



“Spirit of the Pioneers” panel by Lee Lawrie, 1931

CARVING IDEAS IN STONE

“Spirit of the Pioneers” panel by the sculptor Lee Lawrie (see reverse) is located immediately over the North entrance of the Nebraska State Capitol building.

The panel is a carefully composed selection of images, calculated to convey a strong sense of place. Lawrie fixed the geographic location by reference to the historically important position of Nebraska on the famous Oregon Trail. A pioneer family trudges across the open prairie with Conestoga wagon, oxen, dog and scout; traveling left to right above the north facade of the Capitol, their westward direction is unmistakable.

The imagery and detail also refer to regions beyond Nebraska. The entire panel represents movement from one region to another, and these small details contribute to an understanding of that inter-regional movement.

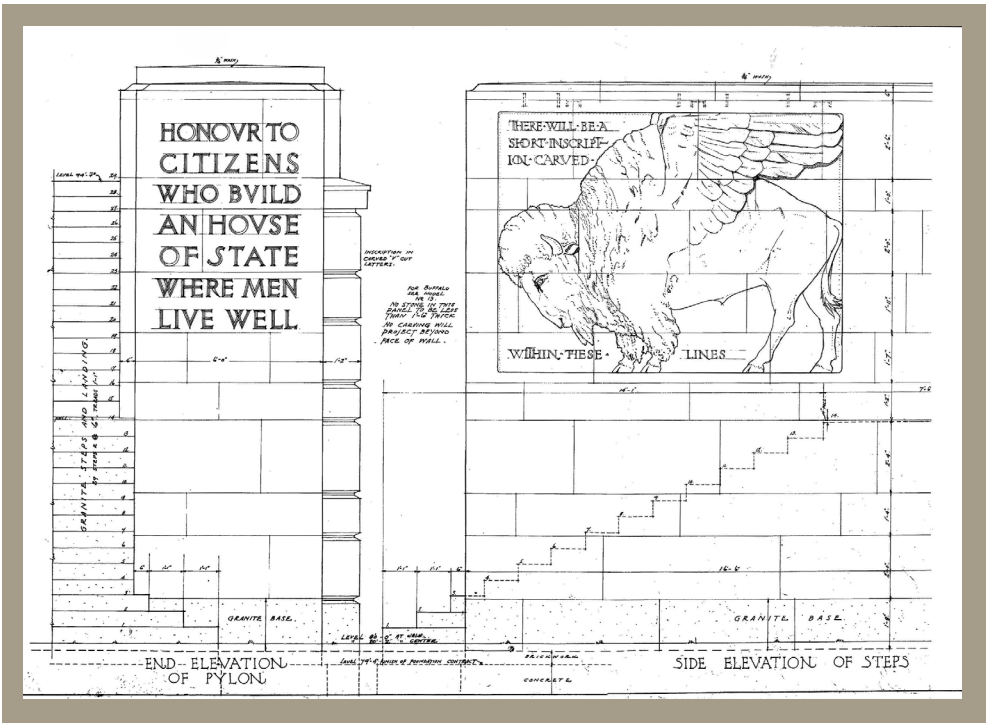
Each person, animal, plant and object in the frieze symbolizes an important part of Nebraska’s pioneer history. Notice that the pioneers include parents with their child, a young man and an older man. The pioneers represent heroes long recognized for great achievements; they are the heroic settlers of the state.



Take a Closer Look: Symbolism

1. Is the sun rising or setting? A setting sun on the horizon symbolizes the direction of the Pioneers’ journey (west). The rising sun symbolizes a new day, new life and new promise.
2. The eagle flying represents the westward expansion of the nation across the continent.
3. The patterns of cactus and buffalo skulls symbolize the west. The deciduous bush at the east end of the panel, and the cactus plant at the west end are framing elements defining the prairie. They also suggest the existence of different habitats on either side.
4. The family dog, a symbol of faithfulness, looks back at the pioneers encouraging them to continue on.
5. The oxen and the dog symbolize the domestic animals which soon will replace the buffalo and other wild animals.
6. Does the man on the horse look familiar? Could he be Nebraska’s Buffalo Bill? Buffalo Bill was a symbol of the American West.

The north entrance of the Nebraska capitol is impressive and filled with symbolism that represents the pioneers, the Indians and Western culture.



Originally Goodhue wanted wings on the buffalo (above), but Alexander argued that there was no myth of winged buffalo in Native American cultural history, and eventually Goodhue conceded the point, and they were de-winged.

The final artwork, the balustrades of the north façade stairs, represent the rise of life with bison representing the first life on the plains of Nebraska. On one side of the staircase a buffalo cow and calf are depicted (below, left); on the other a buffalo bull (below, right). In the background, maize (corn) is shown representing the native Indian culture. There is an inscription on each piece taken from Indian rituals, songs, or legends.



Inscription

Carved on the inside panel of the west balustrade a female bison with her baby calf along with the carved words:

"ARISE WITH THE DAWN
BATHE IN THE MORNING SUN
SLEEP WHEN THE BIRDS NO LONGER FLY
AWAKE WHEN THE FIRST DAWN APPEARS"
Sioux Lore

The inscription around the corner from the female bison reads:
“HONOUR TO CITIZENS WHO BUILD AN HOUSE
WHERE MEN LIVE WELL”.

The sculptural elements of the Nebraska State Capitol were designed by sculptor Lee Lawrie. Through his studies he learned that sculptures of Egypt, Babylon, Greece and the Middle Ages in Europe were made almost entirely for and on buildings. The sculpture for the capitol had a mission to accomplish. The Capitol Commission declared “The Capitol of a State is the outward sign of the character of its people...” and that is what Nebraska’s citizens received from the extraordinary collaboration of this group of artists.



Lee Lawrie, Sculptor (1877-1963)

THE BISON PANELS



Inscription

The inside panel of the east balustrade shows a bull that bears the inscription:

"IN BEAUTY I WALK
WITH BEAUTY BEFORE ME I WALK
WITH BEAUTY BEHIND ME I WALK
WITH BEAUTY ABOVE AND ABOUT ME I WALK."
Navaho Hymn

Around the corner outer panel of the east balustrade are the words:
“HONOUR TO PIONEERS WHO BROKE THE SODS
THAT MEN TO COME MIGHT LIVE”.