

Governor William Aiken
(1806-1887)
and Harriet Lowndes Aiken
(1812-1892)

Governor William Aiken and Harriet Lowndes Aiken were the grandparents of Harriet Lowndes Rhett Maybank, wife of Dr. Joseph Maybank.

Governor Aiken was born January 28, 1806, in Charleston, the only son of William Aiken, Sr. (1779-1831) and Henrietta Wyatt.¹ His father, born in Ireland and brought to Charleston at the age of 10, was a wealthy merchant and planter, and subsequently was president of the South Carolina Rail Road. William Aiken, Sr., was killed by being thrown from his carriage, pulled by a runaway horse in the streets of Charleston, in March, 1831.² His mother, a daughter of Charleston merchant Peter Wyatt and his wife, Violetta Lingard, was a wealthy heiress, described by a relative as "a lady of culture and great beauty." After the death of William Aiken, Sr., she married George Edwards, a Charleston merchant. She died in Paris, September 7, 1848.³

William Aiken attended private schools in Charleston and was graduated from the University of South Carolina in 1825.⁴ He traveled extensively after graduating from college.⁵

Aiken inherited fortunes from his parents and was a very wealthy rice and cotton planter in South Carolina.⁶ His main plantation was on Jehossee Island in St. John's, Colleton, Parish, which he inherited from his father.⁷ He also owned the large mansion at 48 Elizabeth Street in Charleston, and considerable investment properties in the city. The slave schedules of the federal census of 1850, lists 878 slaves he owned in Charleston and Colleton districts.⁸ According to a family genealogist, his ownership of such a large number of slaves was due partly to his benevolence:

It was said that this was assisted through his sentimentality that, he never sold a slave or broke up a family - but invariably purchased the negro boy or girl of the neighboring plantation who became involved with a corresponding girl or boy on any of his plantations.⁹

In addition to his planting interests, Aiken invested in railroads and other business enterprises. He was a director of the Charleston and Hamburg Railroad (ca. 1832-1836), a

director of the Planter's and Mechanics' Bank of Charleston (ca. 1833-1836, 1849-1857), director of the Peoples' National Bank of Charleston (ca. 1867-1868, 1874-1875), and a director of the City Railroad Company of Charleston (1869). He was an incorporator of the Charleston and Philadelphia Steam Packet Company (1835), of the Moultrie House Company, a hotel enterprise on Sullivan's Island (1850), and of the West Point Mill Company (1860-1861).¹⁰ The 1860 census for the city of Charleston valued his real and personal estates at \$290,600 and \$12,000, respectively.¹¹

A Democrat, Aiken entered politics in 1838, when he was elected to the South Carolina House of Representatives, representing the city parishes of St. Philip's and St. Michael's.¹² He served in the House until 1842.¹³ While a member of the House, Aiken served on the committees on agriculture (1838-1841), the colored population (1838-1839), privileges and elections (1840-1841) and public buildings (1840-1841).¹⁴ In 1842, he was elected to the South Carolina Senate, again representing the city parishes, and served in that body until 1844.¹⁵ In the state Senate, he served on the committee on roads and buildings (1842-1844).¹⁶

The South Carolina gubernatorial race of 1844 was hotly contested between the Nullificationists and the Unionists. The Nullificationists, led by Robert Barnwell Rhett, contended that South Carolina, as a "sovereign" state, had the right to "nullify" any Federal legislation, such as a tariff, which South Carolina considered contrary to her best interests, or to secede from the Union. The Unionists were opposed to any political action which would lead South Carolina into secession from the Union. In July of 1844, Rhett, in a speech he made in Bluffton, a summer resort near Beaufort, launched the Bluffton Movement specifically to challenge the Tariff of 1842. Whitemarsh B. Seabrook, a wealthy Edisto Island planter, entered the governorship race as the Blufftonite candidate. But most of the South Carolina political leadership, counseled to caution by John C. Calhoun, opposed the Bluffton Movement.¹⁷ William Aiken, who opposed Nullification, was elected Governor of South Carolina by a secret vote of the General Assembly on December 7, 1844, after three indecisive ballots.¹⁸ Seabrook's reaction, according to South Carolina historian Henry Duncan Wallace, was "exceedingly bitter." According to Wallace:

. . . Seabrook . . . wrote Calhoun that his defeat by the wealthy William Aiken was brought about by corrupting legislators through banking accommodations, backed up by Ker Boyce [a wealthy Charleston merchant, wharf-owner and politician] and the Charleston money power. Ownership of two newspapers [both

the Charleston Courier and the Charleston Mercury opposed the Bluffton Movement] has been bought and another bid for. How much of this is mere rage at the victory of the Unionist Aiken we cannot say.¹⁹

