

The Corlies in Alaska 1879-1884



Anna, W.H.R., Emily, Briton, Edith, and Emily Corlies c. 1888²⁹

Author's note: I first learned of W.H.R. Corlies while researching a Tlingit village on the Taku River where I believed he and his wife Emily may have taught in 1880. Searching desperately for any information on this poorly-documented village, I began researching the Corlies themselves, hoping for any reference to their lives there. I consequently learned many things about them and about missionary work in Southeast Alaska at the time, including that the Corlies spent two winters in another Taku Tlingit village on the coast. By the time I'd exhausted all resources I could find about their lives in Alaska, I'd amassed enough information to write a short biography, which may prove useful to other historians. As it is beyond the scope of my research, I did not include many details about their lives prior to or after their five years in Alaska, nor did I attempt to craft a story beyond laying out the information I'd found in roughly chronological order. I'd like to thank the living relatives of the Corlies for providing details about their lives I would not have otherwise have known, especially great-granddaughter Alison Demyanovich who told me of Emily's diary at the American Baptist Historical Society archives and provided family photos. Please note that the transcriptions of the hand-written letters and diary are mine, and thus could include inaccuracies.

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Map of Southeast Alaska annotated with referenced locations (Taku Kwáan is only roughly outlined)

William Henry Richards (W.H.R.) Corlies (1849-1937) and his wife Emily Goddard Corlies (1845-1913) left their home in Philadelphia in the spring of 1879 for Alaska. The United States had purchased Russian America from imperial Russia 12 years earlier and there were as yet few American outposts; with only sporadic contact with friends and family, the Corlies would experience rugged frontier life in an unfamiliar landscape of rainforests and fjords. The daily lives, beliefs, and social organization of the Tlingit and Haida people, though touched by Russian, British, and American presence, remained largely as they had before Alaska's occupation. Most of Southeast Alaska was poorly mapped, and missionaries relied on Native guides and canoes for much of their travel. Among the handful of missionaries drawn to Southeast Alaska during this time, the Corlies went the furthest afield, teaching far up the Taku River on their first solo expedition and later settling in a village for two winters which had no other non-Native presence. The spark to serve in Alaska began while the family was living on their farm north of Philadelphia and heard Presbyterian minister Sheldon Jackson speak on the need for missionaries (Jackson was then beginning to establish missions in Southeast Alaska). Emily herself came from a family of missionaries and lived abroad as a child (she was born in Bangkok while her parents waited for permission to enter China). She was orphaned as a child and went to live with W.H.R.'s aunts where the two met and married when W.H.R. was 21²⁹.

The Corlies began their Alaska mission work in Fort Wrangell near the mouth of the Stikine River. According to Rev. Jackson, they *had gone out, independent of mission societies, to establish a mission at their own charges. After canvassing the field it was deemed best for Mr. Corlies to settle at Fort Wrangell as a missionary physician*⁴. The Corlies were Baptists*, but the Baptist church had yet to establish itself in Alaska (the first Baptist mission would be founded near Kodiak in 1893⁹), so perhaps they were attracted to the work that was then underway in Southeast Alaska, primarily by the Presbyterian Church. Wrangell had the benefit of a pre-existing military facility behind stockades where the missionaries could live and work. Rev. Corlies studied medicine for a year at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia⁵ *so that my usefulness may be more extended*, as he wrote to Rev. Jackson shortly before leaving for Alaska⁶. For this he was called Dr. Corlies⁵ and Jackson gives him the title M.D.⁴, but he was not a graduate of medical or theological school, though he had studied both⁷. He was ordained, perhaps as a missionary, shortly before leaving Philadelphia^{7,6}. The Corlies were moderately wealthy and did not need to work for a living, allowing them the freedom to work as independent missionaries²⁹.

Serving at Fort Wrangell

Arriving in June of 1879 with their nine-year-old son Briton, the Corlies were the third long-term missionaries to arrive and work at Fort Wrangell, following Mrs. Amanda (A.R.) McFarland in 1877 and Reverend S. Hall Young in 1878. In his first year at Wrangell, the Native population had called on Rev. Young frequently to provide medicine and medical help and he *joyfully handed over all [his] cases* to Rev. Corlies on his arrival. Young comments that *Besides doing a little new Christian work among the "Foreign Indians" up the beach, [Rev. Corlies] took charge of the sick throughout the town*⁵. Later, Rev. Corlies taught night school for adults¹⁰ and was appointed postmaster in 1880¹¹.

Emily Corlies focused her efforts on a day school for the "Foreign Indians" visiting Fort Wrangell from other

*Southeast Alaska historian Bob DeArmond several times describes Rev. Corlies as a Moravian missionary, but his source is unclear and this is not borne out by the Corlies' biographies. The September 15, 1879, edition of the *Alaska Appeal* includes the following three entries under *Churches and Missions* in Fort Wrangell⁸. Perhaps DeArmond saw it or similar erroneous publications:

Presbyterian Church,
School and Woman's Home. Rev. S. Hall Young, Superintendent.
Roman Catholic Church,
Father J. Althoff.
Moravian,
Rev. H. Corliss.

John Muir also misspells *Corlies* as *Corliss* in *Travels in Alaska*. What confusion led the *Alaska Appeal* to mistake Rev. Corlies for a Moravian is unknown (there were no Moravian missionaries in Fort Wrangell at the time).

areas who in large numbers come to the village for the purpose of trade, and usually camp on the beach above the town⁴. These were non-Shtax'héen Kwáan (people from the Stikine) Natives who set up camps and cabins on the opposite (north) side of the fort from the Shtax'héen (Stikine) Tlingit village in Etolin Bay (today's Wrangell Harbor). Wrangell had become a center of commerce in Southeast Alaska during the gold rushes on the nearby Stikine River and Cassiar region in British Columbia (accessed primarily via the Stikine) in the 1870s, providing both a trading hub and wage work that attracted Natives from 18-20 "tribes" from as far as 400 miles away (the term "tribe" here includes the 14 Tlingit kwáans in Southeast Alaska recognized by Rev. Young at the time⁵). According to Rev. Jackson, the school was *very successful, and from it the leaven of the Gospel has been carried to many distant tribes*⁴, even as far as the Yukon country according to Carrie Willard¹². A.R. McFarland elaborates that *Mrs. Corlies is doing a great work among the wild Indians. Many of their children attend church and Sabbath-school....The transient character of the pupils, as they come and go with their parents, makes it very hard and discouraging. But she has such lovely faith that she labors on cheerfully, ever hoping that they may carry to their own tribes some seed that will yet bear fruit*⁴.

