



Preservation as Found

Charleston's Aiken-Rhett House

Jan Fiore

All photographs courtesy of
Historic Charleston Foundation.
Photography by Rick McKee.

The entry hall with its sweeping marble staircases.

Brandy Culp is the curator at Aiken-Rhett Museum, and believes strongly in the concept of “preservation as found.” “It’s a philosophy that’s growing in weight,” said Culp. “This site is a learning laboratory; all layers over time have been preserved and they are there for analysis and study. In addition to having this amazing resource, this is one of the few sites in America with such intact outbuildings, so it allows us to look, in a comprehensive manner, at all the people who lived and worked at the Aiken-Rhett house.”

The Aiken-Rhett House is a remarkable record of the lives of Charleston’s elite, as well as the enslaved African-Americans who lived and worked here. In this antebellum town house, much of the original nineteenth-century material, including wallpapers, paints, textiles and furnishings, still survive. It is the richness of those layers of history that make this property an irreplaceable document of local and national importance.

The Aiken family

Built in 1820, the house was constructed for a Charleston merchant named John Robinson. He lived in the house for almost eight years before he was forced to sell it after losing five ships at sea. The house became the property of William Aiken, Sr., who used it as a rental property. Aiken was an Irish immigrant who accumulated a large fortune and became one of the city’s leading cotton merchants. He was also president of the South Carolina railroad from 1828 until his death in 1831. When Aiken died in a carriage accident, the house became the property of his only son, William Aiken Jr.

Shortly after William Aiken Jr. and his new bride Harriet Lowndes made the house their primary residence, they undertook a number of renovations, including moving the front entrance, and a large addition. The renovations were a direct reflection of Aiken’s social and political ambitions; he served in the state and national legislature and was governor of South Carolina. Aiken family members continued to reside in the house until the 1970s, making minimal twentieth-century alterations and leaving the property much as it was during the previous century.

In 1857 the Aiken family constructed a first floor art gallery, long before it became common for the wealthy to have private art galleries in their homes. It needed more restoration than anywhere else in the house. “When the Charleston Museum took the house in 1975, the art gallery was in danger of complete collapse due to extensive water intrusion, so it became necessary to do some restoration,” Culp said. “But with a conservation eye, it was fitted for climate-control to preserve the Aikens’ rare artifacts and fine art, such as the painting of Harriet Lowndes.”

Governor Aiken’s social and political prominence meant that the family entertained frequently and grandly, hosting parties for almost 500 people in the double drawing rooms, where decorative wallpaper dates from an 1850 interior



Aiken-Rhett House, 48 Elizabeth Street, Charleston, S.C. c. 1820.



The restored art gallery.

renovation. Grand dinner parties were one of the most popular entertainments of the day for the upper class: The dining table could be extended to comfortably seat 22 people, and ceramics and silver were placed on the sideboards to make an impressive display.

Bedrooms still contain sleigh beds, clothes presses, straw matting and wool carpeting owned by the Aiken family, as well as paintings of family members, including the children of the Aikens’ daughter Henrietta and son-in-law Major Rhett. Small metal bell-pulls with ivory knobs

were connected to bells in the work yard. Each bell had a different ring, so the slaves knew which room to attend to.

The ballroom is perhaps the room that most evokes a sense of faded glory, from the floral pattern of wallpaper that was once bright red and silver, to the gold-framed mirrors ready to reflect the gas lights and candles. Two semi-circular seats, called *demi-lune banquettes* are carefully placed in the middle of the ballroom, their upholstery torn and discolored, unused for over a century.



Second floor bed chamber with original furnishings and grass mats.

The slaves

The structure of the house clearly delineates areas used by the family from those used by their slaves, but despite this, there is a sense of intimacy, indicating the household ran in a cohesive manner. The slaves were highly trained in all skills necessary for running a property of this magnitude. Jobs included laundresses, seamstresses, cooks, maids, footmen, gardeners and carriage drivers. In 1846 there were seven adult slaves and their six children living on the property.

The “warming kitchen” is in part of the house used by African-American slaves. They used it to garnish and prepare food for presentation in the formal dining room, and delivered it using the back stairs. Wire-covered pie safes sit close to a metal-lined chest to store ice. Historians long thought slave spaces such as the kitchen and laundry were whitewashed, but these walls were brightly painted with yellows, pinks and oranges.

The second floor contains a series of dormitory-style rooms for slaves. Each room was simply furnished with beds, tables and chairs and slaves’ personal possessions.



Rear view of the Aiken-Rhett House from the rear courtyard that housed the carriage house, horse stalls and slave quarters.



The east parlor.



Second floor drawing room with original harp and demi-lune banquettes.



The upstairs hallway in the slave quarters.

Fireplaces provided heating in the cooler months and doors could be locked from the inside, providing privacy. The slaves living on this property were a small fraction of the 800 owned by the Aiken family.

One aspect of urban slavery that greatly differed from rural slavery was the opportunity for slaves to interact with other African-Americans. Black churches were very important in fostering a sense of African-American community. Many black churches were established during the antebellum period, providing leadership roles for slaves and giving their members opportunities to increase their literacy.

The courtyard behind the main house has the slave quarters on one side and the stable/carriage building on the other. In the center was an avenue of magnolia trees with five trees on either side. After the carriage had delivered Aikens to the front door, slaves drove it through the back gate and up this avenue of trees to the carriage house. The stable contains six horse stalls. Each stall was highly finished with fine woodwork, and pegs nearby to hang harnesses and bridles. Next door to the stables, the Aiken's personal carriages are stored: A *landaulet*,



Detail of the plaster ceiling medallion in the double parlor, installed c. 1830, gilded c. 1870.

built c. 1880, that was typically used as a ladies carriage for making social calls or city traveling, and a *cabriolet*, c. 1870, with its faded folding top. Directly above the carriages are two large rooms that served as additional slave quarters.

After 150 years as one family's residence, the Aiken-Rhett house has survived as a remarkable document of nineteenth-century life. This preserved site allows us to glimpse the past and better understand the lives of white and black Charlestonians.



Portrait of Harriet Lownds Aiken, by George Whiting Flagg, 1858.

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