

AIKEN-RHETT HOUSE

Audio Tour

On behalf of Historic Charleston Foundation, welcome to the Aiken-Rhett House. We are delighted to have you visiting today!

The Aiken-Rhett House allows modern-day visitors to catch a glimpse of antebellum life. This property is a remarkable record of the lives of Charleston's elite as well as the enslaved African-Americans who lived and worked here. Much of the original 19th century material, including wallpapers, paints, textiles, and furnishings, still survive in this dwelling.

When Historic Charleston Foundation purchased the house in 1995, we decided to preserve the house rather than attempting to restore it to a particular period in its history. It is the richness of those layers of history that make this property an irreplaceable document of local and national importance. ***Please help us preserve this important historic site by not touching any of the furniture, wallpaper, or other historic fabric. And please wait to take photographs until you are outside.***

This text is meant to enhance your visit. Our trained staff is available for questions; they can be identified by their name tags. Do not hesitate to ask how we might make your visit more enlightening or enjoyable.

Take a closer look at the display in this room to see the evolution of the Aiken-Rhett House.

Built in 1817, the Aiken-Rhett house was constructed for a Charleston merchant named John Robinson. The house had a central hallway with two rooms on either side and was three stories high. The front door was located on the side of the house where the double porch, known in Charleston as a piazza, is located. A contemporary newspaper advertisement described the house as containing "twelve upright rooms, four on each floor, all well finished, the materials of the piazzas and fences all of cypress and cedar; underneath the house are large cellars and storerooms." Right now, we are standing in one of the original storerooms.

Robinson lived in this house for almost eight years. He was forced to sell this property to meet financial obligations when he lost five ships at sea in 1825. After a series of transactions, the house became the property of William Aiken, Sr.

William Aiken Sr. used this house as rental property and made no changes to it or to the grounds during his ownership. Aiken was an Irish immigrant who accumulated a large fortune and became one of the city's leading cotton merchants. He was also closely involved with the development of the South Carolina railroad, of which he was president

from 1828 until his death in 1831. When Aiken died in a carriage accident, his vast property was divided between his wife and his only son, William Aiken Jr.

As part of his share of the estate, William Aiken Jr. took possession of this property in 1833. He and his new bride, Harriet Lowndes, decided to make this house their primary residence and began extensive renovations. These renovations were a direct reflection of Aiken's social and political ambitions. Aiken served in the state and national legislature and was governor of South Carolina. We refer to him during the tour as Governor Aiken.

The Aikens' renovations began in the 1830s. Three main changes took place: the front entrance was moved, the first floor was reconfigured, and a large addition was added to the house. A second period of renovation took place in the 1850s. It consisted of a redecoration of the house's interior and the construction of a first floor art gallery in 1857.

Although Aiken family members continued to reside in the residence until the 1970s, there were minimal 20th century alterations. For that reason, the Aiken-Rhett House remains much as it was during the 19th century.

Before leaving this storeroom, note the storage bin and utilitarian pine table. Like the rest of the furniture displayed in the house, these objects belonged to the Aikens. We will begin our tour in the service quarters where enslaved African-Americans lived and worked. ***Walk through the door underneath the Exit sign and down the ramp to the room on the right.***

Warming Kitchen

This warming kitchen is part of the service area of the house and was primarily used by African-American slaves. The slaves living on this property were a small fraction of the almost 800 owned by the Aiken family. The slaves were highly trained in all the skills necessary for running a property of this magnitude. Jobs included: laundresses, seamstresses, cooks, maids, footmen, gardeners, and carriage drivers. The number of slaves who worked on this property varied from 10 to 20. In 1846, seven adults slaves and their six children lived at the Aiken-Rhett House. Ann Gregs and Dorcas Richardson lived here; it is very possible that one of these women served as the Aikens' cook.