On August 3rd, 1879, Rev. Corlies joined in the organization of a Christian church in Wrangell with 23 members, 18 of whom were Native⁴. Rev. Corlies gave the benediction during the formal organization in the morning and the opening prayer during the celebration of the Lord's Supper that afternoon⁴. By November 21 of the same year, the congregation (not necessarily all communicants) numbered 200-300 and the Sunday Sabbath-school had an average attendance of 175^{10,13}. Rev. Corlies taught the Sabbath-school boys who could read and Emily Corlies co-taught the "little ones"⁴. A church building was completed on October 5th, and, by December, the Corlies had moved into their new cottage next door⁴. Carrie Willard, passing through Wrangell in 1881, paints this pleasant picture of Wrangell and the Corlies: *There are a good many flowers about the house, and between the Home [A.R. McFarland's boarding school for girls] and the very neat church-building is quite a nice garden. On the other side of the church is the little cottage-home of those consecrated*



THE MCFARLAND INDUSTRIAL HOME.

Rev. W. H. R. Corlies, Wife and Boy.
Miss Dunbar.

Mrs. A. R. McFarland and Girls.
Mrs. Dickinson (the Indian Interpreter).

Rev. S. Hall Young and Wife.

Wrangell missionaries and residents in 1880 (the Corlies family is on the far left)⁴

missionaries, Dr. W.H.R. Corlies and wife. Mrs. Corlies is the daughter of a missionary to China and a more beautiful soul than hers I never recognized. I loved her from the first. Dr. Corlies, although not a graduate of either medical or theological school, has studied in both, and was ordained as a missionary.”⁷.

Stikine Tlingits threw the missionaries a feast during a visit by Rev. Henry Kendall, D.D., secretary of the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions (which visit also precipitated the foundation of the church) and gave Tlingit names to several of the guests, including Rev. Corlies. Toyatt, one of the Stikine leaders, gave his own name (meaning *Great Fighter*) to Rev. Young *because he comes and fights our battles for us*. Moses, another Christian Tlingit of the same family, described for the guests pre-Christian Tlingit naming/succession potlatch traditions (especially the great number of gifts distributed) during the feast, and then bestowed more names among the guests: *We now honor you with the names of our people, without money or blankets...you, Dr. Corlies, we call San-to-nine (brother to Mr. Young)*⁴.

The incident with the still

In January of 1880, Rev. Corlies was involved in the catalyst that caused the death of several Tlingits, including Moses and Toyatt. A group of about 50 Tlingits from Angoon were staying in the guest houses¹⁵ that were often used by visiting Native traders in the Foreign Town, and there they set up a still for making molasses rum. Once common, A.R. McFarland and Rev. Young had put considerable effort into eliminating Native stills from Fort Wrangell and the surrounding area, with reasonable success^{5,16}. Young, who was ill in bed at the time following his first canoe voyage with John Muir, describes the precipitating event as he heard it: *Dr. Corleis [sic] and his wife held meetings in the Foreign Town, and on the first Sabbath after the New Year they found their people nearly all drunk, screeching women lying about the beach with little or no clothing, exposed to the cold. The doctor, without realizing the danger of interference in a drunken mob, took Matthew and Aaron* [informal Stikine policemen] with him and attempted to break up a Hoochenoo still that was going full blast. The proprietor, who was a kinsman of old Klee-a-keet, the famous medicine-man, resented the interference. A fight ensued, and, although the sober Stickeens had the best of it, Aaron received a deep scratch on his face*⁵. (Located in Xutsnoowú Kwáan (as spelled in modern Tlingit orthography), Tlingits from Angoon were called *Hoochenoos* by missionaries of the time. Because these were the first Tlingits to learn how to distill alcohol, the product itself, which was soon produced all over Southeast Alaska, became known as *hoochenoo*, which eventually became the English word *hooch*).

Young continues the narrative by explaining that the shame of having been visibly injured (despite apparently having won the scuffle) led about ten members of Aaron’s family to visit the Xutsnoowú camp the next day *armed with pick handles and ax helves...to collect payment for the insult*. Once again, the Stikines apparently came out ahead, this time leaving the Xutsnoowús with bloody noses and black eyes⁵.

Interestingly, Rev. Corlies describes the incident somewhat differently. First, he writes that the initial exchange at the still was the result of one of the Stikines losing his temper and causing a skirmish which damaged his face and clothes, leaving him with a desire for vengeance. *Two days later, without our knowledge, some thirty unarmed Stakines went to the Hoochenoo’s village and demanded redress, which was given by a young man who came out and received a blow. All would then have ended happily had not some rash fellow struck him again, when immediately there was a general fight, the Hoochenoos bringing out their hatchets, etc., which were wrested from their grasp and used against them, wounding seven persons badly*¹⁶. A.R. McFarland agrees that the Stikines were initially unarmed and adds the detail that *two stills and a large quantity of liquor* were destroyed at the initial exchange³⁵.

