Construction of sod houses

Section 12, Pages 331 - 360

This collection consists of correspondence, plans, and specifications on the construction of sod houses. In 1932, the Kansas State Historical Society put out a call for information about and instructions on constructing a sod house, in order to create one in the museum when it was located at the Memorial Building in Topeka. The collection includes all correspondence received from this request, handwritten and typed reminiscences from around the country from men who built and lived in sod houses, as well as some of the standardized responses sent by the Society's secretary.

Date: 1932

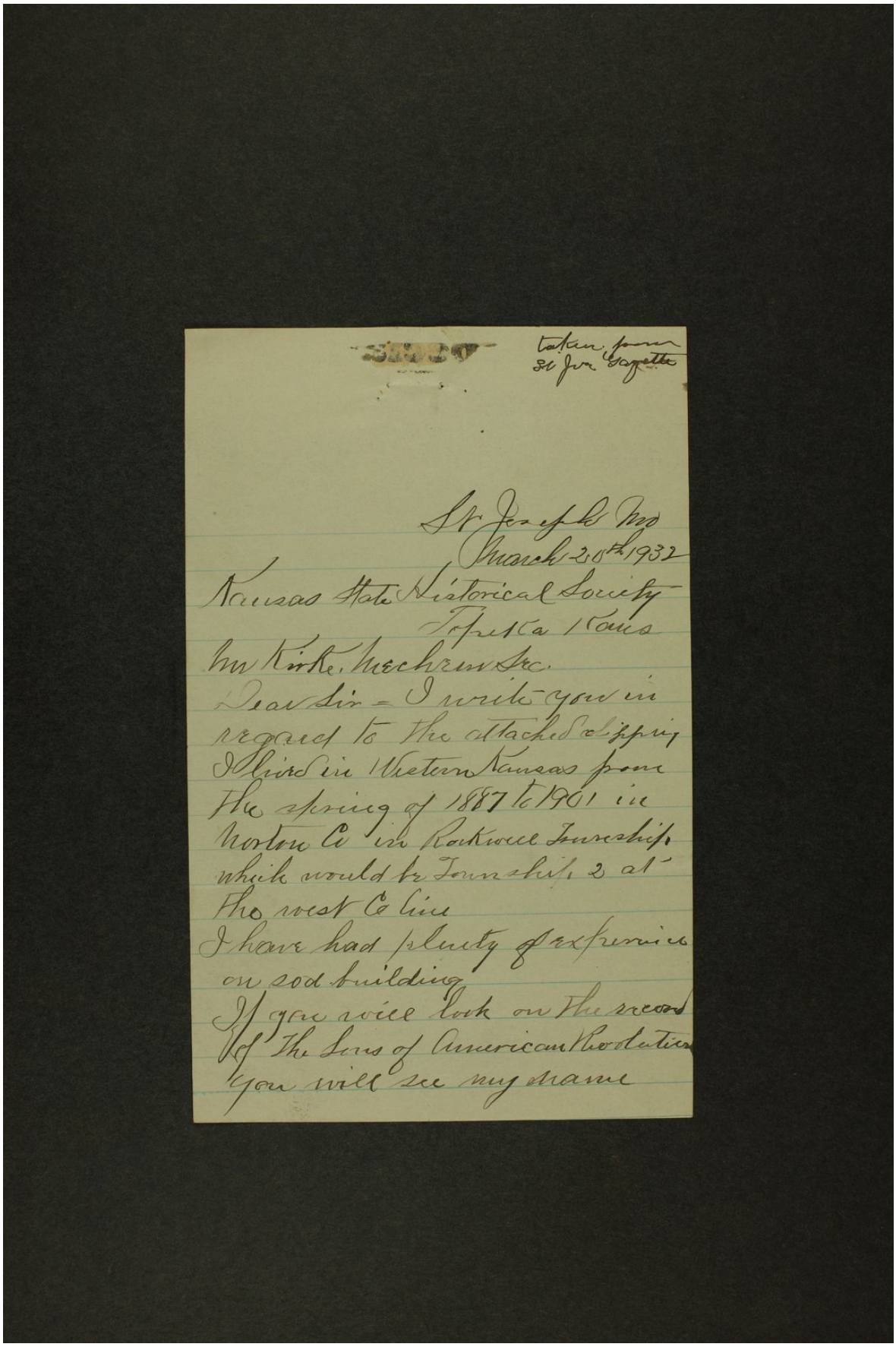
Callnumber: Kansas State Historical Society, Sod Houses, Plans and Specifications on Construction, Boxes 1-2

KSHS Identifier: DaRT ID: 228755

Item Identifier: 228755

www.kansasmemory.org/item/228755

Construction of sod houses



taken from St Joe Gazette

St Joseph Mo
March 28th 1932

Kansas State Historical Society
Topeka Kans

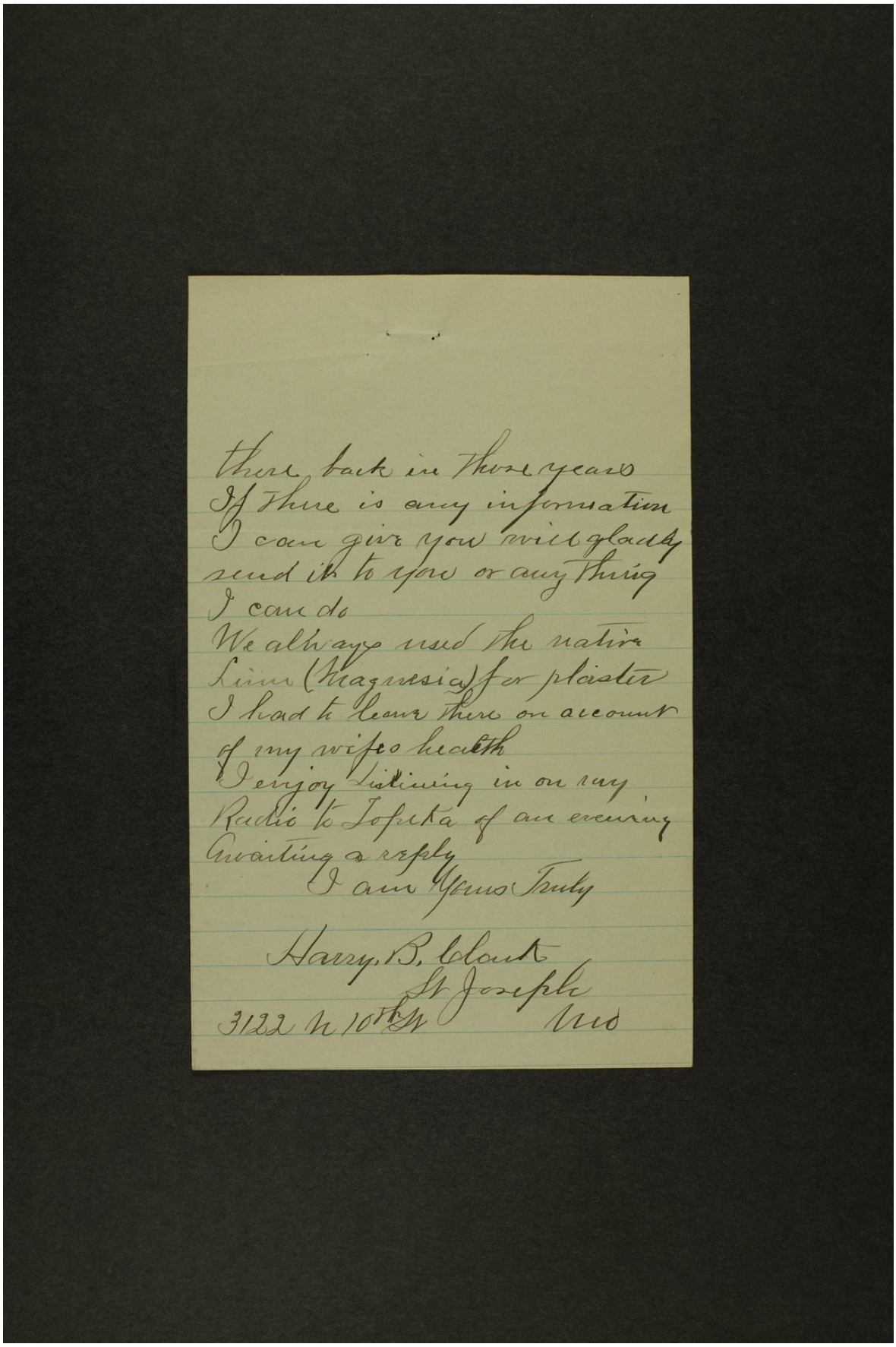
Mr Kirke Mechem Sec

Dear Sir = I write you in regard to the attached clipping I live in Western Kansas from the spring of 1887 to 1901 in Norton Co in Rockwell Township which would be Township 2 at the west & line

I have had plenty of experience on sod building

If you will look on the record of the Sons of American Revolution you will see my name

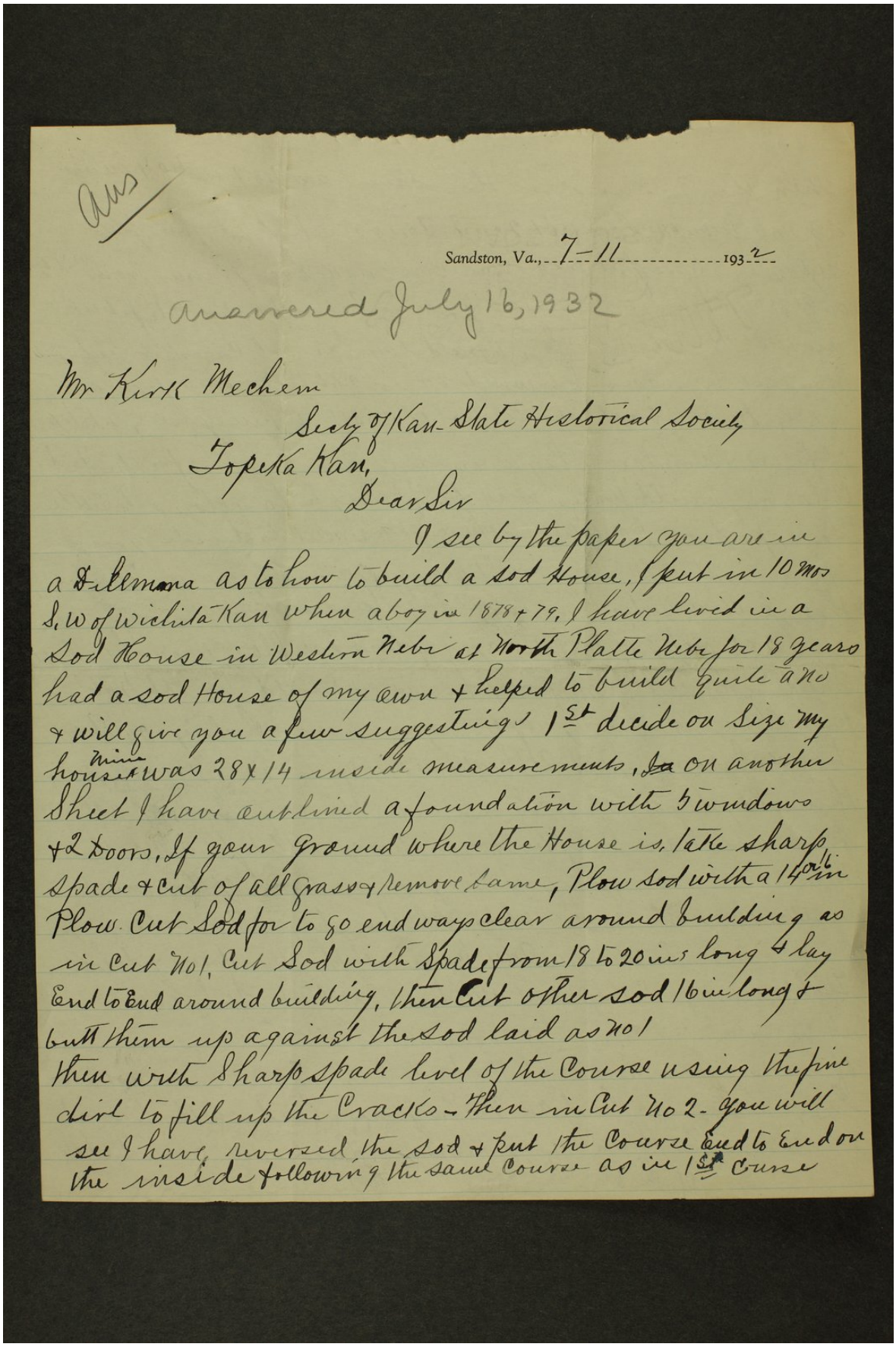
Construction of sod houses



there back in those years
If there is any information
I can give you will gladly
send it to you or any thing
I can do
We always used the native
Lime (Magnesia) for plaster
I had to leave there on account
of my wifes health
I enjoy listening in on my
Radio to Topeka of an evening
Awaiting a reply
I am Yours Truly