Slaves used the Warming Kitchen to garnish and prepare food for presentation in the formal dining room directly above us. Slaves accessed that dining room using the back stairs that are just outside this room. Cooking took place in a separate building located in the workyard area of the complex. We will view that area in a moment. In this room, you'll find wire-covered pie safes. They are located next to the door you used to enter this room. The wire prevented bugs from bothering prepared food. Large storage cabinets are located along the walls. In front of the fireplace is a metal plate warmer. It has an open back that allowed heat from the fire to keep food warm.

This room, like many others in the Aiken-Rhett House, contains a variety of lighting fixtures. A metal gas fixture is located in the center of the room above the pine table.

Gas lighting was probably added to the house in the 1840s. On the ceiling, you can also see the remnants of an early knob and tube electrical wiring system installed in the early part of the 20th century. The Warming Kitchen is a wonderful example of Historic Charleston's preservation policy: all layers of the house's history are being preserved.

When you are ready, exit the Warming Kitchen and turn right. Take special note of the service stairs that you pass in the hallway. These stairs signify the melding of black and white worlds, because slaves used these steps to access the formal rooms of the house. ***Exit the main house using the door at the end of the hallway. When you are outside, enter the open door of the kitchen house before you. Please watch your step.***

Watch your step as you explore these buildings. This is the kitchen and laundry house. On the first floor were the kitchen and laundry rooms and on the second floor were slave quarters. This first room is a cooking kitchen. Cooking took place in a separate building due to the fear of fire in the nineteenth century. Slaves cooked food here before carrying the dishes to the Warming Kitchen, the room which you just left. Imagine this room in its day, a cook laboring over the hot range and the smells of food in the air.

Look closely at the nineteenth century cooking range. The open boxes held small fires to heat the burners on top of the stove. Directly in front of the range is a stone hearth. The hearth was installed to prevent stray embers from catching fire. This room has a storage cabinet and pie safe, and a metal-lined chest that was used to store ice.

As you tour the kitchen/ laundry house, look closely at the plaster walls to see the remainders of the original paint surfaces. Historians had long thought utilitarian and slave spaces such as these were whitewashed. Instead, we have discovered that the walls were brightly painted yellows, pinks and oranges.

Please walk into the next room, the laundry.

This room was the laundry. Slave laundresses spent many hours in this room caring for the household laundry. In the early nineteenth century, dye was not yet color-fast so most clothes were brushed clean. However, cotton and linen fabrics were washed.

Laundrying was labor intensive. Laundresses soaked, washed, and boiled the garments clean. Then they often stiffened the materials with starch. Female slaves would have heated water in a brass or copper kettle in the fireplace that you now see.

Notice the plasterwork over the fireplace. It has a series of lines marked in it. Nineteenth century craftsman made grooves in the first layer of plaster so that the final coat would adhere better. This process is called scoring.

We will next be viewing the second floor slave quarters. ***Please exit the laundry room and go up the stairs. Do watch your step as you climb the stairs. They are extremely narrow.***

Please turn left and walk towards the farthest room at the end of the hallway. Please feel free to explore the rooms that you pass. The second floor contains a series of dormitory-style rooms for slaves. These rooms were the setting for slave family life. Each one was simply furnished with beds, tables and chairs, and slaves' personal possessions. Many of these rooms also contain pegboards for hanging clothing. In 1846, two slave families lived on this property: Ann Greggs and her son Henry, and Dorcas Richardson, her husband, and her five children.

There was some privacy in these spaces since each door could be locked from the inside. The interior windows you see in the hallway furnished light and air ventilation to the occupants. Each room also contained a fireplace, though not all of them remain intact.

When you reach the room at the end of the hallway, please go inside. Notice the plastered walls and the fireplace. Conditions in slave quarters varied by the slave's occupation, reflecting a hierarchy where house servants had the most prestigious quarters, like the ones you are currently viewing. Less skilled workers, such as animal handlers, had far less accommodating and plainer rooms over the carriage house.