Rev. Corlies dressed wounds from both sides of the conflict that evening¹⁶. The next morning, a large group of Xutsnoowú men approached the Stikine village, broke into Moses’s American-style house, and destroyed his

* Beardslee writes that *the policeman, who was a convert, tried to get clear of the task on account of its being Sunday—his real reason being, undoubtedly, that he was fully aware that a Stickiene (Stakhine) Indian, who should attempt to exercise authority over the Kootznoos [Xutsnoowús] would, beyond doubt, get into trouble*.

furniture. Despite Young's best efforts to restrain the Stikines and, to a lesser degree, the Xutsnoowús, men from both sides faced each other on the beach with firearms and exchanged a volley. Toyatt, his brother Kitchgow-ish (McFarland says this was *Santoon*, perhaps Rev. Corlies's namesake³⁵), and Moses were killed along with two Xutsnoowú men. Emily Corlies reportedly restrained her husband from joining the attempts at peace⁵.

Captain Beardslee of the U.S.S. Jamestown, who investigated the affair, put the blame squarely on Rev. Corlies: *Unfortunately, [Dr. Corlies's] zeal is not tempered with discretion and familiarity with Indian affairs....his demand [to destroy the still] was complied with, and the natural result followed; and this imprudent act of this self-constituted missionary was the true cause of the trouble and the bloodshed*¹⁷. The Xutsnoowú traders left later that month, having failed to yield one of their own chiefs to balance the death of Toyatt as the Stikines demanded, and the latter destroyed the guest houses¹⁵.

To the Taku

Beardslee's blame is probably exaggerated. Having lived at Fort Wrangell for only six months, Rev. Corlies can perhaps be forgiven for not anticipating the troubles that would follow destruction of the Xutsnoowú stills. No doubt A.R. McFarland and Rev. Young had shared with him their success in reducing local hooch production and this surely wasn't the first time Rev. Corlies had seen the effects of alcohol on local Natives and non-Natives alike (it continued to be produced by the white population without direct interference from Rev. Young⁵). His narrative about the attempted redress for Aaron's injury suggests at least some understanding of Tlingit reciprocity. Regardless, soon Rev. Corlies and his family would become much more intimate with Tlingit culture as they left the relative comfort of Fort Wrangell and headed for the Taku country the following summer.

The details of their invitation and arrangement to teach T'aaku Kwáan (people from the Taku) Tlingits in their own territory are not recorded, but Taku Tlingit were common among the visitors to Fort Wrangell and some were permanent residents within the Stikine village, having married into the area⁵; thus the Corlies had regular contact with Taku Tlingit and *received pressing invitations to come to see them*³³ during their first year in Wrangell. Two years prior, A.R. McFarland was already receiving such solicitations: *a prominent chief of the Takou tribe [came] to see me. He seemed to be a very sensible man, and expressed great anxiety to have a school for his people*⁴. In addition, after visiting with Tlingits at the Taku Harbor village of S'iknaxs'aanik'í with John Muir in the fall of 1879, Rev. Young *reported what they said and their condition to Dr. Corleis [sic], and the next fall he and his wife went to that harbor and wintered there, starting a successful mission for that tribe*⁵. The Corlies didn't settle in that village until 1882, but the information Young presented in 1879 probably fueled their interest to serve in that area. The gold rush that founded Juneau wouldn't begin until that summer (1880), so the Taku Tlingit had as yet no permanent American settlement in or near their territory.

The Corlies left Wrangell on June 15, 1880, traveling (presumably by Native canoe) over 160 miles to the mouth of the Taku River (near Taku Glacier) and another 60 or so miles up the river (probably) to the village of Naak'ina/Naak'ina.áa (Nakina). It's likely they didn't have a clear idea where they were going, as the river was wholly unmapped, having been traversed by non-Natives only a handful of times. Though the Corlies didn't provide the village's name in the two articles they submitted to Rev. Jackson for publication (below), Emily Corlies's description strongly suggests they summered at Nakina, today better known as Canoe Landing (at the head of canoe navigation on the river). If so, the clear water stream she describes was the Nakina River, and the glacial stream the Sloko River. Although numerous clear water streams enter the river below Nakina, none could be described as uniting with another to form the river, and the mainstem up to that point is opaque with glacial silt. Nakina town was built at the junction of the two rivers about 40 miles beyond today's border with Canada. It was apparently the best place to settle among the Taku Tlingit during the summer season when most families disbursed to seasonal harvesting camps throughout the drainage. A few sources place them in coastal villages that summer, but the Corlies' own descriptions belie what were probably assumptions; it's unlikely that anyone knew (or understood) where they were so far up the relatively unknown river. Aurel Krause, who places them *above [the Taku River's] mouth in a fishing village*¹⁸, may be the only author who

correctly places them that summer.

Rev. Corlies wrote a short article about their time on the river a few weeks after they returned to Fort Wrangell that fall. Though the narrative is somewhat offensive in how it describes Natives (it was common among missionaries at the time to refer to Natives as “children”), it includes enough tidbits of historical interest to copy in full:

As the Tacoo tribe had never been visited by a missionary, and I had received pressing invitations to come to see them, consequently I concluded to take my wife and family and sail for the Tacoo River. It was truly amusing to see the Indians who were sick, and those that expected to be (strongmen), coming to me to obtain a stock of medicine that would serve them in all emergencies. We parted from our beloved missionaries on the 15th of June, and returned on the 18th of September. The Lord, who sent us forth, went with us and provided for us amid difficulties, and shielded us in dangers which we would not have liked to have contemplated beforehand. We were received kindly, though cautiously at first, by the chiefs, but after they became fully acquainted with our motives and work, they repeatedly urged us to “sit down among them.” My wife and I held school twice a day, six days out of the seven, for the young folks, the attendance varying from twenty to fifty. They gave good attention, trying hard to learn; some who did not know a letter at first, could read in easy words before we left. I preached twice on Lord’s day and held Sunday school immediately after the morning service, sometimes under the trees, sometimes in the houses, in fact wherever I could obtain the best audience. Amid much that was encouraging there was one thing that made me sick at heart; namely, the vile soul-destroying hoochinoo, or native whiskey made from molasses. The trader at Tacoo had just brought a new supply of molasses the day we arrived, which the Indians bought by the barrel, and persisted in making and drinking the hoochinoo notwithstanding my warnings and entreaties. The Indians acknowledged the injury that it is doing them, but are like children who can not resist the strong temptation when it is presented. The chiefs and influential men came to me time and again begging that I would write to the great chief at Washington to stop the traders from bringing the molasses. Can not something be done to prevent the importation of molasses and thus keep this strong temptation from these children of nature who are merely governed by their passions?

