

A Brief Look at the Aiken-Rhett Service Wing
Charleston, South Carolina

Carter Hudgins and I looked at the service wing at the Aiken-Rhett House on Nov. 10, 1994, before a meeting with Historic Charleston Foundation staff and advisors about the possible use of the property as a museum that deals with African-American life in the city. Virtually the entire Aiken-Rhett complex was once peopled with slaves, and presentation of issues about race and slavery can be done throughout the house and its ancillary building. There is a particularly dramatic contrast here between spaces in the main house, grandly conceived and embellished to resemble the likes of Napoleon's tomb, and those in the service wing, more like the black hole of Calcutta than most surviving American slave housing. William Aiken, Jr.'s priorities concerning security and segregation are graphically illustrated by the manner in which domestic spaces in the service wing are arranged.

Because this wing represents a pivotal element in the story, it seemed useful to give it a preliminary look before the meetings began. Later additional analysis will reveal a more complex picture, but the general outlines already seem evident. The following summarizes what we saw.

The domestic yard is now roughly balanced, with a pair of detached, two-story, ten-bay brick wings set against the side

property walls and facing one another. Both have an austere Greek appearance that, like the present state of the house, results from Aiken's dramatic mid-nineteenth-century remodeling of buildings probably put up about 1817-20.

Before the remodelings, the buildings may have been less consistent in size. The service wing began life as a five-bay, two-story structure (roughly half its present length), and it is believed that the southwest wing--a stable, carriage house, and quarter--was originally its present length but a single-story high. Growth of the service wing is evident outside, in a straight vertical joint on its southwest (courtyard) face, with precisely finished Flemish bond to the southeast and what appears to be cruder brickwork to the northwest, all now glimpsed through breaks in the hard mid-nineteenth-century rendering. While we did not look closely at the stable wing, I should observe that the small areas of brickwork visible on its courtyard face seem to be well-executed Flemish bond, extending up above the second-floor window sills. In other words, the proposition that the stable began as a single-story structure is worth investigating rather than accepting uncritically. I can see no evidence that the stable was extended in length, in the stuccoed exterior, the rooms, or the small area of its attic visible from below. Stucco covering brickwork intended to be exposed and the use of Greek-like masonry and cornices contrasting with earlier nineteenth-

century brickwork do make it evident, however, that the stable wing was substantially remodeled.

The service building seems to have begun as freestanding two-room plan work building and quarter, more conventional in form than it ultimately became. There was a larger room on both floors at the southeast end, nearest the main house, and smaller rooms at the rear. All four rooms were provided with fireplaces that remain with their chimney stacks in place inside the courtyard wall.

The southeast first-floor room served as a kitchen, with a cooking fireplace about 5' 2" wide and roughly 2' 8" deep. Stone and brick paving along the fireplace wall may date from the addition of a brick and iron range or stew stove with a plastered stud-and-lath hood suspended above in the 1830s or '50s. See notes on the stew stove by Mark R. Wenger, Willie Graham, Cary Carson, etc., and my photos done during the VAF tour this spring.

The smaller room to the northwest may have been intended as a laundry or scullery. It has a more modest fireplace, 4' 6" wide, 2' 1" deep, and 3' 7" high at the spring of its segmental arch. This room still has early floorboards as may most of the cooking room, though the latter are hidden below twentieth-century flooring. Both rooms seem to have been fully plastered from an early period, though their beaded door and

window trim appear to date from the remodeling, as does virtually all the trim in the building. There are now two exterior doorways to the cooking room and one to the lesser room and a single window for each room. Four of these openings (excepting the doorway to the smaller room) have second-period frames, tenoned and pegged, with beaded edges. These match all the early frames elsewhere in the building, in detail but not form. The lower windows were fitted for full out-swinging shutters (the present shutters are all twentieth-century reproductions on this building, while several of those on the stable are early). The present sash may be early twentieth-century replacements but there are several fragments of early beaded stops that suggest the lower windows have been glazed since the mid-nineteenth century. Behind the sash are vertical boards nailed to the jambs and carrying horizontal wooden bars. The two old doorways now have Dutch doors, with salvaged segments of wrought-nailed board-and-batten leaves below and later glazed leaves above.