Despite its turbulent beginning, Governor Aiken's term, 1844-1846, was a relatively calm period, politically. It occurred in the quiet interim between two great political conflicts in the nation, after the Nullification Crisis of the 1830s and early '40s and before the quarrel in the late 1840s and early '50s, over whether slavery should expand into the western territories taken in the Mexican War.²⁰ He devoted his efforts mainly toward economic development and railroad construction.²¹ A notable event of his term was the chartering of the Graniteville Manufacturing Company with a capital of \$3,000,000, in 1845. The establishment of that firm is considered to be the beginning of the growth of large-scale manufacturing in South Carolina.²²

After he left the governor's office on December 8, 1846, Aiken retired to his plantation for a few years.²³ He did express his opinion, however, against the taking of Mexican territory by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which officially ended the Mexican War.²⁴

He was elected to represent the Charleston Congressional District in the United States House of Representatives in 1851 and served until 1857.²⁵ In 1856, he was a reluctant candidate for Speaker of the House, and lost by a narrow margin on the 133d ballot.²⁶

He retired to private life again in 1857, declining to seek re-election.²⁷

Governor Aiken was opposed to the secession of South Carolina from the Union in 1860.²⁸ During the Civil War, however, he made substantial loans to the government of the Confederate States of America.²⁹ He was visited in Charleston in the fall of 1863 by the Confederate President, Jefferson Davis. According to the diarist, Mary Boykin Chesnut, "Mr. Aiken's perfect old Carolina style of living delighted him."³⁰ After the defeat of the Confederacy, he was arrested as an ex-Governor, and taken to Washington, where he was only briefly detained, however.³¹

In 1865, he was once again elected to the United States House of Representatives, but the Radical Republicans who then controlled Congress refused to seat him.³²

In addition to his role in state and national politics, Governor Aiken was active on the local level. He was a Charleston commissioner to open subscriptions of stock for the Edgefield Railroad Company (1834), a commissioner of the poor on Charleston Neck (1835-1836), and a

commissioner to receive subscriptions for the Union Insurance and Trust Company (1838). He was a trustee of the Mary Street School in Charleston (1838), an *ex officio* trustee of the South Carolina College (1844-1846), and commissioner of the Charleston Orphan House (ca. 1851-1856).³³ He was an original trustee of the Peabody Fund (ca. 1867-1887).³⁴

Aiken was a vestryman and warden at St. Paul's Church, Radcliffeborough. He also was a member of the Charleston Library Society (ca. 1832-1868), the Hibernian Society (1830), the South Carolina Society (1831), the Elliott Society of Natural History of Charleston (ca. 1858) and the Vanderbilt Benevolent Society of Charleston (1880s).³⁵

William Aiken was married to Harriet Lowndes on February 3, 1831, at St. Philip's Church.³⁶ Harriet Lowndes was born February 28, 1812, in Charleston.³⁷ She was a daughter of Thomas Lowndes (1766-1843) and Sarah Bond I'On. Her mother, Sarah Bond I'On, was a great-great-granddaughter of David Maybank II and Susannah Wigfall and a daughter of Jacob Bond I'On and Mary Ashby of Christ Church Parish.³⁸ Harriet Lowndes Aiken and her siblings were among the heirs of the substantial estate of their uncle, Jacob Bond I'On.³⁹ A full-length portrait of Harriet Lowndes Aiken hangs in the Aiken-Rhett House in Elizabeth Street.

The marriage of Governor Aiken and Harriet Lowndes produced a single child, a daughter Henrietta Aiken Aiken, born July 7, 1836, in Charleston. She married Andrew Burnet Rhett.⁴⁰

Andrew Burnet Rhett (1831-1879) was a son of Robert Barnwell Rhett and Elizabeth Washington Burnet. He was a descendant of Colonel William Rhett (1666-1722), who rid the South Carolina coast of pirates in 1719, and Landgrave Thomas Smith, governor of South Carolina during the Lords Proprietors' regime. His father, Robert Barnwell Rhett (1800-1889), had been born Robert Barnwell Smith and, along with his several brothers (sons of James Smith and Mariana Gough), changed his surname to Rhett in order to carry on that illustrious name, which had died out in the male line. Robert Barnwell Rhett, the father of Andrew Burnet Rhett, was the editor of the Charleston Mercury and an ardent secessionist, and as such, a political antagonist of Governor Aiken.⁴¹ Andrew Burnet Rhett was also a descendant of Dr. Henry Woodward, the first English settler of South Carolina, and of Colonel John (Tuscarora Jack) Barnwell (d. 1724), a famous Indian fighter of the early colonial period. Tuscarora Jack Barnwell, before he gained military fame, had served in the provincial militia under Colonel Rhett's command.⁴²