When you are finished exploring this room, walk back through the hallway to view the rooms that you have not yet seen.

Slaves numbered almost half of Charleston's population in the years preceding the Civil War. As we discussed in the warming kitchen, many of these slaves were highly trained house servants and worked in a variety of jobs caring for this property and the Aiken family. Some slaves had very specific skills and worked in other occupations such as carpenters, blacksmiths, brick masons, cabinetmakers, tailors, shoemakers, boatmen and fishermen. Nineteenth century slave owners often hired out their highly skilled slaves to short-handed employers in town. Mr. Aiken probably hired out the two carpenters who lived on this property. Their names were Will and Jacob.

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. In Charleston, these included the Calvary Protestant Episcopal Church and the Zion Presbyterian Church. These churches provided leadership roles for slaves and gave its members an opportunity for increased literacy.

After you have completed your tour of the second floor, please exit down the stairs. Please exit this building and stand outside the kitchen building. Please walk towards the back of the lot and stand next to the avenue of magnolias. Please watch your step.

The Workyard

The Aiken-Rhett House is one of the few urban townhouses whose outbuildings remain unchanged since the nineteenth-century. These workyards, varying in size and complexity, were part of every town house in Charleston in the first half of the nineteenth century and were the domain of slaves. Slaves provided the services and manpower that allowed wealthy Charlestonians like the Aikens to live in luxurious style. However, this

resulted in the loss of the most basic freedom for almost half of the population. Charlestonians used their slaves to imitate the servant class who supported the lifestyle of British aristocrats.

The complex you are now viewing is referred to as an urban plantation. An urban plantation is a property that contains a main house with adjacent outbuildings similar to a rural plantation. The outbuildings were constructed at the same time as the main house in 1817. In the 1830s, the building to your right was doubled in size.

To your left and next to the stable/carriage house are the walled remains of a cow shed. Directly across from the cow shed, the outline of a small building is still visible in the brick wall. The building was a chicken coop, but it no longer exists. At the furthest end of the lot are two privies or outhouses. The privy located to the right was rebuilt following Hurricane Hugo in 1989, the one to the left is original to the house.

Look closely at the outbuildings and notice the use of pointed arches above the doors. These arches reflect the Gothic Revival architectural style that was popular in the mid 19th century.

The avenue of magnolia trees once consisted of five trees on either side. After the Aikens were delivered to the front door, slaves drove the carriage through the back gate and up this avenue of trees to the carriage house.

If you would like to explore the backlot further at this time, please do so.

After viewing the backlot, walk back towards the stable/carriage building and enter the first open doorway. The stable contains six horse stalls. Each stall was highly finished with fine woodwork and openings for air circulation. Notice how the wood is worn away in some areas where horses gnawed it. Directly above the stable is a hayloft. Move closer to the far wall and look up at where the ceiling and walls meet. Notice how there are rectangular openings in the ceiling. Hay was dropped through those openings into the horses' troughs.

Turn around and look at the wall opposite the horse stalls. To the left of the doorway is a line of pegs that could have been used to store items such as harnesses and bridles. To your far left, almost at the end of the building, is a narrow staircase which led to the second floor hayloft. Unfortunately, it is not accessible at this time.

Please exit the stalls, turn right and go into the open doorway to view the Aikens' carriages. The carriage to the right is a landolet built around 1880. Landolets were typically a ladies carriage and used for making social calls or city traveling. The carriage to the left is a cabriolet built around 1870. Cabriolets were open vehicles that had folding tops and could be pulled by a single horse. Directly above this space are two large rooms that served as additional slave quarters. Probably each room housed more than one slave at a time. ***Once you are finished viewing the stable building, please exit and go up the back stairs to the main house.***

Main Stairhall

The area you are standing in is the main staircase and would have been used by the Aikens' guests to enter the second floor. We will be using these stairs later to go to the second floor. The bust located in this room depicts a relation of the Aiken family, Ellen Martin Aiken. She was married to a cousin of William Aiken Jr. ***Please remember to help us preserve this property by not touching any of the objects or wallcoverings in the house. At this time, please turn right and enter the marble staircase.***

Main Entrance

This marble staircase was created during the extensive renovations carried out in the 1830s. The original front door on the piazza side of the house was remodeled into a sculptural niche and this entrance was created. The grand sweep of marble stairs, cast iron work, mahogany railing, and French chandelier were all designed to impress visitors to the house.

