

# NEBRASKA VIRTUAL CAPITOL LESSONS



## Title: The Warner Senate Chamber Native American Symbolism

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Grade Level	4 <sup>th</sup> and up
Class Period(s)	2 or more

This lesson plan uses miscellaneous lessons from the Virtual Capitol Tour project.

### Nebraska Social Studies Standards

**SS 4.4.2** Analyze and explain multiple perspectives of events in Nebraska, including historically marginalized and underrepresented groups.

**SS 4.4.2.a** Compare and contrast primary and secondary sources to better understand multiple perspectives of the same event.

**SS 4.4.2.b** Identify and describe how various sources relate their perspectives of Nebraska history.

**SS 4.4.3** Analyze past and current events throughout Nebraska history.

**SS 4.4.3.a** Analyze key sources in Nebraska history to determine credibility and context.

### Nebraska Math Standards

**MA 4.3.1** Characteristics: Students will identify and describe geometric characteristics and create two- and three-dimensional shapes.

Assessment: Students will recognize at least four or five geometric elements that were used in the Native American artwork of the Warner Chamber door and ceiling in the Nebraska State Capitol. Possible examples are straight lines, parallel lines, perpendicular lines, arcs, triangles, polygons, circles, crosses, stars of different numbers of points, crescents, diamonds, squares, zigzag lines, etc. Students may also use these elements of geometry on their own drawings of symbols for their door or their brown paper "leather" project.

### Nebraska Language Arts Standards

**LA 4.2.2 Writing** Modes: Students will write in multiple modes for a variety of purposes and audiences.

Assessment: Students will answer some questions in writing and will receive passing rubric or percentage grades. See SS Assessment.

**LA 4.3.2 Listening:** Students will develop and demonstrate active listening skills across a variety of situations.

Assessment: Students will answer questions verbally or on paper after listening to lessons (rubric grades or percentage grades) and may also receive points for

### Nebraska Fine and Performing Art Standards

**FA 5.2.4** Students will examine contemporary, historical, and cultural context in art and life. **FA 5.2.4.b** Compare and contrast works of art from a variety of contemporary, historical, and cultural contexts.

Assessment: Students will recognize Native American style symbols within the capitol, will determine cultural matches for today, and compare and contrast those symbols on a worksheet for a rubric or percentage grade (cross curricular so also cross-graded in SS and LA).

**FA 5.2.4.d** Explore how images and objects are used to convey a story, familiar experience, or connection to the world.

**SS 4.4.3.b** Identify key events in American history that shaped or were shaped by Nebraskans.

**SS 4.4.4** Develop historical inquiry and research skills.

**SS 4.4.4.a** Construct and answer questions about Nebraska history.

**SS 4.4.4.c** Gather, analyze, and communicate historical information about Nebraska.

participation.

**LA 4.3.3 Reciprocal Communication:**

Students will develop, apply, and adapt reciprocal communications skills.

**Assessment:**  
Students will work in groups to do and complete certain projects for individual and group grades (rubrics or percentages).

**Assessment:** Students will use symbols to create a Native American story on a piece of paper that represents a piece of hide or a brown paper “leather” bag. Rubric or percentage grade for completing the project and including use of x (teacher-defined) number of symbols, as well as telling a story, neatness, organization, and ideas.

## Overview

The Warner Senate Chamber in the Nebraska State Capitol was once an important seat of state government law-making activity, but today Nebraska has a Unicameral legislature, so it does not need or use two-chambers or rooms for legislative actions. The Unicameral now meets regularly in the bigger Norris (House) Chamber across the hall, and the Warner Senate Chamber is used only occasionally for special events and meetings. Although that Senate Chamber room is little used for government purposes, it should not be ignored, overlooked, or passed over. The doorway to that room and the room itself both feature many outstanding examples of stylized Native American symbols (particularly Plains Indian symbols) (as well as elements of classical styles of construction and décor).

## Big Idea or Theme

Although the Warner Senate Chamber in the Nebraska State Capitol is no longer used on a regular basis for law-making, that room and its remarkable door feature outstanding examples of Native American/Plains Indian symbolism (and other elements of construction and décor) worth seeing and understanding.