A. Burnet Rhett was graduated from the South Carolina College in 1852 and the Medical

College of South Carolina in 1859.⁴³

During the Confederate War, A. Burnet Rhett distinguished himself as an artillery officer. He began the war as captain of Company K, Second Regiment, South Carolina Infantry. The unit was sent to Virginia in time to fight in the first Battle of Manassas, in July, 1861. In the following spring, Rhett was detached to form his own artillery battery which became a part of Stephen D. Lee's battalion of artillery in Evans' brigade. He was attached temporarily to Ripley's brigade in A. P. Hill's division and fought at the battles of Mechanicsville, Gaines' Mill, and Malvern Hill, in June and July, 1862, after which he was highly commended by General Ripley:

Near dark Captain A. B. Rhett's battery of artillery, attached to my command, succeeded in crossing the broken bridges of the Chickahominy and was located directly in front of the enemy at about 1,200 yards distance. Captain Rhett opened an effective fire, and soon relieved our infantry from the storm of shell and canister which had been poured upon them.⁴⁴

Captain Rhett was promoted to major in December, 1863, and appointed chief of artillery for the Second Military District of South Carolina. During the evacuation of the South Carolina coast in February, 1865, Major Rhett commanded a battalion of artillery which was composed of Le Gardeur's (New Orleans) Light Artillery, and the Beaufort Volunteer Artillery, and fought in the battles of Averasboro and Bentonville, in North Carolina.⁴⁵

The young Captain Rhett was described as handsome, dashing and charming and somewhat of a ladies' man. Mary Boykin Chesnut (wife of General James Chesnut), in her war diary, recorded a chance meeting with Captain Rhett, when she arrived at the Farmer's Hotel at Flat Rock, North Carolina by stagecoach, accompanied by Captain George Cuthbert:

Burnet Rhett was at the door, caparisoned, horse and man, with as much red and gold artillery uniform as they could bear -- sash, &c&c. He held his horse. The stirrups were Mexican -- I believe they looked like little sidesaddles. Seeing his friend and crony George Cuthbert alight and leave a veiled lady in the carriage, this handsome and undismayed young artillerist walked round and round the carriage, talked with the driver, looked in the doors, at the front, &c&c. Suddenly I bethought me to raise my veil and satisfy his curiosity.

Our eyes met, and I smiled. It was impossible to resist the comic disappointment of his face -- a woman old enough to be George Cuthbert's mother, with the ravages of a year of gastric fever, almost fainting with fatigue then. He instantly mounted his gallant steed and pranced away to his fiancée. He is to marry the greatest heiress in the state, Miss Aiken. Then Captain Cuthbert told me his name &c&c. Albert Elmore says there

is great choice in Rhetts -- a first-rate Rhett is one thing, but a second-rate Rhett is the devil, &c&c.

Captain Cuthbert said this was a first-rate Rhett.⁴⁶

A. Burnet Rhett and Henrietta Aiken were married in at Flat Rock, August 21, 1862. The Aikens were then staying at the summer home of Mrs. Martha Rutledge Kinloch Singleton. Known familiarly as "Mat" Singleton, she was the widow of Richard Singleton of Kensington Plantation, Richland District.⁴⁷ Mary Boykin Chesnut described the rather unpropitious events surrounding the wedding:

The night of the wedding it stormed as if the world was coming to an end. Wind -- rain -- thunder and lightning. An unlimited supply.

[Henrietta] had a duchess table -- muslin and lace -- not one of the shifts of honest poverty war-driven, but a millionaire's attempt at being economical -- thinking that style better taste as bringing them more on the same plane as their unlucky compatriots. A candle was left too near this light drapery, and it took fire. Outside, lightning to fire the world -- inside, the bridal chamber ablaze. Wind enough to blow the house down the mountainside.

The English maid behaved heroically and, with the aid of Mrs. Aiken's and Mrs. Mat Singleton's servants, put the fire out without disturbing the marriage ceremony which was then being performed below.

Everything in the bridal chamber was burnt up except the bed -- and that was a mass of cinders, smut, flakes of charred and blackened wood.

Mrs. Singleton said, "Burnet Rhett has strong nerves. And Etta, the bride, is too good to be superstitious."⁴⁸

A. Burnet Rhett and Henrietta Aiken Rhett were the parents of Harriet Lowndes Rhett Maybank, wife of Dr. Joseph Maybank V.⁴⁹

Governor Aiken died September 16, 1887, at his summer home in Flat Rock, North Carolina, at the age of 81.⁵⁰ His body was returned home for burial in Charleston's Magnolia Cemetery.⁵¹ His widow, Harriet Lowndes Aiken, died March 24, 1892, at her home, 48 Elizabeth Street, at the age of 80, and was interred next to him.⁵²

