

# ANCHORAGE MUSEUM

## Letters of the North

### PRIMARY SOURCES LESSON PLAN

Through a set of primary sources, students will learn how letters record and convey distinct ways of understanding information about an event, place, or moment from a firsthand account and the communication between people. Students will build knowledge on how people and communities stay connected across vast, unique landscapes and in the North.

### STUDENTS WILL

- Demonstrate visual literacy to interpret primary sources
- Understand the various uses, purposes, and features of letters, and foster penmanship skills
- Think critically about ways to stay connected
- Write a letter to a friend, family member, or the Anchorage Museum

### MATERIALS

- Letter; Anchorage Museum, 2007.031.006
- Letter Opener with Pen; Anchorage Museum, 1999.062.205
- [20 Questions Deck](#)
- Anchorage Museum letter template
- A piece of paper
- Writing utensils
- Envelope
- Stamp

### RECOMMENDED GRADE LEVEL

- Second grade and up

### INQUIRY BASED METHODS AT THE ANCHORAGE MUSEUM

The Anchorage Museum uses an expanded inquiry-based approach based in constructivism (constructivist learning theory). Through facilitated conversations which may begin much like Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), students are encouraged to bring their knowledge to look closely at an object or image. In addition to the VTS methodology, educators at the Anchorage Museum provide context and content. This may include information about an object's artist or maker, examination of materials, processes, or uses of an object as well as relevant cultural or historical information.

Examinations of objects create an open-ended dialogue. In dialogue, learner-driven questions and observations, and facilitator provided content drive the process of meaning making between all participants.

#### CONSTRUCTIVISM

Constructivism is a learning theory referring to the idea that knowledge is individually and socially constructed by the learners themselves. The learner actively constructs meaning using sensory input rather than passively accept knowledge.

#### VISUAL THINKING STRATEGIES

Visual Thinking Strategies, or VTS, is an approach to teaching from visual materials, typically paintings, drawings and photographs. Developed by museum educators Philip Yenawine and Abigail Housen, this approach to teaching and learning is a learner-centered methodology that seeks to support close looking and communication skills.



## TIPS FOR OBJECT-BASED TEACHING

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### LOOK CLOSELY

Invite students to look closely for several minutes before sharing observations or beginning discussion. Take different perspectives: encourage getting up close and stepping back. Sketching or writing about what students see invites close looking and engages the students directly with the object.

### ASK OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Invite students to share observations and what they notice from initial observations. In lieu of asking questions that have a right/wrong answer (ex *What color is it? When was this made? or How was this used?*) ask questions that allow students to bring critical and creative thinking to bear (ex *What colors do you notice? What materials do you see have been used to make this object? or What clues to how this object might be used to you observe?*).

### PROVIDE CONTENT

As questions or observations about an object arise in conversation, provide students with historical and cultural context or other relevant information. For example, if a student observes that a painting looks unfinished, you might share information that a painter was unable to complete his unfinished painting of Denali because his paints froze while painting *en plein air*.

### GET HANDS-ON

Drawing and writing support students in looking closely and thinking creatively and critically. Prompts might include:

- *Sketch a detail. Sketch the object from multiple perspectives.*
- *[For paintings, drawings and photographs] Sketch what you might imagine happened before this image. Sketch what you imagine might happen after.*
- *For objects] Where do you imagine finding this object? Sketch an environment where this object might feel 'at home.' Sketch an environment where this object might feel 'out of place.'*
- *Write down a phrase that captures your emotion when you look at this work. Share with a partner. Are your reactions similar or different?*
- *Imagine the story behind the painting or photograph tells, or the story of how this object traveled from its original maker to the museum. Write a brief short story to capture your imaginings.*

The VTS teaching methodology centers around three questions:

*What's going on in this picture?*

*What do you see that makes you say that?*

*What more can we find?*

Educators use these open-ended questions to engage students in examination of images. Content or 'answers' are not provided, rather learners construct meaning individually and together. Educators reflect back what students respond and help facilitate the conversation moving forward.