## Essential Question/s:

What was the original purpose of the Warner Senate Chamber?

Why is the Warner Senate Chamber seldom used today?

What examples of Native American/Plains Indian symbolism can be found on the doors of that room?

What examples of Native American/Plains Indian symbolism can be found on the room's ceiling and walls?

How are Native American/Plains Indian symbols similar to and different from symbols used today?

## Purpose/Rationale

Because the Warner Senate Chamber is no longer used or needed by our legislature (since Nebraska became a Unicameral), some people might think the room should be repurposed for something besides occasional special meetings or events. However, this room has its own great value as a gallery of art and architecture, and some of its most interesting

and noteworthy elements are stylized features of Native American/Plains Indian symbolism.

## Key Concepts/Vocabulary

legislature – that part of the government that makes laws for its citizens

chamber - a room where special things happen

represent – stand for something or someone else

symbol – a number, letter, design, drawing, or something else that stands for or represents something different

stylized – something more artistic than real looking or traditional

mosaic – an artwork that is often colorful and is usually made of pieces of colored stone, tile, or glass put together to form a picture

mural – artwork that tells a story and is applied directly to a wall or ceiling

## Materials

Virtual Capitol Tour project and notebook

Computer with internet connection

LCD or overhead projector for class display

Butcher paper, colored markers and/or crayons.

Brown paper bags, colored markers and/or crayons

Worksheet: Native and Modern Symbols

## Objectives

The student will be able to:

1. understand that Nebraska once had a two-house legislature but now has a one-house or unicameral legislature
2. describe how and why symbols are used in the capitol and elsewhere for historic and cultural purposes
3. recognize that symbols are often cultural or historic and change from one society to another.

4. recognize and explain that symbols can be realistic looking or stylized in design.
5. demonstrate how symbols can be used to describe things or tell a story.

## Procedures

### SESSION ONE

1. Ask students what the word “symbol” means? If they don’t know, they could look it up on vocabulary.com or in a dictionary (an appropriate response: something that represents or stands for something else).
2. Discuss how we sometimes use symbols (instead of real pictures or spelled-out words) to represent things in our culture, so that we don’t have to spell out the word(s), or so we can get instant universal meaning at a glance. (Students may be familiar with texting or tweeting or emailing and how symbols are used in such media, for examples. Other examples could be the heart symbol used for love, or slash marks on road signs used for the word “no”.)
3. Ask students to look around their classroom and find something that could be a symbol and tell what that symbol represents (such as an American flag = our country; or + means add). (Possible assessment later: ask students to think of five symbols that they might see any day and tell what each of those symbols represent: possible score 20 points each = 100%.)
4. Now talk about Native Americans (especially the Plains Indians of Nebraska), and ask students to make their own list of symbols that Native Americans/Plains Indians might have drawn to represent things in their culture.
5. Tell students they are going to be taking a virtual tour of a special (and seldom-seen) place inside the Nebraska State Capitol—the Warner Senate Chamber.
6. Have students look up the word “chamber” or explain that the word chamber just means a big room, and that this particular room used to be one of our two legislature meeting rooms (or law-making rooms—the Norris Chamber and the Warner Chamber) in the state capitol.
7. Go to page 1100\_01 of the Virtual Capitol Tour and click on the Native American woman on that page to get started. Have students listen to her story. Then discuss why that chamber is not used for making laws.
8. Tell students that because that Warner chamber is not used for making laws or for regular meetings hardly anyone gets to see that room. But they will see that room (in person or with the aid of the Virtual Capitol Tour online) because that Warner Chamber has lots of wonderful Native American symbols and pictures that they can see and use to help themselves understand more about Native American culture. Do tell students that these symbols in the capitol were not made by Native Americans but are stylized symbols made by other artists to represent Native American symbols (so they may look more artistic than real).
9. Tell students to listen and to take part in the next part of the Virtual Capitol Tour and to keep their paper list and pens handy, but not to write down anything yet.
10. Click on the Cool Fact window 1100\_03. Listen to the audio and point out the Tree of Life in the Norris door picture 1100\_031.
11. Then click on 1100\_032. Look, listen, point out, and discuss the Warner Chamber doors.
12. Then click on 1100\_033. Look, listen, point out the symbols again.
13. Keep the photo of the door up. Let students spot, point out, and discuss those and other symbols they see and their possible meaning; for example: ears of corn, also called maize are food, but corn is used in many Native American ceremonies too, and it is sometimes called the “mother of life” by Native Americans; sunflowers (productivity); sun, moon, or stars (day and night); the man’s peace pipe, robe, feathers (honors), long feather headdress (many honors), beadwork, moccasins, otter (symbol of medicine); the woman’s long hair, robe, moccasins, cradle board or baby-carrier, baby or papoose, turtle (symbol of productivity); geometric designs like rosettes, diamonds, triangles, etc.; corn plant which is also the “tree of life”; thunderbird (rain, renewal, storm); etc. (If desired, look up the thunderbird on the introductory symbol map of the Virtual Capitol Tour; click, and the thunderbird will tell you his story).
14. Have students add whatever symbols they want to their own list. (Later, they can hand this list in for a participation grade if desired by teacher.)
15. Divide the students into groups of 2 or 3.
16. Have each group choose one member to act as a supervisor to keep everyone in the group on task, as this project will be graded.
17. Also have each group choose another member to act as a record keeper, using the notepaper. That person should give the notepaper a proper

