A Walking Tour of Native Americans on Centennial Mall

Lincoln, Nebraska

New York architect Bertram Goodhue designed the Nebraska State Capitol to artistically represent the state and its people. The broad low base mirrors the vast open prairie and the tower rises with the hopes and dreams of those who have and will call Nebraska home.

Inside, Hildreth Meiere's floor and ceiling mosaics, and outside, Lee Lawrie's relief sculptures tell the story of Nebraska's first People and the pioneers who came later.

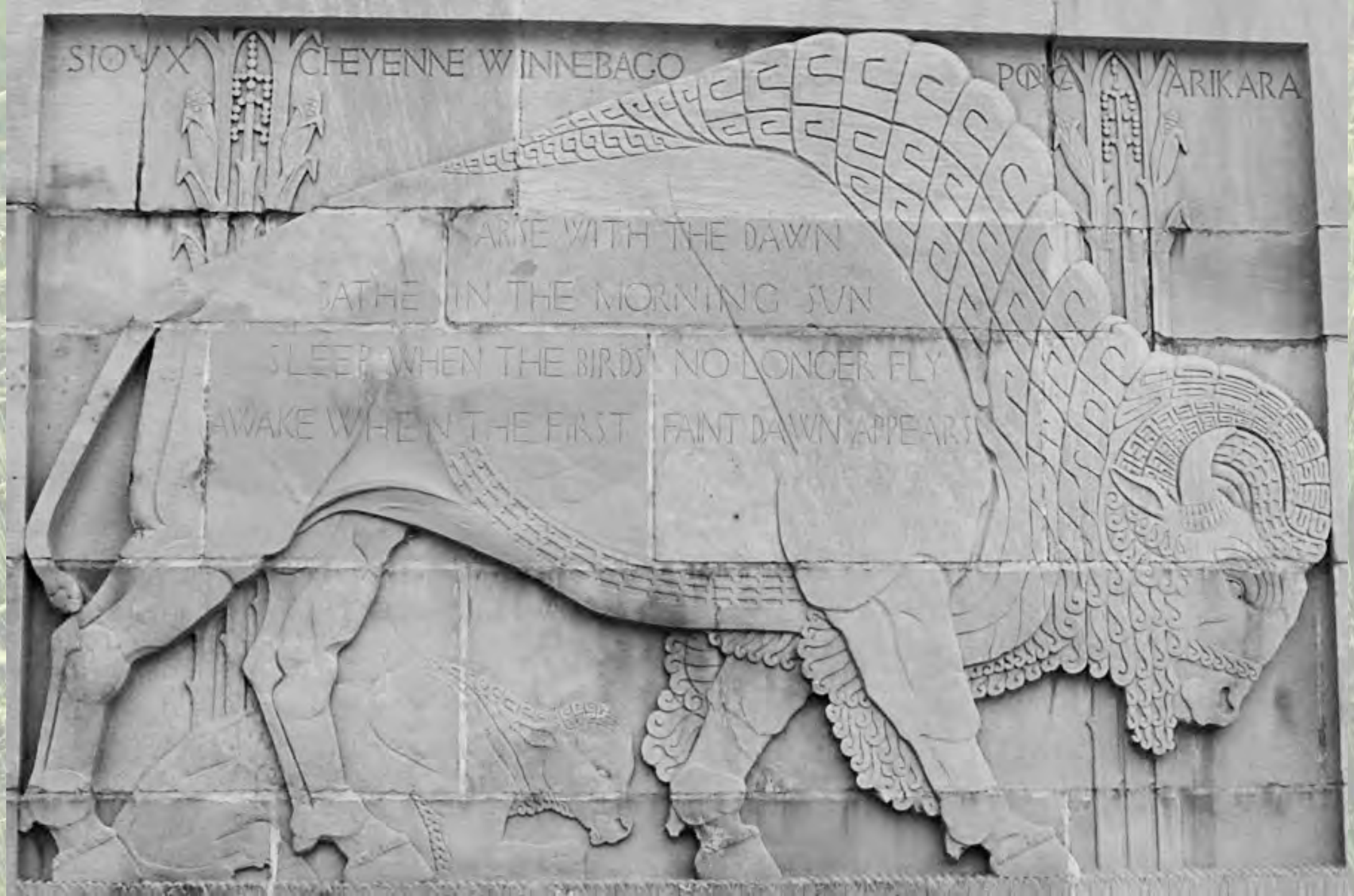
Nebraska, from the Otoe-Missouria “Ni Brathge” (nee BRAHTH-gay) means ‘flat water’. In 1867 the state was created from lands with historic and regional connections to the Pawnee, Ponca, Omaha, Otoe-Missouria, Iowa, Winnebago, Mandan-Hidatsa-Arikara, Arapaho and Cheyenne, Pottawatomie, Sac and Fox, Kickapoo, and Lakota, Dakota and Santee Sioux Tribes.

