being carefully husbanded and wisely used, to effect establishing a price for wheat that will be reasonably remunerative to the farmer, that he may have an additional inducement to save and use it wisely, and to avoid its being priced by a constantly fluctuating currency and overreaching speculators, it has been deemed proper and necessary to call a Convention, to be composed of one delegate from each precinct of our grain raising regions, and to be held in the Tabernacle in Great Salt Lake City, on the second Monday in August next, for the purpose of determining the prices at which wheat and other produce should be sold. And until said decision can be had, WE, the undersigned, hereby COVENANT AND AGREE that, previous to selling any grain, we will reserve at least a year's supply for ourselves, families and dependants, and, in case we have not that amount, we will endeavor to secure it as speedily as possible; that we will not sell flour at less than twelve dollars a hundred in gold or its equivalant, and reserve the bran and shorts for feeding our animals; that from those who dig gold or buy and sell it we will receive only gold for our flour; and that we will mutually sustain each other in complying with the aforenamed covenant and agreement, by those who are able in each precinct buying at the aforenamed price from those who may not be able to hold on against lower offers.

G. S. L. City, July 5, 1864.

"Circular. To the Citizens of Utah." Owner-supplied photograph, cropped only for presentation. The date, "G. S. L. City, July 5, 1864," is handwritten; no author's signature has been identified. The owner confirms that the reverse is blank. [1]

Faithful transcription

Printed wording and paragraph divisions retained; line-end word breaks joined and small capitals represented by capitals. The final place and date are handwritten. [1]

CIRCULAR.

TO THE CITIZENS OF UTAH:

The manner in which we came to these valleys, bringing what seeds, seed wheat and provisions we could for our subsistence until we should be blest with a harvest, meanwhile eking out our scanty supplies with roots, hides, wolf meat, etc., and the having been frequently placed in close proximity with starvation through the destruction of crops by crickets, grasshoppers and drouth, visitations to which we are liable, have given us an experience unusual in other regions, and have learned us that both propriety and duty require the rulers and fathers among the people to advise and follow that course of deal and policy best calculated for their self-preservation, and for securing to them all those temporal blessings vouchsafed to the wise and prudent, and

Whereas, Wheat is our great staple product, and a necessity touching the very existence of our settlements in these mountains, and,

Whereas, Common humanity requires us to take into consideration the probable wants of the many thousands on their way to this Territory and the adjoining gold regions, and,

Whereas, We have naught upon which to rely but the incoming harvest, already in many places seriously lessened by drouth and frost, and,

Inasmuch, As the breadth in barley and oats is probably one half less than last year, while the animals expected to be fed will be somewhere double the number they were at that period, there will be efforts made to buy wheat for horse feed, and

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[Handwritten:] G. S. L. City, July 5, 1864

A warning a family could understand

The heading was direct: “TO THE CITIZENS OF UTAH.” Beneath it, the circular moved from remembered scarcity to a declaration that wheat was essential to the continued existence of the mountain settlements. There was no attempt to make the subject ornamental. A harvest was something people would have to live on. [1]

Its first paragraph gathered different kinds of danger into a common memory. Some belonged to the hardships of arriving in the valleys with limited supplies. Others came from the repeated vulnerability of crops to insects and dry weather. The paper did not provide a separate date for each calamity. Instead, it treated the accumulated experience as an argument for prudence in the present. [1]

The force of that argument did not depend on every reader having eaten wolf meat. It depended on the distance between abundance and want being imaginable. Anyone deciding how much grain to part with was being asked to consider the months after the buyer had gone.

The circular also claimed a role for “the rulers and fathers among the people.” In its telling, experience imposed a duty on those who gave advice: they should recommend measures for the community’s preservation. This was not merely a merchant advertising a favorable bargain. It was an appeal to organize the conduct of many households around a shared danger. [1]

Yet its most important instruction was deliberately domestic. The proposed protection began with provisions retained at home. Grain was to become a reserve before it became an article of trade.

That order matters. The circular did not ask farmers to stop producing for a market, nor did it dismiss the value of earning money. It argued that there was something to settle before the market could make its claim: the household’s own future need.