Removal of loose stucco or plaster may reveal the original fenestration, which would be useful to know, particularly if it suggests exterior access for a stairway leading to the upper floor.

The ceilings in the two oldest first-floor rooms have recently been replastered, so location of the original stair is not visible there. Upstairs, however, we see a 2' 6½"-wide patch

in the floor running from near the southwest wall to a 5'-wide and 5' '6½"-long patch against the rear wall. I assume this represents the original stair location. It may suggest that the stair rose straight toward the northeast and then turned right and left to reach doorways to the two second-floor rooms, doorways that would have been located near the northeast wall. Much the same arrangement still provides access to the two domestic rooms above the stable, though the stair does not divide as it approaches the rooms there.

Evidence for the upper first-period partitions in the service wing may be found on the attic joists, but the crucial second-floor ceiling has also been recently replastered, and I did not spot any evidence in a quick crawl through the attic. What I did see was a sizable opening framed into the attic joists between the two original chimneys and above what I take to be the top of the main stair. The header is tenoned into the joists and the infill dates to second period, suggesting that originally a stair extended to the attic. There also appear to be nail holes as well as a few round drilled holes of the variety used to wedge boards when flooring was laid, so I suspect the attic was originally intended for storage or living space, and that both the upper stair and the flooring were ripped out during the remodeling. I saw no evidence of flooring in the space above the addition, and the roof appears to have been rebuilt as part of

the remodeling, still employing tenoned and pegged rafters. The old northwest gable does not survive.

The remodeling doubled the size of the building, creating grim dorm-like quarters on the second floor and what may have been a single lower workroom beyond a new stair passage. I see no evidence that this unusually large space was partitioned, but the possibility would be worth investigating, especially above its newly replastered ceiling. There are now two southwest doors, both with reproduction frames and leaves, and two windows with second-period frames, a fenestration that would permit the space to be subdivided. These windows have remnants of early beaded sash stops like those to the southeast, but they lack any evidence for bars. There is a 5' 10"-wide Gothic-headed doorway in the gable end, an unexpected feature that seems to have been cut in, conceivably around the turn of the century.

The addition was built against the existing property wall, and portions of the wall's refined Flemish-bond brickwork remain visible in this room, much rebuilt and patched for a chimney constructed to provide fireplaces for a lower room and two rooms above. The chimney was demolished in recent decades after storm damage, but its base survives, uncovered by excavation. These footings suggest a first-floor fireplace measuring about 4' 4" by 2' 9". Just to the left (northwest) of the chimney base is a brick-lined hole, 1' 5½" in diameter, 5"

out from the property wall, and with an 8"- to 10"-wide channel leading toward the room. I am told that this has been interpreted as a privy pit, but I wonder if it is not the base of an oven. A long diagonal patch (perhaps turn-of-the-century) in the masonry of the property wall above conceivably represents a channel cut in as an oven flue leading to the main flue of the adjoining fireplace.

All but 6' 8" of the wooden floor has been removed from the room, and the remaining floor covers the foundations of what appears to be a small first-period structure that stood in the east corner between the old service wing and the property wall. I also hear secondhand that this structure has been interpreted as a cistern, and it does indeed have a cellar deeper than the rest of the wing. However, there are joist pockets in the rear brickwork at the right height to frame a privy seat, and a nailer just above that could have held a skirt board behind a seat. In short, my superficial look at this suggests it may have been a privy. The structure's northwest wall was a single brick thick and rose to a height of at least 8' 4" above the present floor. This and the southwest wall were demolished when the wing was extended.

