Mirari, the Latin root for mirage, means “to look at, to wonder at.”

In 1906, Rear Admiral Robert Peary stood on top of Cape Thomas Hubbard in far northern Canada and reported that he saw land glimmering in the north west. Peary built a stone cairn to mark this spot. He left a written record of his visit inside.

Peary named the distant landmass Crocker Land, after George Crocker, a banker and one of his benefactors.

Peary designated Crocker Land as a new continent and drew it on the map.

Several geologists and other arctic explorers questioned the existence of Crocker Land from the start.

Donald Macmillan, a former assistant to Peary, organized an expedition to confirm Peary’s sighting and, in Macmillan’s words, “to solve the world’s last great geographical problem.”

The Crocker Land expedition was sponsored in large part by the American Museum of Natural History. The museum raised over one million dollars (today’s dollars) from major industrialists to fund the expedition. Many of the donors were members of the Peary Arctic Club, a private club in New York.

The museum purchased top-of-the-line cameras for the expedition: a 4x5 Reflex, a 5 x 7 Auto Graflex, an Eastman Kodak 3-A folding pocket camera, a No. 0 Graphic pocket camera, a Stereographic Auto Graflex and a Kearton cinematograph. The cameras were equipped with a full range of Zeiss lenses designed for both close-up work and landscape photography.

Photographic documentation was an important part of the Crocker Land mission. The crew had access to cameras and a working darkroom at all phases of the journey.

MacMillan and his six paid crew set out on a steamship from the Brooklyn Navy Yards in July 1913. They reached Etah, their starting point in north west Greenland, in August. With the help of local Inuits (paid with rifles and biscuits), the explorers built their headquarters and settled in for the long, dark winter.

In late February, 2014, MacMillan and his crew, which now included seven Inuit guides (paid with rifles and biscuits) and 125 sled dogs, set out on a 1200-mile march across the polar ice to find Crocker Land.

The journey was grueling, food supplies dwindled, and a skeleton crew of four men (Donald MacMillan, Fitzhugh Green, Puagntaqtuq and Ittukusuk) and their sled dogs continued on.

On April 21, MacMillan and his team finally saw Crocker Land. Later, he wrote in his memoir: “There could be no doubt about it. Great Heavens! What a land! Hills, valleys, snowcapped peaks extending at least 130° degrees of the horizon.”

Puagntaqtuq, the most experienced Inuit guide, saw the snow-capped peaks too. He said it was a “poo jok,” a mist.

MacMillan insisted they continue on. They walked towards the distant mountains 3 more days, well past the spot where Peary had marked Crocker Land on the map.

The large tract of land changed in appearance and disappeared repeatedly.

On April 24, when the afternoon sun shifted around, the distant mountains completely vanished from sight.

MacMillan concluded that Crocker Land was a mirage.

A mirage occurs when light is unusually refracted by the earth’s atmosphere, leading to displacement, distortion, inversion and/or duplication of the original image.” In the case of Crocker Land, a warm layer of air over the colder sea ice caused an image of the rough ice and open water to be refracted high into the air, making it look like a distant, snowy mountain range.

Arctic mirages are common and were well known to seasoned arctic explorers, including MacMillan and Peary.

Before they returned to Etah, MacMillan located Peary’s cairn on Cape Thomas Hubbard. Mac Millan later wrote about what he saw there: “We looked toward the distant horizon. Glasses were not necessary. There was land everywhere! Had we not just come from over the horizon we would have returned to our country and reported land as Peary did.”

MacMillan took a photograph at Puagntaqtuq’s cairn on the same day that he saw the big mirage. The photo shows Green standing in front of the cairn, which is draped with an American flag.

MacMillan found Peary’s record inside the cairn. It was dated June 28, 1906, contained hunting and weather details, but did not mention Peary’s sighting of Crocker Land.

On the return trip to Etah, Fitzhugh Green murdered Puagntaqtuq. He shot him in the back for failing to follow orders. Green was never prosecuted for the murder.

Green had a sexual relationship with Puagntaqtuq’s wife, Aleqapina, who previously had been Peary’s mistress and bore two of his children.

The story of the mirage came to define the Crocker Land expedition and newspaper accounts of the Crocker Land mirage circulated around the globe, beginning in the spring of 1914.

MacMillan and his team got sick in at Etah and were stranded there until the museum sent a suitable rescue boat four years later, in 1917.

In 1917, the Crocker Land explorers returned to New York with a trove of photographs, polar bear furs, rare plant and mammal specimens and a collection of Inuit tools and clothing.

The Crocker Land goods were imported by the American Museum of Natural History, which as a public organization, was not required to pay import duties. The museum retained the photographic negatives and about half of the polar specimens. The rest of the specimens were gifted by the museum to the Peary Arctic Club and distributed to its members.

The Crocker Land Expedition Field Photographs (1913-1917) are housed at the research library at the American Museum of Natural History. The archive contains 4941 black and white photographs.

In August, 2013, I went to the research library to look for a photograph of the Crocker Land mirage.

I was not able to find a photograph of the mirage.

Mirages can be photographed.

Mirari rhymes with Ferrari.

Margot Long, 2014

*This description is adapted from “Polar Mirages” by W. G Rees of the Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge.*