



“The First Furrow” mural by James Penney, 1963

THIS LAND IS OUR LAND

Artist James Penney created images that celebrate Nebraska pioneers. The First Furrow (above), The Homesteaders’ Campfire (right), and The House Raising (back) are a tribute to Nebraskans of the past and part of the heritage of present and future Nebraskans. The murals were to connect the monumental frieze “Spirit of the Pioneers” over the exterior main entrance on the North side of the capitol with the interior thematic and artistic design program and are located in the Vestibule of the Nebraska State Capitol.

“Proving Up”

What did it take to own land? A homesteader had only to be the head of a household or at least 21 years of age to claim a 160-acre parcel of land. Settlers from all walks of life including newly arrived immigrants, farmers without land of their own from the East, single women and former slaves came to meet the challenge of “proving up” and keeping this “free land.”

Each homesteader had to live on the land, build a home, and make improvements and farm for 5 years before they were eligible to “prove up.” A total filing fee of \$18 was the only money required, but sacrifice and hard work exacted a different price from the hopeful settlers.



“The Homesteaders’ Campfire” mural by James Penney, 1963

The Homesteading Process

People interested in Homesteading first had to file their intentions at the nearest Land Office. A brief check for previous ownership claims was made for the plot of land in question, usually described by its survey coordinates. The prospective homesteader paid a filing fee of \$10 to claim the land temporarily, as well as a \$2 commission to the land agent.



“The House Raising” mural by James Penney, 1963

HOMESTEADERS

MURALS

Artist sketches...



Compare the sketches of the horses to the horses in the 1963 “The Homesteaders’ Campfire” and “The House Raising” in the Nebraska State Capitol.
Source: Archives of American Art. Smithsonian Institute.

Press release..

Murals Dedicated at the Statehouse
LINCOLN (AP) — Lt. Gov. Dwight Burney dedicated Monday afternoon three murals adorning the walls just inside the main entrance of the Statehouse. Burney called the murals by artist James Penney a tribute to Nebraskans of the past and they will be part of the heritage of future Nebraskans. Beatrice Sun, 1963.

The artist...



James Penney
(1910-1982)

A graduate of the University of Kansas School of Fine Arts, James Penney received many awards for the murals he created across the U.S. He moved to New York City where he studied at the Art Students League. During the days of the Federal Arts Project in the 1930s, he had many mural commissions, and in the 1940s he became Vice President of the Art Students League. By the end of World War II, he had become committed to teaching, and in 1945, was appointed Instructor of Art at Bennington College in New York. He also taught at the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute in Utica, New York, Vassar College, and for more than twenty years, was a Professor of Art at Hamilton College. First recognized as a major American artist during his years as a muralist with the WPA Arts Project, Penney went on to win several national competitions, including the commission in 1963 to paint the murals in the rotunda of the Nebraska State Capitol at Lincoln. Penney created three monumental murals celebrating the early pioneers in our region. Located in the vestibule of the capitol the three murals are: “The First Furrow,” “The Homesteaders’ Campfire,” and “The House Raising.”

Capitol
Location
Vestibule