Let me give a picture of how this drink makes fiends out of peaceable people. On one occasion before drinking they brought to me ten guns to keep so that they would not injure each other; a few days after this the head chief, Chitlane, invited another chief, Tukkay, to drink with him. The chiefs, with their friends, became very merry singing and shouting, keeping time with a native drum, when, as suddenly as a flash, the scene changed, and it seemed as if hell had been let loose; men and women fighting and cursing, biting great pieces of flesh out of each other like wild beasts, rolling over and over each other, kicking down their bark houses in their frenzy. The sober men, by dragging and pulling, separated the combatants, who would hold on with teeth and nail like very bulldogs. It kept them busy, for no sooner had they separated one party than another was fighting; in fact, four or five would be all rolling together on the ground. One chief found a pistol, which he placed to Chitlane’s breast and pulled the trigger, but happily it was unloaded.

A chief received a cut on his eye for which, after he was a little sobered, he demanded payment, which was refused, whereupon they fortified their houses and prepared for battle. At the commencement of the affray I had deemed it best to send my wife and child to the woods for safety, while I remained to do what I could to soothe and quiet the disturbance. As the head chief was entering my tent to get a gun, I seized him around the waist and whirled him away.

Perhaps you can obtain some faint idea, from this description, of what hoochinoo does for this people. I beg you, if anything can be done to prevent molasses from being sold to these Indians, that it be done quickly before it is too late³³.

Emily Corlies wrote a more descriptive and historically interesting article about their summer on the river, though she also falls prey to the racism of her time and culture (the Taku Tlingit were certainly not immune to the beauty of the area, even if they didn't express it in ways the missionaries understood):

An examination of the map of Alaska, contained in the February number of the Presbyterian Home Missions, will show the names Chilcat and Ft. Wrangell; between these is a small river, at whose upperfork is situated the fishing village at which we spent the greater part of last summer. I feel confident in saying that the scenery up this Tacoo River will equal in grandeur any in the world, with its snow-capped mountains, its great glistening glaciers, and its foaming cataracts. Involuntarily the questions arose, "Why all these wonderful works, with no appreciative eye to enjoy them?" Quickly the answer, "For thy pleasure they are and were created."

The passage up the river is extremely difficult. Again and again our canoe was caught by the swirling current and driven upon a sand-bank, when "Sic-i-jik, sic-i-jik!" shouted the steersman and our strong-armed Indian crew would use their poles with all their might, but often unsuccessfully; then "Heen nagoo, heen nagoo!" was vociferated, and they would all leap into the water and drag the boat off by main force.

Sometimes all the passengers were landed on an immense sand-bank and requested to walk across, while the canoe was towed around. Should any streams intersect these islands the ladies of the party, either white or Indian, must walk, or be carried by the men.

Of the two streams that unite to form this river one proceeds directly from a glacier, and its waters are exceedingly cold and chalky white [probably the Sloko River], while the other is warmer, and as clear as crystal [probably the Nakina River], so that the twenty varieties of fish sporting beneath its surface may be clearly seen.

To preach the gospel to those Takoo Indians it was necessary to follow them to this their favorite fishing-place, where the salmon are very large and excellent. At first we were coldly received by the chiefs, who wished no interference with their slaves or their "hoochinoo;" but the young people heard us gladly, and attended regularly the school that we opened at once. Most of them did not know a letter at first, but they learned so rapidly, that within a few weeks they were reading words of three or four letters. When the morning session of school closed we hastened to the woods for shelter from the burning sun. There the trees were deciduous, and raspberries, strawberries, currants, and a great variety of berries before unknown to us, were found. In the cool evenings we held another session, and at nine or ten o'clock, when the deepening twilight prevented the further use of slates or books, we often sang together one after another of the sweet Moody and Sankey hymns. The Indians quickly learned the melody, and the words were interpreted to them, that they might sing with the understanding. Thus those mountains, which for ages had stood silent witnesses to the glory of God, now rang with the echoes of human voices singing his praises. May those voices continue to sing them with the heart as well as the understanding, until at last, in heaven, they join the "Allelujah" to the Lamb.

Being thus alone among the natives, it would have been worse than useless to employ forcible measures against "hoochinoo;" but my husband endeavored, by showing the evils attending its use, and giving them God's word on the subject, to put a stop to it; and we believe his words were not lost, especially among the young people, most of whom refrained from it all summer. The Sunday morning services were held in the houses of the chiefs, and in the afternoons, either before our tent, or on the other side of the river, where a few Indians were camped, who did not care enough for the good news of salvation to cross the stream to hear it. We had to take our congregations just as we found them, for a while, until they learned better—a half dozen watching their fish, ready to turn the stick on which it was spitted before the fire when necessary; a number of others gathered around one pot or dish, helping themselves to its contents by means of immense spoons, whose bowls measured five or six inches in length; others were lazily rolled up



Photos from an 1897 expedition up the Taku River showing Tlingit canoes with sails, likely similar to those the Corlies traveled in (top), and structures (including grave houses on the hill) at Nakina (bottom)³².

in their blankets, half dozing, while the rest listened attentively. The meetings held later in the season were a decided contrast to these earlier ones, especially the last, when a large Indian house was crowded with a quiet and attentive audience. It was evening, and the flickering fire lighted up the rows of painted faces turned toward Mr. Corlies, and the feeble candle held for his benefit. The little candle did its best, which was not much, but it gave the light by which the word of God was read. So may we let our light shine in this dark world³⁴.