More mouths, fewer alternatives

The warning was sharpened by the prospect of people still on the road. The circular invoked “common humanity” toward the many thousands expected to need provisions, whether they were coming to Utah or continuing toward neighboring gold regions. Later it referred to “our immigration” and the many others understood to be depending on the settlements for bread. [1]

These were not identical groups. Some travelers intended to join the communities whose crops would feed them. Others had destinations elsewhere. The circular nevertheless placed both within the same reckoning of food that might be required.

That gives the document a wider horizon than a simple command to keep outsiders away. It did not categorically forbid selling to non-Mormons. The possibility of feeding travelers was part of its argument for conserving and managing supplies, not something excluded from the beginning. [1]

Animals complicated the calculation. According to the circular, the area devoted to barley and oats was probably only half what it had been the preceding year, while the number of animals expected to need feed was approximately double. Those were the circular’s estimates, not a modern statistical reconstruction. Their purpose was clear: if customary feed crops were insufficient, buyers would turn to wheat for horses. [1]

A grain that could become bread could also disappear into animal feed. That did not make the animals unnecessary. It meant that the same harvest faced competing demands.

The proposed agreement therefore reached into the milling process. It directed people to reserve bran and shorts for their animals, alongside its concern to keep wheat from being wasted or unnecessarily diverted from human food. The paper was not only asking what flour should cost. It was asking what use should be made of the different products of the harvest. [1]

Its economy began with the refusal to regard food as plentiful simply because a buyer was willing to take it away.

The tithing office: grain beyond the household

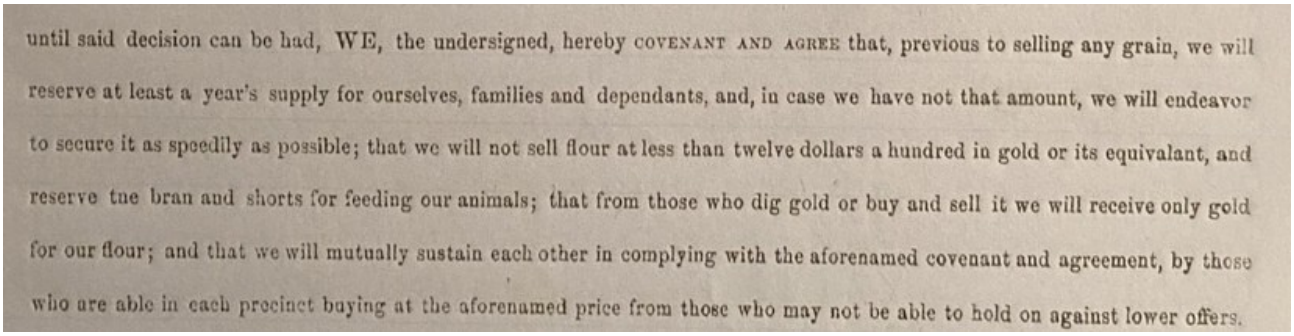


“Deseret News and Tithing Offices, Salt Lake City.” Photograph by C. R. Savage, from the owner’s collection. This later nineteenth-century view provides the setting of the tithing-office complex; it is not identified as an 1864 photograph or as a view of a particular grain-storage room. The original mount and photographer’s credit are retained. [6]

Not all grain moved directly from a farmer to a private buyer. Some passed into the Church’s tithing system. In November 1859, Brigham Young authorized Bishop Phineas W. Cook of Goshen to exchange local tithing wheat, corn, oats, and barley for like grain delivered to the General Tithing Office in Salt Lake City. Cook was to release nothing without a receipt showing that the corresponding grain had already been deposited there. The office was more than an address in an account book: real harvests stood behind its receipts. [7]

Savage’s photograph gives that part of the story a visible setting. The wall, gateway, and offices bring us from the language of provisions to the place where tithing business was conducted. But two kinds of reserve must remain distinct. Grain delivered as tithing belonged to an institutional system; the 1864 circular asked producers to retain a year’s provisions for themselves, their families, and dependants before selling. It did not order those household supplies into this office. The storehouse and the household reserve belonged to the same world of food security, but they were not the same arrangement. [1, 6–7]