Access to the upper floor, as already mentioned, is now through a second-period passage between the old wing and the large new room. The passage seems always to have been accessible

from the yard and directly from what I take to be the laundry or scullery, through a doorway with a board-and-batten leaf and beaded board reveals acting as a frame. Presumably this doorway was cut through when the addition was built, though most of the masonry evidence is now covered by plaster and trim. The present exterior door leaf and frame are recent reproductions, but parts of an arch visible under the stucco as well as the brick jambs make this look original to the addition. There is an odd lobby just inside this door, a space only 2' 2" deep. The beaded board partition is built over the plaster and baseboard, but it is relatively early if not original to the addition. Its board-and-batten doors are hung on butt hinges, while virtually all the second-period door and shutter hinges are straps on pintles.

The stair is a simple open-string affair with two runs and with rails secured to a chamfered post extending from the landing to the upper floor. Originally rectangular balusters were let into the steps and round handrails; these were replaced with a lower rail as early as the late nineteenth century.

Upstairs we see an extraordinary room arrangement, one intended to provide separate rooms for families or individuals, all with independent access and most with fireplaces, but with very little light and ventilation. Climbing the stairs, one arrives in a 3' 2"-wide passage running along the front (southwest) face of the building. The passage leads to two

relatively decent rooms at the ends, each with windows in the front and gable-end walls. Along the way, however, are three rooms with no exterior windows. Their only light is provided by glazed transoms over the board-and-batten doors and by up-swinging six-light sash in partition windows. The two rooms flanking the stair each have a window facing the stairwell as well as one facing the passage. The smallest and most inferior room, the only one left unheated, has only a window facing onto the passage.

The extreme darkness of the quarters' rooms is increased by the nature of the exterior windows. Like those seen in seventeenth-century Dutch paintings and--more relevantly--nineteenth-century slave quarters at Silver Hill in Georgetown County, South Carolina, and Dover in Goochland County, Virginia, these have a heavy beaded horizontal mullion separating a three-light transom above and a hinged shutter below. Such windows were economical and reasonable choices in warm weather, but cold weather brought a choice between relative warmth and darkness. The structural frames of the exterior windows are exposed and beaded, with a beaded stop nailed to the sides of the jambs. Inside the structural frames are board reveals and projecting board sills. The same reveals are used for the interior windows, with stops nailed to them. These sash have always had butt hinges.

The upper rooms are also fully plastered and fitted with beaded baseboards, as one would expect for the late antebellum period. Most of the rooms have short sections of beaded pegboards, that at the far end with a heavy carved peg for hanging clothes.

I did not have time to look closely at the upper fireplaces, but it appears that those in the southeast end and in the room southeast of the stair are survivors from the two first-period rooms. The two rooms to the northwest were both heated with second-period fireplaces with flues that made their way to the chimney above the second-period work fireplace.

The object of this single-loaded corridor plan seems to have been to house slaves in rooms without windows piercing the property wall, for security, and with a minimum of contact with the rear yard, presumably to make the residents' presence less evident to owners. Otherwise the passage would have been located against the property wall and the rooms provided with more light and air.

Presumably this building continued to house some workers into the present century, given its survival, but there is little evidence of improvement except window sash added to the upper southeast room around the turn of the century.

The stable wing has two domestic rooms, that over the carriage bay at the southeast end superior in size and light to the quarters described above and that adjoining the hayloft comparable to the end rooms in the service wing. Both are reached from a stair rising from an exterior doorway in the northeast wall, an arrangement that may be similar to the original circulation for the other wing. The Gothic arcade employed in framing the horse stalls to the northwest express a pretense and gentry presence entirely absent in the service wing.

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November 10, 1994

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THE AIKEN RHETT HOUSE, THE FIRST VISIT

The box of keys was formidable, every size, every shape, every material. As the key turned in the weathered front door it was like entering another era. With Mr. & Mrs. Joseph Maybank, I was finally getting a glimpse into a house that was to me the most intriguing property in Charleston.

The door creaked open revealing the graceful marble double staircase with its' dusty iron balustrade. Bits of broken glass from the shattered fanlight were scattered on the steps. The paint was peeling, the tarnished chandelier hung above. But it was magnificent! I knew that even without going any further, the Museum had to acquire this unique property.