A.R. McFarland provides one more detail to their summer on the Taku River:

Dr. Corlies and family have returned [to Wrangell]. They are glad to get back to their little home, for they had rather a hard time. They got scarce of food—have been on an allowance of so much per day for some time before they started home, and could not get anything where they were. But they do not regret going. They are hopeful that some of the seed sown may have fallen onto good ground, and will bring forth fruit to the glory of God. We were quite as glad to have them home as they were to come. You know Mr. Young has been gone since August, and the ladies have had all the mission work to do, including Sabbath service. Then I was so anxious for the doctor to come on account of my sick children³⁶.

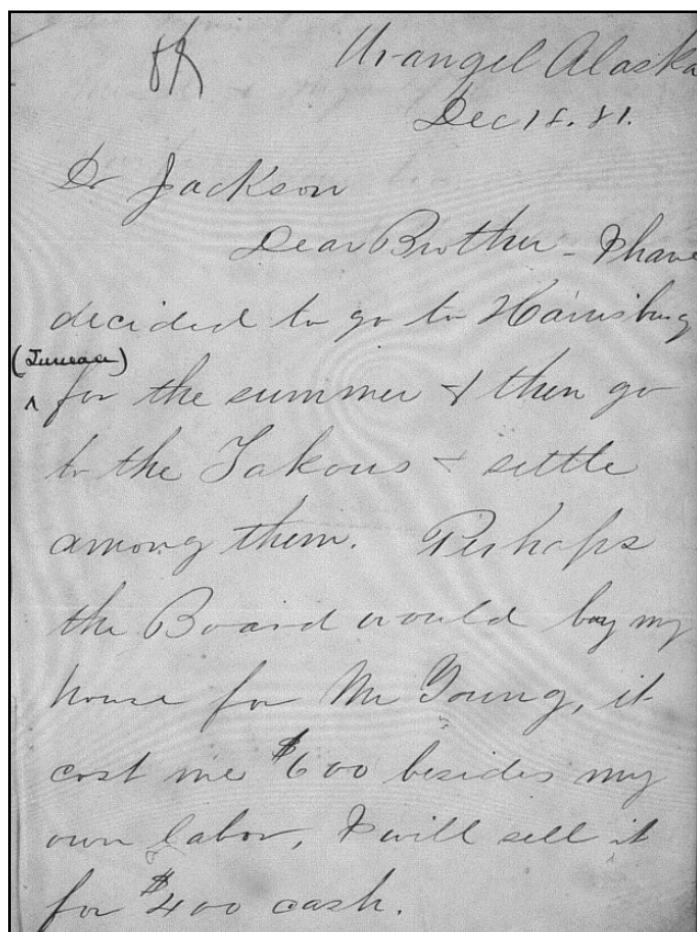
1881

After returning to Wrangell on September 18, 1880, the Corlies lived and worked from there for the next year and a half, joined by a new baby, Anna, in November². Rev. Corlies traveled through Southeast Alaska extensively in the summer of 1881 while assisting Rev. Jackson in establishing missions. He accompanied Jackson and missionaries Carrie and Eugene Willard to Portage Bay (arriving July 18) where they and three carpenters spent two weeks building a house, the foundation of Haines Mission⁷. Leaving the Willards behind, Rev. Jackson and Rev. Corlies headed to Hoonah where they left the three carpenters and building materials to construct a house for missionaries Mr. and Mrs. Styles¹⁴. By August 22, Rev. Corlies and Rev. Jackson were in the Haida village of Howkan on Prince of Wales Island where they founded a mission and left James E. Chapman¹⁴, a carpenter, in charge until Rev. Young's cousin, J. Loomis Gould, "missionary to the Hydas", could relieve him⁵. (Rev. Jackson named *Corlies Point* in nearby Howkan Strait for the missionary, though this name appears to be obsolete¹⁹).

Juneau to Taku Harbor, 1882-1883

After the 1881 summer back at their home in Fort Wrangell (and traveling around Southeast Alaska), the Corlies resolved to return to the Taku people and sold their Wrangell house. As Emily writes on April 10, 1882:

We expect to go to Juneau next June, the Lord permitting, where we will remain during the summer teaching the Indians who gather there from all tribes at that time; in the fall we expect to go to Tsiknuksanky, and erect a church building, living ourselves in an Indian house and holding meetings and school in the same building for the time being⁶.



Wrangell Alaska
Dec 18. 81.
Dr Jackson
Dear Brother - I have
decided to go to Harrisburg
(Juneau)
for the summer & then go
to the Takous & settle
among them. Perhaps
the Board would buy my
house for Mr Young, it
cost me \$600 besides my
own labor, I will sell it
for \$400 cash.

Excerpt of a letter from Rev. Corlies to Rev. Jackson, December 18, 1881: *Dr. Jackson, Dear Brother, I have decided to go to Harrisburg [Juneau] for the summer & then go to the Takous & settle among them. Perhaps the Board would buy my house for Mr. Young, it cost me \$600 besides my own labor, I will sell it for \$400 cash⁶.*

Rev. Corlies's position as medical missionary at Fort Wrangell was taken by Rev. John W. McFarland, A.R. McFarland's nephew, who arrived in Wrangell in March of 1882¹⁴.

In August, having established themselves in Juneau, the Corlies put 12-year-old Briton on a boat bound for Portland and thence home to Philadelphia where he would be *safe from the temptations of this wicked place*, to the great sorrow of his parents²¹. According to their granddaughter, *The Indian Boys were having a bad influence on young Briton, so they sent him home to his grandmother*²⁹. Emily Corlies taught school in Juneau that summer¹⁴ and, on October 30, the remaining family (W.H.R., Emily, and baby Anna) moved to the Taku Tlingit village in Taku Harbor, *S'iknaxs'aanik 'i* in modern Tlingit orthography:

*At midnight we arrived safely at Takoo Harbor. Though we came in canoes and it rained most of the time yet no one took cold. The Indians received us kindly and made us welcome in their overcrowded house*²¹.