Today the Omaha, Winnebago, and Santee Sioux have reservations in Nebraska. The Northern Ponca hold tribal land in trust.

Land acknowledgements remind all Nebraskans our state is the past, present and future home of native Americans.

Professor of Philosophy Hartley Burr Alexander, thematic consultant for the Capitol acknowledged Nebraska's native American heritage in the inscriptions and artwork. The names of tribes associated with Nebraska were carved in sculptor Lee Lawrie's relief panels on the north entrance stairs of the Capitol during the 1922-1932 construction. Also carved on the relief panels of the bison bull, and cow and calf are native American poems and prayers.


OMAHA
OTOE
PAWNEE
ARAPAHOE
KIOWA
IN BEAUTY I WALK
WITH BEAUTY BEFORE ME I WALK
WITH BEAUTY BEHIND ME I WALK
WITH BEAUTY ABOVE AND ABOUT ME I WALK


SIOUX
CHEYENNE
WINNEBAGO
ARIKARA
ARISE WITH THE DAWN
BATHE IN THE MORNING SUN
SLEEP WHEN THE BIRDS NO LONGER FLY
AWAKE WHEN THE FIRST FAINT DAWN APPEARS

The Capitol's main north entrance decoration represents Nebraska's first People with bundles of corn and bison skulls forming a banner across the portal, hexagonal corn medallions decorating the arch.





The bronze entrance doors have motifs of bison and arrows. Native American hunters, a wolf, and pronghorn also decorate the doors.





Nebraska's Hall of Fame, located on 2nd floor of the Capitol, includes Native American members.



Suzette LaFlesche Tibbles
Omaha Translator for
Standing Bear
Native American Rights
Advocate



Standing Bear
Ponca Chief
Native American
Rights Activist



Red Cloud
Oglala Lakota
Statesman

In 1879, Ponca Chief Standing Bear sued the United States of American won the right to be considered a citizen and live freely in Nebraska. The Trial of Standing Bear is portrayed in a mural by Stephen Roberts on the 14th floor of the Capitol.



The State of Nebraska honored Ponca Chief Standing Bear west of the Capitol by naming an office building the Chief Standing Bear Justice Administration Building.


Chief Standing Bear
Justice Administration Building
521



Photograph courtesy of Oklahoma Historical Society.



Ben Victor sculpted the bust of Standing Bear from a photograph of the Ponca Chief wearing his signature bear claw necklace and a fur headdress.

In his 1920 design Capitol architect Bertram Goodhue envisioned four wide on-axis boulevards radiating out from the Capitol.

To the north, Centennial Mall was created in 1967 to celebrate Nebraska's 100th birthday. It connects the Capitol and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Each of the four plazas on Centennial Mall celebrates a unique aspect of the state. One continuous theme along the Mall is native American life in Nebraska.