As part of the renovations, much of the interior was updated in the popular Greek Revival style. This style is characterized by the use of heavy molding and specific decorative devices like Greek keys and acanthus leaves. Greek keys are a series of interlocking squares that can be seen in this room in the iron balustrade and in the plasterwork at the top of the wall. Acanthus leaves are the large scalloped leaves that you see in window and door surrounds.

After viewing this room, we will move into the Double Drawing Rooms. That is the room directly off of the stairhall and, if you are facing the front door, to your immediate left.

Double Drawing Rooms

Please walk into the first room and stand near the barrier. You are now viewing the double drawing rooms. Governor Aiken's social and political prominence meant that the family entertained frequently and grandly. Frederika Bremer recalled that almost five hundred people were invited to a party she attended at the house in the 1850s.

The Drawing Rooms were created as another part of the 1830s renovations. The original central hallway was removed and replaced with moveable mahogany pocket doors. These doors could be adjusted to create one grand room or two separate ones.

At that same time, the interior was updated with new door surrounds, mantles, gilded mirrors, and furniture. The pieces of furniture displayed in the Aiken-Rhett House are all family pieces that were used in this house. The chandeliers in this room were purchased by the Aikens in Europe, they are French.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Aikens continued to redecorate their home. A second period of interior renovation took place in the 1850s. The decorative wallpaper in this room, for instance, dates from that time period. Following our preservation goals, Historic Charleston Foundation works to conserve this wonderful nineteenth century material.

Be sure to take a closer look at the photograph displayed in this room. Many of the rooms in the Aiken-Rhett House were closed off by past family residents. The Double Drawing Rooms, for instance, were closed off for almost fifty years shortly after this photograph was taken in 1918. ***Compare the photograph with what you see today and you will find that many of the furnishings remain in early twentieth century placements.***

Before leaving this room, notice the bust entitled Persephone. It was sculpted by an American artist named Hiram Powers around 1857.

Please now continue into the second Drawing Room and stand in front of the large portrait of Harriet Lowndes Aiken.

Harriet Lowndes Aiken was the wife of William Aiken Jr. and one of Charleston's grandest hostesses. Harriet was extremely well educated, spoke four languages and played several musical instruments. She was the ninth of eleven children born to Thomas and Sarah Lowndes. Her father was a politician who served in the state and national legislature. At the time of Harriet's birth he had retired from politics. Artist George Whiting Flagg completed this painting in 1858, when Mrs. Aiken was 45.

An important aspect of educating upper class nineteenth century girls involved learning a musical instrument. Harriet bought the piano in this room from the Chickering Piano Company for her daughter in the years following the Civil War. She purchased the instrument with money she obtained from selling some jewelry. Harriet's niece, Mary Huger Cottenet sold one of her aunt's rings in New York and wrote to her aunt, whom she called Aunt Heart, about the matter:

"It pains me, dear Aunt Heart ... to dispose of your ring, but of course you have thought it over well & made up your mind.. I am glad however that there is a prospect of Etta's using her fine voice again & hope that next Winter you will invite me to some of the musical reunions you are contemplating"

The nickname Etta refers to Harriet's daughter, Henrietta.

Directly across from the piano are photographs of other family members. The large photograph is of Governor Aiken in his later years. The two smaller ones depict the Aikens' daughter Henrietta and son-in-law Major Andrew Burnett Rhett. He is photographed in his Confederate uniform and served as an artillery officer, eventually obtaining the rank of major.