The Maybanks guided us through the dark maze of the first floor, opening door after door with keys from the box. The light that filtered in was from around the closed shutters or from the flashlights we carried. Only large pieces of furniture remained. The smaller items and the paintings had been removed by the family for safe keeping, following innumerable break-ins and thefts over the years that the house was vacant. Everywhere there was peeling paint, tattered wallpaper and dust.

The Art Gallery wing was completely empty, with the exception of a lone statue of Mary Magdalene. From the doorway it appeared as if she was weeping over the sad conditions of her surroundings. The dining room contained only the table and one sideboard. The library had only its' built in bookcases and a whale oil chandelier. We entered the impressive double parlors through the door at the right of the library fireplace. These two rooms took our breath away! Closed since the 1930's or 40's, they were used for storage by the family. The huge painting of Harriet Lowndes Aiken had been put in safekeeping at the Gibbes Art Gallery, several mirrors were missing, but the rooms still retained enough of their elegant fittings to give us a glimpse, in their faded opulence, of what was once here. The French Empire Ormolu chandeliers, coated in black dust, were hanging with broken chains of prisms. Fallen pendants littered the floor. Just inside the door was an area that had been used by a member of the family as an office. A wood file cabinet and bookcase made from packing crates stood against the walls. I remember thinking how strange it was to construct a packing crate bookcase in a house which has been literally filled with treasures. The wallpaper hung in shreds and pieces of gilded

molding outlined the faded borders. Trunks, boxes, broken furniture and papers were stacked and strewn about the room. The silver door hardware was black. In fact, everything was black, even the carpet in the west parlor was black. Only later, when the shutters were opened and things moved, did we find it to be a floral Victorian pattern carpet. The marble statues which had originally been in the Art Gallery wing, stood in three corners of the two rooms. Even they were black, with dark streaks formed by the condensation from warm spells following cold Charleston winters. The Chickering square grand piano was still in place. We later learned it was the piano purchased through the sale of some of Mrs. Aiken's jewelry right after the war. Each high oversized window still had red and gold silk draperies hanging from the massive gilded drapery poles, but their swags were now accented by the black dirt and rotting silk. The door to the entrance hall bore the scars of a wood drill, left there by one of the vandals who tried to enter the main house through these rooms. The wood was too hard and he gave up.

The second floor was easier to navigate since the shutters here, though closed, were louvered (or missing) and light entered through the broken windows. Large wardrobes and cabinets were the only furniture remaining. The rest had been either stolen or stored by the family. But up here you could see the blatant work of the vandals and thieves. The bronze whale oil chandelier in the hall hung askew with one of its' chains broken. Amid the peeling paint and broken glass, the floors were literally covered with books, papers, feathers from mattresses, and of course, the black dirt and dust of neglect. The only room the vandals had not penetrated was the massive east bedroom above the dining room. This room was an experience by itself. The black dirt hung in the air and covered everything in the room. It clouded the light seeping in through the closed shutters. It was as if someone reversed a vacuum cleaner and it was spraying out dust instead of taking it in. Vines covered the shutters to the north with tendrils coming into the room and onto the walls. Formerly rich wallpaper and borders still decorated the walls. And the two most beautiful mirrors in the house faced each other from above the fireplace and on the opposite wall. The gas lights were still in place. (The others in the house had been removed by the Maybanks following the theft of those in the dining room and library). At the far corner stood a huge sleigh bed, its' canopy frame still attached to the ceiling. We couldn't easily examine

this room except for a few feet inside the door, as the floor was literally covered with stacks of furniture, trunks, boxes of books and papers. For at least 40 years this room had served as a warehouse for numerous family members. We couldn't linger here for very long due to the thick dust in the air. It was difficult to even breathe.