The next day, Emily Corlies notes that *The Lord has graciously provided us a shelter in Tukkay's unfinished house* (Tukkay was one of the chiefs they met on the Taku River), and the following day she opened her school *with a good attendance*. On November 17, building materials arrived and Rev. Corlies began building their house *without a carpenter, and with Indian help*²¹. At the end of November, Emily Corlies summed up their experiences during that first month living at *S'iknaxs'aanik 'i*:

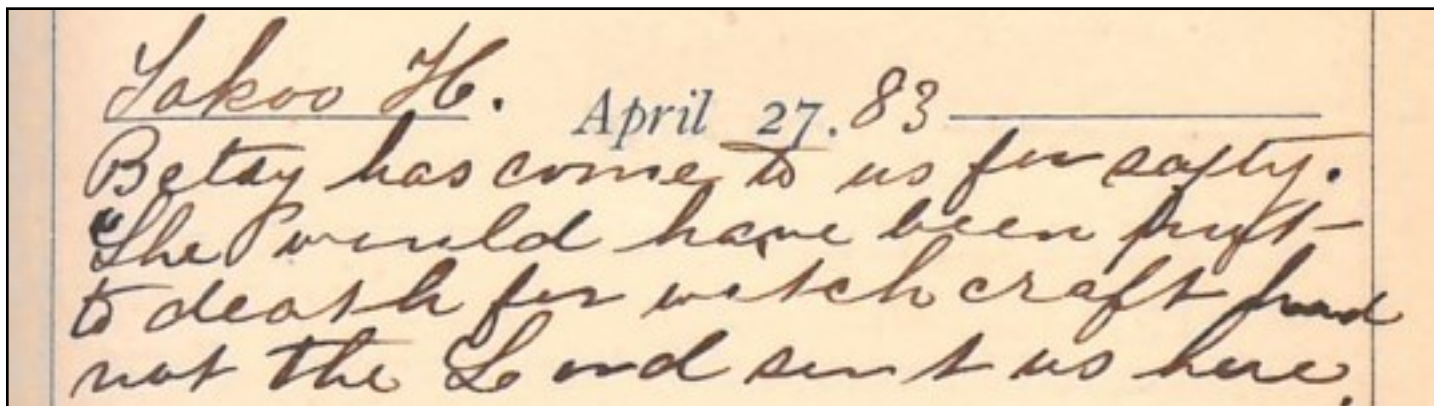
*This month has been exceedingly trying physically but God has brought us safely through and graciously blessed our effort for the people. The meetings and school have been well attended. There has been scarcely any drinking and the people listen attentively to what we say. Both little Anna and I were seized with pleurisy while living in Tukkay's unfinished house but through the blessing of God on the treatment of my dear husband we soon recovered*²¹.

On December 1, the Corlies family moved into their new house just two weeks after work commenced²¹. Several of Emily Corlies's other diary entries describe challenges they faced later that winter:

February 11, 1883: *The [illegible, (number?)] near zero, suffering for wood. [Illegible proper name] a heathen brought an armful and gave us.*

February 13, 1883: *Wood nearly gone, would have been obliged to close school, but appealed to the boys and in time for the second session they brought a large supply.*

February 20, 1883: *Our wood was so nearly gone that I should have been obliged to close school tomorrow, we knew not where to look for more, when very unexpectedly a supply was brought. Have had no chance to buy meat for weeks and our supply was almost exhausted but today an abundance came all from the loving care of our Father*²¹.



The image shows a handwritten diary entry on aged paper. The text is written in cursive and reads: "Takoo H. April 27. 83. Betay has come to us for safety. She would have been put to death for witchcraft had not the Lord sent us here." The entry is written in dark ink and is framed by a thin black border.

Emily Corlies's diary entry from Taku Harbor, April 27, 1883: *Betay has come to us for safety. She would have been [illegible] to death for witchcraft had not the Lord sent us here*²¹.

Rev. Corlies and the locals continued construction after the house was finished and, on April 8, 1883, a new church building was opened, *the second church building in Alaska* according to Emily Corlies²¹ (more accurately the second recently-constructed protestant church). In another entry from this time, she thanked God for a Tlingit girl named Whooshdadady who went to Juneau and *was almost forced to drink beer at the dance house, but she refused because it was wrong. She also kept a companion from falling into sin by quoting something I had said often* (April 10). A few days later (April 13), she wrote that *A large number of young girls promised me today not to listen to the solicitations of any white men at Juneau. May God help them*²¹.

Though the Corlies' writings from their time at S'iknaxs'aanik'i are sparse, these and other diary entries as well as their letters suggest that that reducing alcohol consumption and protecting Native women from non-Native men were key elements of their work, on top of instruction. The Corlies also protected a woman that winter who was fleeing from an accusation of witchcraft who, Emily Corlies writes, would otherwise have been killed²¹.

Rev. Corlies wrote to Rev. Jackson early the next summer (May 5, 1883), including further insights into their lives that first winter in Taku Harbor⁶:

The Indian name of the Takoo village where I have my mission building is TSEK-NUK-SANK-Y [S'iknaxs'aanik'i], the English name Takoo Harbor, or Durham Bay.

