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1959 message in a bottle a clue to glacier melt

'It was really quite extraordinary to be holding that piece of paper in my hands'

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In 1959, an American geologist built a rock cairn 1.2 metres away from this glacier. This summer, the cairn was 101.5 metres away. The scientists who discovered the cairn say it's unusual that a scientist in the 1950s would expect the glacier to retreat, and not advance, burying the cairn. (Denis Sarrazin CEN/ArcticNet)

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In the High Arctic, it's not unusual to find a cairn of rocks built by human hands. even

Arctic
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somewhere as remote as Ward Hunt Island, which sits off the northern coast of Canada's most northerly Arctic Island, Ellesmere. The nearest community is tiny Grise Fiord, Nunavut (pop. 150) 800 km to the south, and many who travel to these distant realms feel an urge to leave something behind.

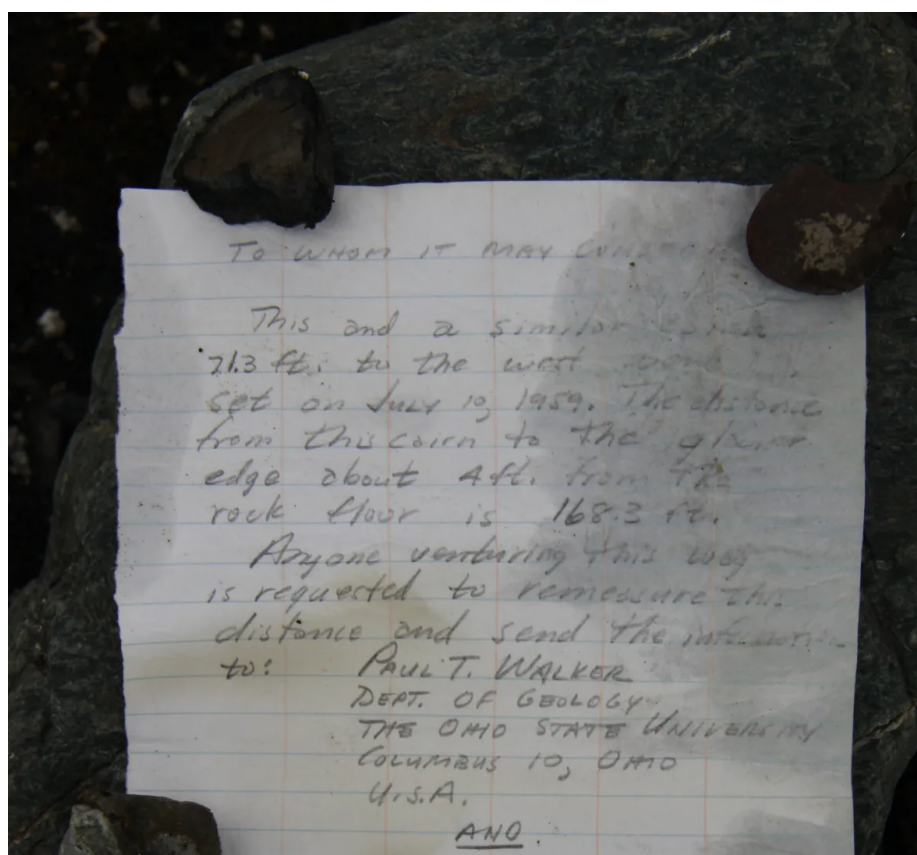
But the message found in a bottle there this summer sent shivers through the spines of a team of scientists.



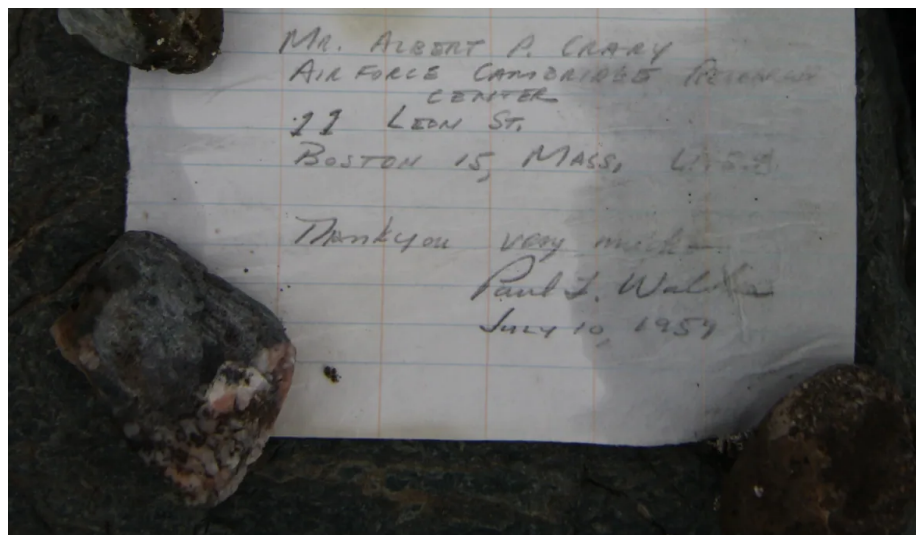
Ward Hunt Island is one of Canada's most northerly pieces of land.

"It was really quite extraordinary to be holding that piece of paper in my hands," says Dr. Warwick Vincent, who led a team of scientists to [Laval University's remote research station](#) established on the island in 2010. "It was like a message from the past."

The note was signed by Paul T. Walker, an American geologist who'd been on the site in July 10, 1959. It left detailed instructions asking whoever found it to measure the distance between another cairn and the glacier. In 1959, the distance between the cairn and the glacier was 1.2 metres. This summer it was 101.5 metres.



Ian Howat is an associate professor at Ohio State University, where Walker was working at the time. He says it took foresight to leave the note to measure how far the glacier had moved.



“You weren't going to get any proposals funded to study deglaciation in the 1950s, so if anything, most scientists would think their cairn and their message in a bottle would be overridden by the advance of the glacier, not a marker for retreat.”

American geologist Paul T. Walker showed unusual foresight by leaving a message in a bottle designed to document the retreat of a glacier. [Click for larger image.](#) (Denis Sarrazin CEN/ArcticNet)

Walker never heard from anyone.

Exactly one month after he wrote the note, he had to be flown out after he became paralyzed by a brain seizure.

He died a few months later in hospital. He was 25.

After reading and photographing the message, Vincent and his team put it back and added their own, that they hope will also receive a response sometime in the future.

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