school heading with date, title (Warner Symbols), etc.

18. Tell students that they will be looking over their own list of symbols and their group members' lists to find 5 or 10 (or 20 or 25, depending upon student abilities) the name of school-appropriate Native American symbols that they can list and spell correctly—and they will also list an appropriate meaning for that symbol (so they will need to choose symbols they understand).
19. Optional: Students are also free to use other symbols not seen on the Warner Chamber door, such as teepees, buffalo, horses, other animals, earth lodge, bow, arrow, arrowhead, etc. (You may want students to brainstorm these together to get them thinking, or use this part of the lesson as a sponge activity or exit strategy.)
20. Have each group of students choose and list their selected words on a separate worksheet of paper first to be sure they really want to use that word, know how to spell it, and have a good symbolic meaning for it.
21. The record keeper should add a listing of all students in that particular group on the group paper (to be handed in), followed by the role of that student, e.g. Jan Smith - record keeper, Tom Johnson - supervisor, Mary White - group member).
22. Then have the record keeper write a number 1. down the left side of the paper, and all wait for directions. Tell students that if they run out of room on this paper, they can use the back of the paper, but to keep their paper neat and readable (for a group grade and/or individual grades), as it will be handed in. (Or they can recopy it if they wish.) Remind them that the teacher may also choose to give a listening grade, a co-operation grade, a participation grade, a spelling grade, a handwriting grade, and/or a role grade (possibly as a rubric) for this paper for any or all group members and also for the following activity, so they need to follow directions well.
23. Put an example on the board, so students understand what to write on the final paper. This example might be: 1. corn = Native American food (or Native American food used in ceremonies, or Mother of Life food). (Note: Students could use any one of those definitions or even shortened ones, as you specify.)  
2. corn plant = tree of life  
3. (and so on)
24. As long as students are on task, give them time to choose the words they want for their paper, to make sure they know how to spell each word (or to look it up), to be sure they feel good about their definition or symbolic meaning, and to proofread and okay the paper before they hand it in for a group grade.  
Assessment: Students will receive points for each symbol and points for each meaning listed. (For example: For a content grade, 20 points total if 10 items are specified by teacher with 10 good meanings, or if preferred, 100% for a perfect paper. For mechanics, spelling, organization, neatness, etc., a Six Traits rubric grade can also be used. Grades may be given individually or as a group grade, as teacher desires.)
25. Optional or as a way to keep groups busy when finished: Give each group a big piece of butcher paper and colored markers or crayons and have them create their own Plains Indian door to their classroom, drawing Native American symbols and putting the name of that item underneath the picture, along with a definition or symbolic meaning. For example, under an ear of corn, write the following: corn = Native American food (or = Mother of Life). Before they start, remind them to make the door attractive and possibly even organized, as you will be giving each door a grade for what it tells people about Native American symbols and possibly also for how neat and attractive it is.
26. Assessment for this day: There will be grades given for the group paper and possibly for the door. I also like to give class extra credit points for how on-task a group or a class is during group projects.
27. Exit strategy: Have students play symbol/symbol to earn the privilege of leaving at the bell: The teacher or students take turns saying a symbol or its meaning or drawing it on the board, while another student matches it with an appropriate name or meaning. This can be Native American symbols, or traffic signs, or math signs, or states and capitols, or whatever is being studied at that time.
28. NOTES: Notes to teachers: 1. Many different tribes of Native Americans were represented in the artistic symbols and designs in the Nebraska State Capitol, and not all of them were Plains Indians from Nebraska. Different tribes sometimes have different symbolism, even those tribes who lived as neighbors. For example, corn was very important to the farming tribes, such as the Pawnee and Omaha, but not as important to the Lakota. So we must be careful to allow for differences of opinion, interpretation, importance, and culture. Native American tribes were not all the same. Some of the Native American symbolisms given in various resources and also in this lesson are