Harry B. Clark
St Joseph
3122 N 10th St Mo

Construction of sod houses



Ans

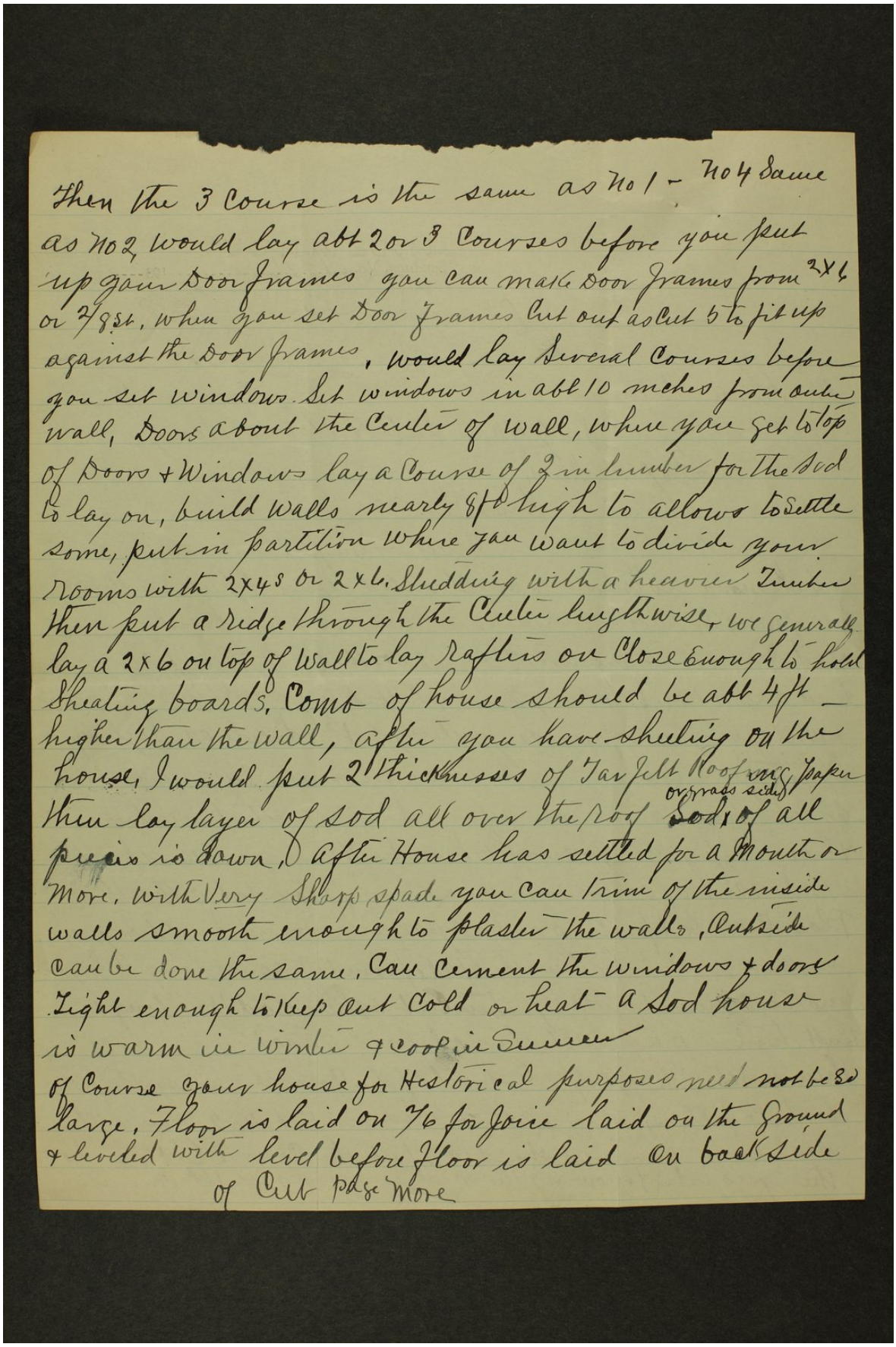
Sandston, Va., 7-11 1932

answered July 16, 1932

Mr Kirk Mechem
Secty of Kan State Historical Society
Topeka Kan,
Dear Sir

I see by the paper you are in a Dilemma as to how to build a sod House, I put in 10 Mos S. W of Wichita Kan when a boy in 1878 + 79. I have lived in a Sod House in Western Neb at North Platte Neb for 18 years had a sod House of my own + helped to build quite a No + will give you a few suggestions 1st decide on Size my house was 28 x 14 inside measurements, On another Sheet I have outlined a foundation with 5 windows + 2 doors, If your Ground where the House is, take sharp Spade + cut of all grass + remove same, Plow sod with a 14 in Plow. Cut Sod for to go endways clear around building as in cut No 1, Cut Sod with Spade from 18 to 20 ins long + lay End to End around building, then Cut other sod 16 in long + butt them up against the sod laid as No 1
then with Sharp spade level of the Course using the fine dirt to fill up the Cracks - then in Cut No 2 - you will see I have reversed the sod + put the Course End to End on the inside following the same Course as in 1st Course

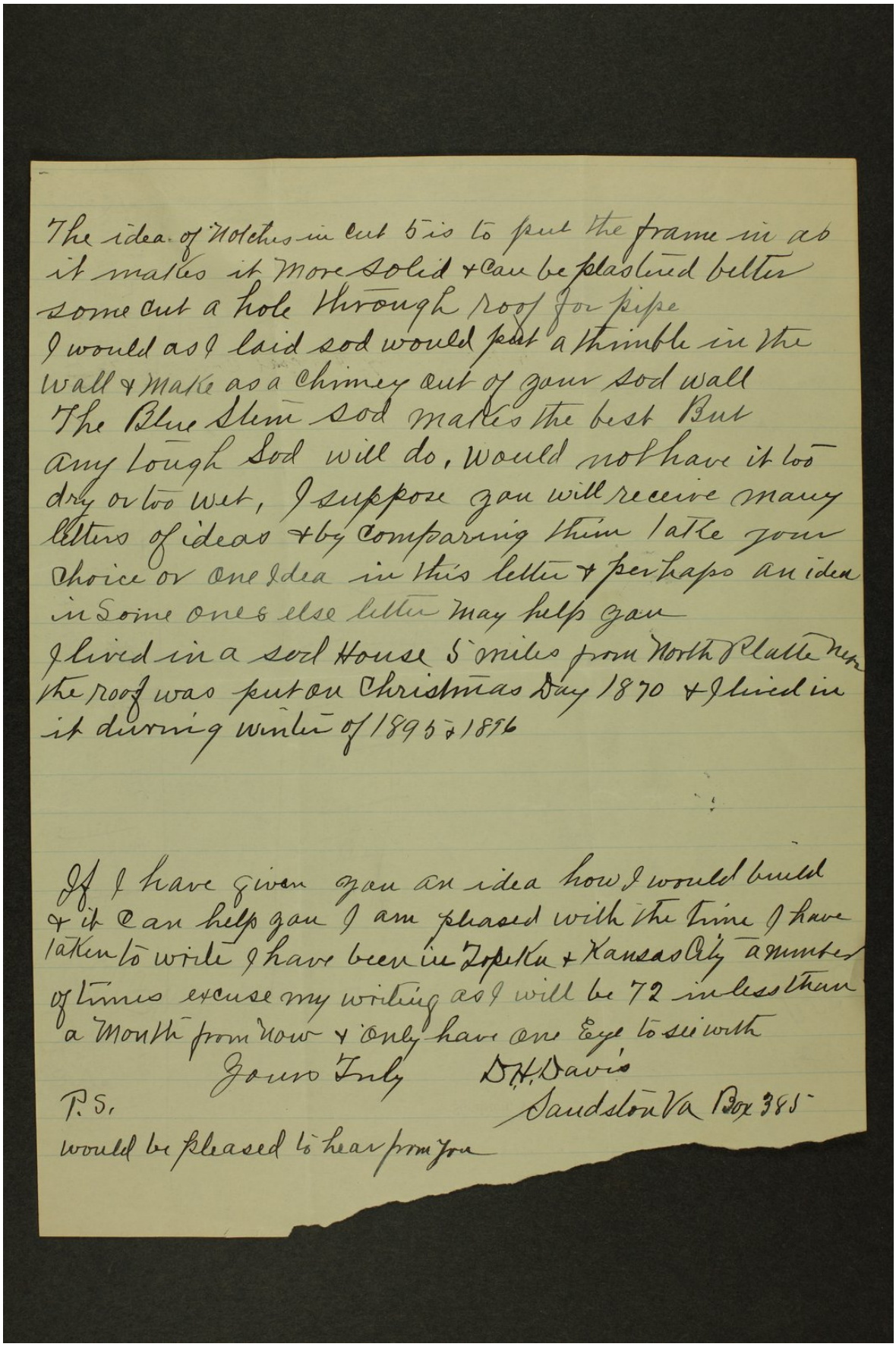
Construction of sod houses



Then the 3 Course is the same as No 1 – No 4 same as No 2, would lay abt 2 or 3 Courses before you put up your Door frames you can make Door frames from 2X4 or 2/8s4. when you set Door frames cut out as cut 5 to fit up against the door frames, would lay several courses before you set windows. Set windows in abt 10 inches from outer wall, Doors about the center of wall, when you get to top of Doors + Windows lay a Course of 2 in lumber for the Sod to lay on, build walls nearly 8 ft high to allows to settle some, put in partition where you want to divide your Rooms with 2x4s or 2x6. Studding with a heavier Timber then put a ridge through the Center lengthwise, we generally lay a 2x6 on top of wall to lay Rafters on Close Enough to hold Sheating boards. Comb of house should be abt 4 ft – higher than the wall, after you have sheeting on the house, I would put 2 thicknesses of Tar felt Roofing Paper then lay layer of sod all over the roof Sod with grass side on of all pieces is down, after House has settled for a Month or More, with Very Sharp spade you can trim of the inside walls smooth enough to plaster the walls, Outside can be done the same, Can Cement the windows + doors Tight enough to Keep out Cold or heat a Sod house is warm in winter + cool in Summer

Of Course your house for Historical purposes need not be so large, Floor is laid on 2/6 for Joice laid on the Ground + leveled with level before Floor is laid On back side of Cut page More

Construction of sod houses



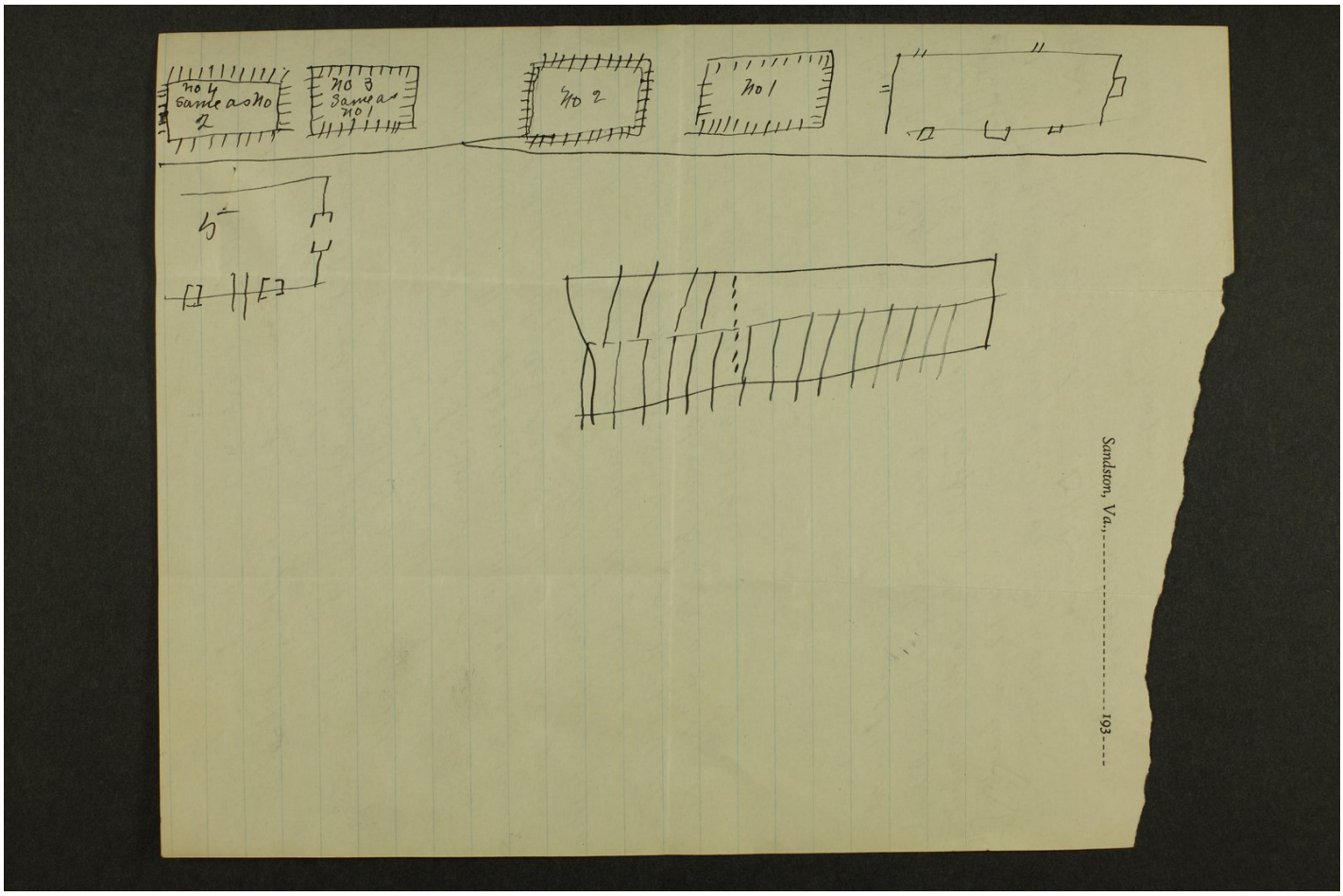
The idea of notches in cut 5 is to put the frame in as it makes it more solid & can be plastered better some cut a hole through roof for pipe I would as I laid sod would put a thimble in the wall & make as a chimey out of your sod wall The Blue Stem sod makes the best But any Lough Sod will do, would not have it too dry or too wet, I suppose you will receive many letters of ideas & by comparing them take your choice or one idea in this letter & perhaps an idea in Some ones else letter may help you I lived in a sod House 5 miles from North Platte Neb the roof was put on Christmas Day 1870 & I lived in it during winter of 1895 & 1896