Henrietta's marriage to Major Rhett took place during the Civil War at the Aikens' summer residence in Flat Rock, North Carolina. Like many families, opinions varied greatly over the political issue of secession. Major Rhett's father Robert Barnwell Rhett, was a passionate supporter of separating from the United States. Governor Aiken was a staunch unionist, although he later provided money to the confederacy. We will discuss Aiken's political career further in a few minutes.

During the Civil War, the Aiken Rhett House escaped damage because it was located well beyond the range of guns that bombarded the lower part of Charleston. This bombardment lasted for 587 days. In fact, Brigadier General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard moved his headquarters into this house in 1864 to escape the heavy Federal bombardment of the city. A year later, when Charleston was occupied, Union troops looted the Aiken-Rhett house.

We will next walk outside to view the piazzas. ***Please exit through the door and stand next to the green joggling board. Notice that the door you stepped through is actually a triple hung sash window.***

Piazza

The joggling board is a well-know sight in Charleston. It is a piece of porch furniture that people can sit on to either rock side to side or up and down. Porches, known in Charleston as piazzas, were and are a very important aspect of Charleston architecture. They serve as extensions of the house. The Aikens' and their guests also used these piazzas as walkways to various rooms in the house.

Look out towards the street and you can see the small formal garden located to the side of the house. The garden consists of a single, short, meandering path that visitors could walk, inspecting the plants and flowers. A visitor to the house in the 1850s described the Aiken's garden as containing creepers, clematis, caprifolium and roses. Turn around to face the house. Notice the sculptural niche. Before the 1830s renovations, it was the location of the front door. As was mentioned earlier the new marble entrance was created at that time. ***Turn right and follow the piazza around the side of the house to the open doorway of the dining room.***

As you pass the corner of the house, look closely to see the brickwork that is exposed by crumbling stucco. The brickwork dates from the original 1817 building. ***Please enter the open doorway.***

Dining Room

As you step through the doorway, you will be entering the Dining Room. Grand dinner parties were one of the most popular entertainments of the day for the upper class. A menu from a Charleston dinner party attended by Governor Aiken in the 1850s describes an elaborate 4 course meal. The first course consisted of soup and vegetables, followed by a second course of broiled bass and fried whiting. The third course consisted of mutton, ham, roast turkey and oysters. The final course, dessert, consisted of ice cream, apples, bananas and groundnuts. Meals like this one were elaborate, ceremonial, and lengthy. Imagine how grand the dining room must have looked with the oil-burning chandelier lit and the light reflected by the gold mirrors.

A slave butler supervised dinner and was responsible for selecting and serving wines and liquors. He was assisted by liveried footmen. Before guests arrived, they would place linens on the table and set the table for the first course. Charles Jackson and Anthony Barnwell were two house servants who lived and worked at the Aiken Rhett House, and possibly served dinner as a butler or footman. They brought the food up using the set of

stairs you saw outside the Warming Kitchen. These stairs can be seen through the roped off doorway.

The table in this room can be extended to comfortably seat 22 people. Today, only one of the original pair of sideboards remain. Ceramics and silver were placed on these sideboards during dinner parties to make an impressive display. Above the sideboard hangs a portrait of Governor Aiken.

This dining room is part of the addition constructed by the Aikens during the 1830s. ***Look closely at the walls***, you can still detect the outline of the original wallpaper panels.

Evidence of twentieth century change is also noticeable in this room. Heating panels were added in the 1950s. Although many of the rooms in the house were closed off, the last family residents continued to use the Dining Room. ***After finishing in this room please exit through the doorway directly across from Governor Aiken's portrait. You will cross a small passageway into the library.***

Library

This is the Aiken Family library. The Aikens were well educated, spoke four or five languages, and traveled extensively. The almost 2000 volumes they purchased give great insight into their interests and personalities. The books cover a wide range of subject matter including popular novels of the day, etiquette guides, religious texts, and historical topics such as the French Revolution. The Aikens purchased many of their books during their trips to Europe. For conservation reasons, the majority of the originals are housed in climate-controlled storage.