The neighbor who could not wait


until said decision can be had, WE, the undersigned, hereby COVENANT AND AGREE that, previous to selling any grain, we will reserve at least a year's supply for ourselves, families and dependants, and, in case we have not that amount, we will endeavor to secure it as speedily as possible; that we will not sell flour at less than twelve dollars a hundred in gold or its equivalant, and reserve the bran and shorts for feeding our animals; that from those who dig gold or buy and sell it we will receive only gold for our flour; and that we will mutually sustain each other in complying with the aforenamed covenant and agreement, by those who are able in each precinct buying at the aforenamed price from those who may not be able to hold on against lower offers.

The covenant near the foot of the circular links household reserves, flour prices, payment, animal feed, and assistance to producers unable to withstand lower offers. Detail of the original. [1]

Near the bottom of the sheet lies perhaps its most revealing provision. Those with sufficient means were to purchase at the agreed price from neighbors who could not hold out against lower offers. [1]

This is where an apparently impersonal price agreement becomes a story about unequal circumstances.

A farmer might agree entirely that flour should bring a better price and still be unable to wait. A need for payment in the present could outweigh the promise of a more favorable sale later. The circular does not identify particular debts, households, or emergencies, and none needs to be invented. Its authors plainly recognized the underlying difficulty: some producers would be more vulnerable than others to an immediate offer.

That recognition changed what cooperation required. It was not enough for a comfortable household to declare that everyone should be firm. Someone with the means to wait had to help make waiting possible for someone without those means.

The proposed solution was a purchase, not simply an expression of sympathy. Better-positioned neighbors were asked to buy at the stipulated price from those who otherwise might have to accept less. The agreement was to be sustained by transactions within the community as well as by restraint in dealings beyond it. [1]

The provision also exposes the practical weakness that every collective agreement must confront. A promise can be shared equally in words while imposing very different burdens in life. Here the circular tried to address that problem before it undermined the proposed arrangement.

Whether particular neighbors carried out this obligation is not recorded on the surviving sheet. No list of purchasers, quantities, or payments accompanies it. What survives is the expectation itself: those able to stand firm should not leave the less secure to stand alone.

For a reader today, this may be the passage that most changes the document. A notice that first appears to concern the price of flour turns out to be asking who could afford to refuse a bad bargain—and what the rest of the community owed that person.

What a hundred pounds of flour should bring

The circular's immediate agreement set a floor of twelve dollars per hundred pounds of flour, payable in gold or its equivalent. It also required gold specifically from those who mined gold or bought and sold it. [1]

The unit is important. The twelve-dollar figure concerns a hundred pounds of flour, not a bushel of wheat. The proposed convention would consider wheat and other produce more broadly, but the surviving circular's explicit interim price is for flour.

The distinction between gold and other payment was just as deliberate. The paper called gold the fixed standard of commercial value and objected to prices shaped by fluctuating currency and "overreaching

speculators.” Those words state its position. They should not be mistaken for an impartial description of every transaction or every merchant. [1]