The third floor was a repeat of the second, broken furniture, hugh packing crates, storage boxes, bits and pieces of every kind of pottery, clothing, and light fixtures. Here also were the pigeons nesting on sills between the sash and shutters and sometimes in the rooms themselves. They had been here so long they had in-bred and were sparsely feathered. Many had deformed beaks. They all look diseased. A rug box in the back storeroom held stacks of early 19th century sheet music, many pieces bearing the signature of Mrs. Aiken and her daughter. The inevitable litter of papers and books covered the floor, but it was up here one of the greatest treasures was discovered much later when packing the contents for removal to the Museum. Wrapped in newspaper dated 1866 was Robert Barnwell Rhett's personal notated copy of the original draft of the Confederate Constitution, and notes he took during the Constitutional Convention. It had somehow been missed by the thieves as they searched for more visable treasures. It was up here we also found many of the old bills and documents which were later to give an insight into the chronology of changes made in the house and its' decoration.

The rooms of the basement were all stacked with boxes and an assortment of cast off goods. Many of the rooms we weren't able to enter that first day, but the warming kitchen under the dining room had a cupboard with replacement gas lamp globes and china still on its' shelves. Much of the original equipment was around the room, plate warmers, the table, pie safe. The floor was wood and badly rotted, over what we later discovered to be the original sandstone block floor.

The Carriage House to the west of the overgrown service yard held cabinets and a late 1940's car parked nose-in to the Gothic arched stalls. The corner privies had been dug by bottle hunters who took little regard to the destruction they caused in their hunt. Nothing remained in the original kitchen except a huge iron crane in one fireplace and several tables. The End Room of the kitchen wing (probably originally a servant's dining and workroom) was stacked

two feet deep with random lengths of firewood. The second floor was almost devoid of anything except old boxes and trunks in a middle room. The second floor had been occupied only a few years earlier by Mrs. Rhett's last remaining servant.

Despite the visible decay throughout the complex of buildings, there was the image of what once was. There was also the image of what could once again be one of Charleston's greatest houses. The images of that first day in the Aiken-Rhett house will always be with me.

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The following notes were taken by Carrie Albee, Research Historian for the Historic Charleston Foundation, during an on-site investigation of the property boundary walls of the Aiken-Rhett House at 48 Elizabeth Street, conducted by Dr. Carl Lounsbury of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation on Friday, May 11, 2001.

Summary

The advertisement placed in the newspaper in 1825 described John Robinson's property as being enclosed by a wooden fence. The present brick walls thus date to a period afterward. Presumably, William Aiken, Jr. added the perimeter brick walls in the 1830s with the first alterations he made to the house and outbuildings. Garden buildings and privies were intended in their present location with the construction of the brick walls. At some later date, the eastern and western walls running from the stable and service buildings were raised slightly.

Wrought-iron fence, south property line: The existing fence along the south property line was observed to be composed of wrought-iron lancets on an irregular, "junk" bond brick base, likely plastered at one time, faced with molded red/brown sandstone. Documentary photos taken by Union soldiers ca. 1865 reveal that the existing wrought-iron fence appears to be the same as that shown in the photographs.

Brick pier and wall, southeast corner: Inspection of the existing square brick pier at the southeast corner of the property revealed that it incorporated closers and has white stone square capitals and a molded brick base. This brick pier measured 1 foot 11 ½ inches along the south face and 2 feet ½ inches along the west face. The brick pier is capped with cut stone. The existing brick wall along the east property line, laid in Flemish bond, running from the pier to the south wall of the 1838 addition, is flush with the eastern face of the brick pier, and clearly tied into to the wall at a later date as exhibited by irregular brickwork. This evidence suggests that the brick pier pre-dates the brick wall and was originally freestanding. The question was raised as to when the brick wall along the east property line might have been constructed, and whether or not it had been preceded by a wooden fence of some sort, similar to the wooden fence shown in the 1865 documentary photo along the south, or Judith Street, boundary of the property directly to the east of the Aiken-Rhett House. It could not be determined at that time whether or not there was a wooden fence or brick wall along the eastern property line of the Aiken-Rhett House from the 1865 documentary photo. It is essential to closely examine this photograph digitally. The question arises as to why there was no brick wall along the eastern boundary of the property.