Notes, Governor William Aiken and Harriet Lowndes Aiken

1. "The Aiken Family," typed MS, attrib. Carrie Aiken Elliott, ca. 1912, Aiken-Martin Family, file folder, file 30-04, South Carolina Historical Society; Biographical Directory of the Governors of the United States, 1789-1978, ed. Robert Sobel and John Raimo (Westport, Conn.: Meckler Books, 1978) 4:1405; N. Louise Bailey, Mary L. Morgan and Carolyn R. Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1776-1985 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1986) 1:40.
2. "The Aiken Family," Aiken-Martin Family file; Biographical Directory of the Governors, 4:1405.
3. "The Aiken Family," Aiken-Martin Family file; Charleston County, Register of Mesne Conveyance Office, Marriage Settlement of Henrietta Wyatt Aiken and George Edwards, Deeds, N10:354.
4. Biographical Directory of the Governors, 4:1405; Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:40.
5. Biographical Directory of the Governors, 4:1405.
6. "The Aiken Genealogy in South Carolina," MS, anonymous, Aiken-Martin Family, file 30-04, South Carolina Historical Society; Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:40.
7. "The Aiken Family," Aiken-Martin Family file; Biographical Directory of the Governors, 4:1405; Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:40.
8. Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:40.
9. "The Aiken Genealogy," Aiken-Martin Family file.
10. Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:40-41.
11. Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:40.
12. Biographical Directory of the Governors, 4:1405-1406; Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:41.
13. Biographical Directory of the Governors, 4:1406; Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:41.
14. Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:41.
15. Biographical Directory of the Governors, 4:1406; Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:41.
16. Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:41.

17. David Duncan Wallace, The History of South Carolina (New York: The American Historical Society, Inc., 1934) 2:489.
18. Biographical Directory of the Governors, 4:1406.
19. Wallace, The History of South Carolina, 2:490.
20. Biographical Directory of the Governors, 4:1406.
21. Biographical Directory of the Governors, 4:1406; Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:41.
22. Biographical Directory of the Governors, 4:1406.
23. Biographical Directory of the Governors, 4:1406; Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:41.
24. Wallace, The History of South Carolina, 3:110.
25. Biographical Directory of the Governors, 4:1406; Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:41.
26. Biographical Directory of the Governors, 4:1406; Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:41.
27. Biographical Directory of the Governors, 4:1406.
28. Wallace, The History of South Carolina, 3:158; Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:41.
29. Biographical Directory of the Governors, 4:1406; Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:41.
30. [Mary Boykin Chesnut], Mary Boykin's Civil War, ed. C. Vann Woodward (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) p. 488.
31. Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:41.
32. Biographical Directory of the Governors, 4:1406; Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:41.
33. Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:41.
34. Notes on William Aiken, anonymous, Aiken-Martin Family, file 30-04, South Carolina Historical Society; Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:41.
35. Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:41.

36. "The Aiken Genealogy," Aiken-Martin Family file; Biographical Directory of the Governors, 4:1405; Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:41.
37. City of Charleston, Health Department, Death Records Index, Charleston County Library.
38. N. Louise Bailey, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina House of Representatives: Volume IV: 1791-1815 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1984) p. 304; South Carolina Genealogies: Articles From The South Carolina Historical (and Genealogical) Magazine (Spartanburg: The Reprint Company, 1983) 1:120; Emily Bellinger Reynolds and Joan Reynolds Faunt, Biographical Directory of the Senate of the State of South Carolina, 1776-1964 (Columbia: South Carolina Archives Department, 1964) p. 243.
39. Bailey, Biographical Directory, p. 305.
40. "The Aiken Genealogy," Aiken-Martin Family file; Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:41.
41. Barnwell Rhett Heyward, "The Descendants of Col. William Rhett, of South Carolina," South Carolina Genealogies; Articles From The South Carolina Historical (and Genealogical) Magazine (Spartanburg: The Reprint Company, 1983) 4:1ff; Stephen B. Barnwell, The Story of An American Family (Marquette, Ill.: privately published, 1969) 165-172.
42. Ibid., 1-17, 21.
43. Barnwell, The Story of An American Family, p. 172.
44. Barnwell, The Story of An American Family, p. 172.
45. Barnwell, The Story of An American Family, p. 172.
46. [Chesnut], Mary Boykin's Civil War, pp. 423-424.
47. "The Aiken Genealogy," Aiken-Martin Family file; Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:41; Barnwell, The Story of An American Family, p. 172.
48. [Chesnut], Mary Boykin's Civil War, p. 456.
49. "The Aiken Family," Aiken-Martin Family file.
50. Death Records Index; Biographical Directory of the Governors, 4:1406; Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:41.
51. Death Records Index; Biographical Directory of the Governors, 4:1406; Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:41.

52. Death Records Index; Bailey, Morgan and Taylor, Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:41.