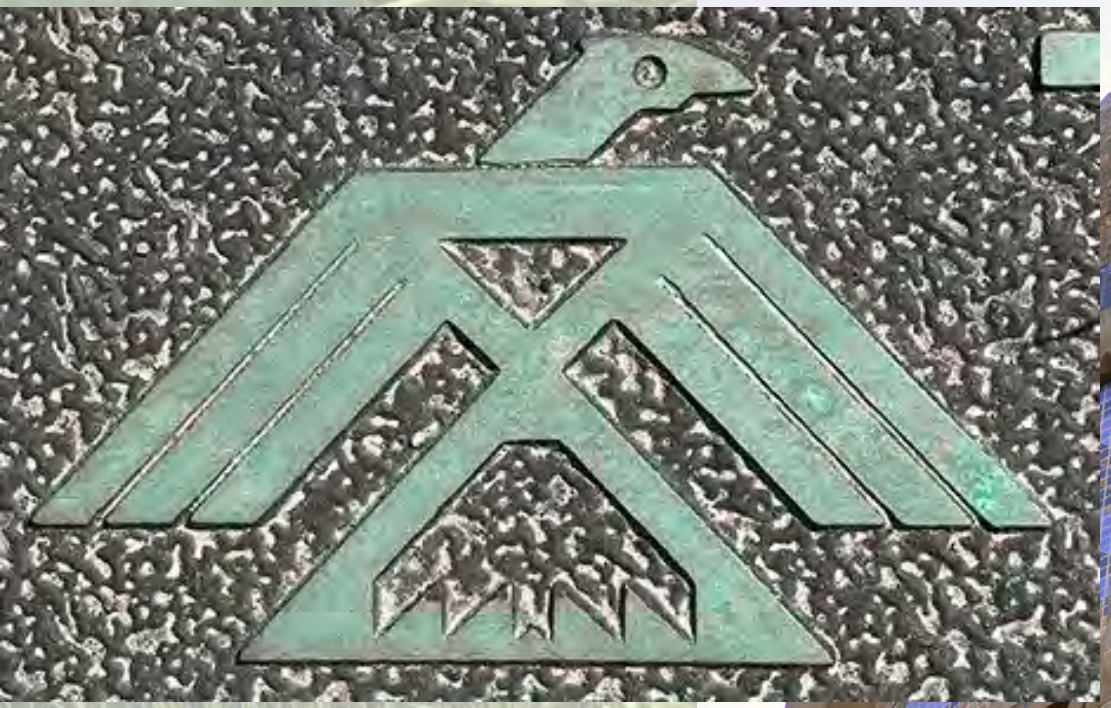
Using artistic detail from the Capitol, including the bronze bison medallions in the north door and the Thunderbird mosaic beneath the gold dome of the Capitol, Centennial Mall designers included Capitol designs in the paving and educational signage along the mall.

The bison is recreated in the granite stone paving at the sidewalk intersections and in bronze plaques identifying important people and facts of Nebraska.











The Thunderbird represents life-giving rain, important to native American and pioneer agriculture, and the design is used in the Mall's sidewalk paving. The pattern of the Thunderbird mosaic on top of the Capitol is similar to traditional loom bead weaving done by native Americans.

Across K Street from the Capitol's main entrance, Capitol Fountain Plaza features two rows of fir trees which visually extend the landscape of the Capitol onto the mall. The planters on the plaza contain a grass native to the vast prairie the pioneers encountered. The landscaping of Centennial Mall incorporates native flora.