VTS has been applied across disciplines. Extensive research on the strategy has demonstrated that students participating in multi-visit programs to museums using VTS techniques generated significantly more instances of critical thinking skills, said more, and were more likely to provide evidence for their thinking.

Learn more: [vtshome.org](http://vtshome.org)

### WHAT IS VISUAL LITERACY?

We live in an increasingly visual world and fostering skills to decode today's visual world is more critical than ever. By looking closely at visual sources and works of art, students develop visual literacy, critical thinking and communication skills.

*Visual literacy is a set of abilities that enables an individual to effectively find, interpret, evaluate, use, and create images and visual media. Visual literacy skills equip a learner to understand and analyze the contextual, cultural, ethical, aesthetic, intellectual, and technical components involved in the production and use of visual materials. A visually literate individual is both a critical consumer of visual media and a competent contributor to a body of shared knowledge and culture.*

- Association of College and Research Libraries



# Letters of the North

## ENGAGE

10 mins

**ASK** the students how they stay connected with people today? Invite them to talk about ways they connect with friends or family members. Reflect together *What role does technology play in our society? How has technology helped? How has technology limited our connection with people? What platforms do you use to connect with people?*

**FURTHER ASK** the students if they have ever received a letter in the mail. Invite them to share their experiences with a partner or your experiences with them. Reflect together. *What does it feel like to receive something in the mail? What kind of things have they received in the mail?*

## CREATE

5 mins

**PROMPT** students to create a list of people they want to send a letter to and why. Encourage students to think about why this individual is important to them. Have the students consider the purpose of the letter and why writing something physically might be meaningful.

10 mins

**INVITE** students to create a list of activities they participated in the last week or a story they want to share. Encourage students to write down anything from reading a book to helping prepare dinner. Use this open-ended prompt to allow the students to think about their daily routine or recent experiences.

## OBSERVE

**SHARE** Invite students to share their initial thoughts and ideas with a partner. *What is a letter? How does the act of writing a letter connect individuals?* Invite students to share their thoughts and ideas with a partner.



1993 Birch Bark Letter  
Redington Family Collection; Anchorage Museum, 2007.031.006

8 mins

Invite students to describe what they see with a partner.

**ASK** *What do you see? What do you notice first? What details do you observe? What are some words you notice?*

30 +mins

**USE 20 Questions Deck** for more discussion questions about the object. Share observations with a partner. *What makes you say that? Why does that stand out to you?* Paraphrase student's observations.

**PROMPT** students to compare and contrast the different uses of letters. *What is the purpose of this letter? What does this letter tell us and what might be absent?*

**ENCOURAGE MORE CLOSE-LOOKING** *What makes you say that? Why does that stand out to you?*

**QUESTION** *What other purposes can letters have? Why might someone want to write a letter?* Introduce examples of various types of letters such as announcement, appeal, appreciation, authorization, congratulations, cover, etc.

## CONTEXT

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**TRANSCRIPTION** (written in black on one side):

*Knik AK/ 10/4/93/  
"Hi Baby!  
I'm in Wigwam  
Thinking of you  
Cozy out here.  
No phone.  
Dogs are howling  
for snow.  
Come to see me  
Sometime  
Joe"*

A love letter, made from a strip of birchbark cut like a postcard, was written by Joe Redington Sr. in black marker and sent to his wife Violet Redington in 1993. The letter was likely written from a campsite near Point MacKenzie, where Redington often traveled with his dog team.

**ASK** *students if reading the letter and information about the author changes their thoughts on the purpose of the letter? What does it tell us? What questions do you have after learning more?*

## Alaska's landscape.

Alaska's landscape is comprised of vast, complex natural environments that spread across 663,300 square miles of tundra, waterways, rain forest, mountain ranges, glaciers, and so much more. With such enormity and uncertainty around these ever-changing lands, staying connected and traveling across the state may have its challenges.