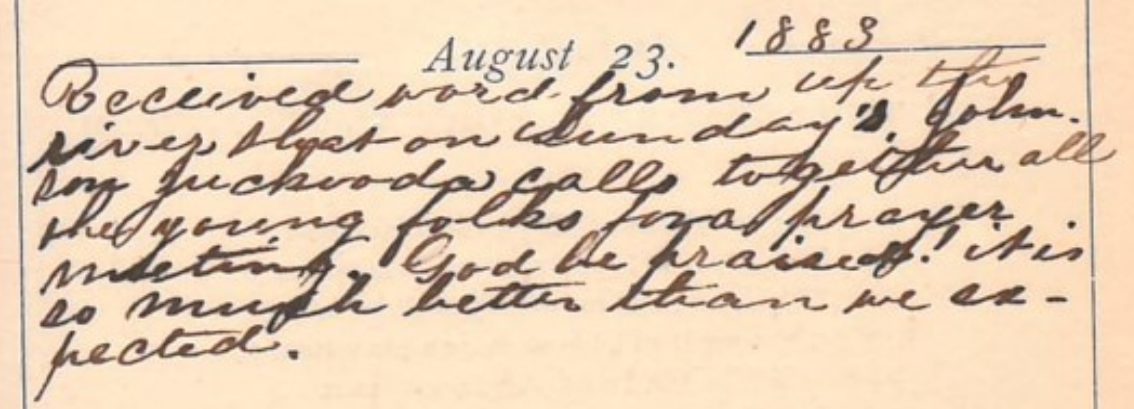
The Takoos are a truly heathen people & the work last winter was a difficult one, yet God has been pleased to bless my imperfect labors beyond my brightest hopes. Peace & quietness prevailed where before there had been riot & drunkenness, a good church attendance for a beginning, 175 the largest at any one time. My wife has on her school roll 132 names and an average attendance of 70 scholars. I have erected a dwelling 26x26 one story & a half, seven windows, double floors the kitchen & ceilings ceiled with plowed [?] & grooved boards. Also a church 30 x 40, six windows, ceiled inside, benches, [illegible] & all complete. The cost of the two buildings is \$1050 & all paid for.

On April 20, 1883, Emily Corlies wrote *I closed my school today and feel very much encouraged with the progress my pupils have made*²¹. The family arrived back in Juneau on May 3 and began taking part in services:

May 6, 1883: *Our first Sunday here this year and so different from last year, the Indian house where we held the morning meeting was crowded and some were unable to enter. Thus God is glorifying Himself.*

May 13, 1883: *The rooms in the government building were filled to overflowing twice today by Indians and there was a good attendance of the English service in the evening. So different from last summer that our hearts are filled with wondering gratitude*²¹.

Emily Corlies's diary entry from Juneau, August 23, 1883: *Received word from up the river that on Sundays, Johnson Juckooda [?] calls together all the young folks for a prayer meeting. God be praised! It's so much better than we expected*²¹.



August 23. 1883
Received word from up the river that on Sunday's John. Juckooda calls together all the young folks for a prayer meeting. God be praised! it is so much better than we expected.

On March 10, 1883, a local newspaper described the Corlies' movements and work in the area: *Frequent visitors to camp are Dr. and Mrs. W. H. R. Corlies, the Presbyterian missionaries from Philadelphia. They come here to hold services and get their mail and needed supplies but are living at the Taku village near the south end of Gastineau Channel. They have a comfortable house there and a small building that serves as both school and place of worship. Last summer Mrs. Corlies taught a school among the Auk children here and it is understood that she will do the same next summer. There is as yet no arrangement for a school for the growing number of white children in the camp*²². Based on this article, it appears that the Corlies made periodic trips to Juneau during their first winter at Taku Harbor.

Juneau and Taku Harbor, 1883-1884

Emily Corlies reopened her summer school in Juneau on May 21, 1883, with 61 students²¹. That summer, Rev. Corlies handled the transfer of mail from Juneau to the newly-established post office in Haines (he calls it *Chilkat* in his letter to Rev. Jackson with the details), hiring Johnson Yasnoos (Chief Johnson of the Takus) to carry the mail by canoe for \$25/month for most of the year and \$50/month during December, January, and February^{6,14}. More details of their work that summer are elusive, but on October 3, Rev. Corlies wrote to Rev. Jackson about their impending trip back to S'iknaxs'aanik'i:

*In about two weeks I expect to leave here for Takoo Harbor; this moving the household goods of a family by canoe, perhaps in a driving rain storm, is at least not a holiday excursion. But with what different feeling we go this year with a good house there waiting for us*⁶.

Little information is available for the next two months, for Emily Corlies does not update her diary but once during that time (for an earthquake), but on January 8, 1884, Rev. Corlies provided an update to Rev. Jackson by letter, here copied in full:

Rev. Sheldon Jackson D.D.

Dear Brother,

*I have not heard anything from the outside world for seven weeks. The north wind has been so strong that no one has dared to cross in a canoe. My letters are waiting for me at Juneau & I will get them in due time but it is very hard to wait. My little daughter asks, "Who are you writing to." I reply Dr. Jackson, when at once she commences talking about you. I am often surprised how much she talks about you, but it seems that your kindness to her when you visited us at Juneau made a deep impression on her. We are greatly indebted to you for the rolls of papers [?] you so kindly sent. Mrs. Corlies wishes me to especially mention *The American Teacher* which you sent to her, she is very much pleased with it because of the valuable hints it contains. We are getting along here very nicely the school is well & regularly attended, the scholars are making good progress, not in just learning to read the English without knowing the meaning like many Indians that I know who can read in the third reader & yet not understand a thing that they are reading, but substantial progress that will be of real benefit to them.*

You know how the Indians congregate where they can obtain work & there is every prospect of a large quartz mill being erected at Juneau. Therefore whether I can hold the Indians here or not is a question which only the near future will decide. This winter there are not so many Indians here as last. I send you a rough draft of the coast between here & Juneau.

I am preparing a vocabulary of the Indian language, also about thirty hymns in Indian. Would the Presbyterian Board of Publication publish them, please let me know? The vocabulary will be a great help to the Indians who are learning the English language besides helping the missionaries acquire [?] the Indians. The hymns are an acknowledged success. It is very cheering to go into an Indian house & hear an old heathen singing the gospel in his own tongue, the truth by this means constantly ringing in his heart. Please do not make it public about the hymns & vocabulary.