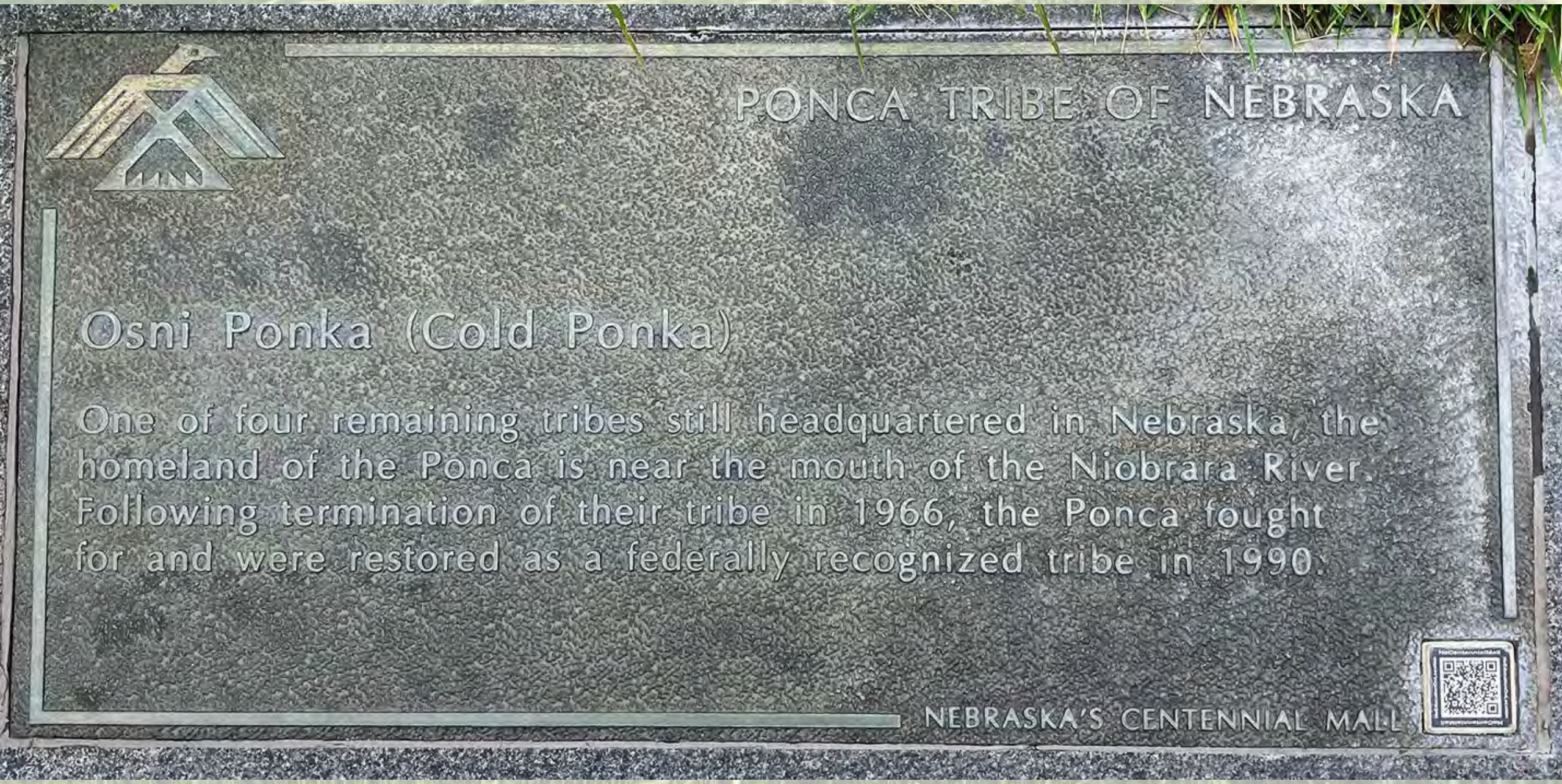
Capitol Fountain features water jets which splash a huge Nebraska State Seal.

Along the sidewalks leading north are plaques featuring members of Nebraska's Hall of Fame.