If I have given you an idea how I would build & it can help you I am pleased with the time I have taken to write I have been in Topeka & Kansas City a number of times excuse my writing as I will be 72 in less than a Month from now & only have one Eye to see with

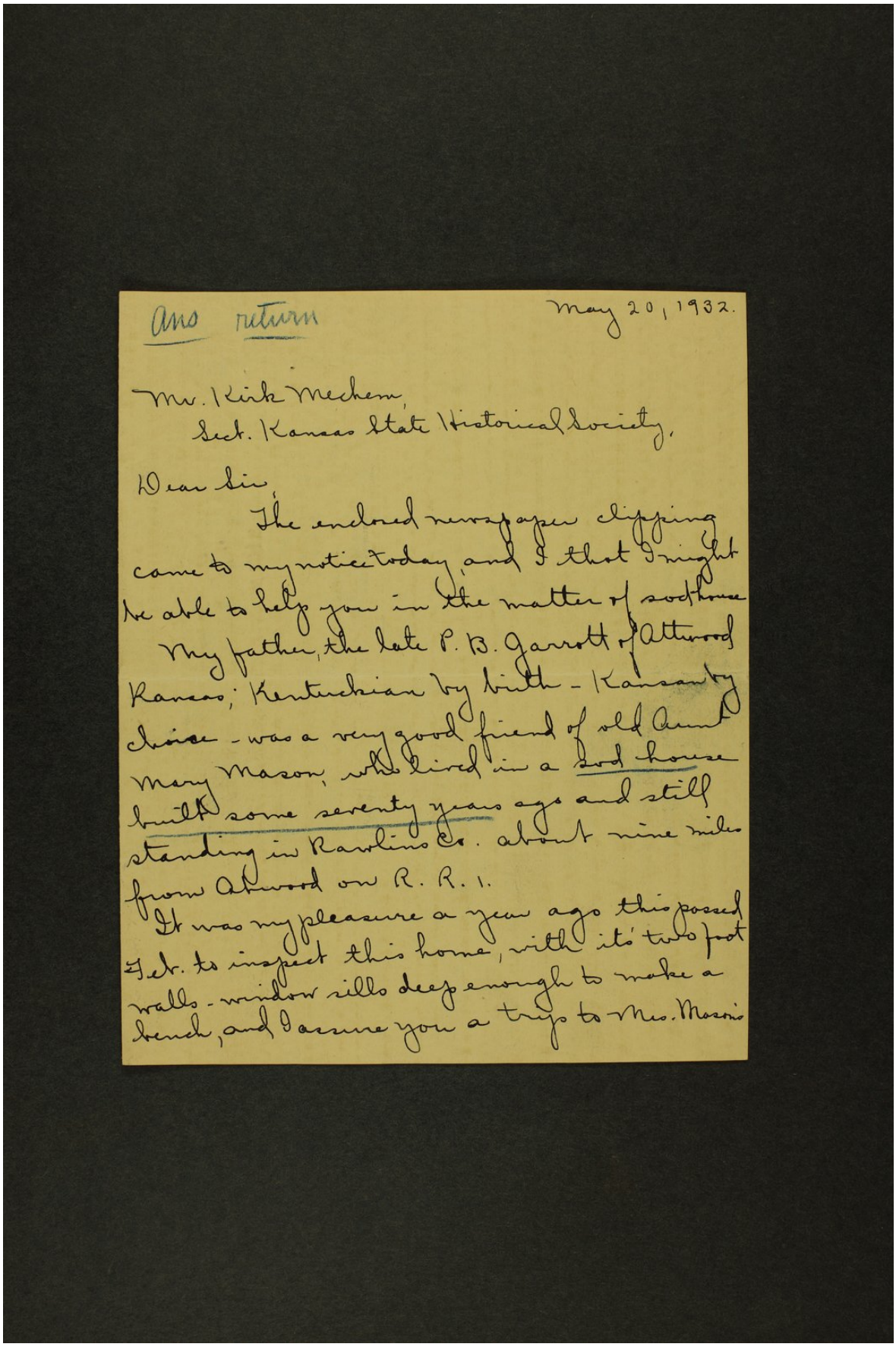
Yours Truly D.H. Davis
Sandston Va Box 385

P.S.
would be pleased to hear from you

Construction of sod houses



Construction of sod houses



Ans return

May 20, 1932.

Mr. Kirk Mechem,
Sec't. Kansas State Historical Society,

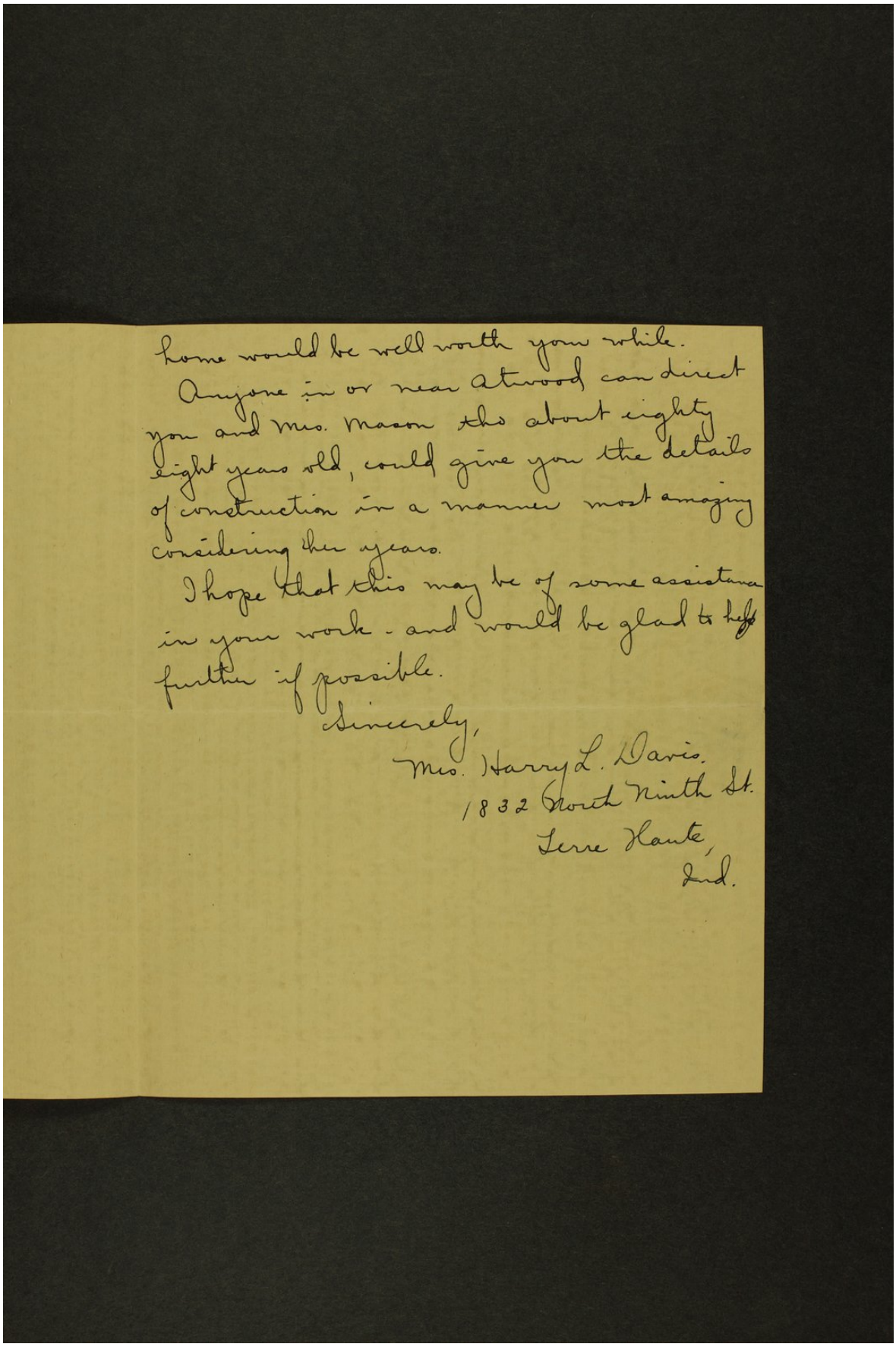
Dear Sir,

The enclosed newspaper clipping came to my notice today, and I thot I might be able to help you in the matter of sod house.

My father, the late P. B. Garrett of Attwood Kansas; Kentuckian by birth - Kansan by choice - was a very good friend of old Aunt Mary Mason, who lived in a sod house built some seventy years ago and still standing in Rawlins Co. about nine miles from Atwood on R. R. 1.

It was my pleasure a year ago this passed Fall to inspect this home, with its two foot walls - window sills deep enough to make a bench, and I assure you a trip to Mrs. Mason's

Construction of sod houses



home would be well worth your while.

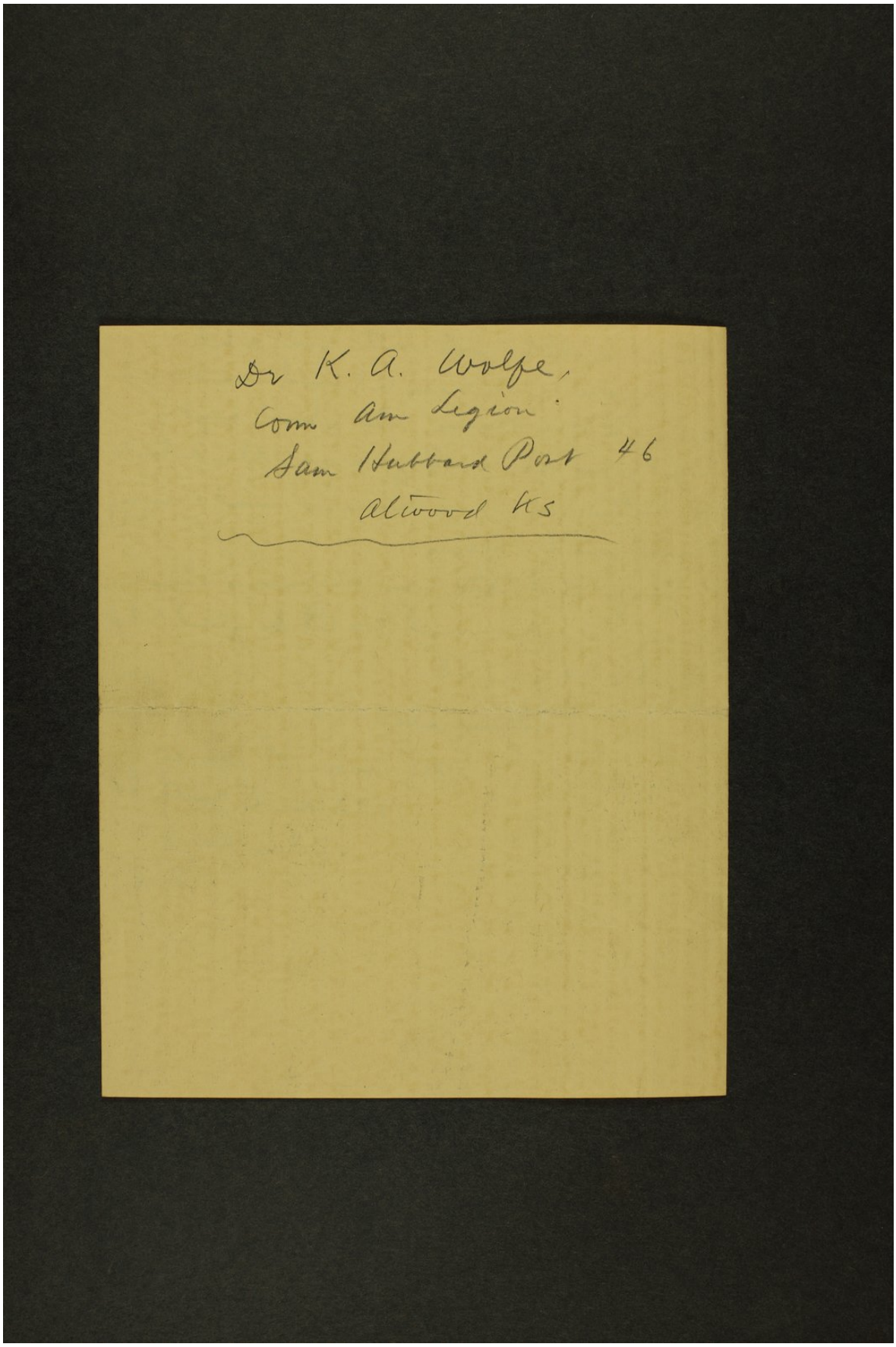
Anyone in or near Atwood can direct you and Mrs. Mason tho about eighty eight years old, could give you the details of construction in a manner most amazing considering the years.

