

# An Ancestral Journey

*Keep the Blue Light of Home*, Martha Jackson Jarvis

What can you learn by following in the footsteps of an ancestor? Martha Jackson Jarvis explored the story of her great-great-great-great grandfather, Luke Valentine, a free Black soldier who fought in the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783), by retracing his journey across America in her artwork.

Using a variety of materials, including ink made from black walnuts, Martha reimagined the natural landscape that Luke would have seen on his travels. Dark blue paint seeps toward the center of the canvas, suggesting a night sky overhead. Red, light blue, orange, yellow, and brown represent the changing of seasons and the environment over his long journey. The artist says that repeating stripes of black and white represent safe passage for Luke, but the splatters of paint and torn edges of the paper suggest dangers along the way. In the center of the artwork, cut strips of painted paper hang off the canvas like dangling, twisted vines. At the bottom of the piece, detailed drawings on folded paper evoke rough and uneven terrain.

Martha's artwork brings together nature and history to tell the story of Luke's journey. By exploring her own family's connection to the American Revolutionary War, she highlights the contributions of Black Americans to U.S. history.

## Classroom Activities

- Martha was inspired by her research into the story of her ancestor's journey across the United States and his contribution to the American Revolutionary War. Have students interview a member of their family about a significant time in their life. Students can write 1–2 paragraphs summarizing what they learned and share their stories with the class.
- Paint, ink, and paper are just a few of the materials Martha uses to make her artwork. Invite students to create landscapes using torn and cut paper and paint. Challenge them to try and create different patterns and textures using these materials. Students can share their work with the class and compare the different landscapes they created.



Martha Jackson Jarvis. *Keep the Blue Light of Home*. 2020. Oil, acrylic, watercolor, black walnut ink, and canvas on paper. 108 x 61 1/2 x 7 in. (274.3 x 156.2 x 17.8 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

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