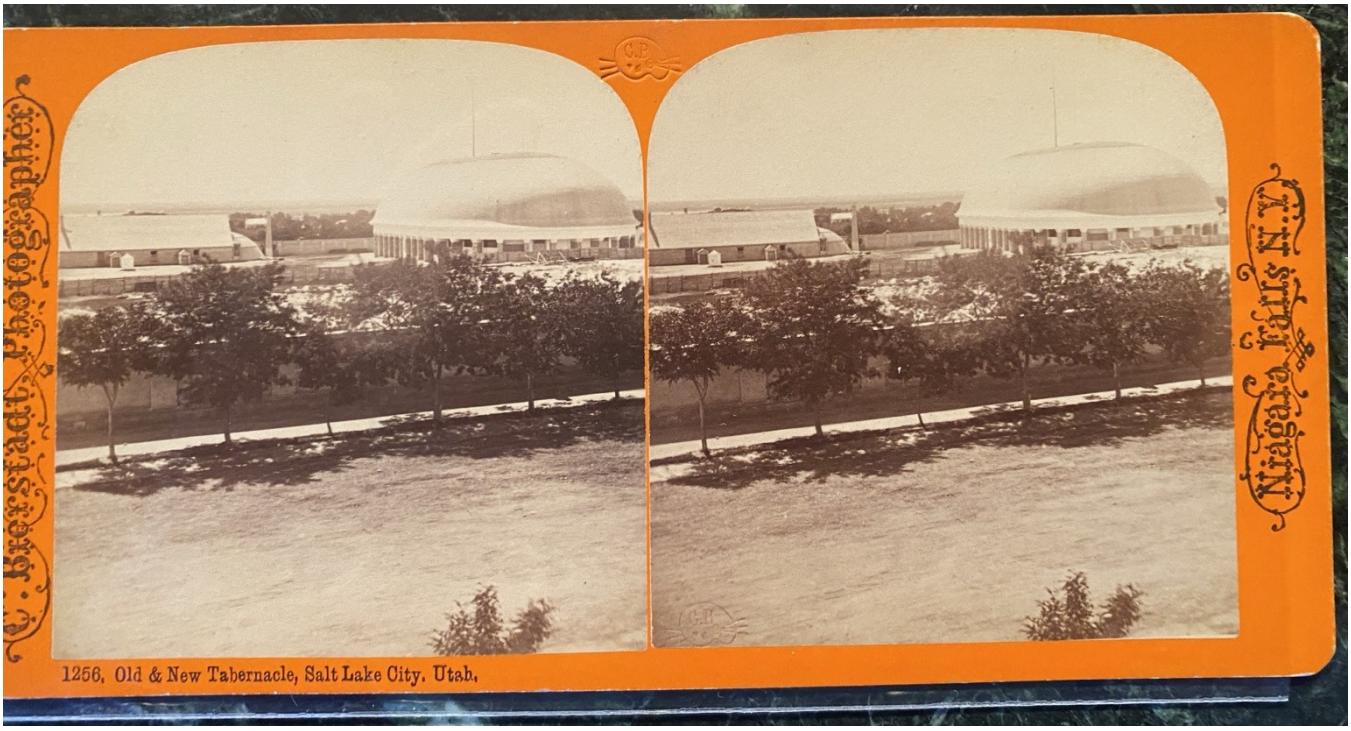
The question underneath them was understandable: what would the producer possess after exchanging something as useful as flour for payment? The agreement sought to protect the terms of the exchange as well as the quantity of food retained.

Its general wording allowed payment in gold or an equivalent, while its narrower clause insisted on gold from people dealing in that metal. That is more specific than a universal prohibition on every other form of payment.

This was not a choice between bread and commerce. The circular wanted producers to receive a price that rewarded their labor and encouraged careful use of their crop. It treated provisions kept at home and satisfactory earnings from a surplus as complementary protections. A household could be injured by selling too cheaply as well as by selling too much. [1]

Nor were the interests of buyers and sellers automatically identical. A minimum acceptable to a producer might be unwelcome to someone seeking food at a lower price. The paper speaks most clearly for those it asks to unite. Its aspirations should be read sympathetically without assuming that every person touched by the arrangement experienced it in the same way.

A meeting in the Old Tabernacle



“1256, Old & New Tabernacle, Salt Lake City. Utah.” Stereograph bearing the imprint of C. Bierstadt, Niagara Falls, N.Y.; owner-supplied photograph. In each paired view the low, pitched-roof Old Tabernacle is at left and the later domed building at right. The circular’s proposed 1864 convention belonged to the older hall. Exact photographic and printing dates are unestablished. [4]

The circular did not offer its immediate covenant as the final word. It called for a convention composed of one delegate from each precinct of the grain-producing regions. That gathering was to determine prices for wheat and other produce. Until a decision could be reached, the participants were asked to uphold the provisions printed on the sheet. [1]

The appointed place was the Tabernacle in Great Salt Lake City; the appointed time was the second Monday in the coming August. In 1864, that was August 8. The future meeting gave the appeal a destination as well as a deadline.