I hope that this may be of some assistance in your work - and would be glad to help further if possible.

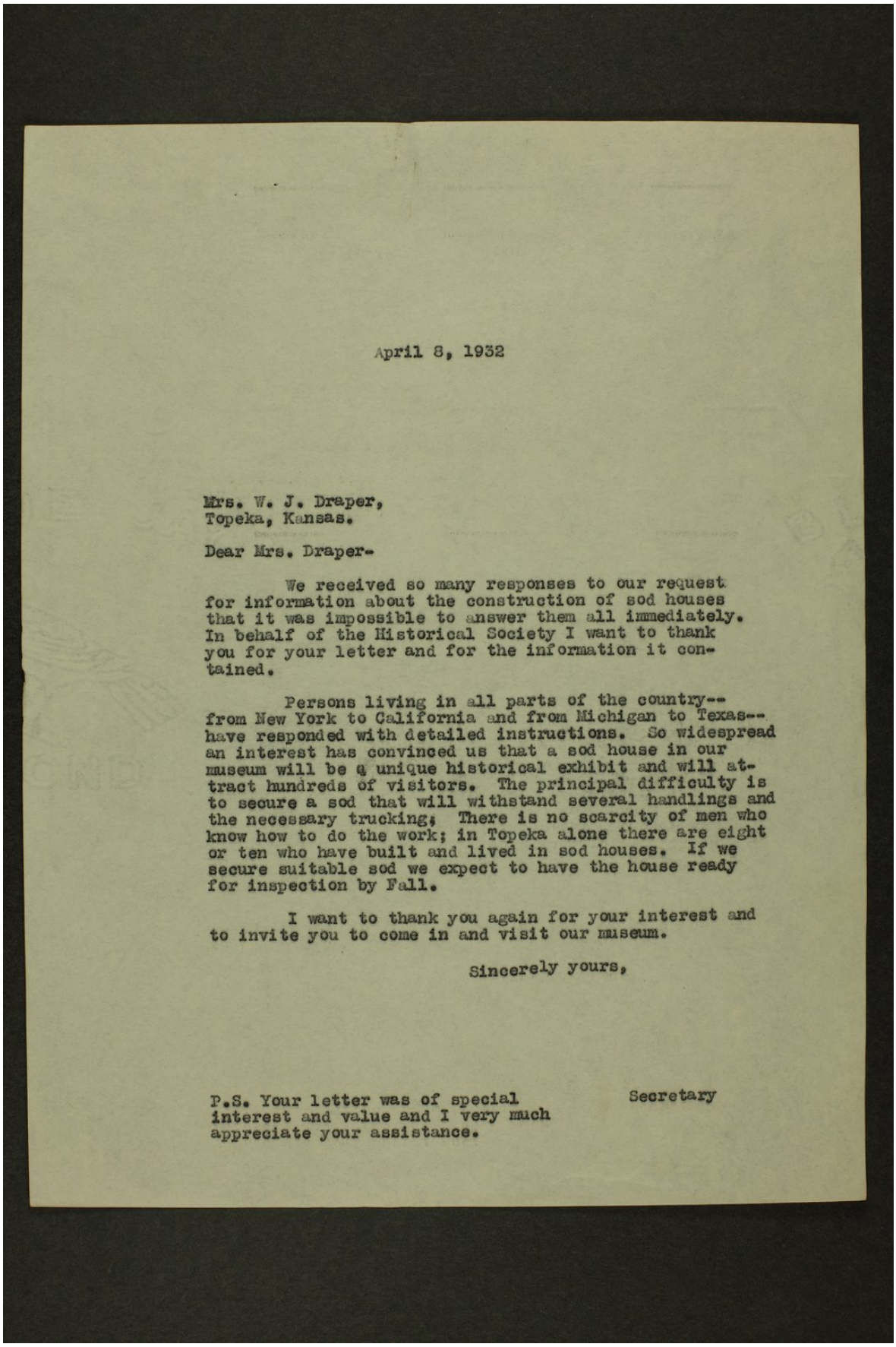
Sincerely,

Mrs. Harry L. Davis.
1832 North Ninth St.
Terre Haute,
Ind.

Construction of sod houses



Construction of sod houses



April 8, 1932

Mrs. W. J. Draper,
Topeka, Kansas.

Dear Mrs. Draper-

We received so many responses to our request for information about the construction of sod houses that it was impossible to answer them all immediately. In behalf of the Historical Society I want to thank you for your letter and for the information it contained.

Persons living in all parts of the country-- from New York to California and from Michigan to Texas-- have responded with detailed instructions. So widespread an interest has convinced us that a sod house in our museum will be a unique historical exhibit and will attract hundreds of visitors. The principal difficulty is to secure a sod that will withstand several handlings and the necessary trucking; There is no scarcity of men who know how to do the work; in Topeka alone there are eight or ten who have built and lived in sod houses. If we secure suitable sod we expect to have the house ready for inspection by Fall.

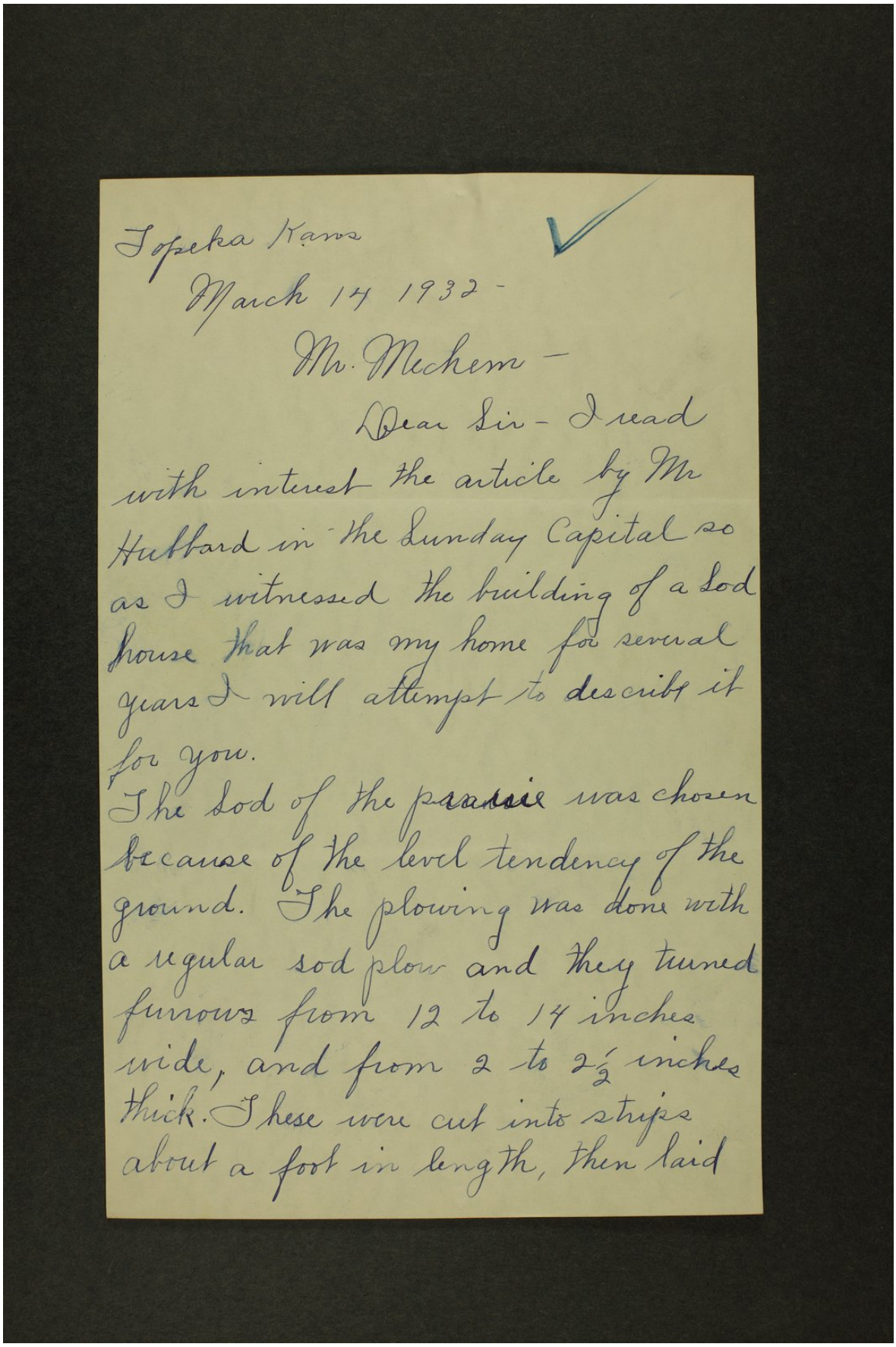
I want to thank you again for your interest and to invite you to come in and visit our museum.

Sincerely yours,

Secretary

P.S. Your letter was of special interest and value and I very much appreciate your assistance.

Construction of sod houses



Topeka Kans
March 14 1932-

Mr. Mechem -

Dear Sir - I read with interest the article by Mr Hubbard in the Sunday Capital so as I witnessed the building of a sod house that was my home for several years I will attempt to describ it for you.

The sod of the prairie was chosen because of the level tendency of the ground. The plowing was done with a regular sod plow and they turned furrows from 12 to 14 inches wide, and from 2 to 2½ inches thick. These were cut into strips about a foot in length, then laid

Construction of sod houses

one on top of the other flat ways with the grass turned down, this made a wall from 12 to 14 inches thick and they were usually about 14 ft wide by 16 to 20 ft long. Ours contained two windows one on each side containing four panes The roof contained a ridge ~~pole~~ pole through the center about 2 or three on each side and was covered with a sheeting lumber ~~M~~ made from either native ~~l~~lumber rudely finished or old boxes torn up and then covered with sod on top. ~~F~~floors consisted of two kinds, the bare clay covered with woven rag carpet as my Grandmother's was or a real aristocrat like ourselves who had a floor of boards from

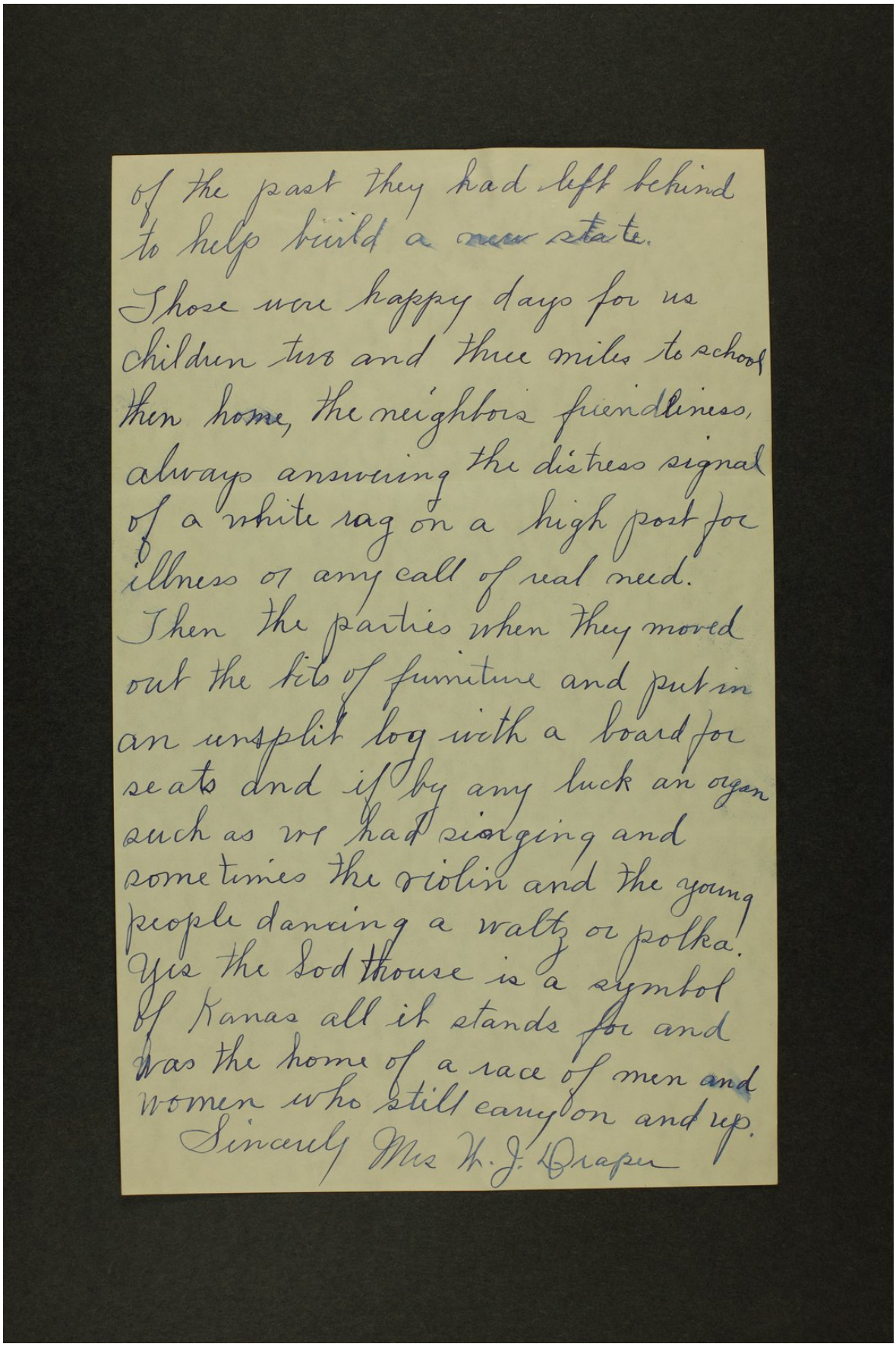
Construction of sod houses

the goods boxes in which the things called "household Gods" were packed. Ours was plastered inside which made it much lighter, cleaner, and also was so much easier to see the centipedes who were our worst enemy at that time.