For thousands of years, Alaska Native peoples have utilized surrounding natural resources—cedar, birch driftwood, animal hide, whale bone- to transverse the different terrains within the state. In Alaska Native cultures, various modes of transportation were designed and engineered ranging from snowshoes, sleds, and toboggans, to kayaks, skin boats, and canoes. These inventions withstand some of the most volatile and unpredictable climates and landscapes in the world. Today, Alaska Native peoples continue to adapt to the changing landscape and use these innovative technologies as part of their cultures and lifeways.

## The use of sled and toboggans in Alaska and Alaska Native Cultures.

Sleds and toboggans were designed for long-distance travel or hauling large loads by sliding across snow, frozen waters, and tundra. In regions where wood is limited such as the Northern part of Alaska, sleds can be made from driftwood, whale bone, baleen, hide, and ivory. In the interior of Alaska, birch is more commonly found and used.

In many Alaska Native groups, sleds and toboggans were human-powered, with men and women pushing and pulling by hand. Dogs were and are primarily used for hunting, tracking, packing and hauling the harvest back to the communities. Some Iñupiaq, Yup'ik, Koyukon, and Deg Hit'an groups used dogs for transportation thousands of years prior to colonization. With the influx of colonizers and settlers to Alaska in the mid-19th century, dog-drawn sleds became more adopted and widespread across Alaska.

**LEARN MORE** about the use of sleds in Alaska Native Cultures:  
[alaska.si.edu/record.asp?id=672](http://alaska.si.edu/record.asp?id=672)



**LEARN MORE** about the use of dogs in Alaska and Alaska Native Cultures: [alaska.si.edu/record.asp?id=255](http://alaska.si.edu/record.asp?id=255)

### Who is Joe Redington?

*"It may be a night when the northern lights are bright, flashing from one part of the horizon to the other, or a beautiful sunrise, with the warmth of the sun so great after a good, cold night. It's a feeling you have to experience to believe. It's funny, but most of the people who run the Iditarod, no matter how rough they have had it, want to go back and do it again."* Joe Redington Sr., 1991

Joe Redington Sr. (1917-1999) moved to Alaska in 1948 and established a homestead in Knik. Upon Redington's arrival to Alaska, he quickly learned about the historic 1925 Serum Run— a heroic effort by 20 mushers and dog sleds to deliver life-saving medicine to the small, northern coastal community of Nome—and the training required to maintain and keep sled dogs.

In the early winter of 1925, a dangerous diphtheria outbreak surged in the remote town of Nome. Located in Northwest Alaska, on the Seward Peninsula surrounded by hundreds of miles of wildlife, tundra, and ocean and without access to major road systems, Nome had limited medical professionals—one physician and four nurses working in the local hospital, and no vaccine— to support the community during this unprecedented outbreak. The quickest and nearest solution to provide aid was a case of lifesaving serum over 500 miles away in Anchorage.

During the winter months, travel between many Alaskan communities is limited due to the harsh, unpredictable, and potentially dangerous weather. Travel during winter could be met with freezing temperatures, whiteout conditions, and severe wind. Powerful teams of dogsleds were the only mode of transportation able to deliver the serum to Nome in these arctic conditions. The method of using dogsleds instead of airplanes provided a higher chance of preserving and protecting the serum since weather may affect a pilot's ability to operate a plane. Tirelessly racing along 674 miles from Nenana to Nome in 6 days, a team of dogs mushed into town, successfully delivering the serum to the hospital, without a signal vial broken along the route.

As airplanes and snow machines were becoming popular, Redington wanted to promote the use of dogsleds. To commemorate the successful use of dogsleds and preserve the Iditarod Trail (named after the Dene village of Iditarod), Joe Redington Sr. and other mushers, organized and fundraised for a 1,000-mile competitive, sled dog race from Anchorage to Nome in 1973. This achievement earned him the title of 'The Father of the Iditarod.'

Over time, the race has significantly grown in numbers, attracting an international audience. Ultimately, Redington competed in 17 Iditarod in his lifetime and raced in the 25th annual event at 80 years old. Joe Redington's vision lives on, with the Iditarod being held annually in March. However, long before becoming a worldwide competitive sport, Alaska Native peoples used, and continue to use, sleds and dogs as part of their lifeways. Dog mushing is more than a competition.