I feel very sad over the condition of things at Ft. Wrangell. May God overrule it for good.

*Mrs. Corlies joins me in much love to yourself & wife.
Your brother in Christ,
W.H.R. Corlies.⁶*

Back to Philadelphia

Correspondence from Alaska ends shortly thereafter, and the Corlies family was back in Philadelphia by April of 1884. Apparently, Briton's stay with his grandmother, designed to protect him from the influence of Native boys, *was not a success either, so they finally came home for his sake*²⁹. The return had been planned since the previous fall and they rejoiced at being reunited with Briton⁶. It was apparently their intent to return to Alaska after summering in Philadelphia, for Rev. Corlies wrote Rev. Jackson on May 21 that *My wife expects to be confined in Sept. consequently we will not be able to go to Alaska before Nov*⁶. Emily Corlies gave birth to her daughter Emily on September 12, but the family remained in Philadelphia.

Wrapping things up in Alaska

In 1886, the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions commissioned E. S. Willard (formerly of Haines Mission) to serve the Native community in Juneau. Rev. Willard *erected a neat structure for the natives from material brought from the mission premises at Tsek-nuk-Sauk'y* [S'iknaxs'aanik'i], *purchased from Rev. Corlies*¹⁴. The Corlies also owned two lots in Juneau, one of which was located on 3rd and Main St. where Rev. Corlies had begun construction of a log cabin. Rev. Young *secured the transfer of the old log church* from Rev. Corlies¹⁴ in 1885, finished it, and called it "The Northern Light Church", the first church for whites built in Alaska since the 1840s⁵. Rev. Corlies wrote Rev. Jackson from Philadelphia about the property transfers in July of 1885:

*Mr. Young wrote to me about those lots in Juneau which I answered last mail by saying that the one situated in the block they wish for a church building I give for that purpose but for the other one I want one hundred dollars. These lots have cost me twenty-five dollars in cash besides much personal labor*⁶.



Two photos of the Native Presbyterian Church in Juneau constructed from the Corlies' Taku Harbor buildings^{23,32}

Perhaps the Corlies had built a house on the second lot while teaching in Juneau. The log cabin church, as Young's Northern Light Church was widely known, was a fixture in early Juneau and, in addition to its duties as church, served variously as the first school for white students²⁰, the offices of The City Brewery²⁴, and a carpenter's shop, among other uses, before it was torn down in 1914. A replica was erected in 1980 for Juneau's centennial celebration²⁵.

The Corlies apparently did not return to Alaska, but a line from Rev. Corlies's July 1885 letter to Rev. Jackson hints at the deep impression it had made:

*I was very glad to hear from you concerning yourself & the work in that land where my heart still is.*⁶

Rev. Corlies studied for the ministry on his return from Alaska, ultimately serving at several churches over his career, organizing a mission, and building a church on Chester Avenue²⁹. Emily, among other pursuits, became president of the Women's Baptist Foreign Missionary Society for Christian work¹. In 1898, Briton, then a medical doctor, left for missionary work in Suichaufu, China, where he established a hospital. His sister Anna joined him there after graduating from the Woman's Medical College of Philadelphia, serving as resident physician at the Woman's Hospital, and studying the Bible at Baptist Training School and Hasseltine House²⁹.

Among their belongings from Alaska, the Corlies took with them a set of Tlingit gambling sticks *consisting of 61 cylindrically carved wood sticks, finely painted in red and black with geometrical and formline motifs, contained in a hide roll up pouch secured with a long hide tie*. The set sold for \$3,585 on www.christies.com in 2002²⁷.

Emily Corlies died of a stroke in 1913 while addressing a women's meeting at her home²⁹; her gravestone in Arlington Cemetery, Philadelphia, reads *Absent from the body, present with the Lord*²⁸. Their fourth surviving child, born Edith Abbott Corlies in 1887, took care of her father until his death in 1937²⁹. Rev. Corlies's headstone, next to Emily's, reads *All hail the power of Jesus' name*³⁰.



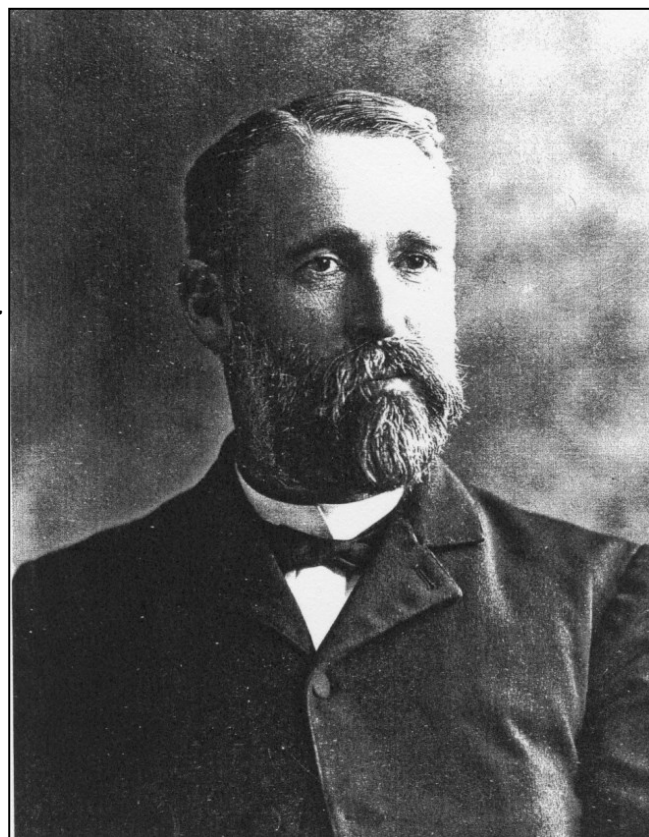
Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

The completed log cabin church in Juneau³¹

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W.H.R. Corlies²⁹