To furnishing one cook stove we could burn wood or the famous cow chips which fuel I and my brother gathered for the family use,

One large wooden bed and a trundle bed that was pushed under the big one in day time. A pine table father made and a real cupboard with tin covered doors, some chairs and the other necessary article of daily use. Most of us had a goods box in a corner that contained the treasures such as pillows and things the young wives had clung to as a part

Construction of sod houses



of the past they had left behind
to help build a new state.
Those were happy days for us
children two and three miles to school
then home, the neighbors friendliness,
always answering the distress signal
of a white rag on a high post for
illness or any call of real need.
Then the parties when they moved
out the bits of furniture and put in
an unsplit log with a board for
seats and if by any luck an organ
such as we had singing and
sometimes the violin and the young
people dancing a waltz or polka.
Yes the Sod House is a symbol
of Kansas all it stands for and
was the home of a race of men and
women who still carry on and up.
Sincerely Mrs W. J. Draper

Construction of sod houses

April 9, 1932

Mrs. Frank E. Davis,
Milwaukie, Oregon.

Dear Mrs. Davis-

We received so many responses to our request for information about the construction of sod houses that it was impossible to answer them all immediately. Inwbehalf of the Historical Society I want to thank you for your letter and for the information it contained.

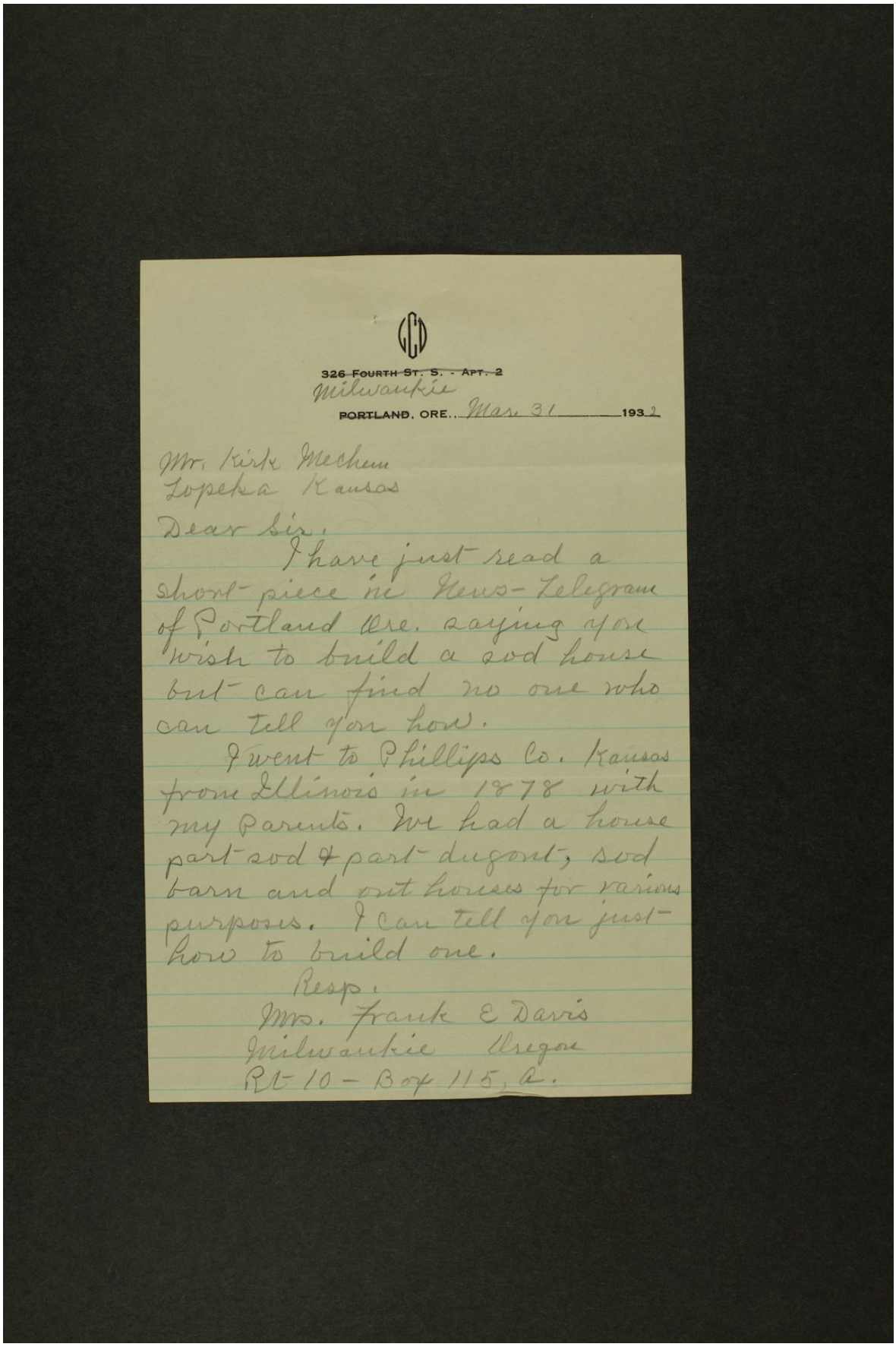
Persons living in all parts of the country--from New York to California and from Michigan to Texas--have responded with detailed instructions. So widespread an interest has convinced us that a sod house in our museum will be a unique historical exhibit and will attract hundreds of visitors. The principal difficulty is to secure a sod that will withstand several handlings and the necessary trucking. There is no scarcity of men who know how to do the work; in Topeka alone there are eight or ten who have built and lived in sod houses. If we can obtain suitable sod we expect to have the house ready for inspection by Fall.

I want to thank you again for your interest and to invite you to visit the museum whenever you are in this locality.

Sincerely yours,

Secretary

Construction of sod houses



326 ~~Fourth St. S. - Apt. 2~~
Milwaukie
PORTLAND, ORE. Mar. 31 1932

Mr. Kirk Mechem
Topeka Kansas

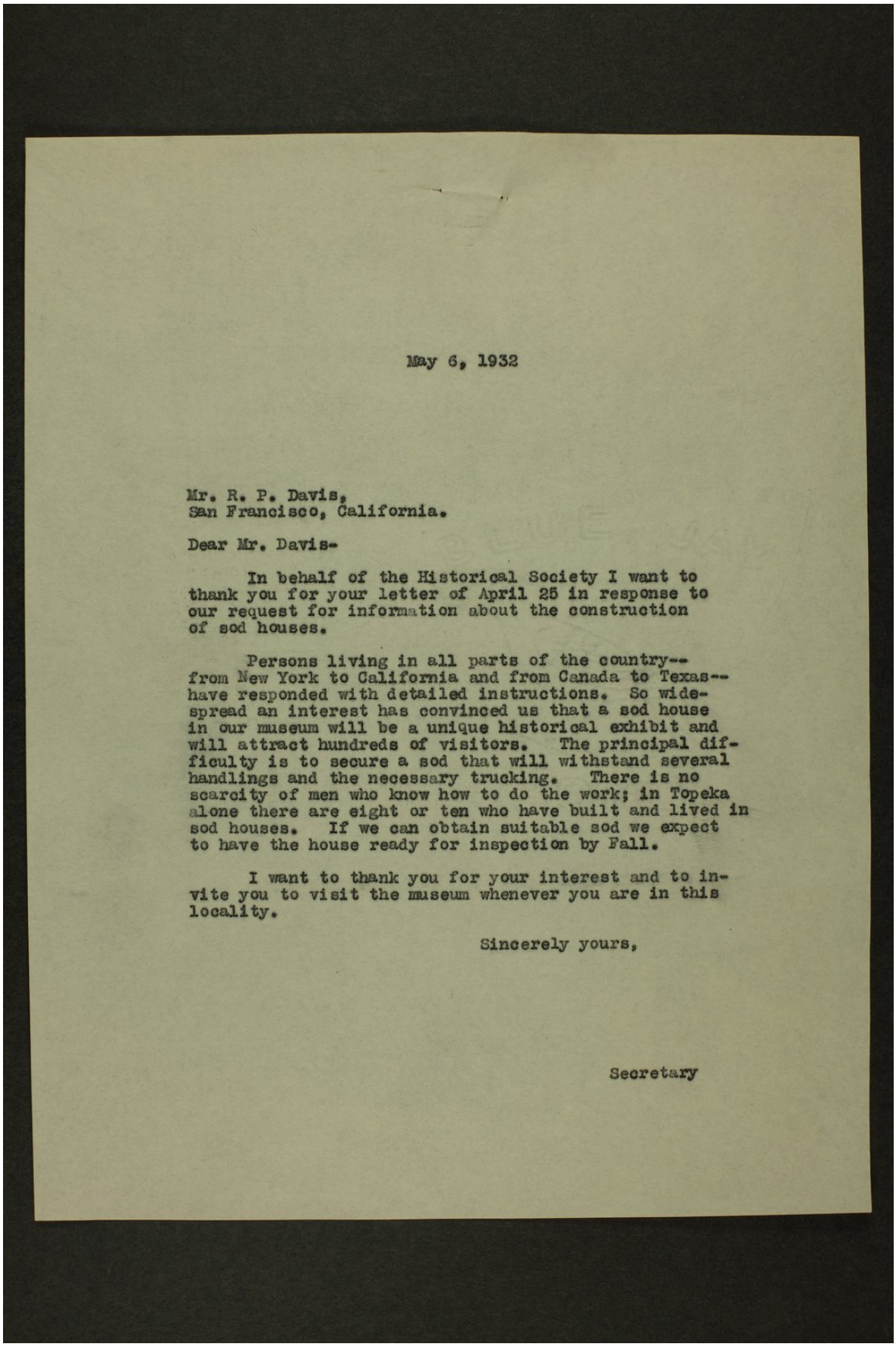
Dear Sir.

I have just read a short piece in News-Telegram of Portland Ore. saying you wish to build a sod house but can find no one who can tell you how.

I went to Phillips Co. Kansas from Illinois in 1878 with my Parents. We had a house part sod & part dugout, sod barn and out houses for various purposes. I can tell you just how to build one.

Resp.
Mrs. Frank E Davis
Milwaukie Oregon
Rt 10 - Box 115, A.

Construction of sod houses



May 6, 1932

Mr. R. P. Davis,
San Francisco, California.

Dear Mr. Davis-

In behalf of the Historical Society I want to thank you for your letter of April 25 in response to our request for information about the construction of sod houses.

Persons living in all parts of the country--from New York to California and from Canada to Texas--have responded with detailed instructions. So widespread an interest has convinced us that a sod house in our museum will be a unique historical exhibit and will attract hundreds of visitors. The principal difficulty is to secure a sod that will withstand several handlings and the necessary trucking. There is no scarcity of men who know how to do the work; in Topeka alone there are eight or ten who have built and lived in sod houses. If we can obtain suitable sod we expect to have the house ready for inspection by Fall.

I want to thank you for your interest and to invite you to visit the museum whenever you are in this locality.

Sincerely yours,

Secretary

Construction of sod houses

PHONE DELAWARE 0334

R. P. DAVIS

ARCHITECTURAL DESIGNER

Contracting and Building

961 GENEVA AVENUE SAN FRANCISCO, CAL.

April 25, 1932.

Mr. Kirke Mechem,

Secy State Hist. Society,

Topeka, Kansas.

Dear Sir:

The enclosed Newspaper item interests me to the point of writing you. I have had considerable experience building sod houses in Western Canada. If I can be of any service to you, please let me know at your convenience.