**LEARN MORE** [about the Iditarod](#)

**EXTENSION ACTIVITY** After reading about Joe Redington Sr. and his favorite Alaskan outdoor activity have the students write or create a drawing of their favorite outside hobby. Afterwards, have the students share their creations with a partner or the class.

**REFLECT** *How do you think the landscape has changed with the influx of settlers and colonization? How do you think this has impacted Indigenous communities, cultures, and lifeways? How do you notice the landscape changing today and around your communities?*

### OBSERVE

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20 +mins

*Introduce the object: mid 20th century, letter opener with pen.*

**ASK** *What do you see? What do you notice first? What details do you observe?* Invite students to reflect quietly by themselves before describing what they see with a partner.





Mid 20th Century Letter Opener with Pen  
Gift of Doris Jones in memory of her late husband George R. Jones; Anchorage Museum,  
1996.062.025

**USE 20 Questions Deck** for more discussion questions about the object. Share observations with a partner. *What makes you say that? Why does that stand out to you?* Paraphrase student's observations.

**ASK FURTHER** *What do you think the purpose of this object is? What do you notice about the material of the object? What more can you find as you look-closely?*

**EXTENSION ACTIVITY** Prompt students to draw an outline of the state of Alaska and fill in where certain resources are found in the state. *Why might someone use birchbark instead of paper? What other resources found in Alaska could be used to write a letter? What resources could be used as ink or a pen if you did not have a writing utensil?*

## CONTEXT

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The object is combination pen and letter opener made of turned walrus ivory. At one end a pen nib is inserted into a round hole with a central ivory core. At the other end the ivory is flattened out into a knife blade with a false edge used as a letter opener.

On one side of the blade is a seal design done with dermal type toll to create shallow incised lines that have then had black pigment rubbed into them.

### Alaska Native Cultures and the use of ivory.

In Alaska Native cultures, the harvesting and gathering of animals is greatly honored and respected. Ivory is harvested from mammals such as walruses and serves as a critical resource used for hunting, celebration, craving, ceremony, and more. Today, Alaska Natives are the only people allowed to gather, harvest, and carve ivory under the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

For thousands of years, Indigenous peoples have sustainably thrived throughout Alaska. Their relationship to the land and animals is one of conscience of stewardship and deep respect. Creating objects or artwork from the bodily raw materials is a crucial part of contemporary Indigenous culture. Not all does it allow Indigenous peoples to practice their traditions of making and respect, but it also provides them the opportunity to participate in the modern economic market. They sustainably hunt animals, feed the entire community, respectfully utilize the animal's body, create objects or artwork from raw materials, sell their artwork for profit, use that profit to traditionally hunt and harvest the animal, thus continuing this circular process that allows Indigenous people to live with a foot in both worlds. One in which they honor their culture and respect the land and animals, the other in which they participate in the modern world. When looking at these objects and artworks made of Walrus ivory, Whale baleen, and Whale bone you are looking at a contemporary practice of a traditional culture that has survived on the land and amongst the animals for thousands of years.

The rapidly changing climate and ivory regulations present many challenges to Alaska Native artists and hunters. Climate change and subsequent sea ice deterioration is threatening and shifting marine mammals' environments. Sea ice floes play a critical role in a walrus's life; it provides protection, shelter, and grounds for breeding, hunting and feeding. Along with climate change, many states across the country have enacted ivory bans in recent years, which affects the sale of ivory. As political and environmental changes emerge, Alaska Native artists and hunters are striving to protect their cultures and traditions.