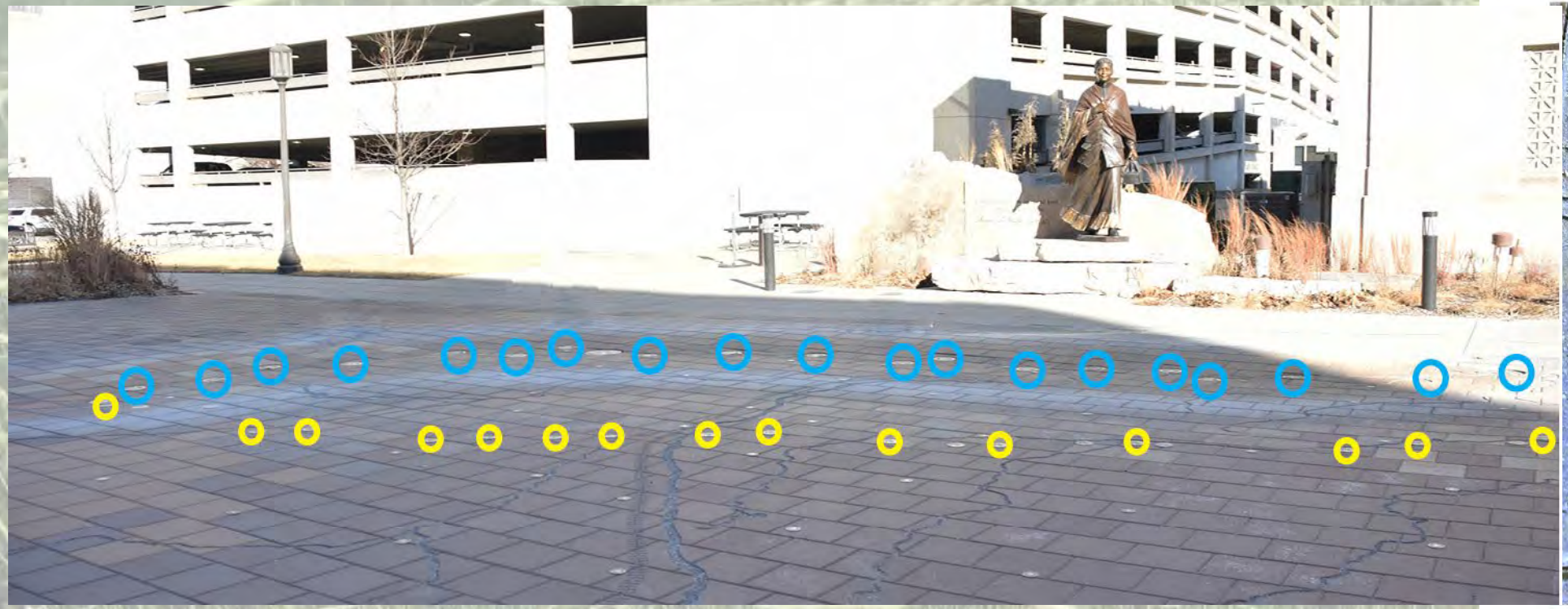
In the next block across L Street, Nebraska Heritage Plaza, features a map of Nebraska and the Missouri River Fountain. Major rivers, trails and railroads are identified inside the outline of Nebraska.

Nebraska's 93 counties are identified in pavers on either side of the plaza and county seats are located with stars on the state map.

Heritage Plaza pays tribute to the native Americans associated with Nebraska. Pavers along the sidewalk feature the names of the tribes and native leaders.


PONCA TRIBE OF NEBRASKA
Osni Ponka (Cold Ponka)
One of four remaining tribes still headquartered in Nebraska, the homeland of the Ponca is near the mouth of the Niobrara River. Following termination of their tribe in 1966, the Ponca fought for and were restored as a federally recognized tribe in 1990.
NEBRASKA'S CENTENNIAL MALL


Chief Standing Bear Trail
The trail follows the Ponca tribe's forced relocation to Indian Territory in 1877, and their return to Nebraska in 1879 led by Chief Standing Bear who sought to fulfill a promise to bury his son in their traditional homelands near Niobrara, Nebraska.
NEBRASKA'S CENTENNIAL MALL





The Nebraska section of the Ponca Trail of Tears, followed as the Ponca were forcibly moved to Oklahoma in 1877, is identified on the state map by bear tracks, yellow circles in the photo. Blue circles identify fountain jets representing the Missouri River, Nebraska's eastern border.