Very truly yours,

R. P. Davis

RPD/LMD

S

SEEKS BUILDER OF SOD HOUSE

TOPEKA, April 23.—A sod house is to be built in Topeka for tourists, and Kirke Mechem, secretary of the State Historical Society, needs the services of a sod-house builder. There are carpenters and contractors out of work in Kansas but apparently their technique does not extend to sod houses.

Offers Dramatic

Construction of sod houses

April 9, 1932

Mr. Emerson P. Doty,
Oakland, California.

Dear Mr. Doty-

We received so many responses to our request for information about the construction of sod houses that it was impossible to answer them all immediately. I want to thank you for your letter and for the information it contained.

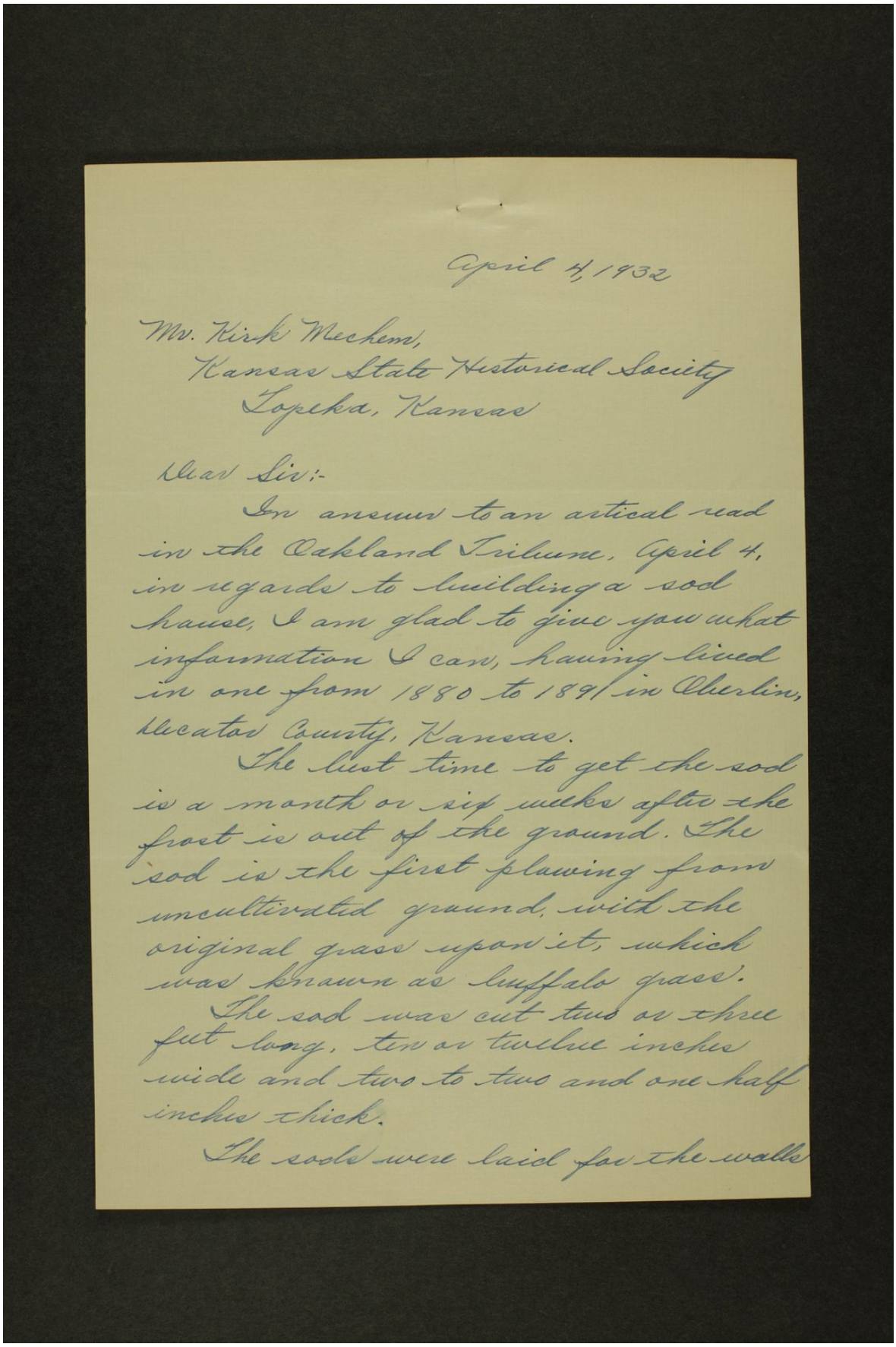
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I want to thank you for your interest and to invite you to visit our museum whenever you are in this locality.

Sincerely yours,

Secretary

Construction of sod houses



April 4, 1932

Mr. Kirk Mechem,
Kansas State Historical Society
Topeka, Kansas

Dear Sir:-

In answer to an artical read in the Oakland Tribune, April 4, in regards to building a sod house, I am glad to give you what information I can, having lived in one from 1880 to 1891 in Oberlin, Decatur County, Kansas.

The best time to get the sod is a month or six weeks after the frost is out of the ground. The sod is the first plowing from uncultivated ground, with the original grass upon it, which was known as buffalo grass.

The sod was cut two or three feet long, ten or twelve inches wide and two to two and one half inches thick.

The sods were laid for the walls

Construction of sod houses

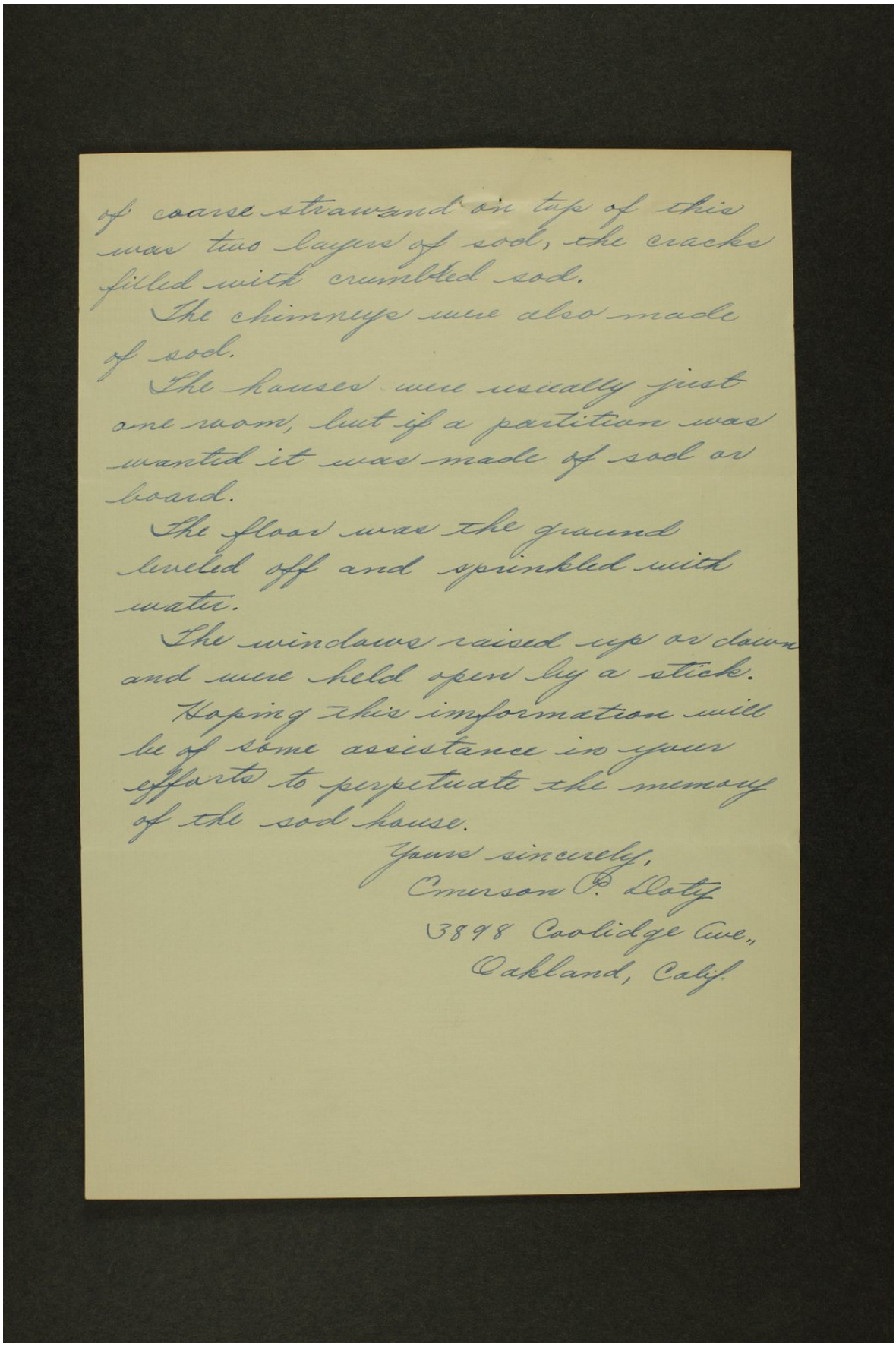
by starting at a corner and laying as with brick and filling in cracks with crumbled sod, making the walls three feet thick.

The inside walls were finished with lime we got from the hills mixed with sand from the creeks and plastered over the sod.

The windows and door frames were built of two by six wood. The sod was built up leaving spaces for windows and doors. The frames were set toward the inside making deep window sills. The protruding sod over the finished frames was held in place by small branches of trees.

The roofs were built with enough pitch for the rain to run off, by shaving off the end sods. There was a ridge pole made with a tree eight or ten inches thick that ran the length of the house. The rafters were made from small trees four inches thick and placed about two feet apart. The rafters were thickly covered with willow branches and over the branches was a layer

Construction of sod houses



of coarse straw and on top of this was two layers of sod, the cracks filled with crumbled sod.

The chimneys were also made of sod.

The houses were usually just one room, but if a partition was wanted it was made of sod or board.

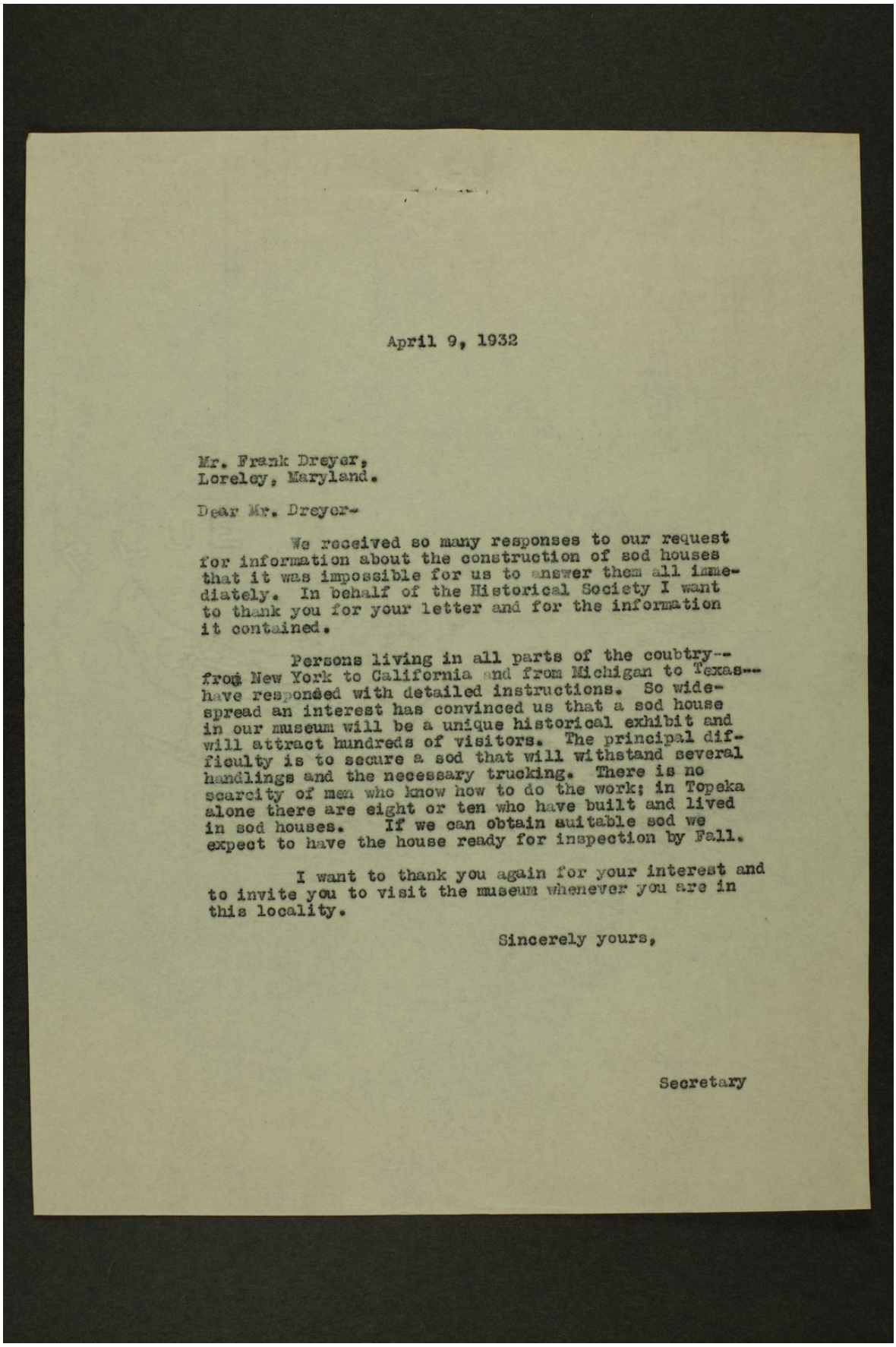
The floor was the ground leveled off and sprinkled with water.