## FINAL PROJECTS

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### WRITE: SECOND GRADE AND UP

**INVITE** students to write a letter to a friend, family member, or even the Anchorage Museum—utilizing their knowledge of letters they have learned and using the letter template provided below. Students will think about the purpose and decide what they want to include. Encourage students to imagine and reflect on the past few months. Prompt students to think about their sensory experience—sight, smell, taste, touch, and sound—when writing a letter to someone. Invite the students to be as descriptive as possible when writing: *How did these senses play a role in those moments? What did it remind them you of?*

**PROMPTS** to help with writing the letter:

- *Create a letter or encouraging banner to your future self.*
- *Create a description or drawing of your week: what did you see, taste, smell, hear, do?*
- *Create a description or drawing of favorite hobby (writing, reading, drawing, exploring, singing, etc.). What do you like about that activity? How do you feel when you do it?*

**EXTENSION ACTIVITY** students will think critically and reflect upon their memories, experiences, and recent activities. Encourage students to discuss and consider all aspects of recent events. Reflecting on the present and the year, prompt students to create a time capsule using materials found around the home or classroom.

### What is a Time Capsule?

A time capsule is any type of container designed to seal shut and store a selection of objects or information that represents how life is in that moment for preservation until opened sometime in the future. Time capsules can be deposited in any place or space that will not damage or affect the contents of the container.

**REFLECT** have students think about where they want to storage their time capsule and use materials that will last in the environment. *Will it live outside or inside? In a place protect from water or the sun? Will it live above or below ground?*

**ASK THEM TO CONSIDER** Encourage students to make conscious choices for their time capsule and its contents:

- What memories, ideas, experiences, or moments do they want to remember and why?
- Why is this item(s) important to you?
- What does the object(s) symbolize?
- When do you want to open the time capsule?
- Who is the target audience for the time capsule? Is it for you to open later or for someone else?

**PROMPT** students to write their reflections down and their responses to the questions above. Students can address the time capsule to themselves or to someone in the future. Afterwards, invite students write about why this is important and share a memory or story with a beginning, middle, and end. Once they finish their writings, students can add additional information, drawings, writing, or photographs to the time capsule. When the contents are finished, have the students storage the item(s) within the time capsule and seal it. Students will storage the time capsule in a place of their choosing until revealed sometime in the future.

**OPTIONAL** students can create a map or image locating where their time capsule lives. Invite students to use a 11" x 17" piece of paper and colored pencils to create this image or map. Include important landmarks and details on the map or image to help with locating the time capsule in the future.

### If you want to send a message or letter to the Anchorage Museum:

625 C St, Anchorage, AK 99501

ATTN: Anchorage Museum Education Department



## WEB RESOURCES

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[alaska.si.edu](http://alaska.si.edu)

Smithsonian Alaska Native Collections

[Alaska Native Ivory](#)

U.S Department of the Interior and Indian Arts and Crafts Board in collaboration with Alaska State Council on the Arts

[Engaging Students with Primary Sources](#)

Smithsonian National Museum of American History

<https://iditarod.com/>

Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race

[usdac.us/nativeland](http://usdac.us/nativeland)

Honor Native Land – U.S. Department of Arts and Culture

[vilda.alaska.edu/digital](http://vilda.alaska.edu/digital)

Vilda Database - Alaska's Digital Database

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Books below are available at the Atwood Resource Center, Anchorage Museum and Anchorage Public Library.

Leborg, Christian. *Visual Grammar*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004.

Roderick, Libby. *Alaska Native Cultures and Issues Responses to Frequently Asked Questions*. University of Alaska Press, 2014.

Williams, Maria Shaa Tláa. *The Alaska Native Reader: History, Culture, Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.

Yenawine, Philip. *Visual Thinking Strategies: Using Art to Deepen Learning Across School Disciplines*. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2013.

## RELATED CONTENT AREAS

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ALASKA CORE STANDARDS FOR LANGUAGE ARTS