The building appropriate to this episode is the Old Tabernacle, the earlier structure with a pitched roof—not the great domed building familiar to later generations. The stereograph reproduced here shows both: the old meetinghouse at the left of each paired view and the new dome to its right. It is a later view, not a photograph of the 1864 gathering. Its value is that it lets us see the earlier hall alongside the building that succeeded it. [4]

The convention's proposed composition is as important as its meeting place. The appeal began with the responsibilities of households but envisioned representatives coming together from the producing districts. A problem encountered in separate fields and separate sales was to receive a collective answer.

The original paper preserves the moment before that answer. Its pledge was provisional: keep provisions, maintain the stated flour price, insist on the specified terms of payment, and help neighbors hold out until the convention could decide.

That distinction should remain visible. The July circular and the convention's subsequent decisions belong to the same story, but they are not interchangeable documents. The price on this sheet should not silently be treated as a complete schedule of everything the later gathering adopted.

The proposal did lead to a convention. Later correspondence carries the story out of the meetinghouse and back into the territory's farms and trade. [2–3]

Brigham Young reports back



Brigham Young, photograph by Charles W. Carter, circa 1865. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, NPG.80.284. [5]

By December, Brigham Young was describing the undertaking as a success. In a letter dated December 23, 1864, to Judge John F. Kinney, he reported that the grain convention had produced "excellent effects" and that farmers were obtaining prices better than they had previously received since settlement of the valleys. [2]

It is a valuable contemporary assessment, but it is Young's assessment. The letter does not supply a household-by-household account or an independent calculation of the convention's effect on every sale.

Its surrounding passage makes the grain question feel immediate rather than abstract. Young discussed soaking rains, mountain snow, and hopes for sufficient water and good crops in the next season before

turning to the convention's results. The weather and the price of produce belonged to the same practical account of the territory's prospects. [2]

His involvement gives the story a central named participant. It does not establish that he personally composed this unsigned circular. No author's signature has been identified on the owner's copy; the handwriting at the bottom records a place and date. [1]

An argument still being made the following summer

The effort did not disappear with the first harvest season. In instructions given to the people of Box Elder and Cache Counties during August 1–10, 1865, Young again urged people to make convention prices their rule when selling grain. [3]

He described an exchange he considered disadvantageous: a farmer accepted a merchant's goods for grain, and the merchant then resold the grain to the army or mail contractors for money at a higher price. Young proposed that communities retain more control over selling their produce and purchasing the goods they needed. [3]

That passage puts bargaining power alongside food security. His concern was not merely that grain leave the territory. It was that the producer should receive more of the benefit of producing it.

The instructions establish continued advocacy more than a year after the date written on the circular. They do not establish universal compliance, an unchanged price throughout that interval, or the final date when the convention arrangement ceased. [3]

Those limits do not leave the document without an aftermath. They give it an aftermath of the right size: a contemporary claim of favorable results, followed by evidence that the organized-price argument remained in active use the next summer.

The first promise

The reverse of the owner's copy is blank. Its surviving message is concentrated on one face: an appeal, a proposed agreement, and a handwritten place and date. It does not carry the additional Gold Act material described for a different institutional copy. That material is not part of this artifact. [1]

Nor does this sheet tell us who first received it, whether that person formally joined the covenant, or which household's provisions were affected by its terms. Those would be welcome discoveries, but the document need not yield every personal history to have something important to say.

Its significance lies in the range of claims brought to bear on a single harvest. There were families already settled, newcomers still traveling, animals requiring feed, buyers seeking produce, and farmers who needed a worthwhile return. There were also neighbors who could wait and neighbors who could not. The circular attempted to place all of them within a common plan. [1]

That plan was not a guarantee. A printed promise could not make rain fall, protect every crop, or remove the pressures that might lead someone to sell early. It could make a choice explicit, state terms for collective action, and ask those with more resources to help others keep the agreement.

What survives is a sheet of paper asking people to think beyond the next sale. Its demands began at home—with provisions for a family—and extended outward to neighbors and strangers who would also need bread.