West property wall, between the art gallery and stable building: It was observed that the short section of brick wall along the west property line between the art gallery and the stable building was set upon a base of several brick course with the rest of the wall recessed slightly from the plane of the house and gallery. This raised the question of whether or not there had at one time been a doorway in this location that was later

replaced with the section of brick wall. Also, what was the earlier condition of the wall between the back of the house and the stable before the gallery was constructed in 1858?

West property wall: It was observed that the brick coping and the top four courses of brick underneath the coping were of a darker color than the lower portion of the wall, suggesting a later period of work. The date of this later work is unknown. The original portion of the brick wall on the western property line and the west walls of the west outbuildings, including the privy in the northwest corner, the stable, and the small pavilion between them, were of continuous brickwork indicating one period of construction. The west perimeter wall is bonded into the stable extension at the north, indicating that that brick wall was part of the same improvements from the 1830s. However, the newer courses and coping are not bonded into the stable. This raised section runs from the stable to a central ten-foot long panel that rises several feet above the top of the original wall height. This raised section was planned from the beginning and suggests that Aiken intended to place a garden building of some type against it, perhaps the present roofless Gothic-structure. When the wall was raised, new coping was extended along the side and tops of this central raised panel.

A vertical seam on the south and north sides of this vertical panel in the wall provides evidence for the later raising of the wall and the original plan for a garden structure centrally located between the north end of the extended stable and the privy at the northwest corner of the property. The same vertical seam in the brickwork for the raising of the wall is evident where the brick wall rose at the northwest corner for the privy. The property wall measures in length 43 feet 2 inches from the north end of the stable to the south end of the central pavilion; 15 feet 7 inches from the south end to the north end of the central pavilion; 42 feet 4 inches from the north end of the pavilion to the south end of the perimeter wall where it rises to incorporate the northwest privy; and 11 feet 9 ½ inches from the south end of the raised privy wall to the south edge of the northwest pier.

North property wall and piers: Examination of the northwest pier, measuring 1 foot 11 inches revealed that the bricks of the piers were cut back so that the west wall could be tied into it. This proved to be true for all of the piers along the north property line where they met the property wall. These piers were comparable in articulation with the brick pier at the southeast corner of the property, with square stone capitals and molded bases with similar profiles where the original brickwork was still present. At first the cutting back of the bricks of the piers to tie in the property wall appeared to suggest that the piers predated the wall. The uniformity of the brickwork, however, seemed to suggest that the cutting back of the brickwork of the piers was rather the somewhat awkward method employed by the mason to join the two elements together. It should be noted that the north property wall appears to have been originally built at its current height. There was no evidence of two periods of brickwork or a later raising of the wall as in the case of the western and eastern property walls. Also note that the clearance for the central carriage gate measured at 8 feet 3 inches. Sandstone blocks appeared in the west pier of the carriage gate and the west pier of the west pedestrian gate where the iron pins that secured the hinges that held these doors. Blocks do not appear in the eastern pedestrian

gate, calling into question whether this gate actually opened or was simply a blind entrance installed as a matter of symmetry.

East property wall: The east property wall could not be closely inspected from the outside due to the inaccessibility of the adjacent property. Inspection on the inside of the eastern property wall revealed two period of brickwork similar to the western wall, with the exception that the eastern wall had six brick courses added with coping rather than the four courses of the west wall. Measurements should be taken of the height of the western and eastern walls as they appear at present to be of different heights. This may suggest something about the original topography and attitude toward the more public (Elizabeth Street) western side of the property and the eastern side, which bordered on neighboring property.

Notes on Outbuildings: A brief inspection was made of the outbuildings in relationship to the property wall. Most notable was the contrast between the brickwork of the privies and pavilions and that of the property wall, the former being smaller, bright red, smooth, uniform bricks with more elegant, thinner mortar joints. This brickwork strongly suggests a decorative function to the outbuildings, perhaps built in the 1830s. The Gothic arches echo the form of the apertures of the carriage house and the north end of the eastern and service wing. Further research should examine the presence of Gothic outbuildings during this period in Charleston.