

Skiles, William West ^[1]

Skiles, William West

by Lawrence F. London, 1994

12 Oct. 1807–8 Dec. 1862

William West Skiles, Episcopal missionary and teacher, was born in [Hertford](#) ^[2], [Perquimans County](#) ^[3]. Following a few years of formal schooling in the local schools, he worked as a mechanic and later as overseer of a group of lumber mills in the vicinity of Plymouth.

In 1844 Skiles left eastern North Carolina to settle in the newly formed community of Valle Crucis [Watauga County](#) ^[4], where [Levi Silliman Ives](#) ^[5], bishop of the Diocese of North Carolina, was in the process of developing a center for missionary work, a classical and agricultural school for boys, and a theological school. During the next year a chapel, schoolhouse, and dormitory were built as well as a sawmill and a blacksmith shop. A farm and a dairy were maintained to help support the community.

On his arrival, Skiles was placed in charge of all agricultural activities. It was not long before the duties of storekeeper, teacher, treasurer, postmaster, and general superintendent were also assigned to him. Skiles had been at Valle Crucis for only a year when he decided to study for the ministry in the recently established theological school. He was admitted as a candidate, since the General Convention of the Episcopal church had recently enacted a canon that permitted persons without a classical education to become candidates for the diaconate. In consequence of his energetic, methodical, and patient character, he was able to add theological studies to his other responsibilities. Skiles had begun to take part in the mission at Valle Crucis when he was appointed warden upon the death of the church's rector in 1846. He prepared the report of the mission's work for the diocesan convention of 1847.

In the summer of 1847 Skiles completed his theological studies, and on 1 August he was ordained a deacon by Bishop Ives in the church at Valle Crucis. Shortly after his ordination he joined the Order of the Holy Cross, which Ives had established at Valle Crucis a few months earlier. The devotional, charitable, and disciplinary nature of the order strongly appealed to him; it undoubtedly influenced his ministry, although it existed there for only two years.

Skiles entered on his vocation as missionary and teacher with vigor and enthusiasm. He visited the mission stations in the neighborhood of Valle Crucis and assisted in the services held there. In addition, he continued as general superintendent of all physical aspects of the Valle Crucis community. This work was increasingly difficult because of the lack of financial support from the outside. By 1852, when Ives resigned as bishop of the Diocese of North Carolina, all of the educational work at Valle Crucis was terminated. At this time Skiles was the only member of the original community left there. He continued to live at Valle Crucis in one of the abandoned buildings until 1855, when he moved to the home of his friend, George N. Evans, at Lower Watauga.

With the closing of the Valle Crucis enterprise, Skiles was able to devote all of his time to missionary work in the mountain region. From the diocese he received an annual stipend of \$100, which was later increased to \$150. His principal work comprised mission stations in the counties of [Ashe](#) ^[6], [Watauga](#), [Mitchell](#) ^[7], and [Yancey](#) ^[8] with occasional visits to [Burke](#) ^[9], [Caldwell](#) ^[10], and [Wilkes](#) ^[11]. On two occasions he visited Tennessee to hold services near Elizabethton. For a few years Skiles taught gratis a four-month day school for the children in the Valle Crucis neighborhood but had to give it up because of the increasing demands of his missionary work. In 1859 he reported that he had held services in sixteen places and had traveled more than a thousand miles on horseback. In the communities without a church building, services were conducted in private homes.

Many members of Skiles's widely scattered congregations depended on him for more than spiritual guidance. Because there were few doctors in the area, he acquired medical texts on the most common diseases of the region in order to give his parishioners some assistance and much comfort. He frequently served as a "public scrivener and legal advisor." His counsel was sought in settling differences between neighbors, in business matters, and on methods of farming. Of Skiles's work a contemporary wrote: "The people among whom he labored, not only Episcopalians, but of all Denominations, felt for him a deep attachment." One of Skiles's missionary projects closest to his heart was the construction of a church at Lower Watauga, about six miles from Valle Crucis, where his congregation had grown too large to meet in one of the local homes. In the fall of 1859 he began building a church with funds, materials, and labor contributed by his congregation and himself. The church, a frame Gothic building with stained glass windows, named St. John the Baptist, was completed a year later at a cost of \$700, of which Skiles donated more than a third. Bishop [Thomas Atkinson](#) ^[12] consecrated the church on 22 Aug. 1862. Only a few months after the consecration of the church, which, in the bishop's words, was "a touching and appropriate memorial of that man of God," Skiles died at the home of a friend on the Linville River. He was buried in the churchyard of St. John the Baptist.