The price mattered. So did the payment. But the first promise came before either: keep enough to live.

That is what makes this circular more than a notice about flour. It preserves a moment when the question of what a harvest was worth could not be separated from the question of whom it had to feed.

Notes on the document and the story

This illustrated edition preserves the approved narrative and adds the owner's two historical photographs. No dialogue, representative farmer, private thoughts, or undocumented scenes have been invented. Interpretations of the circular remain distinct from the contemporary reports used for its aftermath.

The surviving copy

The document is printed on one side. Its reverse is blank, as confirmed by the owner. The photographed manuscript line supplies the place and date, not an identified author's signature. Its printer, author, original recipient, and individual history of use remain unestablished. There is no reverse-side Gold Act printing on this copy.

Prices, dates, and duration

The twelve-dollar interim minimum is for a hundred pounds of flour. It is not a wheat price per bushel. "The second Monday in August next" corresponds to August 8, 1864. The circular's interim covenant must be distinguished from the subsequent convention's adopted schedule. The December 1864 letter and August 1865 instructions support the limited aftermath described in the narrative; neither proves universal compliance or an exact ending date.

An April 10, 1865 convention entry noted during earlier project research has not been independently rechecked for this edition and is not used here as an additional verified milestone. A full transcription of the August 1864 proceedings, confirmation of the April entry, and an established ending date remain research tasks. No claim that this circular prevented a famine is made.

Reading the photographs

Both new photographs are embedded in this edition. The stereograph distinguishes the Old Tabernacle from its domed successor; the Savage photograph shows the Deseret News and tithing-office complex. Neither is presented as an image taken in 1864. The exact dates of the owner's prints remain unestablished. Tithing grain documented at the General Tithing Office must not be confused with the household reserves required by the circular. No particular granary or storage room is identified in the Savage view. [1, 4, 6–7]

Sources and image credits

[1] Original "Circular. To the Citizens of Utah," with handwritten annotation "G. S. L. City, July 5, 1864." Owner photographs IMG_3638.jpeg and IMG_3639.jpeg; owner's confirmation that the reverse is blank. The full image controls the transcription and the discussion of the covenant.

[2] Brigham Young to Judge J. F. Kinney, December 23, 1864, President's Office letterbook, pages 399–403; public transcription, Brigham Young Center. The grain passage appears after the report on rainfall and mountain snow. Open source

[3] Brigham Young, "Summary of Instructions," Box Elder and Cache Counties, August 1–10, 1865, reported by G. D. Watt, Journal of Discourses 11:129–137, especially page 129. Primary-source published report, accessed through its online transcription. Open source

[4] Owner's stereograph, "1256, Old & New Tabernacle, Salt Lake City. Utah," bearing the C. Bierstadt, Photographer, Niagara Falls, N.Y. imprint; photograph IMG_2502.jpeg. Building context: "Buildings on the Temple Block Preceding the Tabernacle," in The Tabernacle: "An Old and Wonderful Friend" (BYU Religious Studies Center, 2007). The earlier hall opened in 1852; its domed successor came into use in 1867. Building history

[5] Charles W. Carter, Brigham Young, circa 1865, albumen silver print, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, NPG.80.284; CC0. Image retained from the previous narrative edition. Collection record

[6] Owner's C. R. Savage photograph, "Deseret News and Tithing Offices, Salt Lake City," IMG_3FFE218F-1B6F-40FD-8969-3AFA3B62FCA5.jpeg. BYU's Charles R. Savage Collection catalogs a related view under the same subject, item 1085, circa 1875–1889; that range is not a securely established date for the owner's print. Comparison record

[7] Brigham Young to Bishop Phineas W. Cook, November 9, 1859, President's Office, Great Salt Lake City; public transcription, Brigham Young Center. Documents tithing grain deposited at the General Tithing Office and receipts required before equivalent grain could be exchanged elsewhere. Read the letter

Source checks for this edition: October 2026. Numbered references in the narrative correspond to the entries above. Original photographs remain the owner's materials; reproduction here is for the owner's project.