more general to Native Americans than specific to individual tribes. If you are looking for information about symbolism for a specific tribe, it would be a good idea to research that tribe specifically. Even so, there could still be some different information or interpretations. 2. It is also important to mention that many of the Native American symbols in the capitol are generally more stylized than authentic or realistic, and that they were created by artists who were not necessarily Native Americans, so there is a great deal of artistic stylization and differentiation of symbols, and also possibly some cultural or unintentional differences of opinion and interpretation as well. However, it must be remembered, too, that there was also great respect for Native Americans and their culture intended in the creation of the capitol and in all its parts. 3. Color can also be a big part of design, as it is in the rich colors of the murals of the dome and the Warner doors. Native Americans used the colors of nature, and often gathered their paints from plants, soils, minerals, and other things (but we now have a much wider range and depth of colors available). Some tribes even had special symbolism for different colors. Among the Pawnee, there were four sacred colors in their religion. Also among the Pawnee, black was the symbolic color for night, and red was the symbolic color for day—but that is not the same for all tribes. 4. And we may have Native American students in our classrooms who may be aware of some of those differences. If so, allow them to share elements of their culture.

## SESSION TWO:

29. Enter the doors of the Warner Chamber (actually or virtually) and look up at the domed ceiling. What symbols do the students see? And what do those items represent?
30. Define the word mosaic. In the center of the ceiling is a mosaic representing the sun (symbol of day, war, warmth, etc.). Bands of beadwork divide the dome into four equal quarters. Geometric figures cover the dome (lines, triangles, different polygons, a cross, and lots more—have students recognize several of these).
31. The dome is high and the figures may be hard to see, but the dome of the room is divided into four equal parts, each one with a major mosaic mural (define mural) depicting activities of the Plains Indians.
32. Go to 0201-0401 in the Virtual Capitol Tour to see and discuss the one called 1. bison (buffalo) hunting.
33. The other three mosaic murals are of 2. the agricultural life of the Plains Indian with the women and children working the women's fields near their lodges and teepees, 3. the war party of men riding into battle on horseback with bows and arrows, and 4. the peace council with the men meeting, greeting each other, and smoking the peace pipe. These represent the four types of activities of the Plains Indians—agriculture, hunting, war, and peace. Discuss these mosaic murals.
34. Small mosaic murals in the dome represent many other things, but may be even harder to see. Discuss them if they can be seen. One set of four of these includes a cradleboard and its tie sling, a firepot, a bow and a quiver of arrows, and a drum and drumsticks. Have students discuss what those items may represent.
35. Another set of small mosaics represents the earth, air, fire, and water. Each of those elements is also associated with an animal and a bird. Earth is associated with the turtle and an owl, both of which may represent productivity. Air is associated with a wolf and an eagle, both of which represent power, strength, and speed. Fire is associated with the bear and the red-headed woodpecker, both of which may represent wisdom. Water is associated with the beaver and the duck, both of which may represent home and industry. (Animal/bird referenced qualities are from the Nelson book, as are some of the following.)
36. Another set of sixteen small mosaics are grouped together on the ceiling in fours. One subset features agricultural symbols and contains an ear of corn, a sunflower, a bean leaf, and a tobacco leaf (Note: Nebraska Indians did not grow tobacco, but southern Indians did, and Nebraska Indians did use some tobacco and other leaves in their peace pipes). A second subset features trail symbols and contains a flame of fire, water, an evergreen tree, and an unidentified symbol. A third subset features war and peace and includes the peacepipe, tobacco pouch, tomahawk, and shield. The fourth subset features the heavens and uses a many-pointed star, the morning star, a guiding star, and the crescent moon.
37. Have students discuss some of those elements and why they are represented and what they mean.
38. Also look around the room at the chandeliers, dividers, columns, and other areas of the room.