The engraved portraits on the wall include three of the leading statesmen of the 19th century: John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, Daniel Webster of New Hampshire and Henry Clay of Kentucky. These famous politicians were known as the "Great Triumvirate." They were at the forefront of debate over states rights', slavery, and the expansion of the United States. The engravings were printed in 1852, around the time all three men died.

Governor Aiken was a political contemporary of the "Great Triumvirate." Aiken was a prominent South Carolina politician who served as a state representative and state senator, and he was Governor of South Carolina from 1844 to 1846. He was also a member of the US House of Representatives in the 1850s.

A political contemporary regarded Governor Aiken as "always moderate and temperate, in opinion, in language, and in act..." Though Aiken was opposed to the idea of South Carolina seceding from the United States, he later supported the southern cause with vast donations of supplies and subscriptions to Confederate loans. Throughout his political career, the family used this house to entertain their many social and political acquaintances.

After finishing in the library, please exit through the doorway that is opposite the one you used to enter the room. Go up the stairs to the second floor landing. On the landing, turn right and go into a dressing room.

West Bedroom Dressing Room

This small room would have been used by a family member for dressing and bathing. It has a lower ceiling to retain the heat. The large clothes press to your right is called an armoire and was used to store clothing. Armoires were extremely important in the nineteenth century, since hangers had not yet been invented and thus clothes had to be either be folded or hung on a peg. Contrary to the common misconception, closets in Charleston were not taxed. They were just not particularly useful since hangers are a twentieth century invention.

Above the door to the bedroom, notice small metal fixtures. These fixtures were part of the bell pull system. The fixtures held wires, which were connected to bells in the workyard and ivory knobs in the house. Each bell had a different ring and were used by the Aikens to summon their slaves. As you tour through the rest of the house, look for the ivory knobs on the sides of fireplaces.

Before exiting this room, do be sure to look out the window to view the art gallery's skylight. We will have an opportunity to view that room in a moment. Please continue into the adjoining bedroom.

The West Bedroom

Displayed in this bedroom is some of the extensive collection of straw matting and wool carpeting owned by the Aiken family. The straw matting was made in either China or Japan. Each summer, slaves removed the wool carpeting and replaced it with straw matting because it was cooler and less prone to bug infestation. *Examining the floorboards*, you will notice the location of tack holes that once held down the carpet. This one task, rotating seasonal carpets, gives some indication of the amount of work it took to maintain this property.

Look closely at the ceiling above the bed to see the shadow of a circle. Originally the bed displayed in this room would have been draped with material. The draping materials would have been attached to the ceiling with a circular piece called a corona. Much of the furniture in the house was made by Deming and Buckley, a New York cabinet making firm that specialized in producing furniture for the elite Charleston market. Deming and Buckley operated from around 1818 to the 1840s.

Although the first floor was updated throughout the nineteenth century, the second and third floors of the Aiken-Rhett House remain largely intact and retain most of its original 1817 woodwork. The fireplaces were really the only aspect of the upper floors which were changed. The wood mantles were replaced with marble and updated to burn coal.

Please return to the stairhall by going through the dressing room. When you get there, stand underneath the chandelier. Turn to face the staircase.

Stairhall

From this vantage point compare the original 1817 Federal style interior with the 1830s renovations. Notice the delicate Federal woodwork of the arch and the heavier Greek Revival molding around the window.

Standing in the stairhall, you can still see the original floorplan of the house. Originally all three floors consisted of a central hallway with two rooms on either side. The third floor provided additional bedroom space for the family. For conservation reasons, it is not currently open to the public.