The windows raised up or down and were held open by a stick.

Hoping this information will be of some assistance in your efforts to perpetuate the memory of the sod house.

Yours sincerely,
Emerson P. Doty
3898 Coolidge Ave.,
Oakland, Calif.

Construction of sod houses



April 9, 1932

Mr. Frank Dreyer,
Loreley, Maryland.

Dear Mr. Dreyer-

We received so many responses to our request for information about the construction of sod houses that it was impossible for us to answer them all immediately. In behalf of the Historical Society I want to thank you for your letter and for the information it contained.

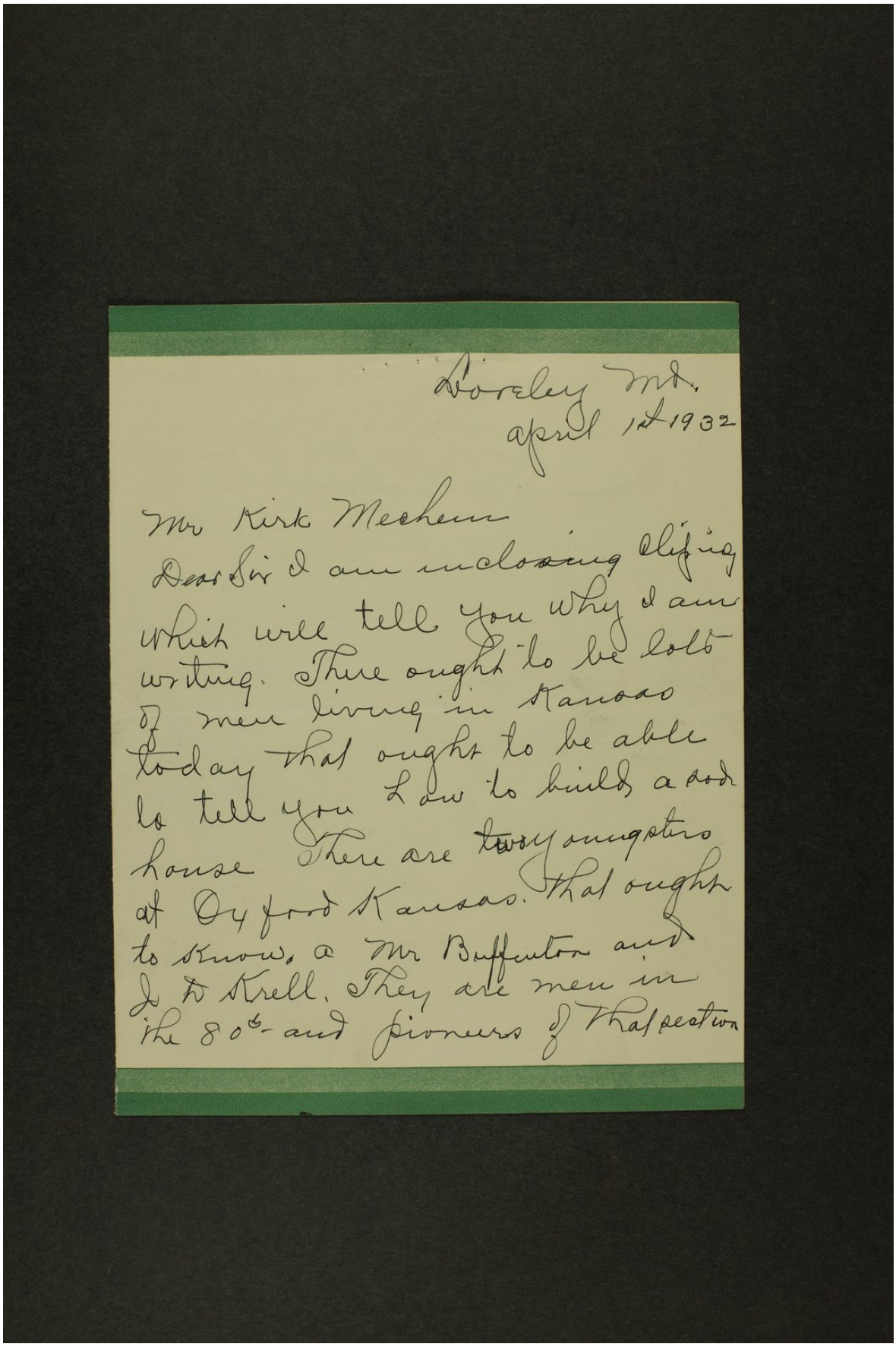
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I want to thank you again for your interest and to invite you to visit the museum whenever you are in this locality.

Sincerely yours,

Secretary

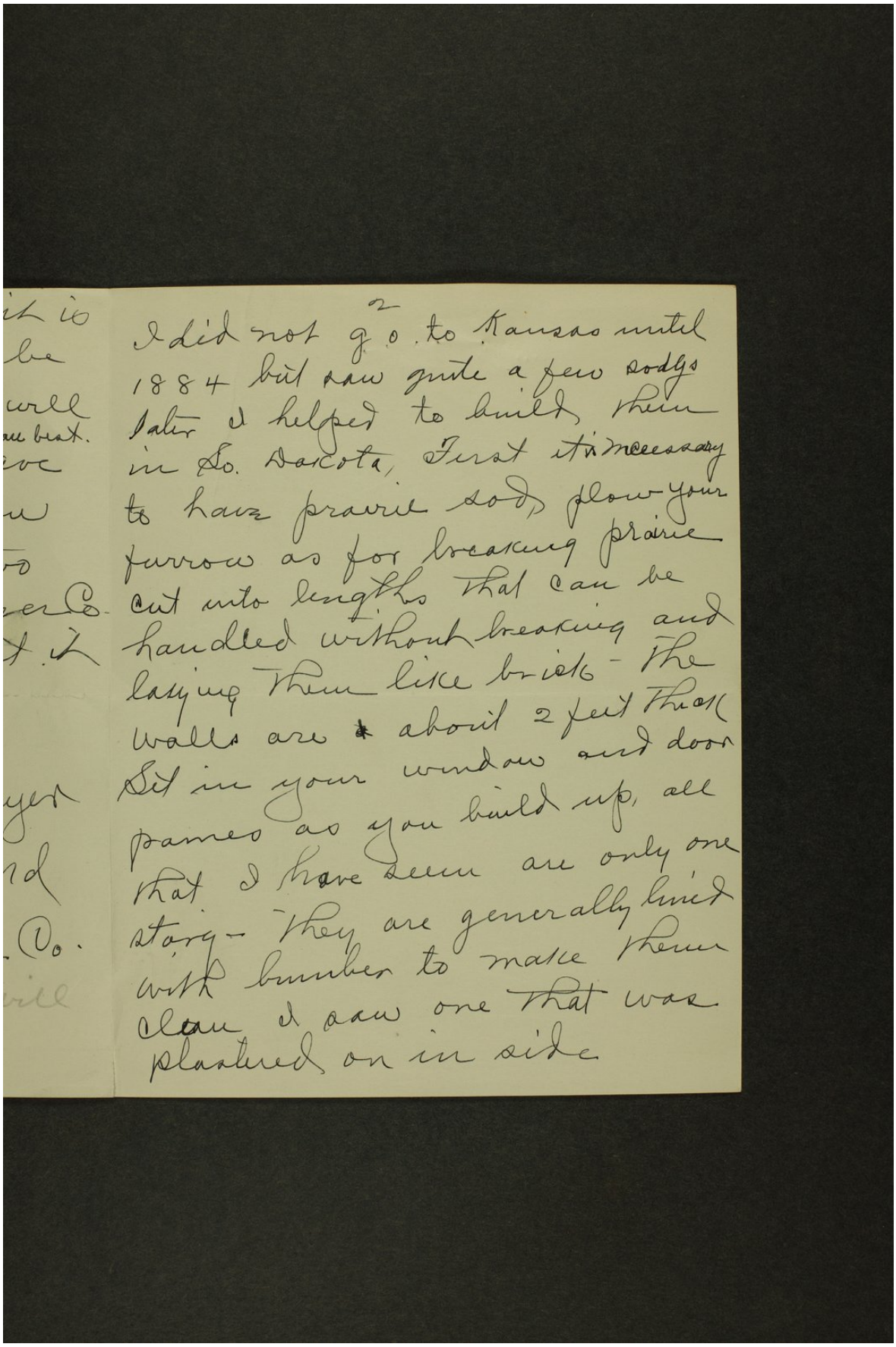
Construction of sod houses



Dorrance Kans.
April 1st 1932

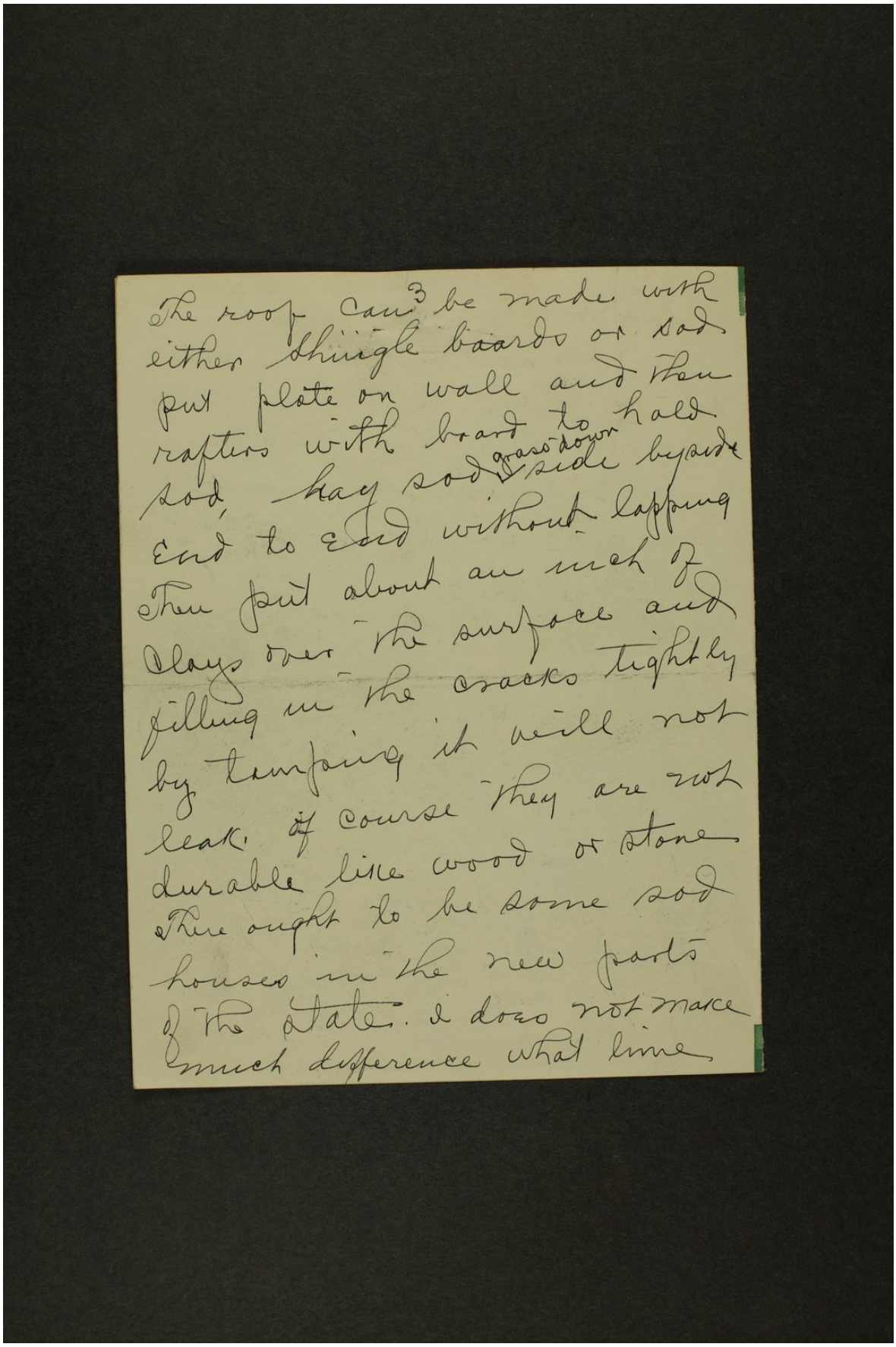
Mr Kirk Mechem
Dear Sir I am inclosing clipping which will tell you why I am writing. There ought to be lots of men living in Kansas today that ought to be able to tell you how to build a sod house. There are two or three at Oxford Kansas. That ought to know, a Mr Buffington and J. D. Krell. They are men in the 80's and pioneers of that section