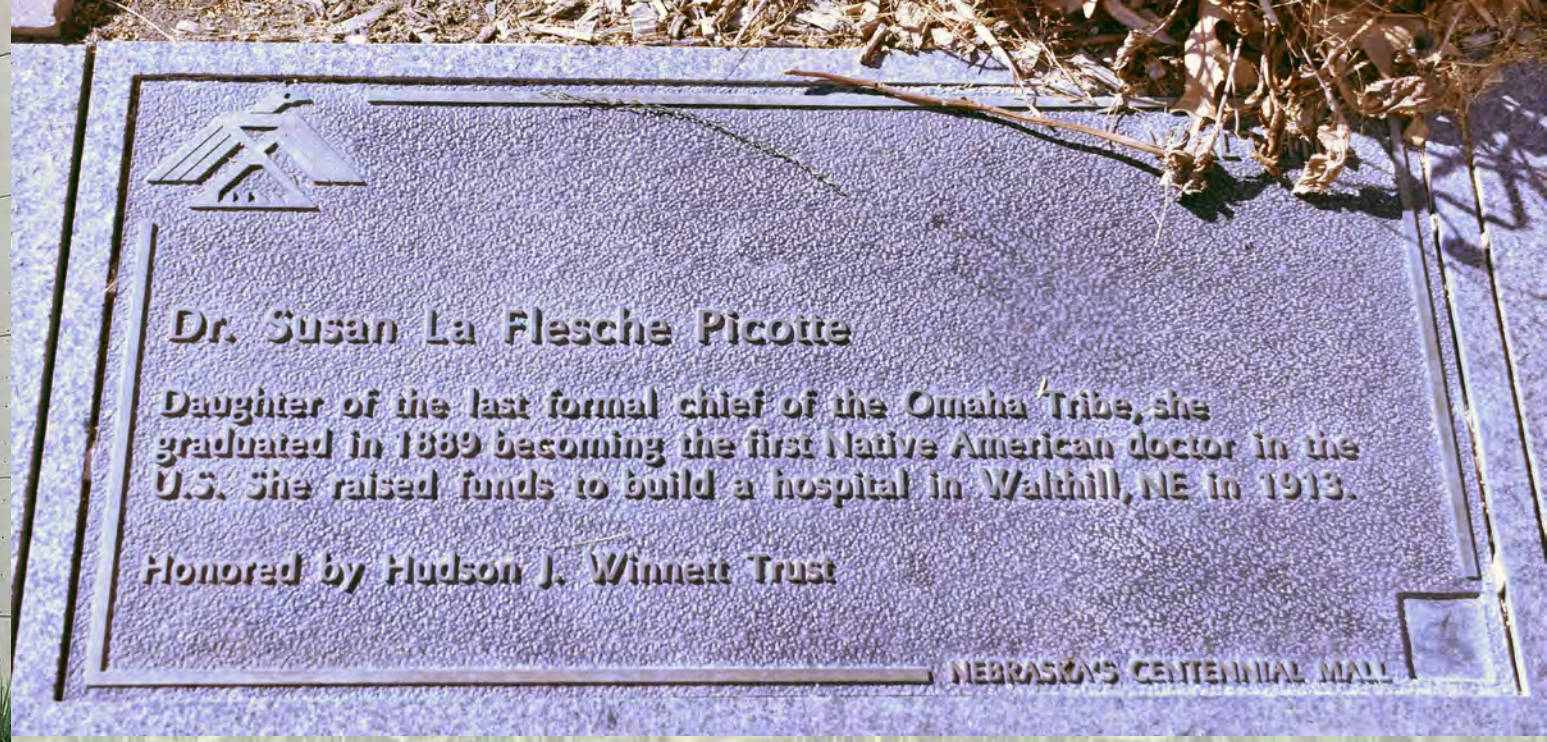

OMAHA TRIBE OF NEBRASKA
U-Mo'n-Ho'n (Against the Current)
The Omaha were influential farmers, hunters and fur traders on the upper Missouri. Their Hethuska (warrior) society's dances contributed to the foundation of all modern pow-wows. Today their tribal headquarters are located in northeast Nebraska.
Honored by Charles and Suzy Wright
NEBRASKA'S CENTENNIAL MALL



Nebraska is home to four tribal nations. These tribes migrated to Nebraska from the the Ohio River Valley and the Great Lakes regions. The name Omaha means “against the current” and recognizes they split off from other tribal groups and traveled up the Missouri River, against the current, to make a new home in Nebraska. The Omaha name is written in the Omaha language on a Heritage Plaza bench. Other tribes of Nebraska, Ponca, Santee Sioux and Winnebago are also named in their native languages.


Ponca
Osni Ponka

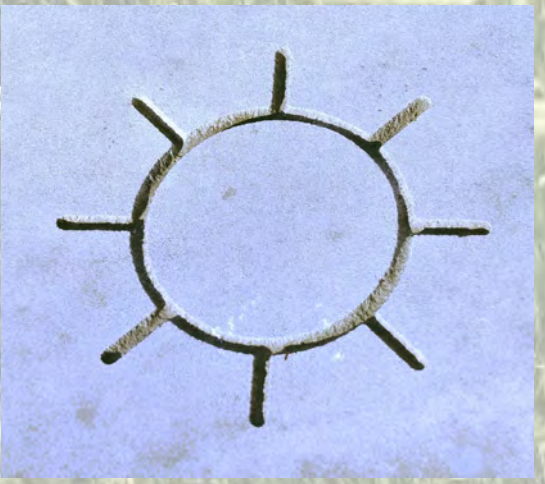




A statue of Dr. Susan La Flesche Picotte, is located on the plaza. It was created by Ben Victor who sculpted the Standing Bear bust west of the Capitol. Dr. Susan is the sister of native rights advocate Suzette La Flesche Tibbles who was Chief Standing Bear's translator in the trial that recognized his personhood and US citizenship.

Continue 3 blocks north along 15th street to the History Nebraska Museum, additional sidewalk pavers on the way identify important Nebraskans.