Look closely at the lighting fixtures in this space. An original oil-burning chandelier hangs in the center of the hallway. The two sconces hanging on either side of the arch were originally piped for gas, but the one on the right was wired for electricity.

Walk to the end of the stairhall and exit onto the piazza.

Piazza

Turn right and walk to the end of the piazza where you will see a park called Wragg Mall. Viewing this scene you can still see remnants of the Aikens' neighborhood. This area was planned by the heirs of John Wragg in the 1790s as a suburb of Charleston and was known as Wraggborough. These suburban areas allowed wealthy planters and merchants, like the Aikens, to build villas and townhouses close enough to Charleston to enjoy the social season, but outside the confines of town. The park you are currently viewing is one of two parks the Wragg family dedicated to the public.

Notice the two brick houses on the right side of the mall that are next door to Courtenay Middle School. The two residences are the only surviving portion of Aiken's Row, a group of seven identical houses that Governor Aiken had built and used as rental properties.

After you have finished enjoying the view please re-enter the stairhall and turn right to enter a bedroom.

The East Dressing room and Bedroom

See the pictures in this room of two young boys. The Aikens' daughter, Henrietta, and son-in-law Major Rhett raised their family of four sons and one daughter in this house. The little boy in the kilt is Andrew Burnett Rhett Jr. He was the youngest of the Rhett children. Andrew received his bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Virginia, but returned to Charleston to teach high school. He was a principal of two local schools and later served as superintendent of public schools for nearly thirty five years.

The other son pictured is I'on Rhett. I'on was born in 1876, the second youngest Rhett child. He worked as a realtor in Charleston and served on the City Council. After the death of their Aiken grandparents, I'on and Andrew lived in this house with their mother

Henrietta. At her death the house was divided between her children and their heirs. I'on and Andrew continued to live in the house. In 1949, I'on purchased the interest of the other heirs and lived here with his wife, Frances Hinson Dill. Frances Dill donated the property to The Charleston Museum in 1975 and moved out of the house to live with her sister Pauline. The Charleston Museum owned the house until 1995 when Historic Charleston Foundation purchased the property.

The bed in this room is called a sleigh bed, in reference to its similarity in form to an actual sleigh. These beds were very popular from the 1830s to the 1850s.

Please go through the doorway to the right of the fireplace and enter a dressing room. Look closely at the exposed ceiling in this room. The wood strips, known as lath, are attached to framing members of the house and supported the plaster ceiling.

Notice the nineteenth century metal-lined foot bath and tub. There is also a dressing table in this room that originally would have been decorated with draped cotton material.

A dressing table similar to this one provided a bit of excitement to Henrietta and Major Rhett's wedding in 1862. The ceremony took place at the Aikens' mountain home in Flat Rock, North Carolina. A guest, writer Mary Boykin Chestnut, described it:

"The night of the wedding, it stormed as if the world were coming to an end. A candle was let too near this light drapery and it took fire. Outside, lightning to fire the world; inside, the bridal chamber ablaze! And enough wind to blow the house down the mountainside. The English maid behaved heroically and with the aid of Mrs. Aiken and Mrs. 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 and smut-flakes of charred and blackened wood. Mrs. Singleton said 'Burnet Rhett has strong nerves, and the bride is too good to be superstitious.'"

After viewing this room go through the open doorway, cross the passageway, and enter the ballroom. You will be leaving the original 1817 section of the house to enter the 1830s addition. Please watch your step as there is a slight step down.

Ballroom

This ballroom was the scene of many of Charleston's grandest entertainments before the Civil War. Francis Kinloch Middleton attended a party here in 1839 shortly after the Aikens' renovations and recorded the evening:

"Last night I was at the handsomest ball I have ever seen ... the 2 floors were entirely thrown open - the orchestra from the theatre played for the dancers - and the supper table was covered with a rich service of silver - lights in profusion, & a crowded, handsomely dressed assembly..."