This lesson supports the following standards 2-12

- W.2-12.3
- L.2-12.1-6

ALASKA CORE STANDARDS FOR HISTORY

This lesson supports the following standards 2-12

- A.2-12





# POSTAL TELEGRAPH-COMMERCIAL CABLES

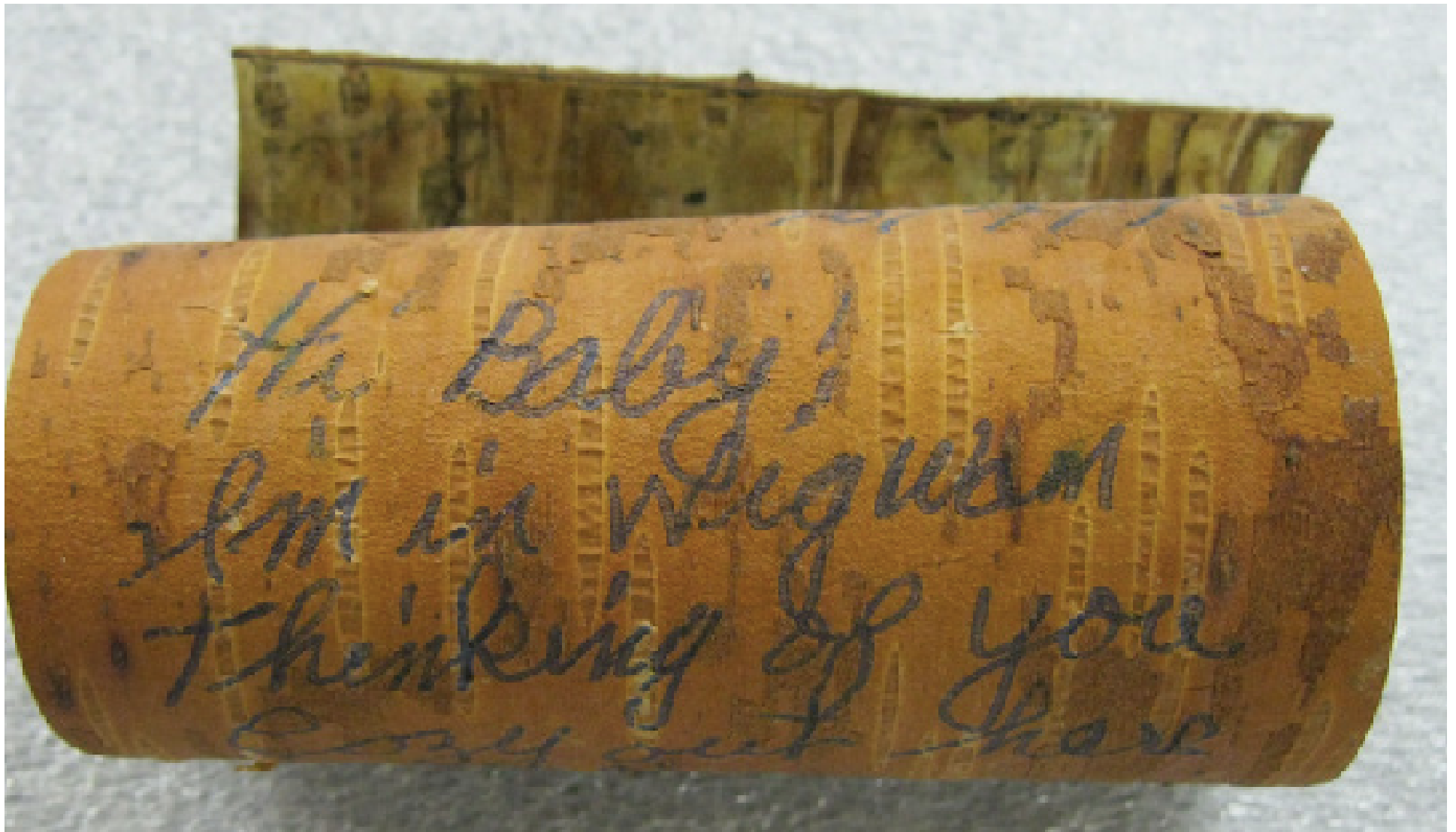


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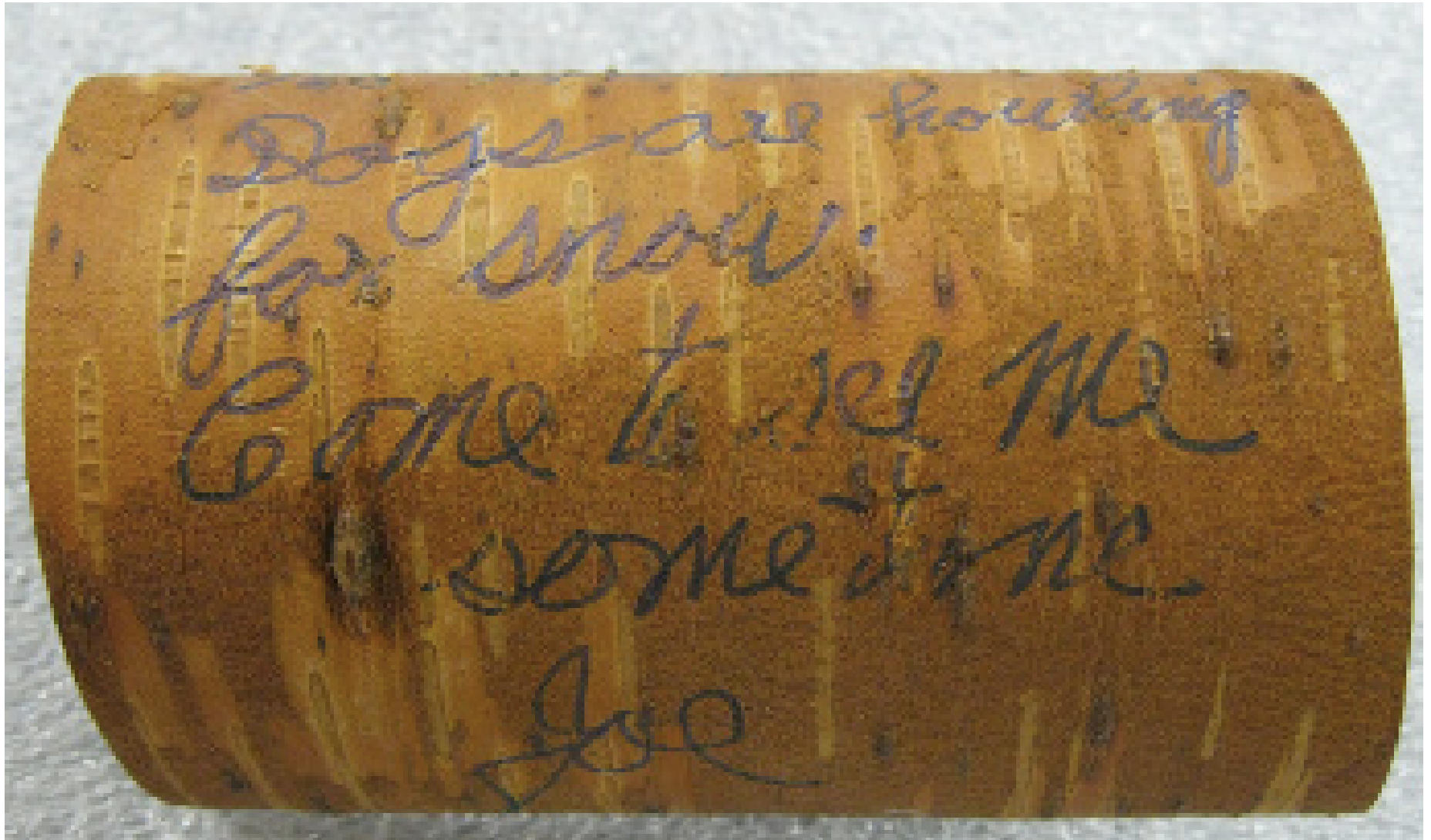


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1993 Birch Bark Letter  
Redington Family Collection; Anchorage Museum,  
2007.031.006



1993 Birch Bark Letter  
Redington Family Collection; Anchorage Museum,  
2007.031.006



1993 Birch Bark Letter  
Redington Family Collection; Anchorage Museum,  
2007.031.006



Mid 20th Century Letter Opener with Pen  
Gift of Doris Jones in memory of her late husband George  
R. Jones; Anchorage Museum, 1996.062.025