

Aiken Rhett House Research Project Report—April 2003

Phases I-III

Carrie Elizabeth Albee and Sarah Lytle conducted the research for Phase I and II of the Aiken Rhett House research project from March to August of 2001. In December 2002 Historic Charleston Foundation contracted with historian Karen Nickless to complete some of the tasks Carrie Albee outlined as Phase III in her August 31, 2001 "Aiken Rhett Research Project: Progress Report."

Phase III comprised:

1. The completion of Aiken Rhett correspondence at the Charleston Museum.
2. Newspaper research at the Charleston Public Library, focusing on key dates in the history of the Aiken Rhett House.
3. The completion of the following and other miscellaneous research tasks:
 - a. Police Reports for 1970s robbery of the ARH
 - b. U.S. Coastal Survey map of Jehossee—check for Confederate Engineer's maps of Charleston/Jehossee
 - c. UNC Southern Collection—family papers, etc.
 - d. Search Charleston Episcopal Church records, i.e. St. Philip's Church, for family references
 - e. Private (family) Records
 - f. Oral History project—interview family members
4. Responding to the specific research requests of the consulting team.
5. The completion of the Aiken Rhett House timeline.

The research to be conducted by Karen Nickless was the completion of the Aiken Rhett correspondence, newspaper research, check for Police Reports and other pertinent information at the City and County that had not been uncovered in Phases I and II, Episcopal Church records, any information at the South Carolina Department of Archives and History that had been missed in Phases I and II, and to add any information uncovered to the Aiken Rhett House timeline. If time allowed or if it was called for work was to be done at UNC and in Aiken Rhett family papers in private hands.

From February to April, 2003 the following research was undertaken: seventeen boxes of personal correspondence at the Charleston Museum; newspaper research at CCPL; research for Aiken Rhett related items in Episcopal Church Records, SCDAH, County and City Archives; research (mostly in secondary sources) for information on the Aiken Rhett House during the Civil War.

Police Records on the 1970s robbery have not been located. The City Archives and the Police Department claim the records have been sent to SCDAH, but they have not. SCDAH suggested speaking directly with the Officer of Records at the Police Department and I am still trying to reach him.

Research in the Southern Historical Collection at UNC has not been done. There are at least two collections there that might be of interest—the Robert Barnwell Rhett Papers (1800-1876) and the Singleton Family Papers. The first collection is identified as mainly political in nature, but contains some family letters. The second is primarily agricultural—6600 items on the Singleton lands (Kensington Plantation) in lower Richland County, but it also includes some family letters. Time would probably be better spent at the South Caroliniana Library searching the Papers of the Singleton and Devereaux Families. M. Singleton was a correspondent of Henrietta Rhett's. Many of Singleton's letters to Rhett are in the Aiken Rhett Collection at the Charleston Museum and the return letters, if extant, would be of interest.

A Brief Summary of Research

Aiken Rhett Correspondence at the Charleston Museum

The bulk of the time spent on this project was spent at the Charleston Museum. The Aiken Rhett Collection there is rich and varied. I have indexed the boxes of correspondence and transcribed pertinent letters/documents. The transcriptions are incorporated into the index. Some items concern the furnishings of the house, such as references to two Gothic Empire chairs put on loan to St. Philip's Church in 1939, an antebellum chandelier purchased by A. B. Rhett in 1937, a letter about a Book of Poems that was lost during the Civil War and returned in 1889, etc.

The letters give a glimpse of the life of the Aiken and Rhett families—hard times and the glorification of the “Lost Cause” after the Civil War, their many travels back and forth to Flat Rock, and the pursuits of the men in the family outside the home. There are *many* letters about cockfighting and raising game chickens, hunting, dogs, and baseball.

A letter to I'On Rhett from E.M. Rhett (page 16 in the Index), dated 1901, refers to painting the house and painting and roofing the house and kitchen. If this indeed refers to the Aiken Rhett House it is one of few references in the correspondence to the house itself. Still the correspondence provides a window into the lives led by the family, not only in Charleston, but also in Flat Rock and on Jehossee. Some of the items transcribed could lead to further collections research or be incorporated into the interpretation of the Aiken Rhett House and/or used in docent training for the house. A good example of this is a note to Mrs. Rhett from her laundress, Pauline Brooks (transcribed on page 18 of the index).

Newspaper Research

As with the Aiken Rhett correspondence, there were no “smoking guns” here. The obituary of W. Aiken Rhett (10 September 1932) describes him as “a breeder of game chickens on Jehossee island [sic], Charleston, some of his cocks being sent as far away as Mexico. Pancho Villa was at one time a customer of Mr. Rhett.” This information, in combination with the documentation at the Charleston Museum, has implications for house interpretation. The chickens were shipped by train and some letters indicate they came in to Charleston and were then transported to Jehossee.