In a tribute to Skiles, Bishop Atkinson declared that he was "a true Missionary, humble, patient, laborious and affectionate,

—not despising the day of small things, and still less despising any human soul, however rude and ignorant and sin-stained that soul might be. Long will the dwellers in the valleys and forest of that wild mountain region miss their faithful Pastor."

References:

Joseph Blount Cheshire, ed., *Sketches of Church History in North Carolina*^[13] (1892).

The Church Intelligencer (Raleigh), 16 Jan. 1863.

Susan Fenimore Cooper, *William West Skiles*^[14] (1890).

Marshall DeLancey Haywood, *Lives of the Bishops of North Carolina*^[15] (1910).

Journals of the Diocese of North Carolina 1844–63.

James B. Sill, *Historical Sketches of Churches in the Diocese of Western North Carolina*^[16] (1955).

Additional Resources:

Cooper, Susan Fenimore. 1992. *Missionary life at Valle Crucis*. Valle Crucis, N.C: Valle Crucis Conference Center. <https://archive.org/details/williamwestskiles00coop>^[17] (accessed July 25, 2014).

Search results for 'Valle Crucis Episcopal Church Mission' in North Carolina Highway Historical Marker Program: <https://www.ncdcr.gov/about/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program/Markers.aspx?MarkerId=N-9>^[18] (accessed July 25, 2014).

Search results for 'William West Skiles' in The Episcopal Church Library: <http://library.episcopalchurch.org/glossary/skiles-william-west>^[19] (accessed July 25, 2014).

Subjects:

[Biographies](#)^[20]

[Religious Leaders and Clergy](#)^[21]

[Educators](#)^[22]

Authors:

[London, Lawrence F.](#)^[23]

Origin - location:

[Perquimans County](#)^[24]

[Hertford](#)^[25]

[Ashe County](#)^[26]

[Burke County](#)^[27]

[Morganton](#)^[28]

[Caldwell County](#)^[29]

[Lenoir](#)^[30]

[Mitchell County](#)^[31]

[Watauga County](#)^[32]

[Boone](#)^[33]

[Wilkes County](#)^[34]

[Wilkesboro](#)^[35]

[Yancey County](#)^[36]

[Burnsville](#)^[37]

From:

[Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press](#)^[38]

1 January 1994 | London, Lawrence F.

Source URL: <https://ncpedia.org/biography/skiles-william-west>

Links

^[1] <https://ncpedia.org/biography/skiles-william-west> ^[2] <https://ncpedia.org/gazetteer/search/Hertford> ^[3] <https://ncpedia.org/geography/perquimans> ^[4] <https://ncpedia.org/geography/watauga> ^[5] <https://ncpedia.org/biography/ives-levi-silliman> ^[6] <https://ncpedia.org/geography/ashe> ^[7] <https://ncpedia.org/geography/mitchell> ^[8] <https://ncpedia.org/geography/yancey> ^[9] <https://ncpedia.org/geography/burke> ^[10] <https://ncpedia.org/geography/caldwell> ^[11] <https://ncpedia.org/geography/wilkes> ^[12] <https://ncpedia.org/biography/atkinson-thomas> ^[13] <https://archive.org/details/sketcheschurchh00churgoog> ^[14] <https://www.worldcat.org/title/william-west-skiles-a-sketch-of-missionary-life-at-valle-crucis-in-western-north-carolina-1842-1862/oclc/3081593> ^[15] <https://archive.org/details/livesbishopsnor00haywgoog> ^[16] <https://archive.org/details/historicalskech00sill> ^[17] <https://archive.org/details/williamwestskiles00coop> ^[18] <https://www.ncdcr.gov/about/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program/Markers.aspx?MarkerId=N-9> ^[19] <http://library.episcopalchurch.org/glossary/skiles-william-west> ^[20] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/biography-term> ^[21] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/clergy> ^[22] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/educators> ^[23] <https://ncpedia.org/category/authors/london-lawrence-f> ^[24] <https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/coastal-37> ^[25] <https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/hertford> ^[26]

<https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/mountai-20> [27] <https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/mountai-17> [28]
<https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/morganton> [29] <https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/mountai-18> [30]
<https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/lenoir-0> [31] <https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/mountai-15> [32] <https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/mountai-19> [33] <https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/mountai-24> [34] <https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/mountai-22> [35]
<https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/wilkesboro> [36] <https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/mountai-14> [37]
<https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/burnsville> [38] <https://ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/dictionary-no>