Guests entered the ballroom from the piazza and did not walk through family bedrooms. The gold-framed mirrors hanging in this room reflected the gas lights and candles at

night and made the room seem larger. The two semi-circular seats, called demi-lune banquettes, could have been placed against the wall or used together.

Look closely at the 1850s wallpaper in the Ballroom to see the floral pattern, but please remember do not touch it. Originally, the wallpaper was a bright red and silver but in subsequent years has faded to brown and gold. It was badly damaged during Hurricane Hugo in 1989, and the Foundation continues to work towards its conservation.

Notice the rectangular shadow on the ceiling in the far right hand corner of the room. After the Civil War and Governor Aiken's death from bronchial pneumonia, his wife Harriet, pictured downstairs, lived here with her daughter and grandchildren. Harriet used the ballroom as her bedroom. The shadow results from where the canopy of her bed was attached to the ceiling. After Harriet's death in 1892, the room was closed off and not reopened until the 1970s. Later residents of the house closed down various rooms and during the occupancy of Mrs. Frances Dill Rhett, a minority of the house was still being used.

When you are finished viewing the ballroom please exit the room. Turn right and go down the staircase. Notice the sink you pass on your left. It may have been used by slaves to wash dishes during grand parties. The staircase you are now using was added in the 1850s. It was used primarily by slaves to service the house without disturbing the Aiken family.

At the bottom of the stairs, enter the room to your right, which is the library. Walk through the library and small stairhall to the marble staircase. At the marble staircase, turn right and enter the Art Gallery.

Art Gallery

This Art Gallery was originally much more crowded because the Aikens furnished it with 38 paintings and pieces of sculpture. Most of the artwork was of Italian origin that either copied the works of the old master's or reflected the sentimental tastes of the day. Many of the original pieces still occupy this room. In the center of the room is a sculpture of Mary Magdalene. Notice the Old and New Testaments. An Italian sculptor named D. Menconi completed this piece in 1858. He copied it after an original sculpture by Pampaloni. Copying other pieces of art was an extremely popular practice in the late nineteenth century and not considered plagiarism.

On the right side of the far wall is a sculpture entitled First Grief. A young boy is holding a dead bird and a snake, presumably the guilty culprit, is slithering across his left foot. Next to that is L. Terry's rendition of Romeo and Juliet. To the left of the painting is a sculpture entitled Shepherd Boy and located in the sculptural niche closet to you is *Venus Italica*. Nearer to the door is a painting called Madonna of the Harpies by an unknown artist. It is a copy of an original painted by Andrea del Sarto.

A turn of the century newspaper reflected that:

“In studying the pictures owned by Mrs. Gov. Aiken, full scope is allowed for diversity of taste, as here one finds the mellowed tints and hues softened by the hand of time...Here also are a number of beautiful specimens of the sculptor’s art ranged about in niches and corners of the handsomely constructed mansion.”

Look up and notice how the skylight provides natural light for this room. The Art Gallery was the last of the Aikens’ alterations to the house. It was built in 1857 following one of the Aikens’ trips to Europe where they purchased paintings and sculptures for the house and attended cultural events. The family traveled in Europe for over a year to cities including Paris, Vienna, Pompeii, Naples, Venice, and Florence and Vienna. This custom of touring Europe was extremely popular among wealthy Charlestonians and is referred to as the Grand Tour tradition.

The Aiken-Rhett family continued to use the Art Gallery in the twentieth century. The gallery became a center for family social life and once a year, Mr. and Mrs. I’on Rhett gave a Christmas party for fellow Aiken descendants.

After a hundred and fifty 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 all Charlestonians. We hope that your visit has provided valuable insights into the rich history of this amazing time capsule.

Please visit often and be certain to visit Historic Charleston Foundation’s other museum site, the Nathaniel Russell House. Our staff members will be happy to provide additional information about this site. On behalf of the Foundation, I hope you have enjoyed your visit. Please return your headset to the counter in the museum shop. Thank you.