North of the museum across P Street, on the Imagination to Innovation Plaza, recognition of native Americans continues. The sides of the limestone seating blocks feature native symbols: sun, deer, spirit, wind, sky, star, buffalo, and rain.






Limestone walls along the stepped plaza are engraved with native words describing the figures on the blocks.









Prominent on the plaza is a second casting of Ben Victor's sculpture of Standing Bear created for Statuary Hall in the United States Capitol.





The sculpture portrays the point in the trial where Standing Bear addresses Judge Dundy with the words carved on the panel behind the sculpture, a scene also portrayed in the Capitol's colorful Memorial Chamber mural by Stephen Roberts.

Near the Standing Bear sculpture a Light Circle in the shape of a native American medicine wheel has pavers with the names of 27 native American tribes with ties to Nebraska. Around the circle and along the sidewalks, plants native to the Great Plains and used by native people for paints, medicines, healing and other purposes are interplanted with native grasses.











The tribes named in the circle include those with reservations in Nebraska or tribes in neighboring states with land in Nebraska.

From the center of the Medicine Wheel, the view back down Centennial Mall toward the Capitol fulfills Capitol architect Bertram Goodhue's vision of a wide boulevard with the Capitol's tower and gold dome as the focus. Lee Lawrie's statue of *The Sower* emphasizes that agriculture was the foundation of native American and pioneer civilizations in Nebraska.


NEBRASKA HISTORY MUSEUM