Information on Jefferson Davis's 1863 visit to Charleston has been copied from both local newspapers. Almost all secondary sources claim Davis stayed in Charleston a week, but he actually arrived Monday 2 November and departed Thursday 5 November. He spent three nights at the Aiken Rhett House as the guest of William Aiken. It is possible that Mrs. Rhett was not at home during his visit. (See below.)

Other Collections

Charleston County and City of Charleston archives did not have any documents pertinent to the house that were not examined during Phases I and II. Episcopal Church records (researched at SCDAH but also available at SCHS) had birth, baptism, and marriage information, which has already been established for the family and was not copied.

The Civil War at the Aiken Rhett House

When John Robinson advertised the Aiken Rhett House for sale in 1825 the ad described the location as "one of the healthiest situations in or near Charleston." Two years later William Aiken's ad to sell or rent the house echoed this claim of safety, stating, "for a Planter it is one of the most desirable residences on the neck, it being completely secure from the stranger's fever." Neither man could have imagined that the location of the house would also make it a safe haven during much of the Civil War, located away from most of the impact of the siege of Charleston.

It is impossible to say with certainty how much of the Civil War the Aikens spent at 48 Elizabeth Street. It is known, from newspaper reports, that William Aiken served as one of the many "Vice Presidents" of the Charleston delegation to the Succession Convention, and that he was in Charleston in November of 1860.

The Aikens may have continued the tradition of spending the summer and early fall in Flat Rock during the war years, but it is likely William Aiken stayed in Charleston part of the year to look after his business interests. Both Governor and Mrs. Aiken were in Flat Rock in September 1863, staying with "Mrs. Mat Singleton" on the occasion of their daughter's wedding, according to Mary Boykin Chesnut. (*Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, pp. 455-6).

By November of that year William Aiken was back at home for Jefferson Davis's visit to Charleston. Both the *Mercury* and the *Daily Courier* provide details on the visit. Davis stayed at 48 Elizabeth and William Aiken hosted a dinner for military and civilian leaders. According to Gabriel Manigault's manuscript autobiography "there were no ladies" present, and secondary accounts that Governor and Mrs. Aiken gave a ball in the President's honor cannot be documented. Given the fact that the trip was primarily to inspect military fortifications and that a ball was not reported in the newspapers, this seems unlikely. Mary Chesnut told of Davis's visit third-hand, as she heard it from John Preston who heard it from the President. Chesnut says, "Mr. Aiken's old Carolina style of living delighted [Davis]. Those old gray-haired darkies and their automatic noiseless

perfection of training—one does miss that sort of thing.” (*MCCW*, 488). At least in November 1863 things seem to be going as usual in the Aiken household.

While in the city Davis reassured a crowd at City Hall that he did not think Charleston would ever fall to Federal troops. The city had been besieged for over 120 days (both newspapers kept a running count of days) when, in January of 1864, the city was subjected to increased long-range bombardment that lasted nearly a month. According to Robert Rosen’s *Confederate Charleston* one diarist reported that Governor Aiken abandoned “his elegant mansion for one a little out of range of Gilmore’s guns.” There is no other documentation for this assertion, and, on the contrary, many other secondary sources claim P.G. T. Beauregard moved his headquarters to the Aiken Rhett House in 1864 to be safe from the bombardment. If so, he was not there long, as he left Charleston in April 1864.

In February 1865 Charleston fell. Federal troops entered the city on 18 February. Secondary sources claim (without documentation) that Governor Aiken was arrested as a political prisoner and subsequently sent on a ship to Washington where he was released through the influence of friends on the Federal side. However, Mary Boykin Chesnut, writing in Lincolnton, North Carolina* on 26 February noted “Governor Aiken passed through.” (*MCCW*, p.740)

Two letters in the Charleston Museum Aiken Rhett Collection indicate that at some point, probably during the evacuation, Mrs. Aiken and/or some of her possessions were in Winnsboro. A letter dated 9 September 1865 from her niece Ellen Aiken in Winnsboro indicates that Ellen has Mrs. Aiken’s silver and is willing to help her sell it. (Charleston Museum Index, p. 23) Another letter dated 7 July 1889 from Thomas Munroe, a former federal soldier who was in Winnsboro, reports that he found Mrs. Aiken’s *Book of Poems* “on the floor of one of the burning buildings” in Winnsboro. (Charleston Museum Index, p. 21)

By piecing together these fragments it seems likely that the Aikens left Charleston shortly before the city fell, and refugeeed through Columbia to Winnsboro (Federal troops were in Winnsboro shortly after the fall of Columbia, 17 February 1865) and then to Lincolnton. Further research in P.G.T. Beauregard’s official records and official records concerning the fall of Charleston might shed further light on this confusing time. Tradition holds that the Aiken Rhett House was looted, but that is also not substantiated.

*Lincolnton is just above Clover, SC. The route out of Columbia was Winnsboro, York, Lincolnton, then north to Richmond or west to Flat Rock.