

THE CHARLESTON MUSEUM
121 Rutledge Avenue
Charleston, SC 29401

NEWS & PUBLIC SERVICE RELEASE

December 8, 1975

AIKEN HOUSE GIVEN TO MUSEUM

The Charleston Museum announces the receipt of the deed to the Governor William Aiken House at 48 Elizabeth St. as a gift from Mrs. I'on Rhett (Frances Dill Rhett). The house and property spreading along Elizabeth St. from Judith to Mary Streets will be used by the Museum for displays and other Museum activities.

Much of the splendid furnishings of the house have been made available to the Museum but they have been removed for safe-keeping until such a time as restoration of the house is completed. Security devices are being installed to protect the house and grounds from vandalism.

The property now known as 48 Elizabeth St. was once part of the holdings of Joseph Wragg. Upon his death in 1751 his extensive properties were partitioned among his nine children. On December 20, 1804 this property was released by Henrietta, Elizabeth and Charlotte Wragg to James Henry Ladson for one dollar. On June 24, 1817 the property was sold by Ladson to a Thomas P. Chiffelle--the spelling of his name varies from one document to the next. On December 26, 1817 Thomas P. Chiffield sold the property to John Robinson, a wealthy merchant. Robinson built a 12 room double house, which remains as the core of the present house.

In the late 1820's Robinson got into financial difficulties. On September 29, 1925 he released this and various other land in Charleston, Sullivan's Island, Florida and elsewhere to Charles Edmonston, William Aiken Sr. and Lewis Petray for debts amounting to \$195,200.00. Apparently this was set aside by the courts for on March 7, 1827. Robert Martin, Master in Equity, released the Robinson residence to William Aiken, Sr. for \$15,600.00. The property again changed hands when Aiken was killed in an accident on March 4, 1831. As he died intestate, title was passed jointly to his widow, Henrietta Aiken, and his son, William Aiken, Jr.

In 1832 William Aiken, Jr. married Harriet Lowndes. In March 1833 Henrietta Aiken and her son agreed to a partition of the Aiken properties; 48 Elizabeth became the property of William, Jr. During

the 1830's the Aikens enlarged the house, closed the central entrance which had faced Judith St. and built the dramatic Greek revival entrance facing onto Elizabeth St. It was probably at this time that Aiken enlarged the kitchen building, doubling its length. The Gothic arches added to all of the outbuildings may also date to this period. In 1857 Aiken added the art room along Elizabeth St. He traveled to Europe to obtain the paintings and statuary for the room. These pieces still exist and are presently in storage.

Upon the death of William Aiken, Jr. on September 6, 1887, the house and property passed jointly to his wife, Harriet, and his daughter, Henrietta Aiken Rhett, wife of A. Burnett Rhett, a son of the celebrated Robert Barnwell Rhett. In 1892 Harriet Aiken died intestate, thus leaving Henrietta Aiken Rhett as sole heir. On December 14, 1918 Henrietta died and left the property to her five children, each of whom in turn passed partial ownership to additional relatives. In September of 1949 Henrietta's son, I'on L. Rhett purchased the various outstanding part interests in the property so that he and Mrs. Rhett would own the buildings and grounds outright. I'on L. Rhett died on December 18, 1959, leaving Mrs. Rhett as sole owner of the Governor William Aiken House.

* * *

William Aiken, Sr. was born in County Antrim, Ireland. At this point we have few dates on his activities. Upon moving to Charleston, he became a merchant and served in the state legislature. He is best known of course as a railroad promoter. In 1828 he was the prime mover behind the planning and construction of the Charleston and Augusta Railroad. 136 miles long, it was the longest railroad in the world when it was opened. Aiken became one of the wealthiest men in Charleston before his death in 1831.

William Aiken, Jr., educated in Charleston, attended South Carolina College from which he graduated in 1825. After graduation he travelled extensively and returned to Charleston to marry Henrietta Lowndes in 1831. He was active in developing a rice plantation on Jehossee Island near Charleston. In 1838 he was sent to the Lower House of Legislature by St. Michael's and St. Phillip's parishes. He was reelected in 1840.

In 1842 Aiken was sent to the Senate and that year was chosen Governor by the legislature. He also served from 1844 to 1846 as Governor. His term in office is noted as a quiet one during which he spent most of his time developing the economic interests of the state, particularly the railroad. In 1850 he was elected to the House of Representatives and was returned to the 33rd and 34th Congresses. Aiken was not known as a debater, but he used his influence on legislation through his position on various committees.

Governor Aiken was known as a man of sterling character. He was free of party and factional violence. He opposed disunion, regretted secession, but contributed to the Southern cause during the Civil War with supplies and subscription to Confederate loans. In 1863 he entertained President Jefferson Davis at the Aiken House. In 1865 he was arrested by Federal authorities and taken to Washington, but he was released on parole. After the war he was reelected by his constituents to Congress, but he was denied his seat by action of Northern members.

William Aiken was active in numerous charities. He served as a Trustee of the Peabody Fund, helped with scholarships for students at the College of Charleston and worked to provide free tuition for the students. The cornerstone of the Hibernian Hall pays tribute to Aiken's role as a member of the building committee which erected the hall in 1839.

Governor Aiken died in Flatrock, N.C. on September 6, 1887. A great man interested in politics, history and the arts, he would probably appreciate the use of his home as a portion of the Charleston Museum complex. We appreciate very much the generosity of Mrs. Frances Dill Rhett in making this possible.