Construction of sod houses



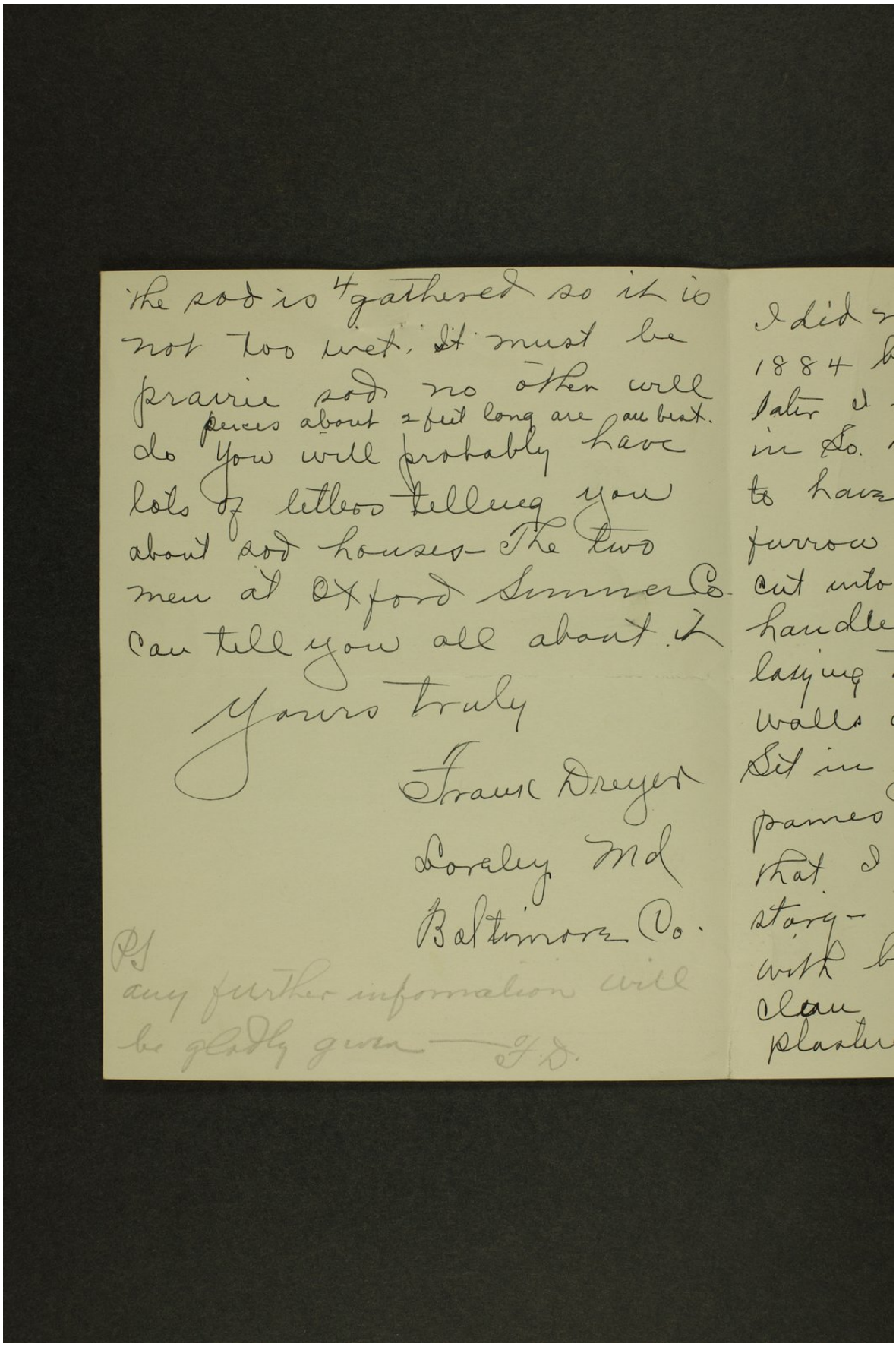
I did not go to Kansas until 1884 but saw quite a few dodgs later I helped to build them in So. Dakota, First it is necessary to have prairie sod, plow your furrow as for breaking prairie cut into lengths that can be handled without breaking and laying them like brick - The walls are * about 2 feet thick Set in your window and door frames as you build up, all that I have seen are only one story - They are generally lined with lumber to make them clean I saw one that was plastered on inside

Construction of sod houses



The roof can be made with either shingle boards or sod. put plate on wall and then rafters with board to hold sod, hay sod grass down side byside end to end without lapping Then put about an inch of clays over the surface and filling in the cracks tightly by tamping it will not leak. of course they are not durable like wood or stone there ought to be some sod houses in the new parts of the State. it does not make much difference what time

Construction of sod houses



the sod is gathered so it is not too wet. It must be prairie sod no other will do You will probably have lots of letters telling you about sod houses. The two men at Oxford Summer Co. can tell you all about it.

Yours truly

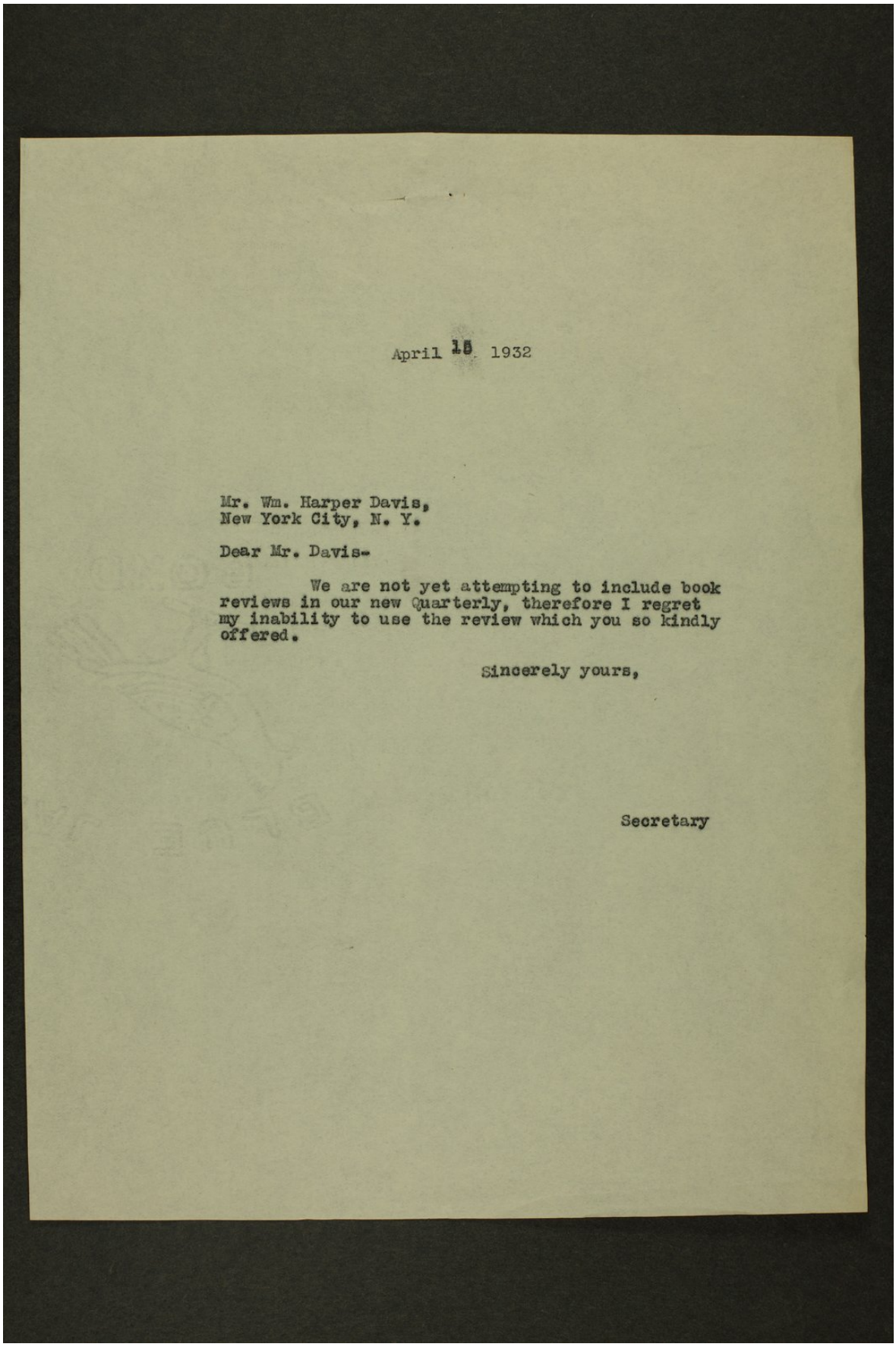
Frank Dreyer
Loreley Md
Baltimore Co.

PS
any further information will be gladly given — F.D.

pieces about 2 feet long are the best.

I did
1884
later
in So.
to have
furrow
cut into
handle
laying
walls
Set in
pames
that
story
work
clean
plaster

Construction of sod houses



April 15 1932

Mr. Wm. Harper Davis,
New York City, N. Y.

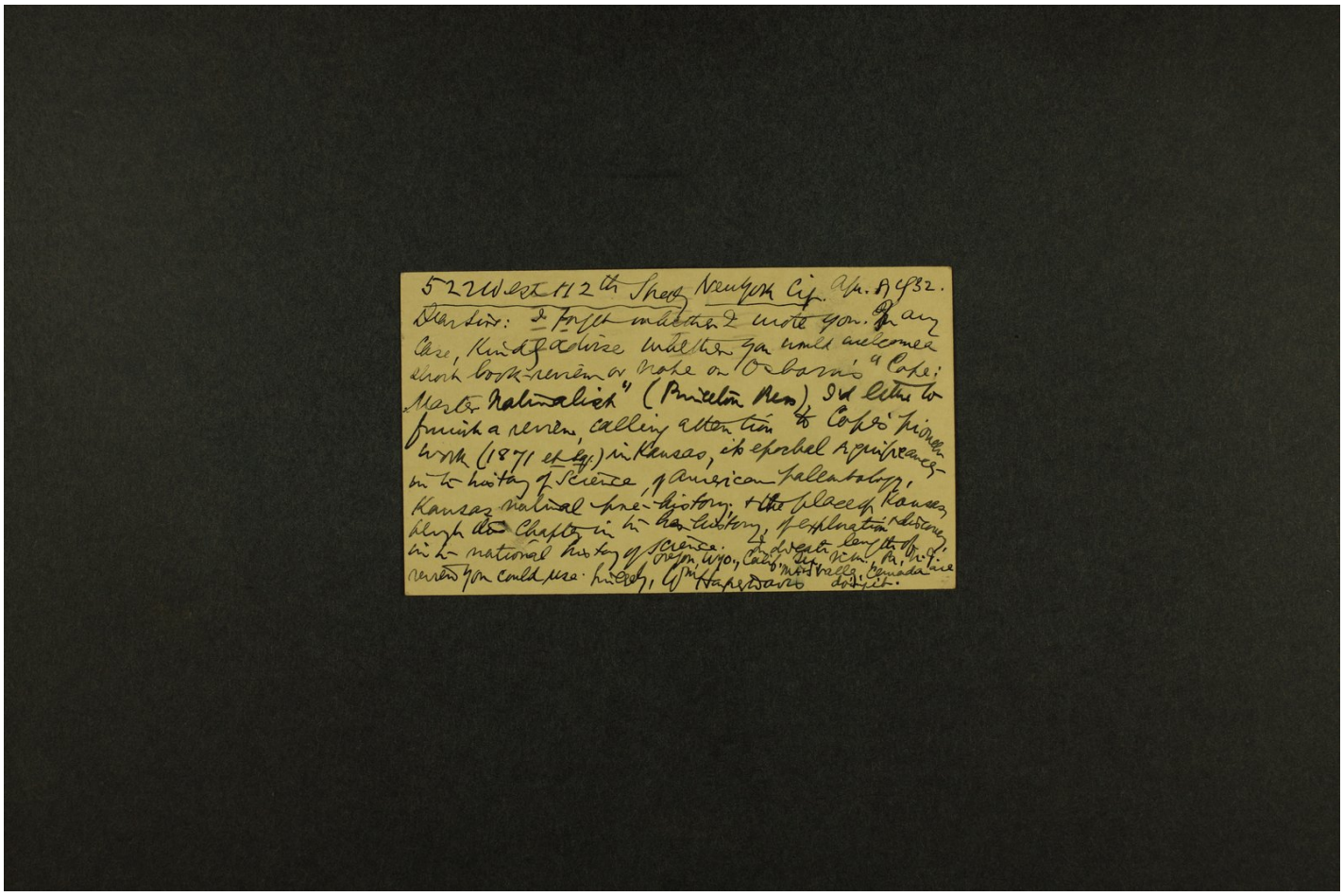
Dear Mr. Davis-

We are not yet attempting to include book reviews in our new Quarterly, therefore I regret my inability to use the review which you so kindly offered.

Sincerely yours,

Secretary

Construction of sod houses



Construction of sod houses