See if students can find symbols there, such as birds, buffalo skulls, corn, wheat, sunflowers, other natural items and even some symbolic picture writing in the room. If students can see these symbols, have them point them out to other students.

39. Activity: If students have already studied the Plains Indian tribes of Nebraska, ask them which tribes (or group of tribes, such as the farming tribes or the nomadic hunter tribes) would be likely to use such symbols as corn (or sunflower, or horse, or bison/buffalo, or teepee, or earthlodge) symbols to decorate their belongings? (Note: Some of these, such as horse, bison/buffalo, and teepee, would likely be used by both the farmers and the nomadic hunters.) There is some leeway on answers. The sunflower is most associated with the farming tribes and might represent productivity or sunshine or other things. Pawnee women often planted sunflowers to separate their own fields of corn/beans/squash from the fields of other women farmers.
40. Discuss how symbols are developed by groups of people, using common items from their own culture, so that recognition and understanding is more likely.
41. Assessment for this day: See assessment possibilities in the standards area, especially the Native and Modern Symbols Activity.
42. Closing Activity: Take brown paper bags and cut or tear them to look like leather. Have students choose to be a member of a group of Nebraska or Plains Indian tribes (namely: the farming tribes or the nomadic hunters). Have students use appropriate Plains Indian symbols to decorate their brown paper/leather bag to show a particular culture. Post some of these on the classroom wall or in the hallways. Give an activity grade if desired.

## Assessment

A variety of possible and optional assessments are specified in both the standards area and in the activity steps.

## Extensions

Use this Warner Chamber Native American Symbols lesson with the other Native American Symbols

Activity from the Virtual Capitol Tour. Or use this Warner Chamber lesson with the Unicameral lessons from the Virtual Capitol Tour.

Use other resources on the Nebraska State Capitol and/or Native American picture writing (such as Robert Hofsinde's books) to find other examples of picture writing or meanings or more depth of meaning.

For free time or as a follow-up game activity: Have students create bingo boards of Native American symbols or have them create a scavenger hunt list of such symbols or items, so they can mark each item as seen when looking at a picture of the Warner Chamber door or another place in the Virtual Capitol Tour

Find actual pictures of Native Americans/Plains Indians that use picture writing on a teepee or a shield or a drum or a leather dress or a horse or something else. Discuss why Native Americans would use symbols there and what those symbols might mean.

Research various groups of Native Americans, then compare possible Plains Indian symbols to those Native Americans of the Desert Southwest or Eastern Woodlands or Far North. Or compare Plains Indian symbols to other modern symbols or items (horse to car, teepee or earth lodge to house, etc.)

## Sources

Harm, Gregory Paul. *Lee Lawrie's Prairie Deco: History in Stone at the Nebraska State Capitol*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Austin, Texas: Gregory Paul Harm, 2011. (Note: In this book, Mr. Paul calls the Warner Senate Chamber the House Chamber, and calls the Norris House Chamber the Senate Chamber.)  
Nelson, Leonard R. *Nebraska's Memorial Capitol*. Lincoln, Nebraska: Leonard R. Nelson, 1931.  
Virtual Capitol Tour and notebook (Note: Hopefully, more close-up pictures of the Warner Chamber ceiling will be added to the tour in the future.)  
Vocabulary.com

Name

Class

### Native and Modern Symbols

Native American  
symbol or item

Modern day  
symbol or item

How the two symbols or items are the same

How the two are different

1

2

3

4

5

